LOOK DOWN.
Keep Looking!
The Tishman Review is a magazine of literature published in January, April, July, and October each year. We believe in supporting the creative endeavors of the writers of the world. We believe in connecting writers through interviews to pass on hard-earned wisdom and insights. We believe literature serves an existential function and its value to humanity is beyond measure. Therefore, we will always remain open to the possibilities of a work to take us beyond the boundaries known today. We will strive to honor each writer and the work they share with us, whether chosen for publication or not. The Tishman Review seeks to publish work that reflects these values, offers new insights into the human condition, finds beauty in the garish, and calls us to read it again and again. We want to fold an issue closed and find ourselves richer for knowing the words contained within.

Submissions of short fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and art accepted year-round. Please read the submissions guidelines on our website: www.thetishmanreview.com.

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Exploring by Amy Still-Pepper
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Autumn has been a long time coming, at least here in New England. We’ve spent the last weeks sweating it out in a late summer haze of ninety-degree heat and nearly 100 percent humidity. I took out my air conditioner that first cool morning in early September only to install it again two weeks later, desperate for a break from the swelter. We do this, don’t we? We race to the Next Thing, intent on the Forward Progress of What’s Supposed to Happen Next while not really paying attention to the heat index. We ignore the hints around us: the bees who aren’t droning yet, the hydrangeas bursting again with new blooms, the oak and elm leaves refusing to don gold and red, and instead we climb up into our attics to pull down the sweaters and scarves and boots as if doing so will bring the temperature down.

This issue of TTR is full of this same back-and-forth, the same power of summer to give up her fight, even in the face of the definiteness of autumn. There is a tug-of-war, a fine balance sought between melancholy and acceptance, a rush of full-bodied pleasure on one page followed immediately by a visceral chill.

The first poems I accepted for October were by the poet Marion Boyer. Her “Alfie, the Ransacker” and “After the Telegram Comes” inadvertently set the tone for everything that came after, as both poems hum with memory, urgency, and soft fierceness—or is it a fierce softness? It amazes me, time and again, too, when we go into layout, and I get to read everything together for the first time and see, again and again, the same threads throughout, golden, twining it all together. Like in billy lombardo’s “Make Your Mother Happy,” where we meet a rumble of students and a teacher, and this moment of clarity comes softly, almost like an afterthought, or in “Catherine of Chelsea” where this exact journey is personified in the main character. As we lay stories next to poems, poems beside art, art balanced with nonfiction, and nonfiction countered with stories, and I offer you this: rather than climb upstairs into your attic to find your sweaters and boots and will the cold nights of the season to settle in, don instead these words and let yourself be pulled and pushed back and forth from summer’s heat to autumn’s chill. Let yourself soak in the journey of it all, for it is brief, and while you may hunger for what will inevitably be here all-too-soon, don’t forget to enjoy what you have here now, both summer and autumn, together, dancing.

Sláinte,

Maura
Ball Lightning by Kathleen Galvin
“Do we have to?” Maree scuffs her thongs on the concrete drive.

“Get in, your grandfather’s expecting us,” says her mother.

Maree drops a heavy sigh. “But Pop’s always so grumpy.”

Tanya launches herself onto the backseat of the car. “And it’s really, really boring ... not like going to Aunty Kath’s.”

“Yeah, she always gives us lollies.” Maree slithers in beside her sister and sees her father’s knuckles, hairy as a huntsman spider, tightening on the wheel.

“And Pop always gives you a shilling for an ice-cream, so don’t start that lark,” says their mother.

“Yeah, but then we have to walk all the way to the shop,” says Maree.

“And back,” adds Tanya.

Their mother slams her door, rocking the whole car. “Poor you. That’s why God gave you legs.” She checks herself in the vanity mirror. She’s wearing her new knitted minidress. “You’re ten years old, a walk won’t bloody kill you.”

“Anyway, he only sends us for ice cream to get rid of us,” says Maree.

Their father brakes hard at the end of the driveway, and the girls catapult forward.

One hand still on the steering wheel, he reaches to swipe Maree’s bare legs, but she sways out of range like a cobra. “Show some bloody respect. It’s Anzac Day. We’re going, so you’ll damn well behave yourselves. Any more strife and you’ll get a good clip around the ears.”

Their mother props her big, round Polaroid glasses on her forehead and throws the kids a menacing look. “You heard. And stop kicking the back of my seat, or you’ll be walking all the way to Leongatha.”

The girls swap knowing glances. The raised eyebrow is a coded dare: Don’t cross her, she means business. For this trip at least, their parents are allies.

They sweep out of the drive, tyres squealing as their father plants his foot. Maree waves to Jodie and Jen out in their front yard, hula hoops swivelling around their hipless torsos. Still gyrating, they stare. She wishes she could stay and play with them. Too late now. Anyway, they’re probably jealous because she’s going somewhere in the new car, Gundagai grey with stainless steel trim so polished it glints in the sun. Jodie and Jen don’t know that the trip to Leongatha is always long and boring.

In the April sun, the Holden is a hothouse. The girls play I Spy, bickering and poking each other.

“Moron.” Maree gives Tanya’s arm a good jab, because for the millionth time, Tanya’s squabbling about words having silent letters.

Tanya moves away with a yelp, because peeling her bare skin off the hot, pleated, bolero-red leatherette is a thousand times worse than ripping off a Band-Aid. “Mum. Mummmm,” she chants.

“What now?”

“Got any lollies?”

“No,” says her mother.

“In your handbag?” suggests Maree.

“In the glove box?”

“I’m not playing I Spy,” snaps their mother. “I said no.”

“How much longer? I need the toilet.”
whines Tanya.

“Where are we, anyway?” Maree kneels on the seat, so she can see out the window.

“Sit down,” growls their father. “I can’t see out the bloody rear window.”

“Mu-mmmmm, she keeps on hitting me,” whines Tanya. Maree hopes Tanya’s whining and suffering might release a hidden stash of lollies, even if they’re only the hard eucalyptus ones, dusted with icing sugar so the heat can’t weld them into clumps.

Their mother swivels and stabs a finger at them. Her new Pink Frenzy nail polish is a perfect match with her frock. “Don’t make me start, you two. Stop your scrapping.”

They manage a moment of silence.

Maree whispers loudly to Tanya. “You know Pop?”

Tanya frowns, used to her big sister’s trick questions.

“I think he’s The Grumpiest Man in Gippsland. In the state of Victoria. In the whole universe. Except for ... ” Maree points at the back of their father’s dark hair, Brylcreem-slick, short back and sides.

Tanya snickers.

Their father takes a long, hard look in the rear vision mirror. He’s whistling a Seekers song about a gypsy rover, but it’s speedy as an LP on 45 rpm.

The girls stare at the passing suburbs, glad he’s busy driving. Same as his old man, he’s got a short fuse. Manic Seekers songs are the musical calm before the storm. But, he’s had a couple of bottles of VB before they set off. That’ll keep him calm for a while.

Their mother furtles in her kangaroo-skin shoulder bag and pulls out her pink lipstick.

“Got any mints?” prompts Maree.

“No, the yukky hot ones, please,” says Tanya.

Their mother finishes touching up her lips with a kiss of the stale air. “You’ve been told, I haven’t got anything, so knock it off.” She zips her bag with a vicious tug.

“Jesus-Bloody-Christ-Idiot!” Their father swings into the passing lane.

“Wheeee!” squeal the girls. “Go, Speed Racer, goo-oooooo.” Maree winds down her window a couple of inches. She stretches her arm out through the gap till it shudders and flaps, a fleshy wing out of her control.

Their mother gives a heavy sigh. “Maree, close that right now, before the flies get in.”

“How?”

“You’re letting in the hot air. Close it.”

The girls wrinkle their noses at each other. Any breeze, warm or not, is welcome.

“Hurry up, before you lose your arm.”

“That’s how Pop lost his?” Maree leans forward.

“That’s why he’s so grumpy,” adds Tanya.

“Stuck his arm out a car window,” says Maree, clipped and confident as a major general. “Didn’t he, Mum? Must be weird only having one arm.” She tucks one arm behind her back, swinging the other protruding fist like a Daleks flamethrower.

“Having one arm is the least of his worries,” her mother murmurs out the side of her mouth. Over the bench seat, Maree sees her father’s jaw clench. A tic dances beneath his left eye. The Seekers have gone out the window.

“Shut yer cakehole.”

Their mother nudges the conversation along. “You know that Pop was in the war.”

“Can you get him to show us his medals?” Maree leans over the seat. “Can I take them to school?”

Tanya chips in. “Has he got a uniform?”

“Probably too grumpy to let us see it,” says Maree.
He gives their mother the hairy eyeball. “For Christ’s sake. Just flaming tell them,” he growls.

“I will not,” she hisses, lips pursed.

He screeches to a halt for a red light. The girls nudge each other with pride, then spread-eagle against the backseat, stranded starfish.

“They’re old enough to know the full story,” says their father.

“They’re enough of a handful without you bloody frightening them.” Their mother takes ages checking her makeup in the vanity mirror. “And you won’t be getting up for their bloody nightmares, will you?”

Maree stares out at the shimmering day, fingers crossed against another row. In the car, the stifling air is thick with secrets. Tanya is far too young, but their father is right—she is old enough to hear what really happened to Pop.

Tanya nods off, sprawling again. Using her bare feet, Maree bulldozes her into her own territory again.

On the outskirts of the suburbs, their father really plants his foot. The rows of houses fall away into a scattering, soon overtaken by farms and stretches of golden grass.

Cattle cluster, taking the shade from stands of spindly, paperbark gums. An occasional dam rises, breaking the flat landscape. A windmill stands sentry over a farmhouse, her metal sails sluggish as an old farm dog in the humid midday. Maree thinks the windmill looks like a lazy, grey comet.

The needle is jerking on the chrome-encased speedometer as they hit the straights.

“Dad’s doing eighty,” chant the girls.

“I saw a wombat,” says Maree.

Tanya jostles her. “Where, where—”

“Get off, it’s too hot.” Maree gives the casual flick of a hitchhiker’s thumb. “Back there. Side of the road. You missed it. Anyway, it’s dead.”

“Oh no!” wails Tanya. “Poor wombat.”

“Crow fodder,” says her father. “Never mind poor flamin’ wombat—the chassis on that car will be stuffed now.”

“Muuuuuummm. Got any Juicy Fruit?” the girls chorus.

She shakes her head.

Maree is spreading out like dough, thinking she’s won the battle for territory. Tanya halts her advance by sneaking a pinch on the back of Maree’s arm. Maree lands a swift rib-jab.

As they hurry down the long, sticky, liquorice tarmac to Leongatha, there’s something strange about the Holden; the body lurches to catch up with the car a second or so after taking a bend, as if holding the road is a fight they might lose at any moment. Unfettered by seat belts, the momentum sends the girls slithering across the leatherette seat, colliding like a pair of Easter Show dodgems.

“I’m getting carsick,” moans Maree.

Once they cross Pop’s weathered wooden veranda, without a squabble, they sit quietly around the old table in his musty kitchen, drinking weak, tepid orange cordial while their mother gets started on the lamb roast.

Their father sharpens an ancient carving knife on the whetstone. Their grandfather hovers, digging out utensils, a smouldering racehorse glued to his bottom lip. Maree tries not to imagine twanging his maroon braces, not to stare at the stump that waggles from his short-sleeved shirt.

Pop is getting skinnier and wheezier. And, he’s a bit more stooped than when they saw him at Christmas. Their mother has explained: This is because he’s Getting On. Never great at hearing, now his eyes are milky with cataracts too.

When he gives them ice-cream money, Maree sneaks the coin into the pocket of her shorts before anyone can notice that
he’s mistaken a florin for a shilling.

“Thank you, Pop,” she says, with exaggerated politeness.

Her father hands Pop his jacket.

“Goin’ to pay our last respects to his mates.” He passes Pop his grey felt hat with the little orange and crimson parrot feather tucked in the band. “And have a beer down at the RSL,” he mutters as they head out the door.

Who is Pop paying respects to? Maree can’t work that out. Her mother reckoned he lost most of his old mates already, at some place called Posy Ears.

Before Maree can ask, their mother musters them out of the kitchen and out the front door.

In the sapping heat, they dawdle to the milk bar, then race outside to eat their ice creams—two scoops: one vanilla, one chocolate—before the globes can melt off their cones and into the dusty gutter. Maree uses the change from her ill-gotten florin to order a lime spider in a long, waxy cup.

They wander back the long way, past the RSL, where people go for a cheap meal and the pokies. Their Holden waits near the front door, dulled by a film of red dust. They cut across the road and trapse through the flat, dry park, Maree still slurping her spider.

At the base of the memorial, flowers fight for space with shiny-leaved wreaths and paper poppies on ice-block sticks, scarlet angry against the grey granite.

“What’s ‘lest’ mean again?” says Tanya.

Maree gives a weary sigh. “Just in case.”

Every time they go to the shop in Leongatha, they stop to pore over the names on each side of the obelisk. Nope, still no one they know. None of their relatives. But this afternoon, Maree wonders if any of the men were Pop’s old mates. Once, she imagined grandfathers marching off to war. Now she sees young men—most, no more than schoolboys—most, never to return. Or like Pop, they came back damaged goods.

Tanya nudges her. “See him, Maree? Sixteen. Could be you in five years.”

Maree picks the crusting green scab from the edges of her mouth then flicks a good kick at Tanya’s shin. “Shuddup, dumbat.”

On the drive home, everyone is quiet, stuffed full of roast. On top of the usual blend of baking plastic, tobacco, and oil, the Holden now has wafts of yeasty hops from their father’s bitter sweat.

Maree shuffles on her seat. The lime spider is threatening to erupt from her gurgling innards, bringing the roast and vinegary mint sauce with it. The pink and purple candy stripes on her mother’s dress make her gip. She looks away and takes another deep breath.

With the afternoon sun in his eyes, and drowsy with beers, their father jerks and weaves, battling with the car. Mostly he stays on the right side of the road.

Tanya leans forward and prods her mother’s shoulder. “Muuuuum, Maree’s gonna spew.”

“Are you? Maree?” Her mother sounds more challenging than concerned.

“Better not bloody chunder in the car,” growls her father, but he makes no effort to pull over.

Her mother jabs the lighter then tugs it from the dashboard, a glowing, angry, sunburned firefly. She lights his cigarette, then her own, two smoking tusks protruding beneath her nose.

They stop at their usual garage for petrol. Their father checks himself in the mirror, then sweeps a rogue Brylcreemed strand into place.

“Fillerupmate,” he grunts at the bowser boy.

The boy nods, sets the pump clanking, and washes the windscreen, earnestly chiselling away the dead baked bugs.
Maree watches the numbers rolling around the bowser register and wonders if Jen and Jodie are still playing. Her guts aren’t churning quite so much now the car has stopped, but she winds down the window, lest she vomit. It’s a good excuse to drink in the giddying metallic fumes.

When their father lopes inside to pay and buy another packet of smokes, Tanya says what they’ve all been thinking.

“Dad’s in a bad mood again.”

“Shut. Up.” Maree gives her a Chinese burn. One thing has been bothering her all day.

What really *did* happen to their grandfather in the war?

Tanya wriggles. “Was Dad in the war?”

Their mother adjusts her collar where it’s chafing her neck. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Then how come he’s always so grumpy too?” says Maree.

Before her mother can answer, he’s behind the wheel again.

“Got some lollies, Dad?” says Tanya.

“No.” He slams the door and the car rocks.

The indicator clicks as he swings back onto the Melbourne road.

Maree winds up her window. The petrol fumes mingling with cigarette smoke are making her feel sick. She coughs, looking for a distraction. The words slide out. “Dad, what’s wrong with Pop?”

“Rrrrright. That’s it.” He thumps the steering wheel. “He was gassed, alright?”

The traffic light has changed, and the car behind them is honking.

“Pardon?” says Tanya, obviously hoping that good manners will win a better result.

“Vinnnnnce.” Their mother’s voice has a warning edge.

“You heard me. He was gassed. Gassed in the war. All his mates died over there.”

He takes off with a lurch.

Tanya wrinkles her nose. “Over where?”

“In The War?” Maree feels the spider threaten to rise again.

“In France,” adds their mother.

Their father grips the wheel tighter.

“So show some bloody respect.”

Maree nods sagely. “I’d be grumpy too, if I’d been gassed.”

“What’s gassed?” says Tanya.

“Mustard gas,” says their mother.

Maree shudders. She feels the burning and blistering from the English mustard her father slipped into a corned beef sandwich that he’d made her once for lunch. “I hate mustard.”

“Not mustard. Mustard gas—it was the colour of mustard, and it made you very sick.”

Maree wonders whether the gas cost Pop his arm and made him deaf as well. Her mother says no, that was The Guns, and do not say anything because he’s very sensitive.

For the next couple of miles, the car is silent. Maree stares out her window and counts the kangaroos calmly grazing in the shade of the scarecrow gums. Spit is pooling in her mouth, frothy and warm. She stole money off her grandfather, a war hero. And, Tanya was right.

In less than five years, she’ll be sixteen. Same age as him and his mates when they went off to war.

And, when Pop lost his arm.

She wonders if he was less grouchy when he had his arm. By that age, her parents were already together: a couple of teenagers stuck in a metal box driving away to the Big Smoke, silent and stewing, or bickering—and not much in between, if the last ten years are anything to go by.

Maree leans against the door, dozing until her sleep fills with drifts of scorching, yellow clouds. She wakes, breathless and coughing as the Holden rolls into their street.
When they pull up in the driveway, Maree shoves open the door and charges into the front garden.

“Are yer right?” calls her mother. She rinses her hanky under the garden tap and hands it to Maree.

Standing on the edge of the freshly dug rose bed, Maree spews. And spews. Acid sears her throat like mustard.

Between bouts of chucking up, Maree can see Tanya out of the corner of her eye, staring as if Maree’s a new reel on her View-Master.

“Jeezus Maree, you’re not a baby. Whaddabloodycarry-on.” Their father is standing on the drive, fists clenched. “Another minute and that lot would’ve been all over my upholstery,” he grizzles to their mother. “I’ve told you not to let her have those bloody spiders. Next time, bring the spew bucket. Is that too damn much to ask?”

Shhhhnick. The car doors are locking.

Maree wipes her mouth with the wet hanky, grateful no one has asked how she paid for the spider.

Yet.

Another spasm seizes her, and she vomits away the curdling green milk, the mean thoughts she’s had, the jokes about his arm, and the dumb things she’s said about Pop being a grumpy old bastard. And, all her moaning that morning, and all the other mornings that they’ve ever made that long, boring drive to Leongatha. ♦
The potato cannot fly, nor can a sea cucumber. Life is filled with unexpected compromises. A scientist took an earthly potato and a nautical creature into the sky. They did alright. Well, really the potato was far more successful. The sea cucumber practically died. Some days I want a child so much I cannot breathe. As if my heart was meant for another atmosphere entirely, an ether with less oxygen pushing me to move on. Some days I make it. I am the potato.

But some days, my longing becomes its own sky of grief, and I am the sea cucumber, struggling in the arms of a stranger, in a metal miracle of ambition, using everything I have to hold on.
We finally talk babies,  
my lover & I. Him now at three months, twenty-two days  
sober & me twiddling fallopians at five years, 
two months & spare change. Today  

he asks me when I say sober time is our baby if I’m nursing metaphors (with damp nips & cloth naps & viscid infant shit—all the grossness the mommyblogs swear  
I would love) or if I am talking about an actual child. 

If I would love an actual child. 

I am carrying a brain & a spine & a howling.  

I would like to declare this a child. Drinking has turned  
into a metaphor for living without.  

Childlessness is not a simple not having, but a constant Lamaze:  
the in out—a taut being-ness of not having & not having & not having what I already quite literally haven’t got.  

Of course it’s a metaphor, I tell him. But what would you name it?  

A baby? He tries. I can feel that. Love is (not having) the answer.  

Lance.  

With a puncture, the name —lessness coos.
She stands barely five feet tall, and the hem of her white fur coat skims the linoleum. Perhaps it once hung a little shorter, before her shoulders and neck formed such a perfect curve. She has to peer up to make eye contact with the imposing gray-mustached man behind the cash register. Between her fresh maraschino lipstick and the white angora tam angled just so across her forehead, the glance is flirtatious.

“À bientôt, darling,” she rasps.

The cashier’s white polo shirt says “George” in black embroidery above the pocket. He reaches across the counter and takes the woman’s hand. “You have a wonderful weekend, Mrs. Ardley.” He shares a grin with the wiry black woman now sliding a twenty across the Formica with a check, fanning her fingers out to show no change needed and picking out one of the shrink-wrapped brownies in the basket by the register, all in one compact motion. “I hope this snow doesn’t interrupt you ladies’ plans.”

Mrs. Ardley turns to inch her gaze across the plate glass front window. Outside on Second Avenue, flurries swirl in great arcs across the yellow cabs and delivery trucks, pedestrians dodging the gusts. We’re in a life-sized snow globe, newly shaken. The diner falls silent for a moment.

“We shall find some appropriate way to celebrate the first day of spring regardless,” Mrs. Ardley pronounces. “Won’t we, Françoise?”

Françoise adjusts the feathery collar of the white fur coat more snugly around Mrs. Ardley’s neck and slides her hand down the curve to gently nudge her forward. “That we will, Mrs. A.,” she says. They move toward the door like a glacial parade and the cacophony of the diner resumes.

From my solo table by the window, I watch as they maneuver through the canvas weather vestibule, an awkward waltz in a very small ballroom. Françoise reaches one long arm around to hold open the door and uses the other to steady her charge, then slides to Mrs. Ardley’s left, cupping her elbow as they emerge onto the sidewalk, turning north. In the time it takes them to traverse the plate glass, George has rung up two more customers and worked through a stack of receipts with his calculator.

“Should someone flag them a cab?” I ask the waitress who comes to refill my coffee. She’s in her twenties, with a long brown braid and a sunny circle of a face, a slight accent—not Greek like George or Spanish like the delivery kid warming up at the counter between runs, but maybe Eastern European?

“They just go to apartment at corner,” the waitress says. “In here every day for late breakfast, 10:30 to 12 like the clock.”

As the last of Mrs. Ardley’s white coat slips out of my peripheral vision, I turn to take in the interior of the Townhouse Diner.

It’s maybe twelve feet wide but fifty feet deep, a mauve and maroon tunnel, a cartoon replica of a digestive tract if you’re in a certain state of mind. A row of booths along one wall, a line of two-tops across from them with a narrow passage in between, then a low glass partition, another skinny lane, and the counter with six stools. The kitchen parallels the counter, all stainless steel and fluttering order slips. I’ve already experienced the single bathroom clearly created from combining two smaller ones, the result
now big enough for a wheelchair but just barely, with chrome grab bars all around.

The Townhouse is at the northern end of the southern leg of Manhattan’s Bedpan Alley. NYU Medical Center hulks a block away, just above Bellevue and the VA Hospital. A few blocks south of there is Beth Israel; Sloan Kettering and New York-Presbyterian are a ten-minute ambulance ride due north. Every other storefront is a doctor’s office, and whole floors of the glossy condominium towers anchoring most blocks are given over to medical suites—Corinthian Health Associates, New York Dermatology Partners, East Side Gerontology Specialists. It’s a destination neighborhood for the ill and frail.

At least that’s how it seemed to me earlier that day as I stifled my gruesome cough along the wind-whipped sidewalks, skulking past impassive doormen, and up and down otherwise silent elevators within a four-block radius of the Townhouse. It was my second bout of bronchitis in twelve months, and my hacking had finally forced me out of my bed in Brooklyn and onto the subway to my doctor’s office in one of those medical condo warrens on East Thirty-Seventh Street.

My doctor’s name is Faust: If he has made a wager with the devil, it was for star-attending status at NYU and a booming in-house colonoscopy practice. My Dr. Faust is the opposite of tortured. He has a dry, no-nonsense bedside manner, a way of minimizing one’s presenting symptoms that I find very comforting. I also see him as rarely as possible. Twice in one year for the same damn thing was just irritating.

We made quick work of the exam that day (“No wheezing this time, which is good,” was his only comment after listening to my lungs) and moved into his office, where he proceeded to order a prescription for antibiotics and a nebulizer on his laptop. No more paper scripts, he explained—doctors in New York State now have to peck away at their screens, selecting drug and pharmacy from pull-down menus, typing in relevant instructions and hitting Send. “It’s hard for the older physicians,” Dr. Faust said, by which he clearly did not mean himself. I calculated that Faust is in his early sixties, a few years ahead of me.

On my way out of Faust’s office, doubled over with a coughing fit that felt like a sharp-clawed raptor trying to escape from inside my chest, I heard an echoing cough from out front. I emerged into the waiting area to see a red-faced grandfather being helped by a younger man and a matronly Hispanic woman. The son stroked the man’s back as they moved toward the seats. The woman pulled an oxygen tank on wheels and held the mouthpiece at the ready. The old man wept with the effort to breathe. I tried to catch his eye but he crouched into the banquette, gaze on the floor, gasping. The woman and I looked at each other, and I saw not the empathy I was hoping for but something fierce: Keep your strange germs away. I glanced back at them as I slipped out the door—a tight murmuring triptych. I wished I had someone to take my arm and calm the raptor today, and I wondered who will when I really need it, in what seemed like a rapidly impending future.

Out on the sidewalk, the snow had started to fly. I was wrung out, a rattling wreck, brittle enough to shatter into pieces with one trip over a crack, one bump from a bulkier passerby. I needed warmth and comfort, and there, as if by miracle, was the Townhouse.

Diners like the Townhouse have been havens for me since I first moved to New York more than thirty years ago. Many Saturday nights early on I circulated among several on the Upper East Side where I lived. I’d have been drinking and trying to write all afternoon—to fight
I would take my notebook into the first diner and order a pot of coffee and a turkey club and make it last for as long as I could, then move to more coffee and pie at the next one, then a glass of wine and more coffee and fries at the third. I’d end up with a dozen scrawled, stained pages and deep gratitude as I staggered my way home around midnight. Later I’d be part of a newly sober girl gang that occupied the same table in the same Greenwich Avenue dive in the West Village every day after every AA meeting, and would follow the Purity Diner in Park Slope, Brooklyn, as it moved ever southward on Seventh Avenue.

Along the way, I developed an appreciation for the odd comforts of the Greek diner: the encyclopedic, photo-decorated menus with handwritten inserts for the daily specials, the Athenian blue takeout cups, the identical little scoops of coleslaw, the sassy older waitress and the sweet younger one and the grouchy gray-haired guy with the heart of gold who runs the place. And the regulars: the long-married couple, the elegant former beauty, the Con Ed workers, the neighborhood scribe-drunks like me.

When I walk into the Townhouse, it’s all right there, along with a bud vase of silk flowers (rose, zinnia, carnation in shades of reddish pink) on each table and a pre-2001 aerial photo of Lower Manhattan taped over the wall vent above the cash register, the World Trade Center flapping gently with each gust of heat.

Sometimes in New York it takes just a whisper of grace—a seat opening on a crowded subway car just when I think my arms won’t last for another minute of strap-hanging; a grin along with my cocoa from the coffee cart guy on a freezing day when I really just need to hold a steaming cup; the bathroom key with no attitude from the Starbucks barista before I’ve even ordered my latte—to make me feel like the city can be a benevolent place. I don’t expect it to coddle me as a matter of course: If I wanted open parking spots and no lines all the time, I would have stayed in East Nowhere and not moved here in the first place. But I need the occasional sign of the benign to remind me that I belong.

The older I get, the more often I seem to need these small mercies, and the less I am willing to leave them to chance. Perhaps that’s why I suddenly feel I can see my future at the Townhouse Diner.

It’s not just Mrs. Ardley and her attendant. At the counter, a stocky man with a careful swoop of silver hair is drinking coffee, ruddy face still with concentration as he lifts the cup, shaking madly, to his lips; a tweed cap lies atop a stack of newspapers—the Times, the Journal, the International Herald Tribune—just to his left. In the center booth, a man and woman in matching Shetland sweaters, his charcoal and hers rose, share a short stack of pancakes, forks clashing. “Why we had to spend three grand for a hearing aid you can’t even operate properly, I’ll never know,” she announces. “Say again?” he answers.

Next to them, a woman with a twisted and pouffed bottle-blond coiffure cuts a hamburger into wedges for a girl of about six, whose pink Uggs are tap, tap, tapping against the banquette. “Your mother had me do this every time we went out for lunch,” the woman says. She reaches down and lays her manicured hand across the girl’s ankles. “Try not to fidget so.”

The tables along the glass divider are occupied by pairs of old white people and younger brown ones, clients and caregivers, patients and aides. One shrunken man, pale and hairless as a baby, stares unseeing as his coffee-colored companion dabs at his face with a napkin, while at the next table the aide plays with her phone while her frizzled gray date holds the menu an inch away from her nose on which rest two pairs of glasses, both with beaded cords swooping around
her neck. Three-toed canes and folded walkers jut out into the narrow aisle but the waitress never trips as she moves from table to table with her refill coffee pot. She knows where to step and where to bend, who to ask for what. They must all be Townhouse regulars.

From 2000 to 2010, Murray Hill-Kips Bay, the Census “Neighborhood Tabulation Area” that includes the Townhouse, saw an increase of 15 percent in residents aged sixty-two and up. Those over age eighty-five increased by more than 30 percent. Murray Hill-Kips Bay was one of half a dozen neighborhoods in Manhattan, and scores across the city, that saw double-digit increases in the elderly in this new century. Manhattan as a whole gained 20 percent, and New York City writ large more than 12 percent.

That’s nothing, the New York City Department for the Aging warns. The number of older New Yorkers is expected to increase by 45 percent to a total of 1.35 million by 2030, “when every member of the large baby-boomer cohort will be at least 65 years old.” In 2030, the elderly share of the city’s population is expected to be on par with the school-aged for the first time ever. Back in 1950, by contrast, there were twice as many kids as old people in New York.

What’s made the difference is that a growing segment of the graying demographic is not moving to Florida or someplace else warm, flat, and out of sight. They’re staying in the city or, in some cases, selling the Long Island or New Jersey house where they raised kids and moving into the city proper. Trading the 5,000-square-foot Colonial and two cars for a one-bedroom in an elevator building with a doorman and the necessitates of life a short walk or subway ride away: the doctor, the Met, the diner.

New York pioneered what is known in gerontology parlance as the NORC, Naturally Occurring Retirement Community. That’s a neighborhood, or in the case of New York, a building, that wasn’t originally intended for seniors but wakes up one day to find itself with a significant proportion of its residents over the age of sixty. Most often, this happens when people “age in place”—like that mythical New York hipster who scored a rent-controlled apartment in 1975 and still lives there forty years later, having resisted the centrifugal force of romance, gentrification, and 9/11. But NORCs are also created when elderly people move in to friendly mixed-age places, or when lots of younger people move out.

There are close to thirty NORCs in New York City scattered across the five boroughs. The first NORC was the Penn South Co-Op in Chelsea, established in 1986 when nearly half of the residents were over sixty-five; more than 2,500 elderly New Yorkers live there now, though Penn South isn’t the most “senior positive” NORC in the city, having been surpassed by places like Lincoln Guild on the Upper West Side and Co-op City in the Bronx. The city and various nonprofits coordinate “supportive services programs” to provide health-care referrals, social events, medi-trans buses, and technology lessons.

For most New Yorkers who live within range of Penn South or Kips Bay Towers or the like, they’re just places with lots of old people around.

And then you start to notice they’re not the only places: The elderly are on the rise in your neighborhood too. They’re squinting at the menu in your deli, inching down the stairs to the 6 train just ahead of you, rolling their walkers two abreast along the sidewalk when you’re late for work. If you’re part of the age eighteen-to-thirty counter-bulge of new New Yorkers, you may literally bump into them as you text your way across Union Square. If you’re a little closer to middle age, you think guiltily of your mom while you grouse to the building manager about the backup at the elevator. And if you’re
like me, closer to NORC eligibility than any other census stripe, you watch them with terrified fascination. Will that be me soon with lipstick on my chin and Velcro shoe straps undone, blocking traffic at Gristedes while I try to remember what I came down this aisle for?

When my heart stops palpitating, I remember that I have a couple of functional models for growing old in the city. One is my husband’s great-aunt Evelyn, a mezzo-soprano at the Metropolitan Opera. Evelyn’s stage heyday was in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when she had an album released and her portrait painted. She married a cardiologist/art collector with severe bipolar disorder. During good times, Evelyn and Morris held salons at their two-bedroom co-op on East Sixty-Eighth Street near Park Avenue, and helped my husband, an art school student-escapee from the Miami suburbs, find his footing in New York. During rough times, Morris would rage against Evelyn’s imagined infidelities; once, he sent her dead roses and half a bottle of flat champagne for Valentine’s Day, and spent the rest of that spring in a locked ward at Payne Whitney. Evelyn was unflappably elegant through it all, though she did carry a flask of bourbon in her purse for a few years after Morris died, sneaking ladylike sips. In the early 2000s, when she was in her seventies, she was diagnosed with a kidney ailment and had to go for dialysis three times a week. She bought a Discman, and later an iPod, and tracked the duration of each treatment against the number of operas she could listen to while hooked up to the machines. A lovely Filipino woman named Maria moved into the spare bedroom to help Evelyn with various “activities of daily living,” as they say in eldercare circles. Right up until she suffered the major stroke that took her out in 2008, Evelyn was dressed up and made up every day, either to receive company or make her rounds in the neighborhood. Once a month or so she’d put on her good jewelry to go to the Met or have dinner out with us and other younger relatives, two at a time. When the very slight rise up Sixty-Eighth Street to her apartment started seeming like an after-dinner mountain climb, she’d regally slow her pace, and the doorman would walk out into the building’s curved drive to escort her to the elevator. You’d have to look closely to see that she was flagging toward the end of the evening, and more often than not she’d change the subject with the wave of a hand. “Now you must tell me what you made of [insert au courant cultural event here] while I collect my thoughts,” she’d say. “More tea?”

The other model I think of is our first landlady in Brooklyn. Sue Casazza and her younger sister Viola had lived in the brownstone on Carroll Street near Fifth Avenue (the dodgier side of Park Slope in those days) since their father bought it for the family sometime after World War II. Sue was in her seventies when we moved in. She had the garden apartment, Viola and her husband, Vincent, lived on the top floor, and our floor-through was in between. Sue and Viola communicated by shouting up and down the stairwell through their open apartment doors. If any message was too complicated, or if there was snow to be shoveled or garbage to be hauled, Vincent would be dispatched to take care of it. Every day around 8 a.m., Sue stepped out her front door under the stoop, unlatched the knee-high cast-iron gate leading to the sidewalk, and slowly traversed the two long blocks to Our Lady of Peace Roman Catholic Church next to the Gowanus Canal for 9 o’clock Mass.

After church, Sue would make her way back up Carroll to “the Associated” to pick up a few groceries, maybe go a block further to the meat store, then spend the rest of her day cooking, hollering with Vi up the stairwell, and fielding phone calls.
from her adult sons on Staten and Long
Islands. In between, she’d walk the rosary
around the moss green carpet in her
kitchen, a kind of devotional
constitutional. “Thirteen steps this way,
Hail Mary full of grace,” Sue might say if
we stopped down to pick up a package or
drop off the rent check. “Seven steps this
way, blessed art thou among women.
Keeps the blood moving.” The rug was
marked with a perfect rectangle path
from her pacing.

When we moved out, friends of ours
took the apartment and kept us up to
date. Sometime around 1999, Vincent
died of a heart attack, and Viola moved
downstairs into Sue’s apartment to avoid
the stairs. Sue passed in the early aughts;
our friends weren’t sure from what or
where—one day, she was just gone,
leaving Vi surrounded by lilies in
cellophaned baskets in the suddenly quiet
kitchen. I like to think Sue completed
some mystical number of steps in her
rosary and was transported straight to
heaven by the BVM herself.

What do Evelyn and Sue and Mrs.
Ardley from the Townhouse Diner
whisper to me about getting old in the
city? Get lucky with real estate. Buy or be
related to someone who can help with the
stuff you can’t do. Find one or two places
to go every single day and keep walking
your path. No matter how slowly, keep
walking.

How hard could that be?

I ask myself that when I count the
stairs in my house: fifty, not including the
five up the porch to the front door. I am
ridiculously fortunate to live here, in a
place we bought for cheap twenty years
ago when the neighborhood was slowly
emptying out. It’s filling back up again
with young families delirious over the
amount of space, the backyards, front
yards, and driveways. But I am haunted
by the memory of those who left: retirees
who couldn’t manage the stairs anymore.
A friend of mine from San Francisco tells
me about her landlord, who lives in the
top floor of their four-story building and is
drawing up plans for an elevator to take
him, with or without a small wheelchair,
from street level straight up to his
terrace, so he can stay in his apartment
until he dies. Assuming City Zoning
approves.

I ask myself how hard it could be when
I recall that I neglected to have children.
They say your best insurance against
ending up in a nursing home is to have a
daughter or daughter-in-law. That worked
out pretty well for my mother, who spent
her twenty-four-month broken-hip
countdown tended by her kids in her own
house. It’s possible that my nieces and the
future wives of my nephews will step out
of their lives to take care of me when the
time comes, no doubt prompted by
memories of the time I introduced them to
vintage shopping or listened to their
guitar compositions—but they’ll have my
siblings, their parents and in-laws, to
attend to. Instead, I overpay for long-term
care insurance, the kind that promises
coverage even if you retire in a foreign
country, even if you want to die at home
surrounded by pool boys, and hope that
neither I nor the provider go bust before I
can collect.

Given how challenging and expensive
an urban dotage might be to engineer,
what’s the real appeal of getting old in
New York, or any city? It can’t just be that you can walk to the dry cleaner, or that you have a pick of museums within a few blocks, though both of those are appealing. I think it might have something to do with aging in public. Insisting on being visible in a world that would just as soon deny everything you represent: infirmity, obsolescence, death.

Through that lens, it’s not so surprising that the first NORCs were in New York City. Where else are you going to find senior citizens pugnacious enough to stay put when everything around them says: Please pack up and go to Boca, or at least to Shady Burb Assisted Living where we won’t have to confront your wrinkled visage on a daily basis?

I’ll tell you where else: China. In Shanghai, Beijing, and the rapidly urbanizing parts of China, there are millions of retirees, many of them young by U.S. standards—up until recently, the mandatory retirement age for women in China was fifty-five, for men sixty. The former one-child policy and the current two-child policy mean that their grandparental responsibilities are focused but light: typically picking up children from school and babysitting till the working parents come home. The rest of their day is unfilled. And so they gather in city parks and plazas just after dawn and at dusk, crank up the boom box, and dance.

It’s a wonder to watch. Out of nowhere, scores of women with frizzy perms, tracksuits, and sneakers, often with a smattering of similarly garbed men, assemble flash-mob style in a city square. A group instructor hits play and leads the assembled through maneuvers that would not look out of place on a cruise ship: synchronized stepping and turning, aerobic arm gestures and a big finish, all to the Mandarin version of American hits from the 1980s and ’90s. Usually there’s a soaring ballad in there somewhere, and out come the bright paper fans, turning the square into a pop-opera house.

Commuters and delivery workers have to detour around the “dancing grannies” while the music echoes in the canyons of the huge apartment blocks lining every street.

Hence the controversy: Urban dwellers who pay a premium to live near the parks and plazas can’t stand the noise. They call the police and complain to local officials, and one guy even dumped human waste from his tenth-floor terrace onto the dancers down below. The central government has now come up with a set of less raucous, more classically correct routines with accompanying music that public dancers are supposed to use, but so far the dancing grannies have shown little inclination to comply—and no doubt no Chinese municipal police chief wants to be the first to appear to be dragging his own mother off to jail.

Meanwhile, in the same parks and plazas, tight clusters of old men play poker or Mahjong and smoke like dragons—ten or twenty to a group, forming a high-emissions human dome over each available concrete table. Though their regular banter sounds like the start of a street brawl as they shout over every winning play, the gambling grandpas haven’t yet attracted public pushback. They’re perhaps not quite so in-your-face as an old lady in bright pink sweatpants busting a move to The Black Eyed Peas.

I wonder how New Yorkers would react if the Penn South NORC seniors gathered daily on the High Line for a mass Electric Slide? What if Mrs. Ardley insisted on leading the Townhouse regulars in a conga line around the diner each noon? They’re probably smart to wait until that magic moment when the last baby boomer turns sixty-five and there’s demographic safety in numbers.

In the meantime, the city keeps evolving at an accelerating pace. Perhaps that’s another appeal of aging in place:
The constant jangle of change keeps the pulse pumping. It’s only when the outside matches your insides—when decline and loss form a backbeat under the peppy melody of progress—that getting old in the city seems sad.

Back at the Townhouse, just as I’m about to pay my check, two guys in suits walk in. “Are you the owner?” the shorter one asks.

George shakes his head. “My brother.”

The second guy pulls out a sealed ivory envelope. “Here’s the offer the new building owners promised.” He looks around the diner as if calculating the square footage in his head. “They’d like to hear back by Monday if possible.”

George nods again, balancing the envelope between his palms.

The shorter guy suddenly seems to notice that the waitresses, the line cook, and the delivery kid are looking hard at the two of them. “We sincerely hope your family will give it consideration,” he says, backing toward the door. The other guy taps a business card down on the counter, and then they are gone.

George looks down at the envelope for a few beats then turns his eyes toward the plate glass window and the maroon awning above it now drooping with accumulated snow. His shoulders slump to match.

The Shetland sweater couple approach with their check and he tucks the envelope next to the register. “Mr. and Mrs. Richards!” he booms. “You have a wonderful time with your son this weekend. This snow, don’t let it trouble your plans.” ♦
GRAY WOLF STUDY

Canine and incisor teeth

Enlight 1 by Carol Wellart
Fall, Environmental Politics, and the Retirement of Vin Scully

fiction by Jack C. Buck

I’m being sentimental, walking through the park, watching the leaves leave. *Don’t leave, leaves, stay up there yellow and red forever.*

I know the leaves have to fall. It’s part of the cycle, we all know this. Gluing the leaves back onto the trees would be unnatural; they might look okay from afar, but up close it would be too weird.

People are raking the leaves in piles to put into garbage bags. Apparently they can’t stand the sight of leaves. I want to shove the people into a garbage bag and put them out on the side of the road. Let them see how it feels.

People used to burn their unwanted leaves, but a group of activists raised hell about it back in the ’70s, so now people rake them into bags instead. Though, when it comes down to it, who am I to say or decide? My anarchist friend told me it’s none of my business what people do with their leaves, and it sure as shit ain’t the Government’s business either. He is missing my point. Despite what it seems, it isn’t about the leaves.

I don’t want to argue politics with my friend, so I let him go on about it. I wish I had his energy. I’m getting tired these days. Somewhere in there I mention to my friend how leaves are a natural part of our ecosystem and, when decomposed, provide necessary nutrients to the soil.

I teach fourth grade at a local public school. We had a lesson on decomposition a couple weeks back.

He tells me to stop acting like leaves are superior to humans. Says I need to be careful about teaching my environmental agenda to kids.

The park is just around the corner—two blocks from my apartment. It’s a convenient loop to walk around and get sentimental if you feel like it. Other times you can go for a run and get pumped. Even though construction of high-rise condos has become more frequent in the city, they will probably never tear down this park. For that I am thankful.

Rent is only increasing, maybe I should look into being a leaf. I will if I need to. At least then I can save up for retirement. For the time being, living in a tree is free.

On my walk, I also think about how it’s sad that Vin Scully isn’t announcing the Cubs-Dodgers game tonight, such a big game, even though the Dodgers are going to lose to the Cubs. Selfishly I wish he could continue announcing the games forever. I don’t even like the Dodgers, but he’s a familiar voice I don’t want leaving us. It’s sort of like the leaves up in the trees and how we don’t want them to leave. How rude of me to think he doesn’t have other things going on in his life besides baseball. Of course he does. It’s time for him to go.

In a past life I made really cool, bad, poor quality YouTube videos of my favorite songs playing over clips of camera footage of nature: like, a shot of a slow-going stream, then a quick jerk of the camera to zoom in on the canopy of the forest swaying in the wind. The internet is wild now, but it was real wild back then. It was the new frontier—a free-for-all. The internet made you think you could do anything. I was insane enough back then to think I was going to save the planet. I thought if I made enough of those music/nature videos then maybe the world’s collective conscience would awaken to my beliefs. I was convinced I could save all those leaves. ♦
BREAKDOWN OF DOE

While males are
called bucks, the females
are called does, and they are
distinct both physically and behaviorally.

Does are different than males, and they
are more hands-on approach to parenting their young;

A doe reproduces regularly throughout her life,
though she can start producing at the age of 1.
And will continue giving birth to one or
more fawns once a year.

the Biology
ART

Breakdown of Doe by Carol Wellart
Indian Summer

poetry by Genevieve Betts

For the late mother, love erupts
like acid reflux, unfurls a spiral galaxy
like the ones in the blind owl’s eyes.

Summer’s nearly over.
You can tell because fat sunflowers
cast their gaze downward

and cicadas drop dead from the sky,
litter hot sidewalks after their last
buzzy lullaby.

Even the children’s clothes foretell
the season’s end—mud splatters
and grass smears and lightning bug entrails.

Gunshots are fewer now. We will soon
open the windows to autumn coolness,
feel it unfold over Brooklyn rooftops.
New Light

poetry by Genevieve Betts

I want to speak the language of
crickets and circuits, circus elephants,
crushed velvet and poetry and tar pits.
My eyes are crammed with skyscrapers.

I want to look at every flower’s center
as the face of God—the mascara-black
asterisk striking the inside of the tulip cup,
the pollen-tipped whiskers of the tiger lily,
the iris’ beard, purple and unfurling
like a bridge’s backbend into an island.

The poor daffodils spent all spring
with their faces in the rain sludge.

So did I, for that matter, trying to mumble
through my trumpet-mouth, muddled shut.

I will have to speak a new yellow,
the saturated canary of the sun,
burn a new light in place of the old one.
“You were drunk,” said Dean Harris.

Claire Gold closed her eyes.

At the annual Chisholm Address she had interrupted a lecture given by the renowned Professor Unwin.

In advance, Claire had vehemently distrusted the relevance of his oration—attendance compulsory—to her studies. Moreover, she was filled with contempt for any fool who could still find redemptive qualities in Stalin’s Russia, even—no, especially—if he hailed from Oxford. Having lost two great uncles, doctors both, in the purges of 1936, she could not bear listening to an apologist for a paranoid, psychopathic regime. So, knowing what the day held in store, she had charged herself with a breakfast of Coopers Pale Ale, washed down with four, or it may have been five, Extra Añejo tequila shots. Halfway through the discourse, she had risen to her feet, a diminutive loaf of bread powered by too much yeast. She had suggested to the great man that he had obviously neglected to consider Irving Berlin’s profound couplet on communism.

Professor Unwin had inclined his head courteously, giving her the floor.

“The world would not be in such a snarl,” she’d said, “If Marx had been Groucho instead of Karl.”

Dean Harris recalled her to the present. “Why should your scholarship not be revoked?”

She felt hectic colour rising to her cheeks and knew her wild red hair would match it. As always, she was embarrassed. Not everyone turned scarlet in extremis.

She shook her head. She wanted to write. That was all. Ever. And she was broke. News of the writing scholarship almost had made her believe in the efficacy of prayer, but it had come at a cost—the necessity of completing a bachelor of arts. Along with the writing components, her attention would be forced upon sociology, psychology, and post-modernism. These she considered to be among the most pissantr subjects of academic inquiry, worse even than astrology. They were fit only for investigation by lunatics and layabouts.

“If she’d lived, Hannah Arendt would be 110 today,” Claire said, hating herself for not keeping quiet.

The dean was irritated. “I fail to see—”

“I spent the night reading Eichmann in Jerusalem in her honour. And her notes on the banality of evil. In memory of my grandparents.”

“Which is relevant to your personal situation, how?”

The blood so recently saturating Claire Gold’s face seemed to leave it with even greater alacrity. She sat silently, unwilling or unable to speak further. She was well aware that Dean Harris was an Australian Jew of Anglo-convict rather than Holocaust-survivor stock. Why, she did not know, but he had gifted her with that information at their very first interview, filling her with misgiving. She knew his type: loath to be reminded of his origins; losing all patience with what he saw as survivor self-dramatization. She hated that he could so carelessly cheapen the valour of those who had outlasted the Thousand Year Reich.

What should she, could she, do as the offspring of first- and second-generation survivors? They had bequeathed her a legacy which forever cursed her to cling to
a tradition of persecution. Look at bloody Harris; neither Jew nor Christian would ever guess at his ethnicity. His must be a far easier way to navigate the rapids of being a Jew.

And now when she needed them no words came.

“All right,” he said. “You can’t, or won’t, explain it to me, but perhaps you could write it. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To write. Not drink. I’ll give you forty-eight hours. If your words pass muster, I will speak to the board on your behalf. If I find them wanting …” He left the sentence hanging.

“I might need more time.”

The dean smiled—more a grimace, really.

“How much?”

“Four days, five?”

“If you think it will help.”

She saw he didn’t really care and without warning, she shivered.

According to my mother (Claire wrote), my grandparents met across barbed wire. My grandfather risked both their lives when he’d achieved serendipitous access to a loaf of bread. All he could think to do with the treasure was to give some to his one surviving brother and throw the rest over the electrified Jew-proof fence into the hands of the seventeen-year-old Jewish-Hungarian princess, who would become the love of his life, the bane of it.

So he threw the bread. She caught it and was caught with it. A kapo—a Jew, a lowly fellow prisoner, who hated my grandmother’s haughty insistence on cleanliness—slapped her face and reported her to the camp commander who came into the women’s barracks that very day, his gun loosely holstered, to find her sweeping the floor.

He watched her for a while. Hungarian Jews came to the camps in 1944, late in the war, relatively well-fed, untraumatised. And Hungarian women had a reputation for beauty. The kapo watched the camp commander watching her. He took her hands in his as, startled, she allowed the broom to clatter to the floor.

He gazed at her palms, their improbable softness, their whiteness, their clean smoothness.

“Fräulein, I see these hands have not had much to do with brooms.”

Fluent in many languages, she looked at him, green-eyed, willing the fear out of her voice and even out of her bloodstream so he shouldn’t feel its tremor through her fingers. He might as soon shoot her as hold her hands for the crime of catching bread.

“Perhaps not with brooms, Sir,” she said in German. “But with other things, these hands are gifted indeed.”

He forgot about the bread and the wire. That was surely her intention. He forgot to ask who threw it. That, even more so. He took her away from the broom to a room where the kapo could not watch and where questions asked with words had no purchase.

What did my grandmother think about, I often wondered, when for weeks every year my grandfather left her in the hands of psychiatrists and hospitals? When the wires were tripped, when they frayed and snapped in spasms of remembering? I had no way of knowing but suspected that Australian-born victims of bipolar disorder weren’t plagued by recollections of Josef Mengele pushing them to the right and their mothers, clutching their baby brothers, to the left, to the gas, where the only way out was up.

That story, about her grandmother and the camp commander, was catapulted into Claire’s teenage consciousness by an Israeli cousin whose grandfather was her grandmother’s half-brother. It belied the notion that there were no gossips within, and later without, the camps, daring to judge the morality of another survivor’s actions. Claire always felt proud that her
grandmother had chosen the slight chance of life over death. It was her daughter, Amy, and granddaughter, Claire, she had chosen, even though she couldn’t have known it then.

Claire pondered, her fingers trembling above the keys. Her mother had treated her only with kindness. No discipline, no harsh words. As though compensating for her own parents’ harsh, pre-Holocaust rearing.

“Darling, the teacher rang:
“You talk too much in class;
“You haven’t handed in your last two assignments;
“You your locker is always untidy;
“You never remember your gym shoes.
“What do you think we should do?”

Claire wondered if her mother thought that the simple act of reminding her would cure what ailed her but it never did. Much of the time Claire simply thought, So what! Grandmother Ruth’s memories or Grandfather Ezekiel’s stories rendered so much of her life irrelevant by comparison.

Now, as she tried to write things down, wasn’t she simply turning excruciating truths into stories—stories, for God’s sake—to make them palatable for the dean? She was sickened by the thought.

When I was only fifteen (Claire wrote) I remember saying to my mother, “Now I know I can trust you.”

“Because?” she asked.

“Because you told me the truth and now I know what to expect,” I said.

Although she was already drowsy, under the influence of a pre-anaesthesia agent prior to cancer surgery, I still couldn’t stop myself from asking her: “Why you?”

“That’s my question, sweetheart,” my mother replied. “Why me? But I already know the answer. A gift to Ashkenazi Jews —like Hitler and death camps were to your grandparents’ generation. It’s the BRCA1 gene. I have it. No bosom is sacred. I have instructed the doctor to excise it.”

I meant to say to her, your bosom is sacred, but what came out was, “Does that mean I have the gene too?”

Nearly a decade later, in the wake of the Columbine High School massacre, my mother turned away from the television and sat in uncharacteristic silence until I asked her what she was thinking.

“Gun control,” she said. “This disaster wouldn’t have happened if there had been proper gun control.”

I waited.

“But,” she said, “do you think that if every Jewish family had had one gun, only one, that they could have rounded us all up like that?” She said ‘us,’ even though she and I had been born after the fact.

As Claire walked the streets of Carlton, remembering, she thought it was not fair that the dean’s words could exist alongside the mild temperatures and pale blue skies of a Melbourne spring. There should have been black clouds, lacerating rain, and southerly gales. Instead, dark grey sand over clay rendered the lawns an intense green under the sun. Bright flowers against old stone buildings dazzled her—daffodils with their golden trumpets; coral and black oriental poppies; snowdrops and lavender, sweet william, crocuses, and primroses. The drought had so recently broken that she thought she could never tire of gazing at them, breathing in their scent. She had almost forgotten what it was like to live in the midst of colour and fragrance.

Jimmy Watson’s was a bar and restaurant in Carlton, close to the university. She waitressed there on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights and had become friendly with another waiter, an Irish backpacker heading off soon to explore the communes in New South Wales. Claire wished she could
follow him. She would be safe with him. He seemed always to know exactly where he was.

He laughed. “I have to go before my visa runs out,” he said. “You can go any time. Why wouldn’t you?”

“I have this phobia.”

He actually took a step back.

“I’m always afraid I’ll get lost,” she said. “Even in the city. I can get disoriented in a minute. And GPS doesn’t always help.”

“That’s a bit weird.”

“It’s very weird. I worry I might never find my way home.”

She didn’t know why she had confided that. It had always been something she thought needed concealing. She certainly didn’t want to explain that many of her ancestors had been forced from their homes in 1941, so that even after four years had passed and it was all supposedly over, they had never been able to make their way home again. On the property they had appropriated, their erstwhile neighbours were waiting to kill them if they tried to recover their homes, their land, and their belongings.

Her assignment lay heavy. She still had to find more words. Where?

So many years ago, drowsy, waiting for the surgeon, Claire’s mother had talked and talked. Her stories had seared themselves into Claire’s consciousness. The dean didn’t deserve them but she knew she would give them to him anyway. As she prepared to write, she conjured up her mother’s words. They seemed to fly straight from her remembering mind to her fingertips where the keyboard caught them.

In Yiddish there is a saying: Shver tsayn a yid—It is difficult to be a Jew. My mother learned it at her father’s knee, before he pulled that knee out from under her.

My maternal grandparents were on the right side of the world at last, having escaped the maw of Auschwitz, having met there, in fact, and fallen in love—fallen in something, leastways—and married once the insanity was over. Not that they ever escaped it. You don’t inhabit such madness without carrying it with you for the rest of your lives. You pass it on, this deformed inheritance, to generations which come after so that they never forget the culture of survival and victimhood.

But a culture of mercantilism was also passed on. The baggage my kin schlepped from one side of the world to another contained much more than psychosis and affliction. Two overlocker sewing machines accompanied my grandparents on their six-week boat trip across the Indian Ocean, which made me the grandchild not just of survivors but of some of the early boat people.

I’ve heard it said that all white Australians— to extrapolate, all humanity—were boat people of one stripe or another. Stripes, stars ... not flags and freedom but the yellow Star of David emblazoned upon the vermin-ridden, grey-and-white striped pyjamas in which the Nazis clad their concentration camp inmates. I was the grandchild of that sort of boat couple.

Claire knew that her grandparents and their ilk were called New Australians. Even now, when they would have been quite old Australians, they would still be New. They died never having been to a football match or eaten a meat pie. Paul Hogan and Kylie Minogue passed them by, although they took her mother to see Danny Kaye as well as the Mickey Mouse Club. They also made sure she was part of an audience that witnessed Dame Margot Fonteyn in glorious flight with Rudolf Nureyev. Doing all that, they were convinced, was the best way of giving their daughter a truly Australian childhood. It certainly wasn’t an Eastern
European, Orthodox Jewish childhood. They never agreed on much but were unanimous in refusing to replicate the small-town, narrow-minded theocratic fascism which had blighted both their childhoods before the real fascists arrived.

In the Łódź Ghetto, in Auschwitz and in the labour camp named Goerlitz, they called my grandfather, “My Lord.” He was tall for a Jew—almost six feet—and handsome in the way of Gregory Peck, women would tell him, often shamelessly, in his young daughter’s presence. He was brave, too, I was told by those who had known him, and I had no reason to doubt them. He became the valet of a camp commander and stole food intended for the German shepherds to divide among those from his shtetl and, of course, for his wife-to-be.

Repressed anger and a sense of powerlessness would plague him the rest of his life. He relived the images of his little brothers being taken from him, disappearing like Hansel and Gretel into the Grimm Teutonic ovens.

Ezekiel, what is it? Ruth would ask him as he woke us in the night, crying out with dreams of flight and pursuit. But who really knew what he dreamed, what he remembered? Those stories he never told.

I know that my mother never did discover the catalyst for my grandparents’ decision to cede guardianship over her. She never asked—that was her strategy for staying sane—and no one ever said, which was theirs. She told me that she was dropped off at her uncle’s seaside home—not for the first time, so she wasn’t afraid—and that she would be picked up in a couple of days. Which stretched into weeks, months. She was nine. Sometimes her parents came back as abruptly as they had left—such hugging and crying—only to leave again.

The last time she remembered, her mother exchanged a glance with her father, saying, “We should go out in the boat, just the three of us.”

“We should,” he agreed.

“Sophie,” he said to Amy’s aunt, “when was the last time you used it? Is it in good working order? Should we give it a test run before we take the child out?”

Sophie shrugged. The ways of her mad brother-in-law and even madder sister were a mystery.

“We haven’t used that boat since you were last here,” she replied.

“Then,” said Ruth, “let’s you and I take it out for a little spin. Just you and I, Ezekiel.”

Ezekiel smiled and agreed and my mother said they both embraced her quite fiercely. She wondered whether hugs were supposed to hurt like that. And they waved to her for a long time on the sun-dappled water until they drifted out of sight beyond the inlet.

The stories had become a weight my grandmother could not bear. It was no longer enough to share them with my grandfather. It was a given that he would hold her fast. To hear him tell it, he had been born—no, destined—to offer her succour. But telling him her troubles had become like telling them to herself. There was no catharsis. So when they took that little boat out, their daughter watched them from the shore. She saw her father turn around, giving her his last glance before asking Ruth which direction she wanted to take.

Once upon a time, the Kabbalists said, God was so lonely that he withdrew the boundlessness of his presence, which occupied the totality of the universe, in order to make room for the world to be formed. It broke him. The enormity of his withdrawal, mingled with the enormity of his passion to create something beyond his own infinitude, shattered the Divine Oneness, causing the sparks of his immortal light to be flung to all
extremities of the earth. And from that time until the present, it has become humanity’s sacred charge to find and gather every one of those sparks, returning them to the Presence so he and his creation might again be whole.

Surely sparks flew through the air as my grandfather flung his love over that wire. And, as it landed in hands not bred for sweeping, were not these flashes of light stored in those very hands for the Holy One’s redemption? Yet in considering the process of their emigration—whence they left nothing behind and did not know towards what they were sailing—I lost sight of what their stories made them out to be. I lost sight of what I had not been alive to see and yet to which I was obliged to bear witness. Now I could only imagine the covetous darkness that must have drawn around them as they and their little vessel—just you and I, Ezekiel—sank.

Did they hold each other’s hands? Stupid question. They held hands even as they slept.

Once in a lucid dream my mother said she reproached them: “You shouldn’t have left me.”

“We had to,” my grandmother replied in the dream. “You weren’t enough. It’s not your fault. No one could have blocked out what we saw. Certainly not a single child.”

What do you think about, Hannah Arendt? Claire wondered. How would you classify such pain—theirs, my mother’s, and mine? There was little comfort to be gleaned when Claire contemplated what might have awaited her grandparents on the cold ocean floor. She found it hard to believe they would meet God in his Oneness, full of holy desire to reclaim the sparks they had gathered for him at such great cost to themselves.

In the end Claire knew that the boat was never found and it made her glad, their total vanishing. It left open the question of their final destination. Who was to say where they ultimately alighted?

For it had always seemed to her that in the water, but especially on boats, people are somehow stripped of their humanity. They are a cluster of indeterminate refugees, clinging to the sides, hoping their vessel won’t capsize. They are nameless and stateless. It is not until they stride the firmness of the earth—whether struggling from the primordial ooze for the very first time or leaving that ark beached improbably upon the mountain; either emerging from the Red Sea or disembarking at Port Melbourne after the German nightmare; or finding sanctuary in Germany after the Syrian nightmare—that they can hope to lay claim to any sort of distinctive identity. But hasn’t it always been so, since the very first child rode the very first wave out of the womb and into the light?

Ex post facto, surely the dean would understand. He had to be able to make the connection between her grandparents’ boat, their wild dash towards oblivion, and her own fierce leap into an academic chasm, challenging the conformist stance in memory of her grandparents’ bravery.

She ripped open the envelope. At a glance read the dean’s note.

“Dear Ms. Gold ...”

She closed her eyes, as though not looking at his words might somehow change them. Still she thought she could understand his thought process, could actually peer over his shoulder as he took a blade to her dreams.

Bloody Jews, he would have whispered as the keys beneath his fingers began to click. ♦
The Easiest Thing in the World

*fiction by Ryan Napier*

My poor brother. He had a terrible problem. He didn’t know it, but I did.

I always knew, on some level. But one summer night, the problem became very clear.

We sat down to supper—him, Mom, and me. I was home from a double shift. My brother was fourteen and about to start high school. And Mom was Mom.

The house was full of my favorite smell in the world—boiled potatoes. Mom had made hotdish.

I said grace and held out my plate. Mom picked up her spatula. And then my brother said it.

“I don’t want to take German anymore,” he said. “I want to learn Spanish.”

“Oh,” said Mom. She scooped hotdish onto my plate.

I laughed. “Nobody in Nininger Prairie speaks Spanish,” I said.

“Nobody speaks German either.”

“But we’re German. Or our ancestors were, anyway.”

“I know.”

“So why do you want to learn Spanish?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It seems exciting. It seems different.”

It was then that I knew his life would be very hard.

I was right, of course.

He took Spanish for four years. And then he told us he wanted to study Spanish in college.

I told him not to bother—with Spanish and with college. I had quit college after one semester. I got a job at Target. I worked hard, and I moved up. I started on the register, and now I was the assistant district manager for all of southwestern Minnesota. I had a house and a wife. I was very happy.

My brother could have been happy too. But he didn’t listen to me. He got a degree in Spanish. He moved to the Cities. He was unemployed. He came back. He found a part-time job teaching Spanish at Nininger Prairie Middle School.

He was very unhappy. “It’s the same old thing,” he said. “Hola. ¿Cómo estás? Muy bien, ¿y tú? The faces change every year, but the words stay the same.”

I tried to help. We met every Sunday at Mom’s house for supper, and every Sunday, I offered him a job at one of my stores. “You’ll start at the bottom,” I said. “But you’ll work your way up.”

“I have a job,” he said.

I showed him the numbers. He would earn more at Target than as a teacher. And still he refused.

Every week I offered, and every week he refused.

I couldn’t understand. So one Sunday I asked: Why not change? Why not be happy?

“It’s not so easy,” he said. “I like things about the job. I get to expose my students to other cultures.”

What he meant was that besides *hola* and *cómo estás*, he also taught his kids about Spanish countries—Mexico, Puerto Rico, South America, that kind of thing.

“I’ll show you,” he said. He went to his car and came back with a green folder full of worksheets—one worksheet for every culture. He gave me the worksheet for a country called Costa Otra. *COSTA OTRA*, it said, *TIerra del Encanto*. I did not ask what it meant.

“It’s a totally different life there,” said my brother. The worksheet had a drawing of some Costa Otrans sitting at a long
table, drinking and laughing. One of them was playing a guitar. His mouth was open in a big O. Behind the people were mountains and fog and fat orange flowers.

“I like teaching kids about places like this,” he said. “I like showing them that there’s a different place—a place with no Target, no prairie, no hotdish.”

“Come on,” I said. “I want to help you. Take the job.”

He refused. He said he wouldn’t be happy.

It was his terrible problem again. He was making everything too difficult. He was making himself miserable. Happiness isn’t something you make yourself miserable over. Happiness is the easiest thing in the world. It makes you solid. It makes you strong.

“Look at me,” I told him. “I’m very happy.”

It was Christmas. We went to church in the morning. When we came home, Mom started to make the ham. I poured two glasses of milk and told my brother to come into the living room.

We stood in front of the tree and drank our milk.

I leaned close to him and whispered, “Mom turns sixty this year.”

He touched one of the Snoopy ornaments and watched it sway.

“We need to talk about her party.”

“Her birthday’s in June,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “We have a lot of work to do.” There was a restaurant to rent, uncles and cousins to invite, plane tickets and hotel rooms to book, gifts to buy, speeches to write, balloons to inflate.

“I can’t,” he said.

“Can’t what?”

“Can’t go. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. I’ve been saving. As soon as school gets out, I’m going to take a trip.”

I took a big drink of milk. He poked Snoopy again.

“I’m going to Costa Otra,” he said.

I told him he had to come to the party. He was part of the family. It was her sixtieth birthday.

“You’re always worried that I’m unhappy,” he said. “This will make me happy.”

I tried to help him. I told him, as always, that happiness came from simple things—family, work, planning—and not from difficult trips to strange places.

He didn’t listen. He bought his ticket to Costa Otra.

He would get back from Costa Otra on June 29. I moved the party to June 30.

On the last day of the school year, I picked him up at his school. He put his luggage in the bed of my truck, and I drove to the airport.

I had never heard him talk so much. He told me about Costa Otra—the food he would eat, the songs he would sing, the mountains he would climb, the ancient ruins he would see.

“It’s a different life there,” he said.

I told him about all the planning I had to do while he was gone—the helium tank to rent, the playlist to make, the cousins to pick up at the airport.

“Come with me,” he said. “It would be good for you.”

My poor brother.

We were silent for a while. When we got to the airport, I parked at the curb. We gave each other a one-armed hug.

“Okay then,” I said. “Goodbye.”

“Adiós.”

Two days passed. I drove to Walnut Grove and rented the helium tank. I listened to my party playlist and decided to move “The Chicken Dance” to later in the evening. I went to the grocery, ordered a cake, and gave them notes on how to frost
it. I worked hard.

And then, when I came home from the grocery, I saw the email.

My brother had written to Mom and me. Something had happened in Costa Otra, he said. Something wonderful. Something life-changing.

He had gone to the beach.

The email was very long. He spent a paragraph on the sand, and another paragraph on the waves. He told us, again and again, how different it was from home. “Even the people are different,” he wrote. “Costa Otrans laugh all the time. They talk with their hands. They shout the kinds of things that we would whisper. I sat on my towel at the beach and listened to them—or tried to listen, anyway. Costa Otrans talk fast, and they have thick accents. I’m used to ‘Hola! ¿Cómo estás? Muy bien, ¿y tú?’ I barely understood anything. But I could tell: They are so happy.”

And so he had made a decision.

He was going to finish his vacation, but he wasn't going to fly home. He was going to look for a job—teaching English, perhaps—and an apartment in Costa Otra. He was staying.

He apologized for missing the party. He said he loved us and hoped we understood. He had seen a different life, and he could not come back.

I called him. Mom called him. His phone was off. We left voicemail after voicemail.

I drove to Mom’s house. She made hotdish. We ate and planned.

“Maybe he's been kidnapped,” she said. “One of those drug cartels.”

It was a comforting thought. It felt good to think that he didn’t mean any of those terrible things. But I knew the truth. He did mean them. The problem had taken over his life.

Worse, I knew what I had to do. It would be very unpleasant, but I would do it. I loved him and wanted him to be happy—as happy as I was.

I went home, took the drawers out of my desk, and searched. Twenty minutes later, I found my passport.

I had thrown it in the back of a drawer. I never meant to use it again. I only had it because one summer my wife and I went to the Border Lakes on vacation. We spent one day in Canada. I didn’t like it—too strange.

And now I was going to Costa Otra.

I drove to the airport, got on standby, and caught the last flight of the night. I landed in Costa Otra at dawn.

The pilot told us to look out the window for a great view. It was water. The Pacific. Or the Caribbean, maybe. I didn’t know. I didn’t want to know. I was here to get my brother, to bring him back as quick as I could. We had a party to go to.

Outside the airport, cars were everywhere—pushed together, in no order. I couldn’t tell what was sidewalk, what was road, and what was parking lot. Everyone was shouting “Taxi!” I was surprised to hear them speaking English. But I had to be careful. The internet said criminals used fake taxis to kidnap people. I had to pick the right taxi. I got into the yellowest one I could find.

I had written the address of my brother’s hostel on a piece of paper. I gave it to the driver. He said something in Spanish, started the meter, and drove off. I watched him for a while and tried to decide whether I was being kidnapped. It was hard to tell.

I kept noticing things, even though I didn’t want to. We were driving through a city. It seemed very large. There were concrete apartment towers for miles and miles. They were gray and dirty, but they were blotched with color too—laundry drying on the balcony.
The cab stopped in front of a building. I looked at the sign. The words matched the words on my paper. I hadn’t been kidnapped after all.

The hostel owner spoke some English. I told him my brother was having an emergency, and the owner led me upstairs. The room was full of bunk beds. Someone was snoring. The owner pointed to one of the lower bunks, and I saw my brother’s eyes sticking out above a yellow sheet.

I stood over him and called his name. He opened one eye then shut it very quickly. I poked his cheek. He turned to face the wall.

“I’m dreaming,” he said. “You’re not here.”

I pulled back the sheet. He was wearing a red long-sleeved shirt. It was made of a strange fabric—a hot, bright red.

I grabbed his shoulder. He shouted in pain. He wasn’t wearing a shirt after all.

“It was the beach,” he said. “I stayed longer than I meant to. I was so excited that I forgot to reapply my sunscreen.”

He was very red, everywhere. I told him not to worry: It would heal before Mom’s party.

My brother dressed slowly. He hissed when his clothes touched his skin. The owner led us downstairs into the breakfast room. We sat at a long table, and he brought us plates of rice and eggs and meat. My brother told me the name of the dish. I pushed it away. He ate slowly.

“There’s a flight at 12:20,” I said. “If you pack quickly, we can get on standby.”

“I’m not going back. I’m staying. I have faith in Costa Otra.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Well, you’re hurting her. I can tell. Her hotdish hasn’t been the same.”

“I’m not going home.”

“I’m not leaving without you.”

“What are you going to do—drag me to the airport?”

It wasn’t a bad idea. I grabbed him by his knees—the reddest parts of him—and he howled. We fought a little. The hostel owner came in and yelled at us.

We sat in silence again.

“Let’s make a deal,” he said.

I listened.

My brother had plans. He was leaving the city this afternoon. He had a reservation at a hostel in the mountains.

“Come with me,” he said. “See Costa Otra. Have an experience. Spend three days in the mountains with me. You’ll understand why I want to stay. I have faith in Costa Otra.”

“But,” he said, “if you’re still not convinced after three days, I’ll go back with you.”

I liked the idea. I would win, of course, and my brother would finally defeat his terrible problem. But I couldn’t accept the deal. I didn’t have three days. I had hundreds of balloons to inflate.

“You don’t have any choice,” he said.

I grabbed his knees again. He kicked me hard. We fought. The table fell over. The hostel owner yelled again.

And so I had to go into the mountains. My brother packed his bag, and I emailed our cousins to say I wouldn’t be at the airport.

“We have a lot of work to do when we get back,” I told my brother.

We walked to the bus terminal. It took a long time. My brother moved very slowly. He held his sunburnt arms away from his sunburnt body and bowed his sunburnt
legs apart.

We bought tickets and sat behind the driver. The ride was slow. The farther we got from the city, the longer it took.

My brother tapped me on the shoulder. He told me to look out the window at the jungle. I refused.

“You have to try,” he said. “What are you afraid of?”

I looked out the window. It was a jungle.

The roads got narrower and narrower. The bus went slower. It lurched over uneven roads. We bounced in our seats. Every time the bus tossed us, my brother landed on his sunburnt thighs. He bit his lip and scrunched up his eyes.

We got hungry. The bus was supposed to arrive in the mountains by suppertime, but it was already six o’clock. The other passengers ate cold rice and beans from plastic containers.

I opened my backpack. I had Goldfish crackers, Nutri-Grain bars, Cheerios in plastic bags, Slim Jims, a fifty-six-ounce bag of M&M’s from Costco, and packets of Country Time lemonade. My brother snorted.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “There’s more in my suitcase.”

“They have food here,” he said. “Good food.” He described the different dishes—all the different arrangements of meat, rice and beans, and chiles.

“I’ll stick to normal food, thanks.” I poured some Goldfish into my hand and offered him the box.

“I’ll wait.”

The bus crawled up the mountain.

We got off at a little village on the mountainside. There were green trees and rusty, red roofs. We walked up a hill, toward the hum of a generator.

The hostel was at the edge of town. Its backyard was the jungle. Vines hung outside our windows.

The place was owned by a husband and wife. My brother asked them if they had an extra bed for me. They didn’t. But he and I could share.

The owners told us to put our bags down and come to dinner. They led us to some picnic tables behind the hostel. The other guests were already there. There was a young Danish couple, a Canadian family, and an old Swiss woman. They all spoke English pretty well. They had come to the mountains to hike.

They asked us where we were from. “I’ve just moved here,” said my brother, “to Costa Otra.”

“He’s joking,” I said. “We’re from Nininger Prairie.” They hadn’t heard of it. I told them all about our town—the Target, the Hy-Vee, the old Applebee’s, the new Applebee’s out by the highway.

“They’re saying we might even get a Panera Bread next year.”

The owners came in and out of the house, carrying forks and knives and bowls, setting them in front of us. They poured soup from a big black pot. The soup was thick and green, and long strips of gray meat floated in it. When the owners had gone inside, the Swiss woman leaned across the table and whispered to us:

“Don’t eat the soup.”

“It smells good,” said my brother.

“Some of us had a bad experience a few nights ago,” she said. “Something with the meat, we think. The Costa Otrans are used to it. But not us.”

She whistled, and a dog trotted over from the edge of the yard. She poured her soup onto the ground, and the dog licked it out of the dirt.

“I’m way ahead of you,” I said. I brought out my box of Goldfish.

My poor brother—he picked up his spoon.

That night, I was his nurse. I sat by his
bedside and wiped the sweat from his face. I poured bottled water into a little cup and helped him drink.

After one sudden bout of sickness, I helped him undress and clean himself off. I rolled his ruined jeans and underwear into a ball and tossed them into the jungle.

I offered him Goldfish and Nutri-Grain bars. “They’ll settle your stomach,” I said. He refused.

He told me to leave the hostel. “Hike. Climb. See things. Have an experience.”

I told him I would never leave his side.

The other guests came and went. The Swiss woman went back to Switzerland. Before she left, she told us goodbye. “Don’t worry,” she said to my brother. “It has to run through your system. It takes about two days. But you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t have two days,” he said.

He did a lot of moaning. I sat by his bed and told him how much better things would be in Nininger Prairie.

On the second night, he finally slept.

My legs were very stiff, and my back was sore. I snuck out of the room and onto the porch.

I stretched. I ate a Nutri-Grain bar and stared at the moon. It was full and round. I thought of all the balloons I had to inflate before the party. I looked at the moon some more, and thought about how full and round it was.

Something caught my eye. In the jungle behind the house, there was a strange bit of color. It was bright, almost glowing in the moonlight. I stepped off the porch, crossed the yard, and stopped at the edge of the jungle. The strange, bright thing was at my feet.

It was a fat orange flower. I had never seen anything like it before. It was a new shade of orange. I bent down and looked at it. The petals were huge and heavy. Little drops of wetness stuck to them and reflected the light of the moon.

I caught myself. I walked very quickly back into the hostel.

On Friday morning, we waited at the bus stop. Things were going well. My brother hadn’t used the bathroom in several hours.

A bus arrived. “This is us,” said my brother.

“It looks different than the last one.”

“We’re not going back. Not yet. One more stop.”

My poor brother. He couldn’t admit he had lost.

“We’re going to the ruins,” he said.

“Before the Spanish came to Costa Otra, there were the Axachil.” He described the Axachil to me—their snake gods and their ball games, their feathered clothing and their great feasts.

The bus went down the mountain. My brother tapped me on the shoulder. He told me to look out the window at the jungle.

I looked out the window. It was still a jungle. But it was different. I found myself squinting at it.

The fat orange flowers were everywhere.

I caught myself again. I opened my backpack and brought out the Goldfish. I offered some to my brother. “You need something in your stomach,” I said.

“You’re empty in there.”

“I didn’t come across the world to eat Goldfish.”

“I have Cheerios too.”

The bus crawled down the mountain.

We spent hours in the ruins. It was hard for my brother: He hadn’t walked in days. Sometimes, he swayed. I kept offering him food, and he kept saying he would wait for a good Costa Otran meal. His sunburn had faded a little, but he still hissed at it every few minutes.

We walked between broken pillars. We
walked through the ball court. We walked past the statues of the snake god. I tried not to notice anything, but the snakes were hard to ignore. I stopped in front of one, and my brother told me about the snake god.

We came to a stone tower. My brother explained that the Axachil were expert astronomers. They had learned how to track the sun and the moon—they had correctly predicted the eclipses for the next one thousand years.

“They scheduled their great feasts around the eclipses,” he said. “But the actual ceremony was held over there.” He pointed to a big stone triangle in the distance. “The Great Pyramid.”

We walked toward it. “I teach this stuff in my class,” said my brother.

“You’re not a bad teacher,” I said.

The pyramid had a row of stone steps from top to bottom. In the cracks of the stones, gray-green moss and fat orange flowers grew.

Something jumped in my chest. “I think I’ll wait here,” I said.

My brother started to climb. “Come on.”

I followed.


I was noticing things.

Halfway up the stairs, I stopped and turned. I bent over one of the fat orange flowers. I stared at it for a while then noticed everything around it.

I looked down the steps and over the land—the peaks and valleys, the green trees and gray stones, the houses and the jungle, and, in the distance, the shine of the sea. There was so much life spread out before me, so many plants and people and animals. I wondered about them, the plants and people and animals. I wondered what they were doing. It was a stupid thought, but I found myself thinking many stupid thoughts. I found myself excited to be thinking stupid thoughts.

I called my brother’s name. I wanted to point at things with him. “Hey!” I shouted. “Look!”

He did not answer. I turned and looked up the stairs. He was lying there. He was a heap.

I ran up the stairs and crouched next to him. “What happened?”

“I got light-headed,” he said. “I fell.”

He was bleeding and bruised. He was sunburnt and empty.

I realized then how close I had come. The terrible problem had almost spread to me. It would have left me bruised and empty and weak—as weak as my poor brother.

I put his head in my lap and took the Goldfish out of my bag. “Here,” I said. “Eat.”

He refused. He tried to speak, but I told him to save his strength. He needed to eat. He was empty. I poured Goldfish into his mouth, and I told him again about the balloons. ♦
Fading Away by Dimithry Victor
That First Winter

poetry by Mitchell Untch

There are no more remnants of your garden.
No more rows of lettuce leaves
curling upward like saints' hands,
or beds of tomatoes ripening in their tight red skins.
The branches of the lemon
and orange tree are pale,
 thick and white as bones.
Those hands of yours—
I remember how thick they were,
how the dirt under your fingernails,
formed the arches
our lives would pass through.
The house smelled of jasmine in the summer.
Delphiniums leaned against our bedroom window,
made us thirsty.
One day, after an afternoon in the sun,
I watched as you came inside
to wash your hands, pour yourself
a drink of water.
You brought the lip of the glass
to your mouth, sipped
like a wild, exotic bird.
I kissed your neck,
the tips of your hair.
Lately, absentmindedly,
I wander from one room to the next
open drawers, straighten your mother’s
wingback chairs, look
for something I know I will never find.
I would have thought I were alone
except that every few moments
I hear a cough, the cat
gunshot through the hallway.
Nothing but the cold makes sense.
I let it in through the backdoor.
I like the way it hovers near
my favorite picture of you.
Remember?
You were twenty-five,
and the sunlight fell over your face
just so, startling everything.
Neurosis

poetry by Cody Kucker

Today you'll leave the starfish upside down, give it no stone; belly it to the sea's sand-cinched tidal; feel, like the ones in teeth, its nerves exposed to each anaerobic thread of current sewn finely with salt, swept over like a stippled cement patio as by a broom in the hands of the most loveable old peasant woman just done shoing the chickadees from her hair, huffed. Harsh is the bristling, needed nonetheless, that'll bring the worms beneath the leaves to parch and curl, the starfish's fingers to stop their writhe and faint, and what was inside-out to take the outside in and—finally—splay.
I stand here scrubbing dishes, and swirls of guilt swish up and down with the sponge.

Logan, diet, autism, and genetics are bubbling up in my head. Because of Logan’s autism diagnosis, I have kept my baby—my big kid—on a strict diet for more than a year now. He eats no carbohydrates, sugar, fruit, dairy, soy, additives, preservatives, or processed foods. Nothing but vegetables and meat, nuts and seeds.

And tonight, like so often, I am despairing because of yet another message from daycare, where I send two meals and two snacks each day to accommodate this special diet:

“We’re having a special daycare Thanksgiving feast for the kids this week—please be sure to send an additional special snack for Logan to eat.”

Managing our everyday meals takes just about everything I’ve got. How can I squeeze out time for one more? And what more can I make for him that feels “special” without sugar?

I ask myself with every scrub of the black ceramic frying pan if it’s worth it: letting the diet consume all of my time and thoughts—what I’m doing, what more I could do, what more I should do. Just about everything we eat is now homemade, meaning our dishwasher runs constantly with the usual plates and glasses, and a cluster of kitchenware—such as my food processor, blender, or pots that are too large for the dishwasher—constantly lurks on the counter. As I work my way through tonight’s pile, the arches of my bare feet hug the floor in relief of being released from high heels; my back aches from standing on the hard tile.

Logan was a beautiful, cuddly baby with wisps of red hair and blue eyes. He loved books, letters, and the movement of ceiling fans. As he grew, he was wonderfully forgiving, even as I threw him into new attempts at alleviating his autistic symptoms, trying to stop him from bumping his body into the other kids in daycare, spitting on the floor, and screaming bloody murder whenever we had to take a detour while driving. In September this year, my husband and I began trying the Gut and Psychology Syndrome—GAPS—diet, our most rigid one yet. The first day, nothing was allowed but broth and boiled chicken in an attempt to “seal and heal” the gut.

“I want waffles!” Logan screamed for more than an hour, moving from the bedroom to the kitchen to the living room. Then it became, “I want oatmeal!” Finally, “I want eggs!”

I refused to give in.

“Broth, sweetie,” I said, feeling a headache coming on.

He eventually drank a few sips of his bone-broth, which is rich with nutrients and healing for the gut. But he was not happy about it. At lunch he was told to drink broth instead of gobbling the hot dogs or chicken nuggets he loved. There was more screaming, and more screaming at supper, too.

Breakfast the next day began with more wails. Around 11 a.m., he began complaining that he was hungry. I offered him broth and boiled chicken, which he declined. And kept declining—and began insisting that he didn’t love me.

“I don’t love you,” he informed me coldly. “And Sadie doesn’t love you, and Daddy doesn’t love you.” He cried and cried and my body felt heavier and
heavier—I hadn’t eaten anything other than bone-broth soup, either—and finally he nibbled at some boiled chicken.

Thankful he at least wouldn’t starve, I collapsed onto the love seat in the living room. With a whimper, Logan crawled on top of me and we both passed out, huddled together.

I know he didn’t mean it, that he didn’t love me, but it still nibles on my mind, even months later. I put my scrubber down, hands soaking in sudsy water. What in me is demanding such strictness? And what will be the cost to him of it all? And to his baby sister—and our family?

Shortly after we began culling foods from Logan’s diet, we started adding a few things too. The biggest were probiotics.

“Nooooo!” Logan would scream as I tried to get him to drink his kefir, made from young coconut water. I couldn’t blame him; it tasted like sour, flat champagne that reached the back of my mouth and clawed at my nose. But it was healthy. Its twenty-five billion colonies per unit of good bacteria took up space in the gut, preventing yeast and bad bacteria from rampantly taking over, while the strict no-sugar regimen starved the yeast that had already taken hold.

He wrapped his arms around his torso and clamped his mouth shut. His face turned red and tears swelled in his eyes as he silently asked why we were subjecting him to such torture.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” I said wearily. “You have to drink it. You’ll get used to it.” Getting a straw or two usually coerced him into drinking it, albeit with a wounded look on his face.

Now he asks me before bed if he can have his glass of kefir; it took three months, but he got used to it and even likes it. He no longer needs a funny straw to tolerate it. I’ve even phased out the drops of stevia I added as a sweetener. “Thank you, Mom,” he says as he eagerly gulps it down.

We had plenty of reasons for trying the GAPS diet, mainly because the last one we’d tried, the Body Ecology Diet, hadn’t worked to recover Logan from autism. We’d stayed on that one for almost a year—like GAPS, it allows no sugar, but it does allow four types of grain (quinoa, millet, buckwheat, and amaranth), and it didn’t begin with a strict protocol of a broth fast followed by new foods added one by one. And before that, we’d tried a simple gluten-free, dairy-free diet. These diets all operated under the relatively obscure theory that autism was triggered by an underlying infection or inflammation in the gut.

For Logan, the trigger might have been tripped by two days’ worth of antibiotics he was on after birth. They put him in the neonatal intensive care unit out of concern that I’d had a fever during labor. The antibiotics would have killed any of the beneficial bacteria human bodies need, leaving his gut sterile and ripe for the harmful yeast or Clostridia to flourish.

As hard as it was to get Logan to accept all these diet changes, it was just as hard to get my husband, Jason, to attempt them in the first place. While there was almost an overload of anecdotal evidence online about this gut-brain connection and autism, there wasn’t much scientific proof, and many people—including our pediatrician—scoffed at the idea. But when I showed my husband the Autism Research Institute’s survey of 2,500 parents of autistic kids that reported 74 percent of families saw an improvement with this approach, he relented. Meeting a few parents who had recovered their children from autism also helped. If they could do it, why couldn’t we?

“No—he can’t eat that,” I said to Jason on our first week of our diet journey, as he prepared lunch. “Bread is made with
milk.”

“And oh, he can’t have that sliced ham either,” I said. “Nitrates, nitrites, and even gluten.”

“Well what the hell is he going to eat?” Jason said. I wanted to cry; I didn’t know. But eventually we fell into a groove, and we discovered what Logan actually could eat. In fact, there was plenty—chicken, beef, fish, shrimp, crab, a million vegetables—the problem was, none of these keep very well, and none of them lend themselves to being packed in a school lunch or given as snacks at daycare. Suddenly, we were constantly grocery shopping, constantly cooking, and constantly washing dishes.

There were no one-pot Hamburger Helpers or twenty-minute meal options on a diet like this. I hated that cooking and scrubbing dishes took time away from my son and my daughter.

Sadie toddles in. She wants me to hold her, to come play Play-Doh and make molded dresses for her little princess dolls. “Mommy! Hold me!” she insists, shrieking louder each time. I scrub my hands dry and scoop her up, giving her a big kiss on the cheek. “Let’s go watch Logan play video games,” she says eagerly. Sadly, I tell her I’ll be there in a minute. It seems I’m forever a minute away from her.

At the wise old age of four, Logan has realized Mommy is too busy. He’ll only try entreating me away from the dishes to play with him for a few minutes before drifting off to his video games. “Mom?” he’ll murmur hopefully. “Want to play with me?”

“I would love to play with you, sweetie—but I need to get these dishes washed,” I always say ruefully. I wonder if a preschooler—if one with autism—if he—can hear my regret.

But the dishes never stop piling up. At 4 a.m. I begin cooking, making breakfast, lunch, and a snack for Logan to take to daycare, and another snack for him to take to the special education preschool he is bused to in the afternoons. I crack organic eggs in a glass bowl, measure out a cup of pureed pumpkin, plug in my electric mixer, and blend with cinnamon. I melt ghee on a griddle and pour out thin dollops of batter, which slip themselves into irregular shapes. I throw leftover green beans and pot roast topped with pureed onions, carrots, and celery into plastic lunch containers. I slice celery and spread all-natural peanut butter into the grooves. I spoon avocado-chocolate pudding, made last night, into another container. I pour a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar into a water bottle and add water and a few drops of stevia. I run a hand through my unwashed hair. I’ve dirtied seven dishes. I still need an afternoon snack.

I turn back to the griddle and flip the pumpkin pancakes. I slice carrots, jicama, onion, and broccoli for tonight’s curry. I dump two big spoonfuls of fermented coconut yogurt into the blender, add a scoop of vitamins and a packet of probiotics, then fill with milk made from quinoa. I place the pancakes on plates. Five more dirty dishes. I unload the dishwasher from the night before and fill it once again. While the kids eat their breakfast, I hand wash the blender.

Twelve hours later, I return home from work and start in again, putting away clean dishes while helping my husband cook dinner; he browns a pound of hamburger while I spiral-cut six zucchinis for “spaghetti.” We eat, and there are more dishes to be cleared, stacked in the dishwasher, and hand washed. Most days my husband will also cook a longer-term item, like coconut milk from unsweetened, shredded coconut and filtered water, to last the next few days, and then there are even more dishes. I fall asleep around 10 p.m., and every morning, miraculously, there are more
dishes waiting for me.

But almost nothing can be trimmed from this routine. Very little can be store-bought because the added chemicals and sugar to preserve shelf life are bad for Logan’s body. We used to buy coconut milk until we realized it contains carrageenan, an additive that is linked to inflammation and bleeding in the gut.

Logan walks into the kitchen, happily zooming his Mario figurine in the air, pretending he can fly. I love days like today, when he is cheerful and clearly connected rather than defiant and isolated. The familiar pang of regret that I should take advantage of this mood, that I should be playing with him instead of cleaning, hits me, and as I scrub I think about the writer Tillie Olsen and her story “I Stand Here Ironing.” There the daughter comments that if she ever painted a picture of her mother, she’d have to paint her at an ironing board. If my children ever grow up to be artists, they would have to paint me at the kitchen sink.

Logan spies a cookie carelessly left there by Sadie—I’d allowed her a quick treat at the grocery store to keep her quiet as I shopped, and I hadn’t realized she’d only eaten half of it there and smuggled the rest home, a sweet canteen to keep in the middle of our sugar desert.

Logan’s eyes are wide and his voice low, his hands practically trembling as he picks up the cookie. “Can I eat this?”

My heart sinks as I half-twist to face him, my hands still submerged. “Well,” I begin carefully. “It has gluten, sweetie.”

Logan looks at the cookie. “Hmm,” he mulls. “I will just put it back.”

On days like today, he is so happy and natural, and the diet seems worth it. I can’t help thinking that, like Tillie Olsen’s Emily, he will find his way.

But like Olsen, I too will never be able to total it all. I’ll never know if following such a spartan diet will have helped him, or if therapy is to be thanked for the positive changes we see, or if he simply grew up. I’ll never know if it was worth it, or if I only burdened his young life with undue sparseness—or if I could have done even more. I know Logan was a quiet toddler who preferred tracing patterns over playing patty-cake, melted down if he couldn’t have something green, and usually had red, splotchy skin. And I know none of those things are true anymore.

I am a stubborn mother. I am an impatient mother. I hated the news that Logan had autism, and I wanted to make the diagnosis go away. I was afraid he’d never make friends. I was afraid he’d be bullied and suffer greatly, physically and mentally. I was afraid he’d be unable to find a job, pursue a meaningful career, support himself and a family. I was afraid of everything I didn’t know. I wanted Logan to have a fulfilling life, and the wisdom that he still could would not come to me until much later. Like Olsen’s Emily, Logan is a child of his day. If Emily was born during the Depression, war, and fear, Logan was born amidst helicopter parents, internet research, and fear—but also hope.

Should I let him have something sweet from time to time? Will he bloom with or without dietary interventions? He has such great potential, and he seems so close to being able to step out from behind the glass door that separates someone with autism, letting him observe the world without really connecting with it. And really, a sugar-free diet is a healthy one—autism or not.

So dogged determination drives me to push on. But even if Logan remains behind that glass door, he’ll still be enough. We will be okay. I put down my scrubber and go to him, wrapping him in a hug. I want him to know that there is more to him than that pan in the sink I am trying to scrub clean. ♦
I sit on the deck of my new home, fingers gliding over braille. The morning cool and unblemished, dew keeping the air snow-fresh.

While growing up, my sister invented a game where she handed me something, and just as the object brushed the soft skin of my palm, she took it away. Shrieks of frustration streamed from my mouth, underpinned by giddy satisfaction that my big sister wanted to play.

Petals of sun smooth away the morning chill. The memory of goosebumps an echo. I honor the pebble-sized moments that line life: tiny bridges of transition just before the promised land. The instant before your fingers close around the toy in your palm; the malleable mixture of sand and water at the edge of the lake; the moment before you take the next breath; the cadence of your heart before you whisper “I do”; when you lift your foot to take the next step; when the past remains on your tongue and the future is a smooth stone ready to pull the heat from your cheek or warm your icy hand.
Nana guided my hand with her time-softened one over a box with crystal sides fitted into a brass frame. “This came from Ireland. Your great-great-grandmother’s wedding ring was in it,” she said.

I pressed its coolness to my cheek as though it could pass its experience through my skin. I let it absorb the warmth from my forehead, as though it could transform my young dreams and make them real. I spent hours running my fingers over the box, listening to the creak and rattle of the crystal sides in their frames, imagining all the box had witnessed.

One day, someone I trusted quietly slipped the box from its shelf of honor next to my bed. I trudged up a ladder of grief: from disbelief, to rage, to grudging acceptance that I would never hold the box again.

From my box I learned that we can imbue objects with meaning. Once we let a story wrap itself around us, it becomes a part of us. Even if you take the object away, the meaning is still there, shining bright and beautiful.

Somewhere in this world is a crystal box with invisible dreams and generations of history, and a felt pillow sewed by a grandmother. Sometimes when I visit my parents, I reach into the depths of an old closet and hope that I’ll feel the cool square that once listened to my dreams. ♦
“Forward,” I direct my guide dog, his confidence tangible through his taut harness handle. My husband’s cane echoes against the concrete. We walk slowly, listen to the waterfall of traffic, hesitation and delight humming between us on our first walk in our new neighborhood. As we approach the corner, we stop a passerby to confirm our location.

“You amaze me. How do you do it?” she asks. We smile and make polite conversation. The light changes and we’re saved by the traffic flow.

After our errands, we sit on our patio. The sun slides morsels of warmth down my back, contrasting with the crisp air. The chill lingers on my hands while the sun’s staccato breaths smooth my goosebumps away.

My fingers sashay across a small rectangular object on my lap; pins of braille jump up and down, blanketing me in story.

My husband sits next to me, his iPhone softly reading him the news. I think of the woman in the street, and I want to say, “We do it by living. We just do it differently. It is what we know.”

Some days, I don’t feel like educating. I want to stop reaching. There are days when I think, This is really hard. But everyone hefts hard days. I think about the times I’ve read in the dark or commented on something my husband is reading while I’m cooking. And I am glad to be me, us—blind, human, alive, right here. ♦
Pines in the Fog, City Cemetery, Louisville, Georgia by Kathleen Galvin
What I thought—maybe not immediately, though—was, *Don’t do it, Mr. Koglin. This is not funny.* I should have said it right away, but everyone else was laughing. I didn’t want to spoil it.

Maybe not everyone was laughing. I hope I wasn’t. And Izzy sits to my left, so I couldn’t see her, but I doubt she was laughing.

I know Ian was laughing and rocking in his chair; he does that even when he’s not excited. He sits to my right, and I was looking that way toward the front of the class. But it seemed like everyone except maybe Jessie on the other side of class was laughing, or smiling at least, like this was going to be something we would talk about later.

I should have just said, Don’t do it. I should have said it out loud.

“Call her right now,” Sophie said. 
“Do it now,” Reis was saying. “Do it now.”

“Put it on speaker,” Tristan said.

Eric started a chant. “Call your mother. Call your mother. Call your—,” but he stopped when no one picked it up.

It was the go-around on our first day back, and Mr. Koglin always has a silly prompt for the first school day after a break. He says he forgets all of our names—sometimes even if it’s just a long weekend. So we go around and remind him of our names, and we tell the class something terrible that happened over the break, or something funny, or a restaurant we’d never go to, or something mean we did when we were a kid.

This time we were just back from spring break and only had two months left of our high school careers, and we had to go around and tell the class our name and a fake thing we were going to do—something that would make our parents really happy but that we would never really do. So, Molly said from now on she was going to spend more time with her brother, and Chase said he was going to do a 5 a.m. workout with his dad, and because Sam’s mother was worried that after four years at Boston College Sam was going to stay in Boston, Sam promised she would move back to Chicago after college, and Charlie said he wasn’t going to go to art school anymore; he was doing pre-med at Northwestern with a double major in pre-law.

And I said I was going to call my racist grandparents and see if I could spend a week with them this summer. Or maybe just two days.

When we finished the go-around, Mr. Koglin pushed his desk out of the way. That’s the first thing he does before he starts teaching. He slides it across the carpet into the corner of the room, like it’s in his way. Then he started to tell us the academic game plan for the rest of the semester, but Sophie said, “But wait. What about you? What’s your fake goal?”

He thought about it for a second, then said, “Well, my father—” and he stopped right there. “I haven’t talked to my mother in more than a year. I don’t even know what would make her happy.”

All of us, with parents up in our faces 24/7, were like, “Whaat?”

Eric said, “Did you ever think calling her would make her happy?” and some of us talked over each other. Someone said, “Why don’t you talk to her anymore?”

Mr. Koglin said he called her in September for her birthday, but she wasn’t home, so he left a message, and she called him back and left a message, and that was it.
So, Ike said, “Why don’t you call her?” and Eric said, “I just said that,” and Tristan said, “Yeah. Call her today.” Sophie said, “Call her right now,” and Eric, who can’t ever let go of anything, said, “I literally just said that.” Ian said, “Put it on speaker,” and everyone laughed.

And just like that he must have hit the button that said *Mom*. He put his finger to his lips and then we heard the phone ringing on speaker. Tristan said, “He’s really calling her,” and Sophie said, “Shut up. He’s on the phone.”

After his mother said, “Hello?” and he said who he was, she said, “Hey, Gray,” and we looked at each other because most of us call him Mr. Koglin. He doesn’t mind if we call him Graham, and so some kids do that, but nobody knew anything about Gray.

He shook his head like the secret was out of the bag and put his finger up to his lips again. She asked him how he was doing, and he said, “Fine,” real quick so he wouldn’t have to say anything in front of us about how he was doing. He turned it around and asked how she was doing and how everyone in Florida was, so she ran down the list of how they were getting along in Florida.

Out of his pocket, Mr. Koglin came up with a marker he brought in for the whiteboard, and while we were listening to his mother tell about the Florida gang, he wrote, *This was a bad idea, Ian,* and Eric put his hands up in the air because he never gets credit for anything.

They were squirming around and holding in laughter, but I thought, *Oh, please, just hang up the phone.* I made my thumb and finger into a phone and gestured hanging it up.

Mr. Koglin’s mother said Melissa broke her wrist skateboarding, and he said, “Isn’t she like fifty?” His mother said, “What?”

“Isn’t she like fifty years old?” and she said, “Melissa?” She waited a second then said, “Melissa. Jimmy’s middle child, Gray. She’s thirty, I think, or thirty-one.” Mr. Koglin smiled like he was doing this to entertain us, and wasn’t it funny?

“Still,” he said. “That’s kind of old to be skateboarding,” and his mother said, “She’s a youthful thirty,” and Mr. Koglin said, “I guess.”

When she asked again how he was doing, it was slow and serious like she knew the answer and wondered why he wasn’t being truthful.

It got pretty quiet in the room. Even Sophie made a face like she hoped he would hang up the phone.

“I’m all right,” he said. “Yeah, I’m good.”

He brushed his fingers along the underside edge of the empty desk he was standing at, and it was quiet for a long second before his mother spoke again. I wondered if he had forgotten where he was. It was like we were at his house peeking into the kitchen where he was sitting with his mother talking, and I thought, *Please, Mr. Koglin, at least turn off the speaker.*

“Have you met anyone?”

Mr. Koglin’s fingers were on the side of the desk now. He ran them along the desk as though he had just sanded the wooden edge and was checking if it was smooth.

“It’s been a long time,” she said.

“It hasn’t been that long.”

“It’s been two years.”

“It hasn’t been two years.”

“She left in 2014,” she said. “It’ll be three years come July.”

It looked like Mr. Koglin found something etched into the edge of the desk.

“I guess it has,” he said.

The laughing was the first thing to leave the room.

“Hey, Mom,” Mr. Koglin said, “I’m actually in class right now, but I promised I was going to call you the next time I thought of it, even if it was during the school day.”
Right away his mother said, “No, I’m glad you did.”
She was quiet then, and I thought Mr. Koglin would finish his goodbye, but he didn’t.
_Somebody say goodbye_, I thought.
“I hear your father’s not doing so well,” she said.
And I was thinking, _Please, hang up the phone, Mr. Koglin._
“Oh, he’s a mess, Mom,” he said.
“Is he in the hospital again?” but she already knew the answer.
Mr. Koglin said that he was.
If there was a question mark at the end of the next thing she said, it couldn’t be heard.
“He checked himself in,” she said.
“Yes, he did. On Friday night.”
“Lutheran General,” she said, and he said, “Yep.”
Then it was quiet, as though his mother was thinking what to say or how to say it.
“Fifth floor?” she said.
Mr. Koglin still had the marker in his hand. He flipped it through his fingers slowly and stood it up on the desk. He hadn’t made eye contact with any of us for a long time. He just flipped the marker and looked at the floor like he was in the room alone.
That’s when Jessie stood up and walked to the door. She opened it real quiet. First I thought she was going to go to the bathroom, but then I somehow knew she was leaving for good, and I wished I had thought of it.
Mr. Koglin said, “Yes,” to his mother’s question about the fifth floor, and I wanted to cry.
“Oh, God,” Mrs. Koglin said.
I looked at Sophie and she had her hand on the top of her head like she was worried something might come out of it.
Tristan sat with her cheeks in her hands and her eyes closed, and I could see she was secretly plugging her ears with her middle fingers.

The desk Mr. Koglin stood at was the one that had the bagels on it at the start of class—it was Ike’s turn for treats—and Mr. Koglin was rolling the pad of his middle finger over a poppy seed.
“He doesn’t belong here,” Mr. Koglin said.
I looked around at everyone then, because I was almost positive Mr. Koglin said, _He doesn’t belong here_, but maybe everyone else thought he said _there_—that his father didn’t belong _there_.

It was so quiet. Ian had stopped rocking his chair long ago, and Charlie was staring into his lap. His pencil was in his hands and he was trying to sharpen it with his thumbnail. That scratch was all there was to hear.
Mr. Koglin’s mother didn’t say anything. I imagined her on the other end of the phone sitting on her front porch in Florida and nodding her head. It was April 3 and it was probably already very warm there.
I don’t know what Mr. Koglin was thinking. I wonder about him. Sometimes it’s hard to tell if he’s kidding or if he’s more serious than anyone I’ve ever known. We’ll be taking a quiz or writing an in-class passage analysis, and he’ll look up from his desk and say, “Did I just say something out loud?” We say, “No,” and then he laughs like he was just kidding, but I don’t know.
“What about medication?” his mother said.

Finally he hit the speaker button on the phone, but when his mother started naming a couple of drugs, we could still hear everything she said. I felt bad for wanting to know about the drugs, so I turned to Ian and asked him something, just so we didn’t have to hear them talking. Ian shushed me as though I was being disrespectful to Mr. Koglin.
“Is it Seroquel?” she said.
Mr. Koglin said, “That sounds right,” and she said, “That’s what Jimmy said it was.” Mr. Koglin nodded.
Ian looked across the room at Reis and they nodded too. Maria, Reis, Ian, and I take medicinal chemistry class.

Mr. Koglin’s mother waited another few seconds before speaking, then she said, “Jimmy says your father wants to die.”

*Please, God,* I thought.

Mr. Koglin looked down at the carpet. He didn’t nod. He didn’t say anything. I’m not sure he knew that we could still hear everything, or even that we were there. What she said about his father wanting to die was like a balloon in the air that wasn’t moving. Even Tristan, with her fingers pressed against her ears, heard it.

Then it was the quietest it’s ever been in history.

I don’t know why it took me so long to do something, but finally I did.

I looked at Mr. Koglin—he was still looking at the floor—and I tapped Ian’s arm with the back of my hand and got up from my desk. I put my hands on Izzy’s shoulders to get her, too, and Ian nodded to everyone on the other side. Ian tipped his head at the door. Tristan touched Sophie on the shoulder because her head was on her arm on the desk and her other hand was holding the back of her head. Somehow Ian reached the door first and he opened it quietly. He stood there with his back against the open door so that we could leave Mr. Koglin and his mother to themselves.

In the hallway, Jessie was sitting on the sophomore couch. There were two sophomores on red chairs. One had a book opened on his lap, and the other looked at her cell phone. They must have been wondering what was going on. We were all leaving the classroom and a senior was sitting on their couch. Jessie got up as we all filed out of the classroom. Some of the kids started down the hall toward the senior stairwell—in single file and walking slowly—but I waited by the door with Ian until everyone left the room. Ian closed the door so quiet you couldn’t even hear the click of the metal catch in the doorplate. Ian looked at me for a second and just stood there. He was waiting for me. I didn’t go up to him right away, though. I wanted to say something to the sophomores who were sitting there. It was like I wanted them to understand something they weren’t going to know unless I told them. But I didn’t know what to say. Ian looked at me and I swear he knew what I was thinking. Then he put his arm out for me to come under so we could walk together and not say anything, and that’s what I did. ♦
Run, Red Velvet by Kathleen Galvin
Alfie, the Ransacker

poetry by Marion Starling Bayer

In the warehouse our beatsters keep to one end by the windows, mending meshes. Old Sarah

and Eileen try to chat up Nora but she’s dead quiet today. I stretch out the repaired nets down the long length

of the building. My job is to ransack the nets, to search them hard, so I look for any norsels a bit short,

see to the cork lines and foot ropes, double-check the splices. And if any of the meshes aren’t square the men

won’t fish. The entire enterprise rests on good nets going over for the Lord so I make damn sure they’re fixed proper.

After that, all anybody can do is hope. That’s the whole business of drifting—hope—hope the catch is good, hope

the weather holds, hope the price is fair, hope our Nora’s man is safe though that boat’s gone ten days late now.
I dream of the black hush
in farming sheds, far off

in Yorkshire, where rhubarb
crowns are forced without

a scrap of soil or light.
The air is warm there,

scented with coal fires
and the wool shoddy

tucked about the plants.
The quiet is so deep

farmers hear the rhubarb
grow—the buds' soft pops,

their rising stems creaking.
In all that darkness

harvest is a ritual
of shadows. Candles flicker

atop iron poles and throw
the pickers' hunched shapes

against the walls as they
bend to cut and cradle

the pale stalks, row after row,
standing at attention.
Strides and Stripes by Devlin Smith
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Dear sweet Catherine. Shopping at Macy’s one day completely upended her life. As she was exiting the renowned department store through a revolving door, another customer, in a typical Manhattan rush to get nowhere and oblivious to everyone but herself, also entered the revolving door, but at warp speed. The doors twirled madly, causing poor little Catherine to be flung out into the air and onto the pavement. Splat!

The young speedy culprit did a hit-and-run, disappearing quickly into the crowds of Thirty-Fourth Street, while Catherine remained on the sidewalk writhing in pain, unable to get up. An emergency ambulance whisked her to a hospital where she learned she had broken her hip. Poor thing. Surgery was performed, a pin inserted, and the hip repaired. She went through weeks of rehabilitation, and then it came time to go home.

Alas, Catherine was eighty-two years old and lived in a fourth-floor walk-up in Manhattan. Needless to say, her life was about to change.

Catherine was our neighbor and lived in the apartment next door. It was the late ’80s in Chelsea, New York. My partner and now husband, Joe, and I were part of the early gay influx into Chelsea. We like to think we started Chelsea as some of the earliest pioneers who transformed the neighborhood into the city’s most vibrant gayborhood. We lived in a typical, neglected rental apartment building with a friendly but frequently missing and intoxicated super. As friendly as he was, his wife was not. She was the battle-ax to his sweet grandfather and a caricature of a New York City busybody. She would lean for hours out of her window pressing all passersby for the latest news and scandals from around the neighborhood. She told people she had been a Spanish translator for the courts; rumor had it she had been a taxi dancer—ten cents a dance. She made everyone in the building fearful of calling the super because if they happened to get her on the phone, she would scream, “What do you want me to do about it?” and hang up. We had to wait until her husband came home from what we knew to be his young girlfriend’s place a few blocks over and bribe him to do any repairs. He always smiled, said yes, and then disappeared again for days on end.

Although Catherine lived next door, Joe and I only knew her to say hello. We would often see her in the mornings, dressed in a skirt and sweater with a hat from a much earlier decade smartly perched upon her head as she daintily made her way down four flights of stairs. Little did any of us know, she would never descend those stairs on her own two legs again after her ill-fated encounter with those merciless spinning doors.

Catherine was a slight, frail figure not much more than five feet tall, and so thin you could see the bones and veins in her hands and arms. It wasn’t difficult to imagine that a hasty shove sent her flying out onto Thirty-Fourth Street. When we heard she had fallen and was apartment-bound, we paid a neighborly visit, bringing her a pie we had baked. Two gay guys with a pie. Who wouldn’t love that? She was visiting with another neighbor at the time, also named Catherine, Catherine Santella. We called her Mrs. Santella so as not to confuse the two. They were both wonderfully warm and welcoming and we had a most charming
time together. It did seem, though, that our Catherine of the broken hip had never been the recipient of an act of generosity before; she kept looking at the pie, gasping and uttering “Oh my.” When we offered to leave a piece for her to enjoy the next day, she fell back in her chair overwhelmed with such great fortune. She simply loved our gay pie.

Catherine was so appreciative of our visit that we began visiting her regularly. On Sunday nights, we would knock on her door and present whatever dessert we had concocted that day. Desserts thrilled her, making her eyes sparkle wide with anticipation. She particularly loved “cream,” her word for ice cream, probably left over from her turn-of-the-century childhood. When we would call her earlier in the day to remind her that we were coming over later, she would invariably ask in a soft, hopeful voice, “Are we going to have cream?”

Gentle, demure, petite Catherine Bloom. Born in Manhattan to German American parents, she spent her early childhood in the West Thirties, not far, ironically, from where Macy’s opened their flagship store in 1902. A photograph of Catherine as a child shows her attired in a child’s typical ruffled dress and wearing the ringlets hairstyle of the early 1900s, looking like the era’s image of a perfect angel. By the time she reached adolescence, city denizens and new immigrants had begun moving outside of Manhattan, where life held the promise of being cheaper, quieter, and cleaner. Catherine often remarked that her mother liked things to be “extra clean.”

“We were German you know,” she would add.

Following the trend toward cleanliness and spaciousness, Catherine’s family moved to Woodside, Queens, where they were able to live in a roomy house instead of a small, although clean, apartment. Catherine often reminisced over coffee and dessert that when she walked home from the Woodside train station, she passed by a farm with cows out in the field. Joe and I could not imagine such a scene. Cows? In Queens?

When she was fifteen, Catherine got her first job as a stenographer. She told a white lie to get it.

“I wrote down on my application that I was …” and here she paused before saying in a guarded whisper, “sixteen.” A sly smile came across her face.

“I was only fifteen. I was always afraid they would find out,” she confided as an aside, looking behind her as if the president of the company might be standing there with a menacing look on his face and a pair of handcuffs at the ready.

“Did you enjoy your job?” I asked.

“Oh, I loved my job, and I worked there for ten years; ten years I was at that job.” She emphasized this as if no one had ever worked so long in a job before. Undoubtedly in her time and family, women did not hold down long-term jobs.

“What happened then? Why did you quit?”

“Oh, I got married.”

She never told us whom she had married, only that her husband had carted her off to a chicken farm and a life of financial struggle.

“The husband,” as Mrs. Santella referred to him, was a topic to avoid, but we were able to glean a few bits of information about him as time went on. For one, Catherine’s father had heartily disapproved of him. He thought his various business ideas were harebrained, and he must have had a point because it wasn’t long before the husband’s mismanaged chicken farm went under and everything had to be sold.

Catherine hated life with the chickens and was more than happy to leave the world of eggs and feathers behind. In order to pay the bills, she went to work as a maid in a roadside hotel. Her background and lust for tidiness provided
her with the necessary abilities to succeed as a housekeeper. Hotel management frequently praised her well-honed skills for detecting dirt that was imperceptible to the common eye.

The story of Catherine’s married life consisted of trails that led nowhere. We did learn there came a time, when exactly no one seemed to know, that the husband died—mysteriously. We were never able to get out of her what the cause of death was. All we found out was that she went back to using her maiden name and tried to never think of him again. When we pressed for information about him, she slipped into a fog of forgetfulness and sudden hearing loss, gazing irretrievably into the distance.

Catherine never had children and didn’t remarry. She was alone in the world and the last of her lineage. She had been the sole caretaker for her only remaining relatives.

“Seven. I took care of seven of them,” she would tell us often, making clear that it was a task of herculean proportions she had undertaken.

She helped these final seven from their sick beds into their graves, and now she had no family. Now what? Where to go? What to do? Move to Chelsea, of course.

She found her way to our neighborhood and to our modest, some might say rundown, building. It was a dicey neighborhood back then, noted for its convenient and well-priced drug offerings on various street corners. It is hard to imagine bird-like Catherine making her way through the boisterous and predatory landscape that was Chelsea back in the day. Yet, neighbors claimed that during the many years she lived there, she walked down four flights of stairs every morning, took a bus to church services, then headed to Woolworth’s for her regular lunch of cottage cheese and applesauce. Since her dentures were an ill fit, she frequently didn’t wear them and could only manage to consume or gum soft foods—information Joe and I could have lived without. Our humble building on Eighth Avenue became Catherine’s beloved home, the place where she felt she most belonged—not with the dying relatives, not with the unmentionable husband—but in her own apartment on the fourth floor in bustling, gayish Chelsea, New York.

Catherine rebuilt her life and made new friends. Her closest friend was Bertha from Jersey, pronounced with a New Jersey accent as in “Boytha” and “Joysy.” Bertha was elderly and not able to offer much assistance to poor Catherine, but did visit when she could and was always available for consultation and correction of Catherine’s versions of her own life stories.

And then there was “Greek Mary,” a friend in the building, long ago christened as such to distinguish her from “Regular Mary,” another neighbor who had recently passed on. A widow who dressed in black every day, Greek Mary was a cancer survivor, and one tough cookie. Every day she was up and out early to attend church services whether in rain, sleet, or disrupted subway services. Sometimes we would see her from our windows slogging up the street and remark with quiet admiration, “There goes Greek Mary.”

Mrs. Santella had only known Catherine as a friendly neighbor to gossip with in the stairwell, but she came to her aid as soon as she learned of her famous-throughout-the-building crisis on Thirty-Fourth Street. She was an Italian American widow in her seventies who lived two floors above us and cared for her dependent brother on a limited income. She was down-to-earth, practical, and loved to laugh. Joe and I always felt a sense of calm and reassurance simply by being in her presence. When things got tough, she would raise her eyebrows, shrug her shoulders, and say, “What can we do? We just have to take it,” often in response to our notoriously greedy
landlord raising the rent or refusing to pay for repairs. Mrs. Santella cooked for Catherine, ran errands, visited her often, and helped plan for her future. She was Catholic, and as Joe would describe her, “the embodiment of Christian charity.”

Bertha, Greek Mary, Mrs. Santella, Joe, and I became Catherine's caretaking team par excellence. We kept her comfortable, entertained, and well supplied with medications and ice cream. We inched our way deeper into her life, ensuring that she wouldn’t end up in the hands of a social welfare agency, existing on Spam and canned spinach, or, even worse, those unsavory packets of frozen creamed chipped beef.

Surprisingly, our sexual orientation never seemed to be an issue with any of these kind and religious ladies. They didn’t avoid us, look askance at us, or talk negatively about the growing gay demographic in the neighborhood. We were simply accepted as the gay couple in apartment 43. We were all together in the trenches of Eighth Avenue.

Catherine’s end-of-the-line relatives had left her a rather tidy sum that allowed her to hire a full-time aide to assist with daily chores and supplement what her devoted team was doing for her. This arrangement enabled Catherine to live rather well for a hobbled shut-in. About a year into this plan, however, Mrs. Santella, aka Catherine’s financial manager, reported that Catherine’s inheritance was dwindling at an alarming rate. Paying for a full-time aide was depleting her stash, and she would soon be selling matchsticks in the snow on Twenty-Third Street if something didn’t change.

Catherine’s team had a meeting of the minds and realized that she had no other choice than to move into a nursing home, where Medicaid would pay her bills when her savings were exhausted. None of us, though, wanted to broach this subject with our dear little friend. We couldn’t imagine Catherine willingly leaving her cherished home to go to a nursing facility. Plus, who gives up a rent-stabilized apartment in Chelsea? Certainly no one in her right mind.

Mrs. Santella magnanimously volunteered to have the talk with Catherine, which went better than anyone imagined. In her matter-of-fact, nurturing manner, Mrs. Santella explained to Catherine that she’d be much better off in a nice building with elevators, round-the-clock care, and a garden she could enjoy during nice weather. It sounded like fine living to Catherine; so she agreed to pack up her life one more time and move on.

Joe and I researched nursing homes all over New York City, not a task for the faint of heart. We encountered every depressing and nauseating stereotype of these so called “homes” and rejected them all. We became increasingly worried. Had we sold Catherine a bill of goods? But then, to our good fortune and good karma, I like to believe, the Jewish Home and Hospital for Aged on West 106th called to inform us they had a room available. They were regarded as one of the best senior facilities in the city and were open to people of all faiths. They even had a Christian chapel in the building that offered weekly Mass—a dream come true for Our Lady, Catherine of Chelsea.

After several investigative visits, much research, and Mrs. Santella’s seal of approval, we decided the Jewish Home would be an excellent choice for Catherine. We showed her the brochures and she was, to our relief, enthusiastic to move somewhere that looked so glamorous, and clean of course. The deposit was made, the necessary papers signed, and her bags packed. Our Catherine was moving uptown.

The day of Catherine’s move, a transport van came to get her, and she was placed in a wheelchair and carried down those four flights of stairs she had descended so many times before on her
own two legs. Mrs. Santella, Joe, and I went ahead to be there at the home to greet her and make her comfortable in her room. Joe, who is passionate about decorating, arranged her Hummel figurines on her bureau along with a stunning bouquet of fresh flowers. Mrs. Santella fluffed her pillows.

When Catherine arrived and was wheeled into her room, she immediately began crying, her hands quivering as she wiped away the tears. We hugged her, held her hands, and began talking excitedly (and nervously) about how wonderful her room was and how much she was going to enjoy living in the home. It wasn’t long before she perked up and began inspecting the crevices and corners for any signs of negligent housekeeping.

Joe and I visited Catherine almost every week for the year and a half she lived at the home. In nice weather we rolled her out to the garden where she waved at anyone who wheeled or walked by. She came to accept her new residence and new phase in life with both grace and suitable attire, wearing a sweater, wig, and hairnet every single day. We could not comprehend the purpose of the hairnet, especially over a wig. She must have figured it was an appropriate fashion statement for someone who no longer ventured into the outside world. Hat and gloves good-bye, wig and hairnet hello.

Catherine made the best of her life at the nursing home, with her inimitable team bringing her sweets and the latest news from our building, making sure she knew things at the apartment building were getting worse and worse and she was much better off where she was (which wasn’t far from the truth).

As time went on, and as we all expected, Catherine’s body and spirit began to weaken. At one of our visits she frightened us when she suddenly and completely broke down.

“What is happening to me? What is happening to me?” she sobbed, her frail body shaking with spasms.

Joe and I did our best to comfort her, and she eventually regained her composure, but that was it for her. She took to her bed, turned away from life, and soon fell into a coma. We sat by her bedside as she lay unconscious, holding her limp, ancient hands, assuring her it was okay to let go.

She hung on for a blur of days and nights, and then the call we were anticipating finally came. We were informed that little Catherine had moved on once again, and would we please come and retrieve her personal belongings.

We buried Catherine near her relatives in a huge cemetery in Queens, one Joe and I had passed countless times on the way to LaGuardia Airport. It is chock-full of gravestones that go on for miles; we always wondered, Who are all those people buried there? Now, we had at least one answer to that question.

Bertha, Greek Mary, Mrs. Santella, Joe, and I gathered together after the funeral to remember and celebrate Catherine’s life. We hoped we did right by her, taking the reins and directing the end of her years. We knew what could happen if someone fell through the cracks, and none of us had wanted to see that happen to someone as dear as Catherine. After all, she had taken care of her multitude of seven and deserved to be cared for in return.

We had pie and coffee, and chatted and chuckled as we divided up her few personal items. Her long life unfolded before us as we browsed through her box of photographs. One she had treasured in particular was a photo of her father with President Taft. She had been so proud of it. Imagine—her father with the president! As Joe and I gazed at it, we noticed that President Taft looked rather two-dimensional. Upon closer inspection, we realized her father was standing next
to a cardboard cutout of President Taft. We broke into peals of affectionate laughter at Catherine’s adorable innocence. Then we had more pie. As we ate, the room became still and quiet, the only sound forks clinking against plates.
The opening riff of Over the Hills and Far Away is a field above town filled with boys too shy to make a move so we smoke weed and drink warm beer, watch the sun set over the mountains all the way across our state and New York too, purpling ridges bonding us to the cool clearing. We’ve brought jackets, even in July, afraid to light a fire signaling our trespass.

* 

In 1972 the band was touring—Tokyo and Melbourne, releasing hallucinatory primal chords too big to be stopped; meanwhile, in our public high school halls we stalked the hit, the drag of elicit Kools & Marlboros.

* 

This was before it got too bad, heroin still a fringe malady, & safe sex an oxymoron. We wove chains of flowers around our necks, held buttercups beneath our chins to see the pollen dust our fresh skin. Yes, we liked butter, the gold shadow claimed. How could anything be so pure?

* 

We were ready for corruption. Shoplifting earrings, pilfering cigs, stealing our fathers’ booze.

We felt incited by music. A drama of pure enterprise.

Skulking around the patio after midnight, slipping into the neighbor’s pool, flinging underwear onto the chaise.

How good the water felt, coursing over our naked chests and between our legs.

* 

It made it easier to dream of boys, their mystery and call.
They knew less than we did but seemed wise; the force of my need so strong I’d bite the sides of my cheeks as classes changed and they brushed denim and flannel against my arms.
The parade of them: hair like the ungroomed waifs in some novel by Hardy. Smelling of earth & hay—they seemed to see everything. I shivered when they looked my way; none of us had words to say what we feared.

*

Every haze, every loose-limbed day we smoked, thought ourselves kissed by light, divine, climbers of towers and trees, headed for Avalon, the eastern glow, felt the last rays cut through our clothes to the seamless skins we wore so awkwardly. The very air was shy.

*

Willing to be beckoned. Shady apartments the boys kept after graduation, rootless and settling into labors like pounding carpet, cutting stone. A semester of college, maybe a year, then back home where we high school girls rushed to their studio spaces to sweep and do the dishes. Like Manson’s nymphs, another narrative we circled, our dedication to the lit fuses of these pan-pipes a fever we craved.

*

You could get a good pair of Army fatigues for five bucks. I had a pair, a jacket too, all I wore for two straight years, even in winter when I stuffed my wide feet into shitkickers without socks. My hems were always soaked; it never occurred to me to roll them. It wasn’t the way.

*

An elegy to plain names:
Steve (Efat) and Glenn (Dinty)
John and Jim and Greg
beautiful Brad
his Suzuki motorcycle
the Ford LTD
the Volkswagen bus
the Corolla.
Bonnie and Molly
Val, Cathy, Karen
Ed and Jeff C, Jeff B and Jeff K
Mary and Patty
Tom, Chris, Sandy
the pasture
the field
route 2
route 302
the woods
airport road
front porch
back porch
night
night
night

*

They gave us a map, a way to navigate:

trust fantasy, trust excess

lead with your skin

desire is a gift
avoid shame
believe your own
   fine   direct   gaze

love the idea of love

love love
love love
love love
love love

lead with your skin

banish shame

let the world cut you

*

Remember the Big Dipper from the pasture
ridge line? The naming of lights, the cold
march up, that rill deeper than the sun could
strike, even in June already bearing intimations
of frost. How we made our way at dusk, watched each other fade into the hill’s contours until Johnny and Chuck cut a hollow in the meadow grass and made a small fire, how our gold-lit faces looked as we passed the joint, how no one talked, the place had us then, how much I knew it was already ambered, setting into an impermeable membrane stretched across the years to come, the waving torchlight far below—two, three—cops who’d found our sigil, how we scrabbled back, kicked dirt on the embers and in total dark nipped by starlight crept across that ridge line and through the orchard, cut back to the far side of the pasture and down the slope into town, the paved walks and streetlamps and darkened homes, crept one after another into our own quiet blocks, wind hissing through leaves, vanished into our domestic spaces, our own beds next to sleeping siblings, how the meadow grass and hemp filled our hair and stayed on our skin, our dirty knees and feet, our penitential palms.

* 

Listen. We were kids. We didn’t know ourselves. We were small and detached, luminous and strange.

We were set free. It was 1973 or 1976 and no one cared. Back doors opened. Parents went to bed.

No fear of what could happen to us. Boys came to the porch and my father questioned them,

then I was in their cars, windows open, 8-track clicking song after essential song into the dusk,

the night of back roads. We were filaments of light, we parked next to farm fields and lit up,

lay back against the parental upholstery and blew blue smoke into each other. The music preserved us, come here baby, come on come on come on, and what-the-hell orchestras—London Symphony—

lifting the guitar with a fineness none of us could play but still we got it, we were in it, glazed,

bountiful, not wanting it to end: the gravel giving under the tires as we spun back onto the road,
car in gear, windows wide open to thrush and thrum,
air and crickets, music always always framing and true
cutting/cross-cutting time and distance, green Ford LTD five bodies or six or sometimes two, celestial
hum, county road to rural route to state highway
night after blessed night: what do you see, what
do you feel in the shoulder of the boy next to you,
the bicep and cotton of his shirt and Dave driving
one-handed, pushing the tape deck buttons: next track next next no go back yeah that one, not
another car in any direction; we’re nowhere (turn out the headlights drive by moonlight fuck you
crazy boy but he does it), we’re screaming or singing both it’s loud we’re stoned so very stoned
this moment right as birth pains into the deep green moss of night, of forever.

* 

February thaw some freak
40-degree day I’m out
the door and up the hill
to Val’s in heavy boots,
sweatshirt, gloves but no jacket: it’s a gift, the snowmelt
liquid streets dripping branch
and eave the neighborhood
soaked this benign day.
We’re off to it, little clay pipes
and the woods, our boots
sinking into snow made soft
we sit on rocks we clear with
our gloves and mittens, don’t care the wet’s coming through
the ass of our jeans it’s practically spring; sky lours low and gray
but air’s warm with some freak southern front blown in.
Like I said: a sweatshirt, enormous, frayed, something from the back hall before I run out of the house
and its clamor and diaper pail, soap
operas and Mum ironing, expectation
hanging like shroud across my
shoulders and neck. Whatever I'm
supposed to be doing can wait—
it’s Sunday February Warm
and I need these rocks these woods
where my body is untethered and I am
both slight and dense, a study in contradiction:
craving release, craving comfort, me,
Val, Tommy and Tom, one small
and dark, one tall and blonde who
are with us, just we unlovely girls with
lovely bones, shooting hoops in Val’s drive
then back to the woods to light up then
walking the quiet wet streets covered in clouds.
My ribs open, my chest cracks wide. Anything
could happen. Anyone could love me.

*  

Imaginary Music Video Script to Over the Hills and Far Away

EXT: RURAL STREET SCENE: AFTERNOON: 1973

A girl, waist-length hair, about 15, Levi's, flannel shirt with a rip in
the right elbow. On either side, modest Colonial and ranch homes,
ageing, a symptom of the town's economic downturn.

The light is soft, a spring light, lilac-tinged.

Girl walks away from camera, back to us, as the opening chords
sound, an acoustic guitar.

EXT: SAME DAY: LATER AFTERNOON: MEADOW

Girl now sitting, back to camera, wind lightly lifting her hair.
She turns her head to the side to inhale a filtered cigarette
as acoustic chord gives way to vocals.

Acoustic guitar, joined by an exterior pressure, a kind of
ache in the crescendo, drives toward a full-out presentation
of the whole: drum, bass, voice, electric guitar.


The band, onstage, in concert, live, full-throated, resplendent
exotic birds.

INT: DAY: GIRL’S BEDROOM: UNREMARKABLE
Pink floral wallpaper, white chenille spread, stuffed animals, posters of Led Zeppelin III & IV above the bed and on the wall.

Zoom out to yard below and a sunbathing mother in a red swimsuit, large sunglasses, glistening with oil. Next to her, an infant in a playpen wearing a white cotton sun bonnet.

Camera pulls back to teenage girl looking down on the scene. Her face is serene, implacable.

INT: CONCERT

The focus is on the sweat.

INT: BEDROOM

You will never be able to evade family noise, its clutter, the cluster of beating wings about your face and head your desire for out flammable...

INT: CONCERT

Plant’s hair fans out, a golden broom, head thrown back, shamanic, his voice carving the air.

INT: BEDROOM

Girl, looks at her hands, palms upturned on her thighs as she sits on the edge of the bed. Her face is unreadable.

Following the final verse, rhythm section fades, echo returns from Page’s electric guitar, a few chords on Clavinet played by Jones. We see the wind moving the tall spruce trees in the back yard, through the girl’s open window, as the song fades out.

Girl turns her head toward the window, the light, the movement of the trees. She is alone. Utterly and always, forevermore...

* 

I didn’t know about the son who died, or the OD’d drummer, the cover story or interviews, the heroin days, the women.

These were peripheral to sound, to a turntable, the careful placing of needle on disc, the ritual of reclining with liner notes and earphones: familiar: incandescent hosanna hosanna
hey baby, oh baby, yes baby
that siren call, primordial as salt

What would I have done with knowledge of their English lives and usual excesses when all I cared about was bass line, riff, strum, and the evergreen vocabulary of desire?

* 

Register this act of looking, watching and being watched.

What does she want, surveying you across that span
She hasn’t yet travelled? What name do you call out?
The song, finally, is about grief. The accumulated losses Filling the trunk at the foot of your bed. And were they Ever else? What do you owe her? She’s turned away Again, moving from you. Striding. No. Dancing.

You wonder if she was ever really there.
When Brooklyn still held elms along its pebbled sidewalks, and dappled horses mixed freely with cars and trolleys, Josephine Pagano lived with her parents, her grandparents, her stormy aunt and uncle, and their tumultuous children in a three-story brownstone on Fort Hamilton Parkway, one block from the butcher and two blocks from Sessa’s funeral parlor.

The only grandchild who spoke Italian, Josephine was Poppy’s favorite. Banana curls the color of chestnuts framed her tiny face, and she could play La Tarantella on the piano. Aunt Aida called her Naso Cagna, Dog Nose, because Josephine’s nose sat flat like a pug’s. Aida said that Poppy preferred Josephine because she had been named after him—Giuseppe—in a clever move by her parents that would endear him to the child forever and insure her place in his will.

Poppy worked as a plasterer at the Metropolitan Opera House, where he fashioned mischievous angels into the empyrean ceiling and watched rehearsals of Aida from his wooden ladder during lunch. On Sundays, he sang parts of the opera and charmed his grandchildren with tales of the Princess Aida’s tragic love and the magnificent animals that filled the stage: a scarlet-headed Brazilian parrot flapping emerald wings, a golden snake coiled around a jeweled dancing girl, an African elephant decked in purple velvet and silver tassels. He whispered to the children that the Opera House was his church, and that its music flowed through him into the cherubs born from his callused fingertips: “I make angels that watch over the singers, the musicians, and the fancy ladies and gentlemen in the audience. I, a poor plasterer, create the Heaven of the rich.” Pouring a splash of anisette into his black coffee, he told his grandchildren that there was no need to share this information with their grandmother or with their teacher, Sister Agatha, who already knew it and would be bored to hear it yet again.

Josephine’s mother, Emily, didn’t mind her father’s tales, but she would not allow Aida’s cruelty to sit like a rat gnawing at her tender daughter, who had just turned nine, so one day she pulled Josephine onto her lap and said, “Aunt Aida is my sister, first and foremost, but she has always been a jealous person, even when we were children. Her kids have potato noses. She wishes she could have a daughter like you.” Emily slid Josephine off her lap, then went to the sink, where she filled the large black enamel pot with water, dried cecis, and a scoopful of salt, then heaved it onto the stove and clamped the cover tight so it could boil.

Emily’s words did not console Josephine, whose porcelain pride had suffered its first chip. “But is what Aunt Aida says true? Mama, I don’t want to have a dog’s nose! I don’t want it to be all runny and covered with whiskers. I want it to look like Shirley Temple’s,” Josephine protested, knowing better than to stomp her foot.

Josephine’s vanity worried her mother. Vain women consumed themselves and everyone around them for a greedy spell of beauty that vanished like a kiss, leaving behind a few cruel traces of smudged lipstick. Vain women expected everyone to mourn the loss of their looks yet behave as if their beauty had not abandoned them. Women who were homely—or at least thought they were—
learned to be useful and tried to be generous, so Emily cupped Josephine’s round little chin in her hand, looked into her teary brown eyes, and said, “Be grateful that you have a nose as well as arms that can lift and legs that can run. Remember what Grandma says: Il diavolo è nello specchio. The devil is in the mirror.”

Josephine continued sobbing so hard that she melted one corner of Emily’s resolve to protect her daughter from the sins of the self-absorbed. Smoothing Josephine’s curls, she explained that dogs had magical noses that allowed them to understand another creature’s life story through its own eyes with just one sniff, and that a person who could do that glimpsed Heaven, free from the prison of their own mind. A dog’s nose, really, was a gift from God, if used in the right way. Then she told Josephine not to mention any of this to Sister Agatha. It was an advanced catechism lesson they didn’t teach until twelfth grade, and Sister Agatha might get upset if she knew that Josephine was skipping ahead.

Josephine didn’t understand everything her mother had said, but she felt important being treated to a grown-up idea, especially since it involved keeping something, with her mother’s approval, from the terrifying Sister Agatha, who glided along the school’s polished halls in a starched white habit and had eyes in the back of her head. Josephine decided to think more about what her mother meant, even though she still didn’t want to have a dog nose.

Every Saturday, Josephine and her older cousin Susie played opera and house on the fire escape, refugees from the explosions of Aida, who could go off like the Atomic Bomb, and from the rough teasing of Susie’s brothers, who were immune to Josephine’s charms. No pigtail or candy stick was safe from their greasy grasp; no imperfection was free from their taunts.

Susie remained loyal to her little cousin, and yelled at the boys when they barked at Josephine and shouted “Naso Cagna” during their stickball games in the street. Josephine reciprocated by playing with Susie, whose plump legs and wheezing kept her from jump rope and hopscotch with other girls. Alone together, with the kitchen window shut safely behind them, the girls entertained princesses and Shirley Temple with songs and dinners of crumpled paper pasta and button cookies. Susie, her black hair cropped close to her round face, wore a fedora and puffed on a teaspoon for a pipe. She didn’t much care for her mother, Aida, who did not cook, preferring instead the gentle attention of her Aunt Emily, who always kept a pot of garlicky ceci beans simmering on the stove and allowed Susie to dip a piece of crusty bread for a taste.

In their fire escape world, Josephine wore her mother’s green-checked apron, fed the doll babies, and sang. She prepared for her performances by applying invisible rouge and primping in front of a tiny hand mirror, which sat on their wooden play table next to the milk bottle. Susie, as man of the house, delighted in wearing Poppy’s giant Sunday shoes and fake-expectorating onto newspaper that covered the floor. She did not want to sing pretend opera songs or drag the stuffed bear by its ribbon rope, but she provided an enthusiastic audience for her cousin in exchange for being head of the household.

“Josephine,” she chided, “the ashtrays are dirty; the papers need changing.” She waved her dimpled hand toward the rusty metal ladder and took a drink of water from her coffee cup.

“Yes, dear,” Josephine said, gathering up the newspapers.

“Josephine, there’s a hair in my salad.” Susie rolled her eyes toward the sky. Josephine plucked the offensive follicle from imaginary lettuce.
“Have you finished ironing my shirts?” Susie folded her arms.

“No, dear, I have not. The baby was sick.” Josephine made the same apologetic face her mother made when her father complained that the pasta was overcooked. Then she added, “Darling, Shirley Temple is here; it’s time for the opera,” and removed her apron. With the tomato garden below as a backdrop, and the pigeons on the roof above as a chorus, she clutched her brown stuffed bear and burst into a sad song about her true love’s betrayal.

Susie turned her wooden folding chair to watch, stomping and clapping enthusiastically when she grew bored with the singing, signaling that the show had ended.

In this way, the girls continued, but over time, Susie maneuvered their play so there was less opera and more house, a development that bothered Josephine, tired of the drudgery too close to her mother’s life. She wanted to make her own stories.

One flat Lenten afternoon, Josephine tried a new tactic.

“Let’s go to a picture show,” she said.

“We can’t. We don’t have any money, and Poppy gave us nickels for Mello Rolls yesterday,” Susie said.

“Not for real. For pretend,” she said. “We’ll sit here, on the ladder, and play movie.”

“No. Movies are just a bunch of silly ladies wearing frilly nightgowns, drinking champagne. They don’t do anything.”

“We can make it Abbott and Costello painting the fire escape. Please, Susie, please. They’re so funny. Hey, Abbott,” Josephine called, trying to sound like Costello.

“No. That’s dumb.”

“What if you’re the usher? You can hold the flashlight and show me where to sit.”

“No. I want to play house. I like this game. I want my lasagna!” Susie thumped their little oak table with her fist.

Josephine sighed. She didn’t want to play house anymore, and her cousin’s recalcitrance annoyed her. As it was, Susie and her brothers took up too much of her mother’s time and affection. Because Aida always seemed to have one sort of an illness or another, Emily spent most of her time cooking for them, washing their clothes, and going to the school to plead with the nuns whenever one of the boys was failing or fighting—an almost weekly occurrence. Josephine felt the space in her mother’s heart shrinking, and worried she might someday be just a whisper against her mother’s ear, tiny and unsubstantial. She had tried to protest, to grow and keep her place in her mother’s kind eyes, but Emily would always say, “My sister doesn’t know how to mother. Aida is not quite right in the head. You know how Uncle Joe treats her. Your cousins need me. We cannot begrudge them that, Josephine.” She would cup Josephine’s chin in hands that still felt smooth and gentle, despite the work they did, and say, “Faccia di uno brutto” and smile. “Sometimes you have the face of a brute, my dear daughter. Try not to grow a heart that matches.”

Thinking of her mother’s words, Josephine felt a flush of guilt for arguing with Susie. She had heard the shouts and crashes from her cousins’ apartment. She knew that Aida flinched at the slightest sound. And that the neighbors whispered about Uncle Joe and a Polish woman. She felt sorry for Susie and for a moment relented, saying, “Yes, okay, I’ll get more lasagna,” but something came over her—her grandmother would have said the devil slipped in while the Holy Spirit took a nap—and in a flash, as if she had swallowed a moth desperate to be free, she let it out by adding, “Vaccalini.”
Susie didn’t understand. She put down her teaspoon pipe. “Vaccalini? We’re having lasagna.”

“No,” Josephine said. “Vaccalini. Little Cow. That’s your name. It’s what your mother calls you, isn’t it?” She was not as good a girl as her mother would have wanted.

Susie teared up and opened her mouth but no words came. Her tongue flapped, a blind worm gasping for truth. She stood and overturned the toy table, crashing the porcelain teapot and the little hand mirror onto the metal grate. The pigeons roosting on the ledge above them flew up with a low, rumbling coo.

Josephine had hit her mark with more sting than the lash of her father’s belt, but her mouth tasted as if she had bitten into the fuzzy part of an artichoke heart.

“You’ve wrecked our home sweet home! Why did you do that?” Josephine wailed.

“You made me, Naso Cagna,” Susie said, throwing open the window to crawl back into the kitchen.

“Your father goes with a Polish woman!” Josephine called after her.

“Your mother isn’t fit to wipe up my father’s spit!” Susie’s reddened face looked as if it would pop.

“At least I have a mother,” Josephine screamed.

“Your mother,” Susie said, suddenly calm, “is not as saintly as she pretends. She does things with Mr. Sholly. My mother told me. That’s a lot worse than my father. Men are allowed.”

Josephine shook her finger in Susie’s face. “You are a liar. A fat, ugly liar!”

“Your father drives a cab at night.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“So what? You’re making up stories!” ”Josie, everyone on the block knows.” Susie stepped through the open window then slammed it shut so hard the glass rattled in its wobbly frame. Across the alley, Mrs. Castaldo’s sheets flapped on the line, indifferent white flags waving to the world.

Josephine picked up a shard of the rose-colored teapot, leaving the mirror where it had fallen, and drew back her arm, ready to launch the shrapnel at her cousin. But she was too late. Susie had disappeared, and Josephine was left with the sting of her cousin’s words, which sat in her stomach as if she had swallowed a raw egg.

Mr. Sholly, a banker, and his wife came from Switzerland. Unlike the other men in the neighborhood, Mr. Sholly wore polished black shoes and a suit, with his hat tilted slightly to the side. He had a bloodstone pinky ring and a gold pocket watch that chimed. When he walked with his wife, he carried her under the elbow, as if she might tip over. Mrs. Sholly, who had been an actress in Switzerland, seemed much older than him, with streaks of silver running across her brown hair, which she kept piled in an elegant bun pinned with tortoiseshell combs. She wore ruby lipstick and basil-green velvet suits in winter and crisp vanilla linen in summer. She smelled of lavender. The Shollays knew five languages and whenever they visited the Paganos, they asked the family to speak Italian so they could take a rest from English, which Mr. Sholly said was practical for business but didn’t warm his heart the way Italian did.

The Shollays brought the kind of Europe that the Fort Hamilton families had never lived. Some people said they were taken with themselves; Emily said the people down the block were ignorant. The Shollays were refined and good-hearted. They marveled at Josephine’s lilting pronunciation and gave her small bundles of caramels wrapped in wax paper. She found herself studying the way they cut their meat, passing the fork to the right hand before taking a bite, and the way they did not gulp their orangeade, even on the hottest of days. Mrs. Sholly begged her to play the piano, and Mr. Sholly told her German fairy tales and smiled with his broad, white teeth. He had a reddish
blond cowlick that he kept trying to smooth, without success. It made him look boyish, playful even, despite his serious blue eyes. Then one day Mrs. Sholly got sick and didn’t come to visit anymore, but Mr. Sholly still called, sometimes for dinner, sometimes after dinner, bringing pastries in a green cardboard box tied with white and red string and playing gin with her mother while her father dozed before he left for work.

All this ran through Josephine’s mind as she ran down the steep concrete steps into the basement, where her mother was scrubbing her father’s undershirts on the metal washboard in the big iron laundry sink. Behind her were five jugs of Chianti that her father had made.

“Mama!” she shouted. “Mama!”
“What is it, Josephine?”
The words burst from her chest as if pushed by her pounding heart: “Susie! Susie said you did bad things with Mr. Sholly. She said everyone knows.”

Emily stopped her scrubbing and wiped her hands on the pockets of her faded apron. “Come here, Josephine.”

Josephine approached the sink and lifted her face so her mother could brush the wisps of hair from her eyes. Emily’s hands smelled of bleach. “Josephine, Mr. Sholly is our friend. So is his wife. I have known them since before you were born.”

“Yes. But is it true, what Susie said? Do you do things with him when Dad isn’t home?”

A small flicker of anger passed across Emily’s face. “What are you talking about? What ‘things’ do you mean? Mrs. Sholly has heart trouble. For a while, I brought her lunch every day because Mr. Sholly could not come all the way home from New York. He was very grateful. Then she got worse and had to go to the Norwegian Home. He cannot take care of her anymore, and they do not have any children. We are the closest thing to family that they have in this country. You know all this.”

“Yes, but he still visits. I see you laughing with him when we eat. He even got you to sing that Mario Lanza song. You don’t sing with Dad.” Josephine grabbed her mother’s hand and squeezed it. She tried to picture Mr. Sholly holding her mother’s hand; she wondered if they had ever kissed; she wondered what her father would say. She had seen her parents dance together only once, at her cousin’s wedding, flying across the wooden floor, like a big, happy bird born by the blue chiffon wings of her mother, steadied by the sturdy coal black legs of her father. Surely they loved each other. Surely her father would not allow Mr. Sholly to steal her mother. Surely her mother would not allow herself to be stolen.

Her mother suddenly looked beautiful. She had bright jade eyes and a perfectly round dot of a beauty mark on her left cheek. Even when she was angry, as she was now, her lips were full.

Emily offered a plate to everyone who came to her door, but she refused to nourish the gossips. “The ‘things’ we do are between your father, Mr. Sholly, and me; they are none of anyone else’s business.”

Josephine thought her mother meant to embarrass her, but the desire to understand overpowered her shame. “Aunt Aida said.”

“Mr. Sholly and I keep each other company. We discuss music, books, and the movies.” She did not know how else to explain to her daughter something that lived outside the bounds of Heaven and of Hell: that a woman could want more than daily bread and calloused caresses along the small of her back.

Emily returned to her scrubbing, thrashing the shirt in the water with loud splashes. “Ignorant people spackle the gaps in their heads with poison. My sister has too much time on her hands. I’m starting to think that maybe you do too. Remember: Tomorrow is cemetery day.”
Josephine, confused, wanted to press her questions, but she did not. In an instant her mother—her round, familiar mother who fed her warm milk with cinnamon and sugar, who draped flannel blankets over dining room chairs so she could build a castle, who told her stories about Stub, the dog that they had owned in Caserta—transformed into a mysterious woman. What was she really thinking? Josephine had never had to decipher her mother’s mind; Emily spoke with the direct, blunt force of a cleaver. It hurt, but Josephine had always understood what she meant. Now, she was an angry sphinx forbidding Josephine to approach.

The next day, Emily and Aida took their daughters on their weekly pilgrimage to the cemetery. Emily peeled and divided a tangerine between the girls, who ate it as flies buzzed around them, through the beating sun. While the mothers laid bouquets on the graves and prayed, the cousins squatted on a graveled path, poking at ants. They ran among the headstones, apart, but each keeping an eye on the other, until they reached a mausoleum where Aida stood with Emily, black mourning dresses draping their heavy shoulders like tired uniforms, their eyes ringed by ashen gray crescents. The air sat heavy with lilies.

“This is ours,” Aida explained, pointing to the granite wall. “Everyone has a place so that in Heaven we’ll be together. No one will be better than anyone else.”

Nodding, Emily added, “Forever.”

Josephine and Susie eyed one another. The day of the broken teapot weighed on Josephine, making her wonder if she had lost her cousin as well as her mother, but she pushed the idea to the back of her mind, where she kept her memory of the night sky during the blackout, when she and Susie had climbed to the roof to look out at the city and seeing nothing where the lights of life should have been, looked upward to the millions of stars in a blue-black ceiling.

Josephine watched her mother and aunt, one leaning against the other, their reflections partial in the cool gray granite, next to her own and Susie’s. She felt the heaviness of the day against the sheer muslin of her dress and the light pink of Susie’s cheeks, flushed from running. They had battled boys together; they had dreamed of husbands; they had made the fire escape safe. Almost. There were things, Josephine knew, that they could never keep on the other side of the window, thoughts that shattered even the twinkling memories of the night sky and the taste of a sweet lemon ice melting on her tongue.

Reaching toward Emily, Josephine lifted her mother’s soft, strong hand to her own face and inhaled, trying to smell the tangerine on her skin. ♦
The air around us is a blanket or
basalt prickling; the air is anything
but air.

And the science says it weighs
one hundred pounds in any given walled-in space,
so is this tonnage on our napes, that presses onto
us like minnow does dock and
bone stock did marrow,
only the omnipresent,
inescapable huff-and-puffing
clearness of air?

Perhaps we should hold
our breath so not to overstrain our lungs
and bite our tongues and drain our brains of its massy grayish slop

and drop underground without the good clear
stuff like recovery, like addiction shakes
to see if it’s the problem.

Or we can recapture it, weaponize it, solve it
like old words and blast through it to
unmapped, wooded islands where the air is sweetest—
use it as a solvent and chug it down;
it doesn’t matter to me.

Or not, but the weight will keep on
weighing and the air will hang about incessantly,
either mockingly or in complete innocence: a problem or a solution.
Hermitage

poetry by Jim Gustafson

At the edge of the northern pine
forest, a white cottage has everything
you would expect from one who cares

for the simple things, like marigolds.
The porch, to the right of the door is stacked
high with wood ready to feed winter fires,

warm the air, bake cakes, breads, and boil
water for dinner soup and morning coffee.
He has lived here in recent years, having come

from far away giving up much once needed,
keeping only the little now necessary.
He plants seeds when the snow melts,

keeps a barrel of rain for the dry days.
The suit he once wore to chase dreams
is stuffed with straw to scare away crows.

In the evening, after supper, he rests,
reads books, writes in his journal
and celebrates the sameness of days.
Pumpkin Picking

poetry by Linda Lamenza

This year I don’t go into the patch.
Alone at the edge, petrified to trip,
reinjure my shattered elbow,
disfigured foot.
I overlook the surface,
rippled with rocks and dirt.

I breathe
apple cider cinnamon stick,
dare not hold a cider cup one-handed.
Shift my weight, I ache to stand,
adjust the sling around my arm.

Watch my daughters weave vines and fruit,
close my eyes and pretend:
we welcome a hay ride,
roll down the grassy hill.
Memorize tree-lines of color.
Nude 5 by Alexander Chubar
One late summer night we slept with the windows open. The cool air felt wonderfully crisp. Just before dawn I awoke to the whining of airplane engines. It was not the steady grind of an occasional passing but the penetrating sound of diving and climbing. There were loud, thunderous explosions. I jumped out of bed and saw them through the window. They were barely noticeable but I saw three or four, maybe five. One by one they dove over the roofs of the sleeping city, each dive followed by an explosion and a small cloud of smoke. Within a few minutes, a siren started. Then another and another, till their frightening cacophony filled the air. Nazi Germany had attacked Poland. It was Friday, September 1, 1939.

My surname is Etan, but that is not important. I was born and raised in the Polish industrial city Katowice, not far from Kraków. We were not deeply religious Jews, but when the Nazis invaded my homeland, it became obvious that the Germans were rounding up everyone of our faith. My family quickly left the city and went into hiding in a nearby forest. After two weeks of evasion, the intruders eventually apprehended us. There were no charges or trial for the captives, only a conviction and sentencing to a concentration camp because of our ethnicity.

During the early days of my incarceration, my vision of life became distorted into a surreal scene. I was twelve years old and had only completed the sixth grade. The opportunities to further my studies, play music, play sports, dream about the opposite sex were denied to me. My family’s voices, our apartment, the smells of my favorite foods, my childhood friends became a distant, blurred image. The brutal reality was the prison camp. Its many inmates, with their senses dulled, milled around like ghosts.

The only shred of good fortune, if you can call it that, was that my father and I were incarcerated in the same camp—but in separate barracks. Father was assigned to a different work detail so we didn’t see each other during the day. Some nights we would sneak out from the barracks, hiding from the searchlights, and meet in the dark to spend a few precious minutes together.

Every morning we marched six abreast under guard to work in the nearby factory. After twelve exhausting hours we trudged back to the camp. My survival instincts took over as I adjusted to the dreary routine of avoiding the Schutzstaffel or SS men and the kapos.

The kapos were concentration camp prisoners assigned by the SS guards to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks. This sinister system turned kapos against their fellow prisoners in exchange for the possibility of favorable treatment. Kapos were spared physical abuse and hard labor, provided they performed to the satisfaction of the SS guards. They could use beatings,
humiliation, and punishment of whole
groups for the actions of one prisoner.
Their methods were psychological and/or
physical torments such as starvation and
physical exhaustion from backbreaking
labor. If he displeased the SS hierarchy
however, the kapo would be returned to
the status of ordinary prisoner then
subjected to those whom he had
tormented. Some showed flashes of
humanity to their fellow prisoners, but
many became known for their brutality.

Upon our return to the camp one evening,
a large number of armed guards in long
coats with rifles slung over their
shoulders herded us into the barracks. An
SS man accompanied by several guards
 barged into the barracks with a skinny
prisoner carrying a small toolbox.
Screaming and prodding us with their
rifle butts, the guards made us form a
line. The prisoner set the toolbox on a
small table, opened it, and took out a
strange instrument. The SS man and
guards began dragging people to the
Table. Two guards firmly held each
prisoner as the man tattooed each left
wrist to distinguish an escapee if he
successfully fled the compound. I didn’t
know what the letters meant, but I knew
that I did not want to be tattooed.

Someone from behind pushed me
forward then two guards grabbed me,
forced my left hand to the table, and held
the palm of my hand firmly on the table’s
rough surface. I kicked and screamed in
an attempt to break their grip, but within
seconds, the repulsive stigma was on my
wrist. When I was released, I scampered
up to my high bunk. Enraged, I tried to
suck the ink out. Stubborn and defiant, I
bit deeply into the skin until much of the
ink and surrounding pieces of flesh were
gone. The offensive tattoo was mutilated,
but a scar was left behind.

The next month the executions began.
Every night a long procession of prisoners
slowly passed by my window, dragging
their feet in silence. Occasionally we could
hear the machine guns’ staccato fire
followed by the muffled growl of tractors
moving earth to bury the dead. The
horrific scent of death clung to the air.

Rumors spread that if you belonged to
a work detail, you might be saved from
execution. Shortly thereafter my father
seized upon an opportunity to talk to a
kapo named Switsky who regularly took a
 group of prisoners to work outside the
main camp. I heard the two speak in
Yiddish, the language commonly spoken
by Jewish prisoners. The kapo abruptly
turned to look at me, apparently assessing
my abilities. Finally he motioned to me
and we joined his detail.

Kapo Switsky came from a nearby
village where the Germans had captured
him as he tried to jump onto a train to go
north, but he had succeeded in sending
his wife and two daughters into hiding.
Kapo Switsky appeared kindly, unlike
many kapos. A tinsmith by trade, he had
spent most of his life fixing leaking tin
roofs. Judging by his limited vocabulary,
he likely had little schooling. He would
yell and curse in Yiddish pretending to be
tough, especially when the guards were
around. Kapo Switsky projected the
appearance of a soldier with his special
armband, but from some unknown army.
He dressed in ragged clothes, but his
pants legs were always neatly tucked into
his boots. His dark olive-green jacket was
tightly buttoned and a threadbare black
beret cockily tipped over his right ear.
Always full of energy, he exuded a
determination to survive with the belief
that the war would soon be over. Using
smuggled cigarettes, money, and other
bribes, he shielded us from the
viciousness of the guards and the sadistic
kapos.

From the very first day, Kapo Switsky
took me under his protection, watching
out for my safety. I became his personal helper, carrying his toolbox full of tin snips, hammers, a dented kerosene blowtorch, and soldering irons up narrow stairways to fix leaking roofs. While I moved cautiously when placing my feet on the slippery inclines, Kapo Switsky, in his element, hopped around the rooftop as sure-footed as a mountain goat.

High above the nearby city of Płaszów, we would peer at the horizon where grey and white clouds crept quietly, giving the impression of serenity and perhaps sanity. We were two improbable friends, a simple tinsmith and a young boy, both enslaved because of an evil dictator’s hate for the Jewish people. By inhaling the fresh breezes that filled our nostrils, we somehow felt free of the war, the camp, and the guards. This fantasy always ended when the shrill factory whistle proclaimed the end of the workday and the brutal reality of electrified fences and wooden bunks returned.

Once Kapo Switsky reached into his breast pocket and retrieved a creased photograph of a young woman and two small girls, the blurred image of his wife and daughters. He said he was confident that some day they would be together again. Then, gazing on the city below, he mumbled about them being safe and that the Germans would never find them.

A day or two later, when we assembled for the trek back to camp, Kapo Switsky became agitated jumping back and forth, looking from the head of his column to its rear and repeating the tally several times. There was no mistake; the count was short. Two men had escaped. The guard at the gate always counted the prisoners in the morning and again in the evening, and Kapo Switsky was responsible for bringing his entire work detail back to camp. We inmates had learned to cover for the missing men by creating diversions to confuse the guards and slip them up on the count. On this day, however, a guard at the gate noticed some excessive shuffling and sounded an alarm. We were rapidly surrounded, ordered to stand still, and counted. The escape was discovered. Kapo Switsky was roughly dragged into the guard shack while we were escorted to our barracks and locked up.

The next morning, the customary commotion created by the formation of work details was missing. All was quiet. No one ordered us out to work. We speculated what would happen next. The Nazis did not tolerate escapes from the camps and often retaliated by executing the entire work detail. The day plodded on as one rumor replaced another. The night came and still nothing happened. The camp was eerily silent, yet there was a palpable sense of anticipation.

About mid-morning on the following day, hundreds of soldiers poured from military trucks and surrounded the barracks. With loud shouts, the soldiers ordered us to assemble in front of each barracks in rows, six deep. Shortly afterward the prisoners from the Płaszów labor camp were marched onto a rectangular field then ordered to stand and remain silent in a four-sided formation. I looked for my father but did not see him.

Machine gun barrels pointed menacingly at us from the watchtowers, as guards with snarling dogs took positions all around us. I then noticed a newly-built platform in the middle of the field about five feet high with a stout pole immediately adjacent to it. Near the top of the pole was a long, sturdy reinforced arm. A thick rope tied into a noose hung from this arm. Under the rope was a three-legged stool. Ten soldiers appeared at one corner of the field led by an SS officer in a black uniform followed by a nondescript spectacled man in a white coat. Immediately behind them were four armed guards surrounding the diminutive
figure of Kapo Switsky.

Switsky’s small frame was barely visible between the guards. His hands were tied behind his back, but he walked briskly with his head high, his black beret pulled over his right ear. The legs of his pants, as always, were neatly tucked into his boots. Once at the platform, two of the guards effortlessly lifted him and stood him on the three-legged stool. One of the guards tightened the noose on his neck. Suddenly, the silence was pierced by Kapo Switsky’s high-pitched voice.

“Brothers,” he yelled in Yiddish, “the war will be over soon. Take care of my wife and children.”

Just as the wind carried his voice to the corners of the field, the SS man yanked the small stool out from beneath him with one quick, decisive motion. Kapo Switsky dropped straight down. His feet thrashed, feeling for support. None was there. Within seconds his listless shape started to slowly sway in the bright sun. Kapo Switsky’s head was bent sideways, his swollen tongue protruding between bluish lips.

The man in the white coat walked up to examine the body. He whispered something into the SS man’s ear. The SS officer nodded, turned to the swaying form, then pulled a pistol from the leather holster on his belt. He fired two shots into the hanging body, the quick pops cracking the silent air. Kapo Switsky, the *mentsh* (the Yiddish word for a righteous person of noble character), was no more.

The prisoners stood motionless. I stared at the ground rather than the limp, lifeless body hanging from the end of the rope. Executions were a common occurrence at the camp, yet this death was deeply personal. Kapo Switsky’s companionship had erased the darkness in my bleak world.

A large black raven squawked, interrupting the tense silence. Dwarfed by my fellow prisoners, I stood transfixed. Tears blurred my vision, but I knew that all eyes were riveted on the wooden scaffolding in the center of the field. The Nazi bastards had taken my family, my youth, my innocence, my material possessions, my health, and now had pillaged my faith in humanity.

I had little time for spirituality, but faith brought hope and, at times, courage. Because of the atrocities I had witnessed, I began to question the existence of God. Was God present? Would not a compassionate God save us from this evil? Why did God permit this wickedness? These are questions without reasonable answers—answers that only exist beyond human comprehension.
The darker ink is Percy’s editing her manuscript, a section where she wonders about the human: hubris wins out—the decision is the crypt will be violated to create man. Percy’s edits (and politics), fill the margin for the nineteen-year-old woman. My wife and I are reflected in the glass. I slip my hand behind her: the other me can only imitate me, Percy’s quip in the darker ink, that her monster in every way must reflect man. On nearby papyri, Sappho is in the grip of desire known only to a woman, written with vanishing ink.
The Swing Set

poetry by Cameron Morse

Deep in the shade of my third year since diagnosis, the swing set rafters web above blackened planks. Cicada casings cling to the undercarriage, their bodies missing. I can no longer hear them screaming. The cricket hums to itself its little lamentation.

Autumn and my bimonthly visit with the oncologist tomorrow morning, a wheelbarrow to be pushed from the wood pile to the back patio, unloaded and pushed back again.
The almanac says to buy you something made of metal,
but you already own those coin cufflinks you never wear,
and our plastic cocktail shaker works just as well. In this union,
partnership, anything but a marriage, we’ve already framed
leftover license plates—New Mexico’s hot air balloons climbing
up the kitchen wall, Florida’s oranges rolling around our basement.

Instead, I want to give you the smell of the ocean
on the first day of every beach season, and the sun-filtered
green of oak leaves that shock us into spring. A decade
is worth more than sundials and birdbaths. It’s worth
the hollering of barred owls in the middle of the night,
worth the offering of their spotted feathers on our deck.
It’s worth the cross-country moving trucks, sick housecats,
knowing we will always hear the language of each other’s sleep.

My wish for you tonight is flight, for the wind
to sweep you above our rooftop, above our small green city;
and though I can’t give you wings, I hope the helicopter lesson
will be a good stand-in; because a decade is worth the shaky
take-off and landing, the stories you will tell me of the pint-sized
farmhouses and wisps of rivers, your bird’s-eye view above it all.
Retro Ashland, Oregon by Kirby Michael Wright
It wasn’t like this yesterday. The bears stare into everybody’s windows, their paws making cups between little black eyes and reflective glass. Another thing that changed: There aren’t any more explanations left. No bridges from Alaska to Russia. No tiny volcanoes of blame. Do you know how empathy works? We don’t love what we don’t see. We don’t cry for a tragedy we don’t see. We don’t feel bayonets sticking somebody else’s skin. We don’t drown ourselves in oceans that exist on other planets.

The grizzly bears don’t want to bother us. They just want to stare in and make us wonder whether or not they are our friends. I don’t know if I’ve loved a lot of bears, but when I was a girl, my best friend ripped her hair from her head and told me it didn’t hurt. I crushed bees in my palms and wiped the paste on the roof of my mouth. I screwed in the lightbulbs I could find, then closed my eyes.

Up in the attic, I chip tiny holes into the roof. I imagine the possibility of an entire sky. Downstairs, my child, who screams and covers her ears during fireworks, crawls up to the bears and puts her pink hands to the glass. She laughs and pets like a lover before the truth. She doesn’t know about bears, and I don’t try to explain. Whatever the bears have planned for me, they also have planned for her. At night, rain falls through the roof’s holes. For a moment, we believe we are putting out a fire in another part of town. ♦
The farmers conduct a rodeo: separate the Belted Galloways, cleave the herd into new pastures.

The animals bellow for three days and nights, refusing even sleep. Standing, noses near the electric fence friction,
bulls call to heifers across the dirt road;
young steers low, scrape hooves against ground; calves hold still and cry, paralyzed by grief.

You tell me of your illness on a Friday and I weep for a week. Watch dying leaves orange and yellow the mountainside. Translate the particular Morse code of autumn rain on a tin porch roof: staccato reminder that the voiceless fall of its frozen form will hush over Vermont soon enough. In a room, in a hospital, in a city, a doctor gives you a number. You don’t share the prognosis with me.

Out in the field, a cow and three steers graze their way toward the watering trough. Mist threads through the trees. Next year’s rodeo will send these steers to slaughter. But see, now, how the slightest nuzzle sends them frolicking. See the moments of small joy still to come.
There Used to Be Trains Here

poetry by Ray Keifetz

Trains made us,
they promised us,
now all is weed and rust
and we
passengers of dust
beyond time and timetable,
pitted with waiting
for the creosote dusk
when locust leaves rustle,
windows rattle,
platform planks tremble
and tombstones lean
into the blaze and thunder
of dead rights of way rising,
gather
beneath a waterless tower
whose pocks leak sky
upon our shrouds
to listen to the unanswerable wails,
the frantic chug chugging of them
beating the weeds for their torn-out rails
as we take their place
on the widowed ground
dreaming
dreaming
of oysters and cigars,
porters in white,
Pullman cars,
our husbands and wives
returning.
I am standing at the bar and I am telling the bartender I want a gin martini. Dirty. The bartender winks at the word and takes an olive from a tub, drops it into the gin. It splashes, sends concentric circles rippling from the centre. Once the waves are done I beckon the server over again. More dirty, I tell him. He frowns and I tell him, Dirtier. He drops another olive into my drink. I wave my hand, go on go on. He drops another and another and another. He drops olives in my drink until the olive mountain is taller than the gin and the liquid runs to escape the intrusion and sloshes out of the glass and onto the bar.

The barkeep says, That’s enough, I’m cutting you off, and that’s when I begin to cry.

Then there is a hand on my shoulder. I think, what if I could grab these fingers and grip them so tightly and hurl the finger-bearer over my shoulder, over the bar. I wonder if he’d pop up, ta-dah, wearing the same coattail as the bartender is wearing. Excuse me ma’am, is what the hand is saying, ma’am, your salad is leaking.

I look at my glass and, sure enough, there are droplets of gin collecting at the rim, avalanching down the glass, pooling around the base. This is what the man does: He sits on the stool beside me and he takes my glass and a spare glass and turns them horizontal, presses their mouths together in a fish-mouth first kiss, and the alcohol drools out, collects on the bar’s surface. I watch the puddle grow and grow until the dribble stops. The man separates the glasses and sets them down side by side. Each is half full of olives, and he says, See! And I say, Wow, what a trick.

Then he tucks a napkin into his collar. He says, Bon appétit, and uses two toothpicks like chopsticks to eat the olives. Once both of our glasses are empty he says, That was a nice lunch, let’s do it again sometime.

The man calls me the next day. He says, I will pick you up at eight p.m. He arrives at five-fifteen. I say, You are very early, and he says, Yes, well, I finished all of my jobs and you were the last thing on my to-do list, so here I am. I nod at the man because I understand then I say, What are we doing?

He tells me he’d just like to have sex, please, and I tell him I think that would be okay. I take my shirt over my head and he goes into my kitchen and takes all of the condiments out of the refrigerator and lines them up on my counter.

I say, Do you like them? And he says, Condiments or breasts? I say, The condiments, which is not what I mean, and he says, Condiment. He digs his hand into his pocket and retrieves a Trojan and an Eclipse and he says, Condom, and he says, Mint. He smiles his best smile and I let him inside of me.

After, he says, That was nice sex, let’s do it again sometime. And he leaves me in bed, sticky and pink, and I feel like raw chicken. There is a chicken in my freezer and I do not know how long it has been there.

The next morning, the man comes to my house, lifts his arm above his head, and knocks at the top of my door. I am upstairs in my bedroom spinning around on my desk chair. I am holding my pen and there is paper on the table but I haven’t made one mark on the page yet. That’s my favourite part of writing. My editor calls and says, Have you finished
that sex tip article yet? I spin, No. My editor says, I need that sex story on my desk tomorrow morning. We’re right on deadline.

I am spinning spinning when the knocking starts and I think that maybe the sound is my heart knocking against my skeleton because I am spinning so quickly now, but, when I stop, the knocking continues.

I feel drunk when I walk to my window, so when I open it and lean out, I say, Whaddaya think ya doin’, because that is how a drunk person would address a window caller.

I’ve come to take you on a date now, he says.

My head rocks to a stop like a chair, not the spinning kind, and I nod. I walk downstairs and open the door and say, Why did you knock so high on my door? He says, You are wearing pyjamas. He’s right. They have cats on them. Cat’s pyjamas.

He says, Well we’re late, so I guess you’ll have to wear them. I take my coat off the hook and shrug it over my pyjamas and ask, Where are we going? To dinner? He checks his wrist. There’s no watch on it, just a mole. He says, It’s eight in the morning. It’d be a very early dinner.

I say, Or late. And he says, Are you hungry? I nod, I could eat. He says, Well, we are not getting food, so grab a banana or something.

I get a banana and tuck it into the waistband of my shorts and he says, Put ’em up.

We climb into his car and it coughs itself awake. Its bones shudder when he slides the stick into gear and I think about climbing over the gearbox and straddling him and making him drive without being able to see.

Sex Tip #1: Spice up your sex life with a little danger! Mount your man on the road and have him drive off a cliff! That’ll really send him over the edge!

I take the banana from my shorts and peel its skin like a sunburn and press it to my lips. I know he’s watching so I can’t open my mouth, I can only kiss this banana as if it were a distant relative. He says to the windscreen, This might be love, I think.

And it might be. I’ve been in love many times. Different loves are different, I know that to be true. My first was a cousin of mine. Loving a first cousin is legal while loving a second cousin is not. His name was Michael, I suppose it still is, though to me it might as well be nothing for that is what I call him when I do not speak to him.

At Christmas, I finished reading Charlotte’s Web and I cried. When I saw the Christmas ham, I could do nothing but sob and my body became salt and I could not stop weeping for fear of crumbling. When the adults stumbled outdoors to play croquet, Michael took the ham out to the back garden, into the trees that surrounded his house, and let Wilbur back into the wild. He set the ham beside the creek.

So he has something to drink, he told me. He plucked the pineapple skewers from his flesh with such care that I wanted his fingers to pluck me just the same.

I wind down my window and toss the banana as far as I can toward the roadside scrub, but it still slaps the concrete and banana shards fly. I say, Where are we going? And he says, House shopping and turns into a driveway.

The house is large. White. There are pillars out front and a staircase to the door. A real estate woman greets us, him by the hand and me with a nod, and says, Hello there, welcome, do come in, and I feel like an undercover agent.

The floors of the house are hardwood, glossy. There are two staircases that curl up to a mezzanine embraced by a white bannister. He takes my hand and leads me across the foyer and he says, Tell me about your dreams.
I start to tell him about the one with the cat wearing dreadlocks, clicking his long fingers to jazz music, surrounded by a kitchen appliance orchestra, when he presses his palm on my mouth. He says, *Wrong dreams*, and I lick his callouses. Feel the crevices dip and rise beneath my tastebuds. He is the flavour of nothing and I want to eat him.

Sex Tip #2: Men love oral. Show him just how far you’ll go by eating your man whole! You’ll have him screaming your name in no time!

When he removes his hand, I smile at his jeans. He shakes his head slowly. Then rubs his damp palm over his crotch.

He takes my hand in his unlicked one and leads me into the lounge. There are two couches, a rug, a television showing a woman holding a mop. She smiles as if the mop were her lover and talks so animatedly that the mop seems like the best mop to ever mop and I curse the mute button, for I wish I could hear the number to call in and order that joy-bringing mop.

*I think we should meet one another’s parents*, he says.

The lady and her favourite mop disappear and in her place is a man scowling at a counter filled with engagement rings. A woman appears in a thought bubble above him. She has her arms crossed and one eyebrow raised. She is a Disapproving Girlfriend. The man’s hand hovers over a gold ring with an emerald stone and the imaginary woman shakes her head. He moves his hand to a silver ring with a triangle diamond. More head shaking. Then his hand lands on a platinum ring whose diamond is shaped the way diamonds are. The woman smiles. Nods. The man sighs and wipes a stripe of perspiration from his forehead. Phew! Now their love will be okay!

*I think we shouldn’t*, I tell him. I take him into the bathroom, sink to my knees, and take his whole self into my mouth. Afterwards, I wipe the corners of my throat and he says, *This bathroom is nice. We could live here; don’t you think? Doesn’t this feel like home?*

My stomach feels full and I do feel like I might be home.

He takes my hand, tugs me to my feet, and lets me lean on him, dizzy with vertigo, and I realise that I am not full; I am empty instead.

He takes me through to the laundry and I say, *Sex tip #3: Is he into dirty girls? Try doing it on a washing machine. Don’t turn the machine on. It’s better to be surrounded by soiled laundry for a truly filthy experience.* He says, *Sex tip #4?* And I say, *Stop pressuring me.*

I find the last door in the house. A bedroom. It’s a strange thing, to see a bedroom that has never been lived in, trying so hard to look like home.

There is a bed made of twigs. A wooden frame that could never stand the weight of love. There is a rug never stepped on, a chest of drawers filled with nothing, and a wardrobe with paper dresses hanging, paper pants folded, paper shoes set carefully side by side. I say, *These clothes are not real.*

He takes a paper tie and loops it around his neck. Ties it like a noose. Pretends to hang with a laugh. *They’re real*, he says. *But you can’t wear them,* I say as he takes a paper ring from the jewellery stand and loops it onto my finger. He says, *Will you marry me?*

Only I don’t do any of the proposal things. My stomach feels nothing but mourning for this morning’s banana. The paper ring is too tight; it strangles my finger. I make a come-hither motion and the paper tears and the ring floats to the carpet and lands in a pile.

*It’s not real,* I tell him.

I take his paper tie in my fist and I tug. There is a ripping sound and I am left holding his noose in my hand. Or lasso? Or reins?
Sex tip #4: Tie your man down. Gag him. Cuff him. Bind him to something that is forever and then leave the room and never return. Men love women who play hard to get.

He bends down, takes the scrap of paper that no one would ever know was once a ring.

You don’t think this is love? He asks me this as he tries to tie the paper into a knot.

I smile at the man and I say, I’m afraid I think it probably is. ♦
Death with Dignity

fiction by Judith Alexander-McGovern

He’d been awake all night, lying in the dark, fingering the minutes like worry beads. In twenty-nine hours exactly Iris Fox, Senior Care Administrator of Hamilton House, the upscale continuing care retirement center that was his current place of residence, would be on his doorstep. The cunning little vixen, Rose once called her. Tom had another name in mind, more canine than vulpine.

“A social call,” she’d said, coming up behind him yesterday morning, laying a cool hand on his arm while he sat with his espresso and pastry in a secluded corner of the Hamilton House deli. “To see how you’re doing.” Of course. “And find out if there’s anything I can do to help.” Help? Not likely. “Maybe interest you in a few of our scheduled activities.” As if he spent the majority of his days behind closed doors, crumbling to dust. Which he did. And he was. And she knew it.

On his last visit to the rheumatologist, Dr. Cohen, he’d seen his most recent X-rays, the veneer of flesh stripped away to expose distorted joints and the rat-nibbled margins of eroding bone. Seeing them, Tom fell silent. In his life outside the good doctor’s well-appointed office, his body registered its disintegration slowly, in measured doses of pain and lack of mobility and the number of pills it took to get through the day, so that the story revealed by the pictures pinned to the lighted wall was unnerving—a time-lapse film of retreating glaciers. Iris Fox, reviewing the flood of reports that crossed her desk, would have seen the same pictures. It was this irrefutable evidence of his decline—not altruism, not even the skinned-down milk of human kindness—that was behind her visit. Ever since Rose’s death three months earlier, she’d been sniffing for a reason to move him out of their condo and into the dribble-chinned halfway house of assisted living.

Some—his son, William, his daughter-in-law, Christine, smug in their East Coast brownstone—would consider his attitude irrational. Rose was gone. He didn’t need the space. Why not allow himself to be fed, watered, walked, cosseted? What difference could it possibly make, a simple move from one wing to another in the same building? He’d heard this argument before: from Dr. Cohen, from his friend and neighbor, Martha Jorgensen, even from Rose herself, in one of her moods.

But logic told Tom otherwise. He was a firm believer in statistics and he had read, in a recent American Senior Housing Association report, that the average older resident in a place like Hamilton House, once transferred to assisted living, had a remaining life expectancy of less than two years. He was eighty-three now, which meant he’d be dead before his eighty-fifth birthday.

His mother’s mother had survived the Potato Famine, an Atlantic crossing, two decades in domestic service, four children, and eighty years of sweltering New York City summers, to die at ninety-six, upright in her slat-backed rocker, eyes trained on the neighbors. His father lived to ninety-two, his mother to almost one hundred. He had a responsibility to continue the family tradition. There were other reasons to live on: books unread, wines untasted, Sunday crosswords to puzzle over, and the remote but relentless hope that a change in the economy would provide him with the means to reclaim his
freedom.

He wasn’t unreasonable. He knew he was no longer “the man he used to be.” There were some things he would never do again: sail the Pusillanimous into the Canadian San Juans, prune a rosebush, hike the Cascades. He was open to compromise, as long as it kept him where he was. But Iris Fox refused to bend. If you could manage the five requisite “Activities of Daily Life,” bathing, dressing, mobility, eating, toileting (a word he couldn’t bring himself to use), or if you had someone to look after you, as he’d looked after Rose, then you were left alone. If there was some question, however remote, that you could not, then you were scrutinized, evaluated, summarily disposed of.

He made a mental note to move Rose’s empty chair to the wall opposite the fireplace. He didn’t want to see Ms. Fox sitting there, ankles crossed, gray eyes inspecting the room, inspecting him. She’d find no fault with the condo. The cleaners were still coming twice a week, to vacuum and dust and misplace his books; the florist still delivered the tulips and dahlias and gladioli Rose herself had once arranged in the outsized crystal vase that reared like an upended iceberg from the middle of the dining room table. If, during tomorrow’s encounter, he didn’t have to use his cane to lower himself into place, or his hands to do anything more than open the door, it might be possible to convince his unwelcome visitor he was still capable of living on his own. Alone, yes, but he’d managed Rose and her congestive heart failure by himself for years, and wasn’t he now, after all that time, entitled to a little solitude, a little breathing room?

Tom eased his bony feet into felt-lined slippers. In the kitchen, he measured coffee into the grinder, his fingers morning-stiff. He stared into the clinical brightness of the refrigerator, his attention caught by an unopened box of Enbrel syringes. Had he shot himself up already this week? He patted his upper arms, the fronts of his thighs, his slack belly, like a man searching his pockets for misplaced keys, and felt, above his left knee, the faint soreness of a recent injection. He flexed his fingers. The joints clicked, caught, and released. The pain was no worse than usual. Maybe even a little better now that his system had adjusted to the Enbrel.

Before rheumatoid arthritis, his illnesses were short-lived and soon forgotten. Now his life was ruled by pills. He hated them for the tyranny they imposed, even as he harbored a certain fondness for their inflated promises of relief, couched in a fantasy language of Latin, Greek, and pharmaceutical gibberish. Specialized vocabularies had always fascinated him. Were, in fact, the engine that had driven his career. First as an industry analyst in New York for Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Beane—as it had once and long ago been known—and later as CEO of his own investment advisory firm in Seattle. Now RA was providing him with a whole new lexicon. Autoimmune disease. Synovial joints. Subluxation. Not to mention his personal favorite: ankylosis. The union or consolidation of two or more bones or other hard tissues into one. As apt a definition of marriage as any he’d ever come across. A shame he’d never thought to share this with Rose. She would have enjoyed the analogy, the two of them one, or as near as could be, given who they were.

He poured coffee into a thick ceramic mug, added a slice of buttered toast to his plate, and sat down to eat. Had it been possible, he would have fled Hamilton House on the afternoon of Rose’s funeral. But three years earlier the market had turned and now he was trapped, living in a place he couldn’t sell, his portfolio a fraction of what it once had been, most of the rest of his money tied up in the
irrevocable trusts he'd established for his grandchildren. He wasn't destitute. The Hamilton House condo—a three-bedroom, two-bath, sixteenth-floor unit with a view of Elliott Bay and the hideous cantilevered birdcage of Rem Koolhaas's downtown library—was his free and clear. And the extortionate health-care contracts he and Rose signed when they moved in six years ago would cover his expenses through impairment, incontinence, rampant senility, and whatever came after—as Iris Fox herself had explained when he met with her to appeal Rose's banishment from the main dining room the year before she died.

"Rose has fainted at the dinner table twice in the last month, Mr. McCauley," she'd said. "Her doctor and I are concerned that she's becoming increasingly fragile. That particular space was designed to function as a restaurant; I'm afraid it doesn't offer the safeguards Rose needs now. I'm sure you can appreciate the situation."

Tom rested his cane against the side of his chair and sat back, away from the pool of light cast by Iris Fox's desk lamp. "I do, Ms. Fox," he said. "But Dr. Wong has adjusted her medication. She hasn't had a dizzy spell in several days."

Iris Fox placed a blue folder in the middle of her desk. "Just to remind you," she said, smiling, "Hamilton House is a continuing care retirement community. People come here, many of them, while they're relatively young—in their early to mid-sixties. They live here because they like the location and the amenities and because they can continue to lead active lives. But they're also looking ahead to a time when they might not be so active, when they'll need help with day-to-day living, which we can also provide. I believe that kind of care is why you came to us in the first place, yes?"

Tom glanced at the unopened folder. He'd seen it once before, on the day he and Rose signed the papers committing themselves to geriatric limbo. He hadn't bothered to read them; it wouldn't have mattered if he had. It was what Rose wanted and he would do whatever was necessary to see she got it. Sell the house in Ballard. Consign the Pusillanimous to a Lake Union yacht broker. Box up his library. Say goodbye to his garden. The folder was thicker now. He wondered how much Iris Fox knew of his own condition, whether he was still safe behind the façade of Rose's more serious illness. He pushed the thought away.

"Why we came," he said, placing his hands on the polished surface of Iris Fox's desk. "Why Rose came, is so she could be around other people. It wasn't my idea. But Rose's social life is very important to her; this decision to separate her from her friends has devastated her."

"We're not trying to limit her social life, Mr. McCauley. The two of you have a beautiful condo. You could entertain Rose's friends there; the dining room would be happy to cater for you. And if Rose wants to eat in a larger setting, there's a lovely dining room in the assisted living wing."

His stomach churned. "That's not an option, Ms. Fox, at least not for me. I prefer to eat my meals with people who can still feed themselves."

The smile left Iris Fox's face. "That's a bit of an exaggeration, don't you think? Many of the residents in assisted living are highly intelligent, interesting people who happen to be physically limited, as Rose is now." She looked down at Tom's fingers. "And you may be yourself someday."

Tom eased his swollen hands onto his lap. "I can take care of Rose."

"I'm sure that's what you'd both prefer and I agree it would be wonderful if you could go on that way. But if the time comes when you can no longer do so—if
Rose’s heart continues to fail, or your rheumatoid arthritis gets worse—it may be necessary to move to someplace smaller, where you can get whatever help you might need.”

Qualifying words. Squishy. Evasive. The kind of language Tom abhorred, although he’d used it often enough himself to cushion the blow of a stock price gone awry. All right in its place, but not here and not now. And not coming from Iris Fox.

He kept his voice steady. “Is that a euphemism for evicting us from our own condo?”

Iris Fox leaned forward reassuringly. “No, Mr. McCauley, it certainly is not. Nor is it meant as anything more than a concern for your well-being. Because, as long as you and Rose continue to live here, Hamilton House is responsible for your care.” She unlocked the file cabinet behind her desk and slipped the folder into place.

“If you think about it, I’m sure you’ll agree it’s in Rose’s best interests to take her meals in a safer environment.”

He retrieved his cane and left the office before she could walk him to the door.

Standing at the kitchen counter, Tom counted out the day’s pills. What terrified him about growing old was not the slow subsidence of his body, or even death itself, but rather the knowledge that Iris Fox might have a say in how he lived out his final days. Shuffled from room to room and bed to bed. Each room smaller, grayer, more sterile than the one before, with tubes and wires and alien appendages hanging from the ceiling like stalactites, pointed and deadly. Nurses and orderlies would creep, crepe-soled, across the floor, whispering words he couldn’t understand while he lay helpless under his white sheets, his cheeks scraped clean of stubble, his hands scrubbed and folded over his chest. Lifted and turned and bathed and wiped. Being dead without dying.

Except he wasn’t there yet. For one thing, the Enbrel was working; for another, he had Martha.

Six years earlier, on their first night at Hamilton House, Martha, plump and white-haired in caftan and coral beads, had crossed the hall and invited them to dinner. Rose had dressed carefully, her black pantsuit understated, her bobbed hair—dyed at the first sign of gray—brushed behind her ears, her red lipstick subtle, yet bold enough to attract attention. The color reminded Tom of his first glimpse of the twelve-year-old Rose Fahey, banging two erasers together on the blacktop at St. Ursula’s, a cloud of chalk dust rising from her hands like smoke from a magic trick, a scarlet ribbon in her long dark hair; and how he’d braved the taunts of his fellow altar boys to navigate the playground and make himself known.

From the beginning he’d been her willing foil. The solid boyfriend, husband, lover, their separate roles wordlessly agreed upon: himself measured, analytical, unobtrusive; Rose vibrant, sophisticated, and determined.

So it surprised him when, midway through the lamb tagine in Martha’s condo, Rose fell silent. At first he thought she’d mistaken Martha’s tongue-in-cheek dissection of Hamilton House society as criticism of anyone who aspired—as Rose most certainly did—to join it. Later he realized her objections went deeper, to their opposing views of God with an uppercase g: Rose’s devotion to the Church in sharp contrast with Martha’s pragmatic approach to life and death, a philosophy arrived at during her years as a young doctor on the killing fields of Biafra and Afghanistan.

As for himself, it pleased him to find,
in this practical woman, a rare friend, someone whose opinions he respected, whose company he relished. And whose views on religion, as Rose well knew, he shared.

Over time, Rose softened and Martha pulled back, while Tom developed the uneasy feeling the two women were conspiring against him. He was not invulnerable, they told him; sooner or later, he would have to accept “the inevitable.” But what did they know? They had their own shibboleths. Which he graciously refrained from mentioning.

Since Rose’s death, he and Martha had become good-natured adversaries: Tom resisting Martha’s attempts to prepare him for change; Martha, against her better judgment, continuing to care for him, sub rosa, during the crippling flares that sent him to bed for days at a time.

Tonight he was cooking dinner for the two of them. Nothing fancy, more of a gesture than anything else. A sincere thank you for services past, a thinly veiled bribe for the future.

After breakfast Tom took the elevator to the ground floor shops. He was standing in line at the market, a jar of Martha’s favorite olives in his hand, when Iris Fox walked by. He turned away, determined to postpone their encounter until the following morning, when he would have no other choice. Already he saw her everywhere, even when she wasn’t there—a wisp, a shadow, a gray-eyed, slippery-tongued harbinger of death. He handed the olives to the woman standing behind him in line and left the store.

The shortest way back to the elevators was through the gift shop, one of those places that contained the incidental items no one realized they needed, until they did: hearing-aid batteries; brochures for the symphony, the opera, the art museum; a wire rack of train and bus and ferry schedules; a discreet display of condoms. Condoms? Surely he was mistaken. He stopped to take a closer look and his cane snagged the bottom of the rack. A shower of bus schedules fell to the floor. He snatched them up and made for the lobby.

Once inside the condo, he resisted the urge to chain and lock the door. Clearly, wherever he was inside Hamilton House, Iris Fox would find him. The solution, then, was to get away, if only for a while. But how? He no longer drove; no one he knew did. He looked at his haphazard collection of bus schedules. Growing up in the Bronx, he’d ridden trolley cars and buses, but never in Seattle. Now, it appeared, the time had come. Some god—not the God of his and Rose’s youth, and surely not the God he’d discarded when his older brother Francis died at Guadalcanal—had provided for him.

Within an hour he’d devised a route that would take him back to the old Ballard neighborhood. Getting there would require four buses and three transfers, but the final bus, the 44, would deposit him within walking distance of the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks. He would skirt the lawn where he’d brought Rose on those days she felt restless and bitter and resentful of what she called her “captivity” and go instead to the iron bridge that spanned the waterway, where he could watch the tugs and barges, the sailboats and canoes and kayaks, the purse seiners and gill netters thread their way along the narrow causeway before heading for open water. He would stand holding the railing and imagine his hand on the tiller of his own boat, the rustle of canvas sliding like silk up the forty-foot mast.

He left Hamilton House through a side door. Outside on the street the weather was crisp and cool, the October sky a cloudless blue. Strangely, the air smelled of burning leaves and ripe apples—
childhood scents, their roots sunk deep in ancient autumns. He felt untethered, liberated, on the brink of some rare adventure. When the 12 arrived he negotiated the ramp that came beeping out to meet him and settled into a forward-facing seat, his cane upright between his knees.

He managed the first two transfers without difficulty, his hands a little shaky, but that could have been the excitement of getting away, or the shock of having seen Iris Fox materialize on the other side of the market’s plate-glass storefront. He looked at his watch: In twenty-two hours he’d be seeing her again.

Once on board the northbound 44, he closed his eyes and leaned against the window and felt his bones rattle with every bump in the road. Hot air poured down on him from the vent above his seat, making him feel drowsy and claustrophobic. The bus stopped, started, stopped again. He wiped a thin film of sweat from his upper lip, unbuttoned his camel-hair coat, and opened his eyes. Where was he? In a minor panic, he pulled the cord and got off.

Near the bottom of the beeping ramp, he stumbled. Two heavyset women, fringed scarves knotted under fleshy chins, caught him as he fell. Work-roughened hands jerked him to his feet.

“You stand now,” the shorter one said.

“No, you sit,” her friend ordered, pushing him down on the bus-shelter bench.

They all sat: Tom in the middle, the two women pressed thigh to thigh against him. No one spoke. It was as if he wasn’t there. He glanced at each of them in turn. Their granite stillness summoned up images of gimlet-eyed Madonnas and Cold War espionage. Were they Russian? Ukrainian? Moldovan? Ripples in the stream of immigrants that staffed the kitchens and swept the floors and tended the feeble at Hamilton House? They appeared to be in their late seventies, not that much younger than he was, but while he moldered, they flourished; where he slumped, they sat erect, gray heads squared on the solid pillars of their necks. While his grip was paper, theirs was rock.

For one brief moment, he hated them. He pinched the bridge of his nose until his eyes watered. The analyst in him dissected the plan he’d created, searching for flaws. His logic had been sound, his planning meticulous. And yet he had failed. No, not failed. Merely suffered a temporary setback, fallen victim to the learning curve inherent in any new venture. Tomorrow he would complete the trip. It was time, anyway, to prepare for his dinner with Martha. Reassured, soothed, convinced once again of his competence, he buttoned his coat and thanked his silent rescuers before making his way to the opposite side of the street to wait for a southbound 44.

Dinner was impossible. While he’d been gone, his roasting pan had assumed the heft and awkwardness of an anvil; his knives, pots, and ladles transformed into instruments of torture, racking his tender joints whenever he tried to lift them. Defeated, humiliated, infuriated with himself, he called the dining room and ordered two full-course meals and a bottle of malbec, to be delivered at six-thirty. Then he took three methotrexates and lay down.

“It won’t be the meal I promised you,” he said when Martha arrived at his door.

“There wasn’t time.” He passed her the wine and a corkscrew: Despite the methotrexate, his hands still ached.

She pulled the cork, set it neatly on the countertop. “Why’s that?”

He hesitated. What to say about his afternoon? He’d been certain of success, convinced the long bus ride would prove,
to anyone who doubted, that he could still manage on his own. But he had not succeeded. So why mention it? Was he looking, subconsciously, for sympathy? Or was he still groggy from his drug-induced nap? Whatever the reason, he’d boxed himself in—unwilling to tell the truth, unable, for the moment, to conjure a plausible lie. He waved toward the windows.

“I went out,” he said.
“Really?”
“You don’t believe me.” His voice sounded petulant, querulous, defensive.
“Don’t be silly. Of course I believe you.”
He pulled out her chair. “I thought you’d be pleased. You’re always telling me I should get out more.”
“I’m delighted,” she said. “Now tell me about it.”
He stared at the blank brightness of the linen napkin spread across his lap, his mind still empty of words. “Later.”

After dinner, they sat in the living room, a bowl of fruit and a bottle of port between them on the coffee table. He waited for Martha to ask again about his afternoon; instead, she pointed to Rose’s chair.

“You’ve moved it.”
He nodded. In the weeks after Rose’s death, he’d purged most of her belongings. Her early scrapbooks, with their yellowed clippings and faded photographs, he sent to the Bronx Historical Society. The rest he mailed to William in Boston. His own memories defied expulsion, sequestering themselves in the crevices of his brain to reappear in living color or black and white, depending on how he remembered the technology of the time.

The chair was another matter. “Good bones,” Rose had said when she first brought it home. And Tom had agreed. But the color, a sickly green, disturbed him, and the pattern put him in mind of rotting vegetation. He’d been disappointed when it followed them to Hamilton House. So why was it still here?

“Are you cold?” he asked, dragging himself back to the present. “Should I light a fire?”
“I’m from Alaska, remember?”
“You haven’t been there in ages,” he reminded her.
“I’m flying back tomorrow, to see my brother.”
“Are you?” he said, annoyed she hadn’t bothered to tell him. Before she could respond, he said, “I went to Ballard today. On the bus. I sat in the botanical gardens and read my book.”
Or he would have.

Martha touched his knee. “Good for you,” she said, and Tom chastised himself for the lie. Forestalling her a second time, he talked on.

“So you’re going to see your brother. How’s he doing?”
“Dying.”
“He’s ... ?”
“Seventy-four. Two years younger than me. He’s started palliative care. It helps with the pain, but the crux of it—the dying—isn’t happening fast enough for him. He wants me there to speed things up.”

Tom hid his shock. And then remembered Martha’s acquaintance with suffering, and her disdain for what she referred to as “the Western attitude that refuses to recognize mortality as a natural part of life.”

“Could you? Would you?” he said.
“Legally, no. Alaska doesn’t have assisted suicide, and even if they did I’m not sure he’d qualify. He has a year, maybe more, if they take good care of him. Rather ironic, when you think about it. All that attention, he claims it distracts him; he feels obligated to live on.”

Was he supposed to laugh? He wasn’t sure, so he focused on the legalities. “How does that work, exactly? Here in Washington, I mean.” He’d voted for it but he’d forgotten the details.

“Well, there’s the usual: age, residency, six months to live, mentally competent.
Then there’s the physician’s side of things, which mainly has to do with writing the prescription and recording the death.”

“And the patient?”

“That’s where most of the safeguards come into play. You have to make multiple requests, oral and in writing. And the medication has to be self-administered and ingested without help.”

“It really is suicide then.”

“Oh, yes. Rose would definitely disapprove.”

Tom held his port to the light. “Rose had a quick death. I don’t mean to say she didn’t suffer while she was alive, but she didn’t linger. One minute she was sitting in her chair and the next minute she was gone.” It still angered him, how easily she’d abandoned him, left him exposed and vulnerable. He kept his eyes on the red-brown liquid at the bottom of the glass. Martha took a fig from the bowl.

“What about your brother?” he said.

“I told him I’d come. I can’t bring anything with me, but if he has something at hand ... ”

“So you will. If you can.”

“If I can.”

He had one last question. “Would you for me? Someday? Not that I expect ...”

Martha returned the fig to the bowl.

“Let me see your hands,” she said, and when he held them out she took them gently, turning them over to look at the swollen joints. “Are you in pain?”

“No,” he lied. “Just a little stiff.” He pulled his hands away. “I’m sorry. Only, talking about your brother, I wondered ...”

Martha sat back against the pillows.

“It’s forgotten. Don’t worry about it.”

But he could tell from her voice that she knew why he’d asked. Why then hadn’t she answered him? He’d never known Martha to hedge. Was she losing patience with him? The next time he needed her, would she refer him instead to Dr. Cohen, who would inform Iris Fox, who would place yet another damning note in his file?

Tom checked the time. “You should probably be going. It’s a long flight and your brother is waiting.”

At the door, Martha kissed his cheek.

“We’ve been friends for a while now, Tom,” she said. “I know the kind of pain you’re in, but you’re not dying any faster than the rest of us, and we’re managing. Finish the port and go to bed.”

The next morning Tom woke to the metronome drip of rain from the balcony outside the bedroom window. Earlier he’d heard, or imagined he heard, the soft thunk of Martha’s door closing and the muffled drag of her wheeled suitcase moving down the hall.

He pulled on his robe and went to sit in the living room. He’d slept badly, the mattress hard as a pine board, his sheets tangled. Pain knifed through his body. His palms were slick with sweat. Someone else held the strings that worked his arms and legs and kept his head steady on his neck.

He had four hours left until Iris Fox’s visit.

Sliding his hand into the pocket of his robe, he found a small, four-holed button: hard, round, with a tail of loose threads hanging from the shank. Rose’s. He remembered it dangling from her blouse one afternoon as he struggled to move her from her walker to her chair. He’d looked for it afterward, to sew it back on, but it had disappeared. He limped into the kitchen, opened the double doors under the sink, and tossed it into the trash.

He filled a glass with water and shook two leflunomides into his open palm. With the water still running he examined his hands. He’d grown accustomed to the effort it took to open doors, unscrew lids, tie his shoes, but this deformity shocked him. At what point had they ceased to be
hands, become instead a grotesque pair of flippers, the bones twisted out of alignment, the knuckles large as walnuts under his skin? How much longer would it be before they failed him completely?

It was a thick glass, and heavy. One of a set he and Rose had bought in Venice before William was born. It slipped from his fingers just as his knees buckled and he fell to the floor, where he lay, white tiles cool against his cheek. Shards of broken glass glittered like ice on an arctic sea. He could feel, deep beneath him, the thermal heat of volcanoes, the Roman candle surge of a flare.

There was the panic button, if he could orient himself. He'd used it, sometimes, to summon help for Rose. Though more often than not he let her sit, slumped in her chair, afraid whoever came would report back to Iris Fox that Tom McCauley could no longer look after his wife.

Rose. Over the course of their marriage he'd given her everything she asked for. With one exception: his return to the Church. He'd confessed his apostasy a month after the wedding, too late for her to leave him. The pain it gave rise to—for Tom, for Rose, for both of them; he was never sure—made any other refusal impossible.

By the time he fathomed the inner workings of Hamilton House, Rose was entrenched, deaf to his requests to move back to Ballard, to some small bungalow where they could resume their former life. Where, although he never said it, he would be safe. In public, nothing changed. But, alone together in the condo, the hairline fractures of their day-to-day lives deepened, widened, collapsed, taking whatever fragile bridges remained between them.

His mind wandered to the grisly stories the nuns had told about godless Eskimos sending their old people off to die in the frozen wilderness. His eyes closed. When he opened them he was still lying in an ice-field of shattered glass. He fumbled for a chair leg and dragged himself up and sat, forehead on the kitchen table. He would call Martha, ask her to come—and then remembered Martha was gone, tending to her brother.

It didn't matter. He had the means. No medication for RA worked for long. His prescriptions were constantly changing: Eventually, even the Embrel would fail him. He had, therefore, a sizable cache of NSAIDs and DMARDs and corticosteroids—a motley grab bag of medicaments. He pillow his head on folded arms and considered how to use it. If he waited much longer, it would be too late.

He watched the rain, still falling outside the living room windows, and raised a second glass to the speckled light and asked himself: How was it that the two women most in control of his life were both named after flowers? A curious question, impossible to answer. A diversion and a distraction from the task at hand. All he wanted now was to experience the drift and tug, the ebb and flow, the eventual dissolution of fear. He wanted to be blanketed in whiteness, shrouded in windblown snow. ♦
The Prison, prison for life by Anna & Michal
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Exegesis (with a line from Richard Siken)

poetry by Alysia Nicole Harris

People ask me about the world. Whether
I think the world is worth saving. I think the world is first worth loving.
For it is just a marble
of the human heart. Turn it and behold
all its contradictions. Sometimes it is azure sapphire sometimes it's
gangrenous. Always singular, one of a kind,

a tiny gem of life in a fist of the dark,
The Earth and the Human Heart.
People ask me why believe in God why have faith at all just
do good deeds but this is the pillow
on which all of my good deeds sleep—

And religion is not just an attempt to recover the beloved
to your bed,

So when I say Amen
When I say the dawn is breaking the bones of your heart like twigs
Look at every fall we’ve taken and remember we are still august.
Remember the tiniest sparrow

its belief in its seeming
invincibility, trusting the air to catch
its wings. Its ringing throat. Its eggshell bones—

A body has only its feeble song

I have no gorgeous harmony for us today
But predators I pray of you won’t you feast on this praise

What I mean is: creation will kill you
it is so beautiful. Look at how brightly it unmakes
all its children.

When I say humanity is my first love
I mean 276 girls studying physics, 40
Palestinians and a black boy

When I say burial, ashes to ashes and dust to dust
I mean I saw life today. It fasted
From sun up to sundown and broke  
with much joy.

Where is the funeral for the going out of your smile  
Where is the shroud  
white enough to smother  
the muzzle of spring. Its fatness, its pink.

When I say feast I mean  
Quince, parabolic pear, or peach  
perhaps my tongue  
or lower  
my breasts  
or lower

my  
flesh,  
a claret ribbon in your mouth  
because it’s all love

—it tastes good to me  
it tastes good  
to me it tastes  
good to me

when the fruit becomes red meat,  
what do you need to know about the sine  
or cosine, except

the apple curves  
to fit the vivid frame of your lips.

And that’s another Amen.

When I say let’s stay  
marooned in this here chapel of  
a few hours, remember how I

have kissed in the scratched out  
light, you became a fountain, and my mouth  
was full of pennies days after.  
Each day another amen.

When I say the promise of paradise  
look around you

When I say hell  
look around you ...
for the miracle finally to burn and not burn out

And when I say alleged
heaven, remember the crime they have tried to make of living
remember the body
has so many things to apologize for
for which it is not sorry. It is not

sorry

for bearing witness
For loving what I could not love, for living in the creases
of your palm like salt, with your excess tears

not sorry for giving up.

And I am not sorry for using words that feel familiar
For using language as a prosthetic

a phantom limb

so that I can
hold this world with extra
hands that is how much I want
to keep it

I have stood at the edge of a sea of reeds
admired the prenatal architecture
awe on my right awe on my left
the smell of creation all over us.
We weren’t much but we were humble enough
for the smallest anything to fit.

My shoes
were rubber. My skirt soaked
and everything I was
was the drug of God.
The Road Home by L.M. Henke
Embracing the Pseudo-Disease: A Review of Vikram Paralkar’s The Afflictions

craft talk by Nicole Yurcaba

When I first met the Lanternfish Press crew at the 2017 AWP Bookfair in Washington, DC, I immediately found two items on Lanternfish’s table seducing me: their steampunk-inspired coloring pages and Vikram Paralkar’s novel The Afflictions. With Filippo Balbi’s 1854 oil painting Testa anatomica as its cover art and an intriguing storyline about Senhor José, an elderly librarian at the Central Library, and Máximo, an apothecary, who peruse the sacred Encyclopedia of Medicine, The Afflictions immensely appealed to my fascination with all objects, art, and literature darkly enchanting and macabre.

Although the novel depicts a plethora of pseudo-diseases—some curable, some incurable, most thought-provoking—and the pseudo-diseases’ diagnoses and effects, and although the novel is a series of third-person medical entries and seven first-person monologues providing insight about the library and those who work there, The Afflictions is anything but a sterile, unreadable medical manual.

With nine gorgeous charcoal drawings by Amanda Thomas interspersed randomly throughout the book, with its poetic yet clinical voice, and with its focus on human fallibilities and susceptibilities, The Afflictions takes the reader through a variety of philosophical anecdotes regarding existence and spirituality, critical observations about society and humanity, and the struggle between the afflicted individual and the world’s perception of that individual.

Cleverly fusing Paralkar’s nearly poetic writing style’s gorgeousness with the grotesqueness of diagnosis, disease, survival, and, of course, death, The Afflictions leaves the reader possessed to know more about the pseudo-diseases depicted in the Encyclopedia of Medicine.

The Afflictions is a literary cabinet of curiosities housing subtle philosophical observations regarding society and religion that genuinely reflect on the current state of society, politics, and humanity. Instead of chapters, the book is
divided into short metaphysical, historical, and insightful disclosures, narrated in the third person, that name and detail the pseudo-diseases, their symptoms, their causes, their diagnoses, and their progressions. In many of the depicted afflictions, deafness and blindness occur and recur, and the frequency of such afflictions comments on the figurative blindness that plagues not only individuals in their beliefs but also society’s learned and unlearned members, that refusal to understand or accept anything different or challenging.

One of the most beautifully written and thought-provoking quotations is found at the end of the entry “Aphasia floriloquens” (a pseudo-disease which causes the afflicted person to suffer from an excessiveness of speech): “The whole world lines up to hear the torrent of words that the disease inspires, yet the invalid’s own thoughts and lamentations pass unheard.” This instantiates the devaluing of individual uniqueness as often seen in our current time’s bullish, often anti-intellectual rhetoric (especially in politics): An individual or group (e.g., minorities, women) possesses a unique idea, thought, etc., but because of the constant melee and onslaught of recycled traditional values or ideas, those individuals remain unheard or further oppressed.

This transition into the idea about the oppression and “blinding” of individualism is a stark theme in The Afflictions. One way of reading the novel is that those who are afflicted with the portrayed diseases possess a sort of uniqueness that makes them beautiful in a world that refuses to understand the invalid’s imperfections, a world that attempts curing the individual of that uniqueness by any means necessary. In a short monologue, Senhor José states, “The man on the street doesn’t understand these things. He’s quick to label someone a monster and move on without bother to look for the man within the body.”

As a reader, I relate to what the narrator poses because as a Ukrainian American female and a gothic subculture member, I continually ask others, “What are you afraid of?” I have asked this of cashiers who have refused to wait on me because I’m dressed in a black Victorian mourning dress and wear elaborate eye makeup. I’ve posed this to small town policemen who follow me through stores in my rural hometown, simply because I’m wearing a coffin-adorned t-shirt and a bondage skirt. I’ve asked this of members of my community who offensively call me the n-word or some other racial slur because they cannot comprehend, and continually strive to deny me, my ethnicity. Thus, The Afflictions forces readers of all backgrounds to take the novel’s subject matter, its subtle—yet unsubtle—philosophies, and look at the current world and its beliefs in a manner that forces hypocrisy, evil, and oppression once more into the forefront. Most of all, The Afflictions poses that the “cures” for the world’s afflictions, as well as individual afflictions, are, more often than not, ostensibly unattainable and require improvisation at its finest.

In “Erysifia Poisoning,” a poisoning which induces the oppression of happiness
and plunges the sufferer into the utmost pits of despair, an alchemist’s treatise states, “We all believe that illumination would give us pleasure. But none of us dares look straight into the noonday sun.” By publishing *The Afflictions*, Lanternfish dared looking into the sun, and in Vikram Paralkar, Lanternfish has found a literary genius who presents a gruesome side of life the majority of people disassociate themselves from, a poetic and narrative gem who will surely cause the larger, mainstream presses to salivate with envy. *The Afflictions* is a must-read for anyone who enjoys the social commentary of Ukraine’s Serhiy Zhadan, the philosophical inquiry of the Czech Republic’s Ivan Klíma, and the poesy of America’s Yusef Komunyakaa. And, more so if one loves all things darkly enchanting, *The Afflictions* is a book worth adding to one’s own cabinet of literary curiosities.
Whenever I teach a class about writing and publishing, there is always a student who asks, “Aren’t you worried your ideas will be stolen?” This is probably because of my teaching philosophy, which is to share everything in the world I know that might help them. I always answer, “No. I am not afraid my ideas will be stolen.” In the first place, the very essence of an idea is that it can’t be stolen. An idea is an intangible thing. Add to it the writer’s voice; toss in their version of plot, character, and setting; and you’ve got something that can’t be exactly duplicated.

Maybe there are only two or three or twelve basic plots, as some writing teachers like to point out. And maybe if that monkey sits at the computer long enough, it will eventually type out *Romeo and Juliet*. I tell my own students that most good stories are basically about three things: love, loss, or longing (or any two or all of these in combination). Which on the surface doesn’t seem to allow for much creativity. But the beauty of it is that there are as many stories about love, loss, and longing as there are human beings.

Should no other writer have written a story about doomed lovers after *Romeo and Juliet*? Of course not. The library shelves are filled with stories about doomed love affairs. *Romeo and Juliet* has itself been reworked in thousands of incarnations. In fact, a time-honored exercise in writing classes is to have students read and “imitate” passages by favorite authors, by writing actual prose that copies as closely as possible that author’s style, tone, and voice. Try it sometime. So far, I haven’t seen any students “turn into” the next Stephen King or Alice Munro. On the contrary, this exercise often nudges developing writers toward finding their own voices, and propels them toward the often startling (to them) revelation that they do have their own voice, and that that voice will have its way.

Of course, there must be legal protection of our creative work, and I don’t mean to minimize copyrighting one’s work. Copyright law so far has applied more to tangible forms such as actual written words, and not the intangible form of creative work called an “idea.” This recognizes that I couldn’t successfully sue James Cameron because I too was writing a drama about the *Titanic*. If I wrote a book, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Cicadas*, and you wanted to write a book with the same title, you could use that title. As long as the text of the book was different, the same idea, and even the same title could be used.

I have given some thought to this issue because something once happened to me as a writer that, at the time, shook me to my very core. I was accused by another writer in my writer’s group of stealing an idea from a short story of hers, and re-working it as my own. I won a fiction prize for the story—a story which had elements she said I had plagiarized.

Of course, I did not plagiarize her story, or any story. But when you are accused, how do you defend yourself? Do you get mad, or are you taking the chance that you “doth protest too much?”

To my utter gratitude, the other writers in our up-untily-then very intimate writing group were as dumbfounded as I was. And without any hesitation, they dismissed the charges as being a personal mental health issue of this person. My accuser claimed that I
had betrayed her trust, when, in fact, by her unwarranted and unsubstantiated attack, she had betrayed the very trust our group depended upon. There had been other small warning flags planted along the way, but no one had wanted to confront this person until this event, the rest of us being rather reluctant to rock our little boat of shared dreams.

Our writing group was formed like many are, I suppose. An editor-friend of mine wanted to work on more creative, personal work than was afforded by the newspaper job he had. He knew other writers, because of his position as editor, and he thought the five of us he invited to start a group would be compatible and helpful to one another. We met at each other’s homes for about two years, trying for once a month, but usually not quite meeting that goal.

We sent each other our stories for the next meeting in advance, and so we came prepared with comments and suggestions (aided of course by food and wine).

By its nature, a writing group operates on a basis of trust, even when you don’t have a long history together. Maybe especially if you don’t have a long history together. Trust becomes everything. This is where you go with your rawest material. As a matter of fact, this was often used as a disclaimer as we introduced a new piece. “If this is really awful, it’s only the first draft, and I wrote while I had the flu and the washer was broken.” In other words, “Don’t be too hard on this fragile and thinly veiled representation of my ego.”

In a good writing group, like the one I belonged to, we never attacked each other’s work. This was the place we came to feel safe. We could write a story with an ending that stunk (and we knew it stunk), and we’d get gentle feedback like, “The ending didn’t quite resonate for me.”

We talked a lot about the issue of trust in the first meeting of our group (minus one) after “the incident.” Our group was intimately familiar with both writers and the work being challenged, and they were baffled as to how my story had been called into question. You would be hard-pressed to find two writers more different in tone, voice, and style than me and my accuser.

Nevertheless, I sat through that first meeting shell-shocked and feeling both violated and betrayed. By accusing me of plagiarism, my accuser had not only attacked my work but also my very essence, my integrity—the way I live my life. When you are accused of something, you are automatically put into a position of having to defend yourself, a position I was unfamiliar with.

Being put in that position made me think about how when you write something and share it, even in an intimate writing group situation, you open yourself up in a vulnerable way. I thought a lot, at the time, of whether I should respond to this person, and if so, how. In the end, I wrote her a handwritten note, a few sentences stating my thoughts, and wished her well. Our group continued to gather for a few more years, until moves and other life events caused a natural end to our meetings. I have been thinking about writing this essay since the incident happened fifteen years ago, but every time I sat down to write it, it made me uncomfortable. I was hurt, and something in me, that I couldn’t quite put a finger on, was shattered. But, in the end, I thought it was a subject that might be worth looking at. Trust is the starting point when we share our work.

Years later, thinking about how stories work, it seems that at least my fiction or essays start with a central image—an idea, if you will. I let that idea simmer in my brain as I go about life and jot down notes as they might apply to that image. The story reveals itself to me bit by bit, and although my thoughts are intricately linked to everything I have read, seen, and experienced in my life, it is still my story. No one else can tell it the same way.
Stephanie Saldaña’s *A Country Between: Making a Home Where Both Sides of Jerusalem Collide* is a memoir of marriage, motherhood, and the Middle East. It’s a long love letter written to her firstborn son, Joseph; a tribute to her husband, Frédéric; a eulogy to her father, who passed away shortly after the birth of her second son; and an homage to her first house as a new wife in a new land. Her words are full of longing and gratitude, of hope and respect—for countries lived in, plans changed, paths taken, boundaries crossed, and people coming and going.

When American-born Saldaña visits Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi, a Catholic monastery in the desert of Syria, she is surprised to meet—and fall in love with—a French man and novice monk serving tea. This foreign man with an unidentifiable accent had spent years traveling around the world until arriving in “the monastery in the clouds,” where he “sensed that it contained the something he had been searching for” and stayed. He leaves the holy life for her, and together they journey to France, America, Turkey, and eventually Israel, where they settle in the summer of 2006 during the Lebanon War.

A former war correspondent, Saldaña explores several themes from myriad angles: faith, language, borders, boundaries, countries, cultures, and history, by writing chapters that sometimes begin with a one-page letter addressed to Joseph, written in second person. Sometimes the beginning, middle, or end of the chapter switches to second person and she drops in her son’s name. Sometimes the change in point of view is seamless; other times forced or contrived.

She meditates on every aspect of her existence: her marriage to a man she barely knows; the eleven-room house they rent from Franciscan Sisters; their road in an eclectic neighborhood; the region and Israel’s relationship to it. Of Nablus Road she writes:

*The first house of our married life lay in a country between...close to the invisible line dividing Jerusalem into East and West, Palestinian and Israeli. Our house stood just outside of the Old City gates and fell on the eastern side of the border, the only house like it on that part of the street, an enormous Arab stone edifice of red roof tiles and a façade of Jerusalem stones, surrounded by grocery stores and convents and shoe stores and butcher shops.*
The chosen themes suit the story, but they seem excessive, constantly reminding the reader, underestimating the reader’s ability to retain information or understand the stakes. That said, this particular country, the dynamics within and surrounding it, are foreign to many and so fraught with fragility that they need to be treated with great care under the microscope; by reviewing and revisiting the themes over and over again, Saldaña achieves that care, even at the cost of sounding repetitive.

I have visited Jerusalem more times than I can count but never have I seen the city the way Saldaña depicts it. In my version, it’s full of white limestone buildings and black-hatted ultra-Orthodox Jews, politically charged and on edge; hers is colorful, breathing energy, pulsing with life: “Sister Pascal climbed the stairs carefully, pausing so as not to stumble on the Jerusalem stone that had worn away from more than a century of footsteps, shaded beneath a bougainvillea tree that littered the steps with bold, pink petals.” Her language is so poetic and lyrical and utterly captivating that even war is transformed on the page. As a reader, I’m relieved.

When Saldaña and her husband move to Nablus Road, they are not welcomed with open arms. Their neighbors are suspicious of their ability to speak Arabic with a Syrian dialect and of their connections to the clergy. Saldaña questions if she and her husband are considered spies. That’s when the reality of their decision to move there dawns on her: “I did not yet understand much about Jerusalem. But I did know that being here meant severing ourselves from entire worlds we had previously inhabited—cutting ourselves off from belonging to the rest of the Middle East. The border to Syria was closed. The northern border to Lebanon was at war.”

One of the most important personality traits needed to survive and thrive in the Middle East is a sense of humor that Saldaña—like the Israeli Arab Sayed Kashua, author of *Native: Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life* (2016) and like the Israeli Jew Etgar Keret, author of *The Seven Good Years* (2015)—possesses as well. While waiting to hear if she’s pregnant, she writes: “If I were pregnant, I at least wanted my parents to know before the falafel vendors did.”

The world sometimes forgets that Jerusalem is home—and sacred—to many people. Saldaña doesn’t. Overall, the exquisite writing about an oftentimes flawed, ugly place is page-turning, leaving me wanting more:

I had often thought to visit Jerusalem was to participate in sacred space, to witness the Dome of the Rock where Mohammed ascended through the heavens, the remaining wall of the Temple, the narrow alleys where Jesus dragged his cross on the way to his crucifixion. Every corner remembered the past: where a battle once raged, a saint once slept.

But the more time passed, the less I took notice of these physical places, for to live in Jerusalem was to be drawn instead into holiness in time—in the hours siphoned off by the call to prayer, the church bells marking off vespers or matins, the traffic dying off as the sun set on the Sabbath day, its onset marked by the wailing of a siren. We were living not only in a place, but in a moment in eternity, a single swath of time suspended between a past already gone and a future not yet realized, both of which were embedded in the present in a way I did not yet grasp.

Next time I step foot in the City of Gold, I hope to summon Saldaña’s words to mind,
to pay attention and reflect on the cultural exchanges, conversations, sights, sounds, and smells surrounding me. No matter how much its roads widen or its building expands or its neighborhoods gentrify, its rich history and those sensory details remain constant. ♦
In his 1932 epic *A Glastonbury Romance*, John Cowper Powys has one of his characters ask rhetorically, “What’s Poetry if it isn’t something that has to fight for the unseen against the seen, for the dead against the living, for the mysterious against the obvious?” Jenny Molberg admirably enlists in this fight with her debut collection, *Marvels of the Invisible*. The poems here endorse memory, feeling, absence—even pain—as viable if invisible keys to experience and understanding. Molberg presents us with “marvels” in the sense of “wonders,” as likely to be shocking or painful as to bring delight. Likewise, the “invisible” takes several forms, from the literally microscopic to the ineffable.

The book opens with “Echolocation,” as much an introduction to Molberg’s themes (birth, loss, time, absence) as to her methods, and her ways of blending figurative language with scientific and medical terminology to achieve a memorable lyricism. Whale song here is “unfathomable, plosive, drummed, the loudest blues / on earth,” but connecting in the poet’s mind to a sonogram image: “When they found your heartbeat / I thought, this could be a girl. Just as quick, / you were gone.” That line-ending pun on “quick” is at once poignant and steely, an indication of how rich but exacting Molberg’s mix of the analytical and metaphorical can be.

The volume’s title poem exemplifies this as well. A deer’s antlers “bloom like capillaries,” an orchid’s “large white blossoms are hands / cupping the empty air” beside a hospital bed, the speaker’s mother sleeping while “beneath her skin, / her blood blossoms.” Clearly, poetry exists to reveal these small marvels, these intimate and otherwise invisible correspondences. Elsewhere Molberg refers to memory as the current among “the cagy coves of the brain” (“Mirror”), and she likens what we retain of painful experience to the remnants of a dissected insect: “here a trough of heart, / here, a gutter of liver, channel / of hearing or touch” (“Chrysalis”).

Relating exteriors to interiors, comparing surfaces to depths are the preoccupations of the collection. “Superficial Heart” and “The Uncommon Mirror” are meditations on specific cases of birth defects chronicled by the Royal Society of London in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while “The Outer Core” muses skyward: “I am sitting with the moon and we are drinking from the sky. / We break open the earth like an egg and look inside.” Technical yet tender, Molberg’s sensibility has unusual range, from the cellular to the interstellar, as in “Voyager,” where Ann Druyan (future wife of Carl Sagan, of *Cosmos* fame) is pictured, “her forehead wreathed / in electrode cups” for the EKG.
that will be part of the exploratory spacecraft’s payload.

The scientific and the metaphorical reach peak concurrence, perhaps, in “Necrosis,” an apostrophe to that iconic instrument of science: “You, microscope, are a hungry priest. I wanted / to confess to you...” In a mere fifteen lines we come upon an endometriotic sac, leiomyoma, and ribosomes, as well as “cytoplasm, leaking / like spilled jelly.” While the microscope’s lenses may be “the wooden crosshatch / of a confessional,” the speaker concludes such a device can only delineate or magnify, can “never know repentance.”

But Molberg’s poems do more than acknowledge limits. Though “celebrate” would be putting it too strongly, she does indeed marvel at the insights provided by occasions of loss or absence. Often, this showcases the mysterious, paradoxical ability of poetry itself to say the unsayable. The third (and to my mind, most effective) poem in the “Voyager” sequence concludes with just such an effect:

I hear my own heart a galaxy away, propelling down that black ocean, both of the earth and outside it, both mine and not mine, its language impossible to speak.

The control of line here—a taut three-beat structure—balances the image of infinite space; the doublings (hear and heart, mine and not mine) and the acoustics of those ′s and long o’s deepen our involvement in the poem, immerse us in “the great open sea” without and within. Many marvels in human experience may be invisible, many others beyond expression: “Another endangered syntax descends,” Molberg writes in “Echolocation.” Yet that opening sequence turns out to be something of an a r s poetica, language the ultimate location device in the geography (or cosmography) of emotion, the GPS, if you will, for context and meaning. If, as Molberg says in “Oyster,” “It’s the place closest to pain that shines,” that place is poetry. ♦
Jenny Farhat’s work is prominently displayed at Ironsmith Coffee Roasters in Encinitas, California, an oceanside suburb that runs along the Pacific Coast Highway in San Diego. The framed art pieces line the walls in five-by-six columns and rows. They add dimension to a destination café grounded in the ambiance of coffee beans and souls studying. Their explanations, as you will see, are otherworldly. They are ethereal, when you consider the items’ everyday reality, but the perception and interpretation of a seer such as Farhat instructs otherwise.

Her work has become a chic interdimensional accent across San Diego. A quick Google of “Jenny Farhat” produces articles in the San Diego Union-Tribune due to her recent work with her not-for-profit Harvest Peace as well as in all sorts of local shops, such as Culture Brewing Co. in Solana Beach. The launch of her business began with a Kickstarter campaign that raised more than $25,000. There are also the occasional references to her former work in oil paintings reflecting her interpretations of the West.

We meet at Philz Coffee, while her work hangs at Ironsmith Coffee, which is right across from Vapor Studio, a design studio where graphic designers make cool things look cooler and build lifestyle brands. Philz Coffee is somewhat different—airy, light, and constantly running with day energy. There are everyday people alongside the creatives, chatter with the doodling, and smiling with the finishing. The mood is definitely lighter, and I find that Jenny is more open to interpretations about her work than her artwork would suggest. Her work is specific. Perhaps her work is more of a meditation than art.

Jenny’s Palestinian background leads her to reference aboriginal knowledge that is intertwined with her work. She started out as a painter living by her trade in Florida, and she enjoys outdoor activities, such as hiking, camping, and equestrian exercises. Much of her work covers subjects such as horses and desert cliffs specific to California. She acknowledges there is a tug and pull between the world of ancestors and spirits and the more earthly one that we all inhabit day to day. The more she pulled away from the world of ancestors and spirits, which includes stargazing, dream interpretation, and letting go of structures, the stronger that influence became. So she doesn’t resist—she just follows the guidance and puts it into her work.

Patrick A. Howell: You have said there is a lot of ancestral knowledge intertwined with what you do.

Jenny Farhat: Yes, absolutely, and I feel like the further I try to move away from it, the more it actually called me and the
more it took on a different form. So I said "I am not going to paint anymore [Jenny Farhat was a professional painter]; I am going to turn it into what other people think I should be. I am going to be more structured, more interacting with other people and not just in my own head and not interpreting my own dreams." I always like looking at the stars, and my friends know me for that, like “Jenny’s Book of Made Up Lands.” It was a running joke, and I wanted to move away from that so I moved out here from Florida to San Diego.

PH: How did that work out for you? You seem to be finding more success now than you did back then. There seems to be more of a blend between artist Jenny and reality. As a spiritual energy, you seem to have negotiated a different outcome for yourself.

JF: It didn’t work out. I’m more artistic than I was back then. It just took on a different form. I’m taking it equally as seriously, but I am pushing it out more. It was my own thing, and I wasn’t trying to harness it.

That’s a good way to look at it. I also started not looking at it like I’m not this crazy person and I have stuff talking to me. I had all of this stuff that was pouring out of me. Like I started sitting with plant medicines. I’m not crazy—it’s my intuition. It’s Mama Iya. It’s like nature, which has totally changed me from being somebody who was living in an imaginary world.

PH: Where are you going to take the Jenny Farhat vision? Where do you see yourself taking it?

JF: It’s in my hands, but it’s not because if I don’t have any more feelings or ideas, that’s where it stops. I know it will, because it’s just what I do. It slows my days down. But I haven’t thought about where I will take it.

PH: What is your background? Your work seems to reference a lot of indigenous cultures. They seem to hold a special space in your work. On the one hand, you are creating the outcome of your work, which is the artwork, but there is also the meditation.

JF: I don’t think part of me is Indian. My mom is an American U.S. blend of white. My dad is a Palestinian immigrant. I feel like the Native Americans and the Palestinians are very similar in terms of confiscation of their land, being colonized and being misinterpreted insofar as the way their religion is seen. Whatever is sacred to them is misunderstood by a lot of people, and it becomes very scary. I also started importing olive oil and started a company called Harvest Peace. With Harvest Peace, I am importing Palestinian olive oil, and I am giving back to help replant the groves there that are being uprooted from the occupation. When I see what is happening at Standing Rock—the fact that this is their land—and we are doing what we want with it, and we are not listening to the people, it is not the same thing, but it is very much the same thing as what is happening in the Middle East and in Palestine. So I think I am Palestinian, and I am very connected to that. But me being here, there is a relationship with the land I am living on currently.

PH: That’s really cool.

JF: It’s very “using the other side of my brain.” So I think that is also what has happened: While my olive oil is happening, my “artistic drawing on pictures” and getting outside is really important to me because I need that balance.
The play between our physical Earth and the divine Heaven above.

Star Dust © JENNY FARHAT ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
The word “Kawayo” comes from the Hopi tribe which means “Horse.” I find these beautiful beings emote an energy of calmness that is centering, which I tend to gravitate toward.

Kawayo © JENNY FARHAT ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
This piece was created while contemplating a specific relationship. We’re going on a ten-year friendship that’s constantly evolving. Our roles always change yet when one thing ends, a new one begins. In many ways we are the same person and in many ways totally opposite. Both brutally honest. Our relationship is fluid, always starting again and ending simultaneously. Our relationship is the triangle and we are the dots which are never quite side by side, but are part of the same shape.
Martha Cooley is a long-standing member of PEN America, a contributing editor for *A Public Space*, a professor of English at Adelphi University, and the author of *The Archivist, Thirty-Three Swoons*, and most recently the memoir, *Guesswork: A Reckoning with Loss*. Begun as a journal, her memoir in essays takes place primarily in Castiglione del Terziere, a small Italian town in the Lunigiana region where Martha repairs with her husband, Antonio Romani, to write and work on co-translating Antonio Tabucchi into English. Although only a dozen or so people reside year-round in Castiglione, the inhabitants prove engaging, entertaining, and eccentric from the two elderly women who serve as the borgo’s storytellers and newscasters, to “mythomane” Loris Jacopo Bonini, a “doctor-pharmacologist and poet” who, with his “consort and helpmate,” Raffaella, “happiest in the company of Mia, her enormous Central Asian sheepdog,” gives tours of their castle and its amazing library of rare medieval and Renaissance manuscripts. Most importantly, her fourteen-month sabbatical, or “caesura,” as Martha poetically dubs it, marks “a deliberate interruption, a chance to reckon with divisions imposed by loss”: specifically, in the span of a decade, the loss of eight close friends to drug addiction, illness, and suicide. In addition, her father, showing signs of early dementia, and her mother, blind for years and suffering a recent heart attack and broken pelvis, move to an assisted-living community.

Hiking daily, Martha navigates the hilly terrain of her picturesque in-between place and ponders her emotional landscape while drawing insights from the bees humming in the cemetery, the black birds dancing beak to beak, the feral cats slinking around, the bat gliding through their bedroom, and the owl, whose “eerie call from somewhere deep in the garden is an aural magic wand, able to freeze me in place.”

Straddling two countries, two cultures, two languages, neither strictly at work nor on vacation, she gazes at the shipwrecked *Costa Concordia* and contemplates her mother in Brooklyn and the capricious nature of memory. Poised in this liminal state, Martha vacillates between anxiety and exhilaration, pleasure and discomfort, confusion and clarity, all the while journeying, in this contemplative and sensual memoir, toward acceptance and the realization that guesswork will lead her where she needs to be.

Martha was my first-term faculty advisor in the Bennington Writing Seminars MFA program. Currently in Italy, she kindly replied to my questions via email.

**Colleen Olle:** You’ve written two novels, dozens of essays and short stories, and co-translations from Italian, including Antonio Tabucchi’s *Time Ages in a Hurry*. Now you’ve
written a memoir. Why a memoir? How did the experience of writing a memoir compare with that of writing a novel?

Martha Cooley: I didn’t intend to write a memoir, actually. My university granted me a sabbatical year, starting in May 2012. As I tried to plan for that time off, all I knew was that I wanted to work on my (third) novel and undertake a translation project—the Tabucchi stories—with my husband and co-translator, Antonio. I had no other book projects in mind.

But things shifted. After Antonio and I moved to Castiglione del Terziere, a tiny medieval village in northernmost Tuscany (for reasons elaborated in the memoir), I found myself writing sketches. They began inching or stretching or ambling into the realm of the personal essay, a form I’d rarely experimented with. These narratives centered on my experience in the village but ranged as well to matters of language, of poems and poetry, of friendship and family. Before long, I realized that the through-line connecting the essays was loss and my reckoning with it.

As for the experiential difference between writing a novel versus a memoir, I knew right away that I needed to set the stage for a drama that wouldn’t be narrowly personal. Thus the mise-en-scène had to be rich in sensory details, so the reader could feel present not just intellectually but also physically. Most of all, I wanted the narrative to resonate with its readers. I use that overused word advisedly. To me a prose narrative, like a poem, compels the reader’s attention first at the sonic level; its words and sentences function seductively, like the flute player of Hameln enticing the children. Not to abduct, though, but to enchant. In Guesswork I wanted readers to hear in my grief-inflected travails certain notes, chords, and echoes of their own experience.

Novels and memoirs both need vivid characters, of course. For a memoirist, however, it’s risky to assume that Individual X, personally fascinating to the author, will interest the reader. I tried to avoid this problem by offering as wide an array of character types as possible. Some of the liveliest characters I encountered during my sabbatical year in Italy were the animals in Castiglione, especially the cats. I figured they might captivate the reader, too, if I could render their inherent strangeness. Hence the village’s felines make many appearances in the book.

Of course humans do, too; and not only living ones. My dead, as I came to think of them—friends I’d lost over the decade before my sabbatical began—are continuous presences, overt and covert, in Guesswork. (Among them are several people intimately associated with Bennington: Liam Rector, Jason Shinder, and Lucy Grealy.) I needed to honor them in prose, though not in a deliberately fictionalized context. Instead, I wanted to bring them forward in a set of linked personal essays that would borrow liberally from fiction’s toolbox.

I’m a bit weary of all the talk around the nature of fiction versus creative nonfiction. In literature there’s really no such thing as nonfiction. There are only degrees of purposefulness, awareness, and skill in the crafting of a prose narrative. Successful works of fiction and nonfiction engage us not because one is based in “facts” and the other in “invention” but because they’re well wrought, period.

I like what Theseus says in A Midsummer Night’s Dream: “And as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen / Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name.” What interests me here are the forms of things unknown—unknown not just to the
reader but to the writer as well, and initially inchoate. That airy nothing is precisely what the writer must somehow locate, name, and shape into a narrative, which might then be termed fiction or nonfiction; it doesn’t matter.

CO: In The Archivist, Matthias says, “A good archivist serves the reader best by maintaining, throughout the search, a balance between empathy and distance. It is important, I’ve discovered, to be neither too close to nor too distant from a reader’s desire.” Is this a guideline you use in your own writing? Does the guideline change in any way when writing nonfiction vs. fiction?

MC: Unlike Matthias, I don’t think much about proximity to or distance from readers and their desires. I try instead to be loyal to my own desire, which is to move from the quicksands of memory and the hills-and-valles of imagination to the more solid terrain of drafting and revising.

CO: Because of all your losses, which you describe in Guesswork as a “strage, a massacre” you feel your writing has suffered. Yet despite the privileges of health, a happy marriage, and a gratifying job in academia, for the past ten years my life-work—my writing—has felt invalid, in both senses of that word:

weak and spurious, feeble and unconvincing. The urge to just do it that used to counteract self-doubt won’t buoy me. Each day, shame indicts me. Prior to their departures, none of my deceased friends ever made death the fall guy, nor did they whine about whatever they weren’t accomplishing. I picture them conferring and agreeing: too bad she can’t wake up.

When contrasted with a chronic or terminal illness, worrying about what one is not accomplishing seems to be a privilege, doesn’t it? And yet, for a writer, not writing and/or not writing as well as we’d like can feel emotionally, psychologically, even physically and spiritually debilitating. Did writing this memoir diminish your shame or your worry about what you are/are not accomplishing?

MC: Certainly it was good to move from being blocked to working steadily again, and on something unexpected. Shame is a chronic thrum in the background of my consciousness. I can label it as such, and even mock it for being there, but it remains wily: It goes underground for a while, then reemerges. In Guesswork I decided to take a closer look at how this mechanism operates in me. In others as well—I don’t think I’m alone in this. Women writers are particularly prone, I’ve noticed, to feeling ashamed of what they deem poor productivity. And to underplaying what they do produce. To all such nonsense Emily Dickinson offers a brisk, salutary rebuke: I’m Nobody, who are you?

CO: When you were nine years old, your mother developed retinitis pigmentosa and went blind. She learned Braille, how to use a cane, how to be guided by a seeing eye dog. “She learned to memorize room arrangements, to bake bread ... But she rarely lets herself talk about the emotional consequences of her experience, and never in detail.” Your mother’s reticence contributed to your own. You write:
I taught myself to obey our household’s implicit rule of silence. Moving through junior high and into high school, I seldom spoke with either of my parents about what Mom’s inevitable loss of sight was like, either for them or for myself. [As a teenager.] I regretted any lapse on my part into angry or agitated speech. What right did I have to it, after all?

This pattern of remorse and self-censorship continued into adulthood.

Then in your late thirties:

The fog cleared when I gave myself permission to do what I wanted to do—finish the novel I’d begun several years earlier—and thus break the lock of silence: not Mom’s but my own. I stopped longing to tell my mother how I’d felt during her slide into blindness; it wasn’t her business and shouldn’t be her concern. And I quit wishing for her to talk about it, though my curiosity . . . never ebbed. If silence served her best, so be it.

Your acceptance of your mother’s silence seems to have been connected with your writing. Could you talk more about giving yourself permission to do what you wanted to do, especially when it came to finishing the novel (The Archivist) you’d begun several years earlier? Why did you need permission? What was stopping you?

MC: Nearly every human has a hurdle to climb over with regard to his/her relationship with a primary caregiver, whoever that person might be. Sooner or later, the (adult) child has to reconfigure this relationship, in actuality or in spirit, so it ceases to be that hall of mirrors in which the child and the caregiver mutually project needs, fears, and desires. A writer either has to write her way out of the hall of mirrors (“has to” in the sense that not writing becomes very costly, psychologically and physically), or find another way to deal with it. How to write one’s way out is, of course, the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. It can’t be answered with a bag of cash, only with hours and hours of work.

My mother’s silence was something I respected and feared when young. As I grew up, my challenge was to continue respecting her silence, but to escape the lure of emulating it.

CO: What was it like writing about your mother? How easy/difficult was it? Would you have ever read Guesswork to your mother? Why/why not?

MC: Here I’ll cite the flinty counsel of Lynn Freed, a former Bennington colleague, who said that when it comes to depicting family and friends in either fiction or nonfiction, a writer has to be ruthless. What this means in practice is that the writer must decide where to draw her own line in the sand. I didn’t write about my mother til she was quite near death; I wouldn’t have published any writing about her until after her death, nor would I have read such writing to her. That wasn’t something I could live with. Once she’d died, it was neither difficult nor easy to write about her; rather, doing so was bracing—at once scary and liberating, like diving under and through a wave rather than getting thrashed by it as it comes down on your head.
So there’s the question of ruthlessness, which I answered in my own way. Yet I also wanted to bring to Guesswork a quality my mother mastered: restraint. It’s something I greatly admire in memoiristic writing. But it needs modulating—too much restraint is withholding, too little is exhibitionism.

CO: Your mother’s questions about your writing evoked various emotions in you—anxiety, exasperation, frustration, impatience, etc. What about your father? Has your father ever talked to you about your writing? If so, how do you feel about these conversations? I also wonder what your brother and sister think about your book and your depictions of your parents.

MC: I always talked with my mother about books and writing; they were our territory, just as teaching was my father’s and mine. He was a very good junior-high teacher, and remained curious about my teaching life long after his career ended. My father is quite senile now; he can’t read books, so there’s no need for me to worry about his reading my memoir. As for my siblings, they haven’t read it, and I don’t know if or when they will. But that’s fine. Readers draw their lines in the sand, too. Writers can get awfully worked up over the reactions of family and friends, but the fact is that ruthlessness starts with the self. Just keep calm and carry on, as the Brits say.

CO: Loss and grief for departed friends as well as for your mother pervade your memoir. Did writing this book alleviate any of your grief? Did it change your emotional outlook/landscape in any significant way?

MC: Like love, loss shapeshifts constantly, yet if it’s genuine it’s constantly there. Writing Guesswork required detachment, an ability to step away from the intensities of grief in order to witness how various losses were operating in my life. They continue to operate, naturally; writing doesn’t make them go away. But it clears space around them, aerates them.

CO: In your essay, “Novel Anxiety: Notes from the Genre War Trenches” (The Writer’s Chronicle, April/May 2011), you note that in today’s social-media-driven world, “We’re still looking to literature to tell us something we don't already know. And too many contemporary novels just aren’t doing that.”

In both content and form, too many novels published today fail to startle, unnerve, or exhilarate us, or to speak in fresh ways to the actual complexities of our experience. In response, readers are increasingly asking themselves: gee, I’ve only got so much time, and might I not get a bigger kick—in the pants, in the gut—from a work of nonfiction?

Has your opinion changed in any way regarding the contemporary novel? Are there any novels you’ve read recently that do succeed in speaking “in fresh ways to the actual complexities of our experience”?

MC: I’ve not become completely fed up with long-form fiction, but I do tend to put a novel (or story collection or memoir) down pretty quickly if it’s not doing something that rivets me. Most often, that something has to do with language and sensibility rather than with plot, characterization, setting, or subject.
matters. I’m always listening for a music I can respond to. Narratives are musical compositions with their own time signatures, their own rhythms; if they’ve got too many or too few beats, they’ll fail. A beat can be an action or gesture, a line or stretch of dialogue, a shift in setting; a beat can be as brief as a comma, as simple as a tiny telling detail, as extended and complex as a lengthy scene. A beat can be white space—a pause, a moment of pure silence. Point being: if the various beats in a narrative aren’t well balanced, the time scheme will be wrong, and the reader will feel it. It’s like dancing with someone who steps on your toes.

In the end, everything depends on whether a narrative’s music is authentic and natural or forced and contrived. A story whose elements (subject and themes, structure and pacing, tone and narrative strategy) are all in sync, properly marshaled, will be a story with its own necessary and wonderful sound. You can’t legislate that sound, and you can’t dictate how to make it right if it’s somehow wrong. But you can work on it. You can play with it.

Some novels I’ve enjoyed in recent years: José Saramago’s *Death with Interruptions*; Simon Fruelund’s *Civil Twilight*; John Keene’s *Annotations*; Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*; Yolanda Barnes’s *When It Burned to the Ground*; László Krasznahorkai’s *The Last Wolf*; Alexander Maksik’s *A Marker to Measure Drift*—there are plenty more, of course, but these are some highlights. I really admired Hisham Matar’s memoir *The Return*, as well as Ruth Ozeki’s *The Face*. Three recent story collections I loved were Antonio Tabucchi’s *Time Ages in a Hurry*, Christos Ikonomou’s *Something Will Happen, You’ll See*, and Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*.

**CO:** Are you still working on that third novel? If so, how’s it going?

**MC:** My novel’s finished, and it’s currently looking for a home. I’m at work on a story collection now.

**CO:** What do you wish you had known earlier in your career about writing? In other words, what would you tell your younger self (or any fledgling writers) about writing?

**MC:** I’d say, hey, you do have a body, you know. You might want to stand up and stretch, now and then. Do some jumping jacks every fifteen minutes or so. Take a long and conscious breath. As my writer friend Mark Matousek says, “The body doesn’t lie, and it doesn’t tell stories.” It’s the writer’s most valuable (and most vulnerable) ally. Writers of literary fiction need to pay more attention to what their bodies are trying to tell them as they work. And to what their characters’ bodies are saying, too. The body is extremely articulate, but it usually speaks in a low voice. One must tilt one’s head and listen with care.
Loving Lena: An Interview with Cassie Pruyn on Occupying Space and Writing Autobiographical Poetry

craft talk by Meaghan Quinn

Meaghan Quinn: First and foremost, congratulations, Cassie, on earning the Walt McDonald First-Book Prize in Poetry! You must be thrilled with this honor and to have this body of work out in the world. *Lena* is now a staple in my library. It deserves to be read, discussed, and recited by readers. Because the poems in this book strike me as deeply autobiographical, based on a forbidden relationship, how does it feel to have it in the hands of readers?

Cassie Pruyn: Thank you so much, Meaghan! It feels wonderful to have the book out in the world, if also terrifying. The fact that it’s being read is a huge honor, and conversations with people for whom the poems have resonated—that’s been a magical part of this whole process. As you say, the book is deeply autobiographical. It was never my intention to write such a book. I’ve never, as an artist, been super interested in my own story. And in fact, I worked hard for a while *not* to write these poems: I felt I didn’t have the right, perhaps, to write about this relationship, to write about this woman who is no longer alive. It seemed … ethically questionable to me, and sometimes still feels that way. But the fact is, as any artist will tell you, you have to create what’s inside of you to create. This story was—is—inside of me, and it wanted to reach people. Once I wrote one Lena poem, it was over; they just kept coming.

MQ: That is a very relatable struggle for writers. These poems sweep gingerly, at times hauntingly, from narrative to lyric to the imagistic and yet they are tethered by core motifs: Lena’s lingering, ghost-like presence, Lena’s intrusive mother, nature, beds, water, and rooms. It seems like place is important to you as a writer. Would you agree?

CP: Absolutely! I get excited when readers pick up on the importance of place in this book. One, because the landscape that served as the backdrop to our real-life relationship—the Hudson Valley, with its lush mountains and glacial river, and New England, where we both are from, with its rocky coastline and ubiquitous sailboats—was crucial to the relationship as it was unfolding. Any place we found ourselves in was important to our relationship because we were hiding. The landscape was our giant closet—full of secret hideaways and twisting backroads. It was the third member of our relationship because of the properties of
our relationship. Also, as a person and as a writer, I have always felt a deep connection to place. The way space and place are active forces in themselves. This is what I wanted to be writing about before the Lena poems took over, and where I plan to go next!

MQ: Speaking about the fact that you both hail from New England, it is no surprise that the book begins in a metaphorical ship docked in Massachusetts and ends on the shores of Louisiana. Always water is nearby. Though sex and sexuality between the speaker and Lena is at the crux of many of the poems, the sex itself is often shrouded in water metaphors. I could not get enough of the water figuration you include. Writers often have such obsessions. Is it fair to say that water might be one of yours?

CP: Yes! That is definitely a fair statement. Again, I’m fascinated by the energetic properties of both the natural world and of built spaces. Water exemplifies this—what water can do, where it can go, how it keeps us alive and also threatens to destroy our homes and cities. The built capsule of a boat floating on water: the way it encloses the human body while facilitating the liberation of the open sea. This concept is fascinating to me. Those opposing energetic forces. And our relationship, while it was unfolding, kept returning to the water, both literally and psychically. The book’s opening poem, “Lena’s Summer House in Rockport,” was inspired by a dream in which the bed became a boat bobbing among the bone-white masts of sailboats—and we were both in her bedroom and on the open sea; both spaces held us. “Aubade” also originated from a dream in which we became boats ourselves, moored, tipping to and fro all night long, in tandem. Lena, in real life, was an avid sailor, and I grew up sailing. We both had this connection to the New England coast, and now I live in a place that is singularly defined by its relationship to bodies of water—I suppose this is why the book is so watery!

MQ: Ha, watery! I love that. The second poem, "Polaroid," ends with a visual of a matchbox. It unzips the poem, destabilizes it. In this poem and in others, you seem particularly fond of achieving a striking ending. Can you share with us how you arrive at your endings? Or touch on your writing process in general for Lena?

CP: I love the way you characterize the ending of “Polaroid.” Arriving at the endings to so many of the poems in Lena encapsulates what the process of writing was like: painstaking revision that demanded peeling away the layers of conscious memory to reveal the images beneath that well-worn surface. What I mean by that is, we all have stories we tell ourselves about our relationships. Often, they’re fairly linear: we met, and then this happened, then this happened, etc. Almost all of the poems in the book came out of these core memories I had of our short time together: that time we took a trip to Woodstock, that time we almost got caught making out in her dorm room, and so on. But the first drafts of those poems had no discovery to them, no spark or life force. Through the help of my two closest readers, I would rework the poems countless times to find that shimmering image just below the surface—that thing that made the moment memorable to begin with, perhaps, but that my conscious mind had flattened out or erased. This key image—which would often become the ending to the poem—was often just off-screen. The statue at the end of “Closeted in Dutchess County” for example: There were several completely different iterations of that
poem in which there was no statue at all. But, of course, the statue was critical to that poem, that memory. Or the matchbox in “Polaroid”—visible in the Polaroid itself, and, according to poem logic, absolutely imperative to that moment, that snapshot, in our relationship. But I have no conscious memory of this matchbox other than it must have been there because eventually, that evening, we had a fire. Through revision I came to regard the memories as three-dimensional, still evolving, still awaiting discovery.

MQ: It is interesting that certain fragments of the conscious memory end up appearing in one’s art. I’d have to say that “Want” is a favorite poem of mine. It drips of want. I noticed the anaphora of "when I" and "when she" and here, Lena as a character and Lena as a dominating force over the speaker come alive. Can you share with us more about the real Lena? Was it painful or cathartic to write about her?

CP: It was both. She was an unforgettable person. We had a very difficult relationship—full of passion and strife and tension. We never achieved anything close to a friendship after our relationship ended because of this, although we were always incredibly important to each other. I don’t feel as if I ever fully understood who she was, and vice versa. Can a person ever really “understand” another person? I don’t know. But we somehow always missed each other, crossed our signals and got the timing wrong, but at the same time our relationship always felt undeniably fated. Meeting her for the first time felt like the universe slapping me in the face, and I know she felt the same way. We were born on the same day. Our connection—as imperfect as it was—had a touch of the cosmos to it. Maybe this is always how a first love feels, I don’t know.

But those first few months of anxious courtship (“anxious” isn’t nearly a strong enough word) when we were delaying the inevitable out of fear—her fear of her family, in specific—were both exhilarating and tortuous. The combination of fear and desire led to manipulation, and, sometimes, downright cruelty. I always knew I would remember those days for the rest of my life—they were so singular and surreal. Writing about her—this person with whom I shared something so formative, and who is gone now—was both extremely painful, and also, I think, healing. We were anything but perfect, but we had a momentous adventure together; I will never not feel her absence because of this.

MQ: After rereading this beautiful collection, I keep going back to the stunning line "it's always been about the distance / with the two of us" as that seems to be the thesis of it all. The separation—and Lena’s eventual permanent separation from the physical world—results in this heat and tension when the women are together. Would you agree?

CP: Absolutely. Our relationship was about distance: our initial, troubled proximity that had to be negotiated because of her being in the closet—how, depending on the ever-shifting variables of time and privacy, we would fly together or fly apart like rotating magnets. After we had been together for a semester, Lena transferred to a new school (not her idea) and our relationship then became closeted and long-distance (what a blast!) and then the whole thing fell apart. After it ended, we continued to negotiate what we meant to each other, how close we could and should be. When she got sick, it seemed we were doing this dance of distance and intimacy—all of her friends and loved ones, figuring out what it means to love someone well who’s going through what
she was going through. Even while she was sick we had our difficulties and differences, and I’d go long periods without being able to reach her. And now, of course, she has achieved the ultimate distance, and I’m left hoping she’ll visit me in my dreams sometimes.

MQ: And lastly, we know early on Lena is sick, and this is a book length elegy for her. Yet it does not feel entirely mournful but more of a self-discovery of the speaker. Do you feel it is more about the preservation of Lena or the journey the speaker undergoes?

CP: When I first began writing the poems, they were about preservation—preserving Lena, preserving the memories that were unique to the two of us, since we were so often alone together, rarely in the company of mutual friends or family. The most terrifying part of her disappearing, for me, was the fact that I would be left alone with the memories. But I soon realized, through engaging with the poems themselves, that the series has much more to do with the speaker’s self-discovery through grief than with preservation. How the speaker grapples with her own guilt, and with fallibility of memory itself. The poems did not want to engage in static preservation, but with dynamic exploration. I had to let go of the idea of loyalty—to Lena or to her memory—although I do feel this book, even in its moments of brutal honesty, is true to what we had, even if it is more about the speaker and her journey at the end of the day.

Contributors


**Judith Alexander-McGovern** (fiction) is a retired bank portfolio analyst and former Peace Corps language instructor. Her short stories have appeared in *Alligator Juniper* and *The Timberline Review*. She lives in Seattle with her husband.

**Genevieve Betts** (poetry) is the author of the poetry collection *An Unwalled City* (Prolific Press, 2015). Her work has appeared in *Hotel Amerika, Southwestern American Literature, Digital Americana, NANO Fiction*, and in other journals and anthologies. She teaches creative writing for Arcadia University's low-residency MFA program and lives in Santa Fe.

After a career of wearing a variety of hats (and disguises) in the theater, television, and film worlds, **Garrison Botts** (creative nonfiction) has recently plopped down and begun writing short memoirs. He is very grateful to his extraordinary teacher and editor, Margo Perin ([margoperin.com](http://www.margoperin.com)).

**Marion Starling Boyer** (poetry) has published three collections of poetry: *The Clock of the Long Now* (2009, Mayapple Press), *Composing the Rain* (Grayson Books, 2014), and *Green* (Finishing Line Press, 2003). She is very pleased *The Tishman Review* has welcomed two of her poems from a series she is currently writing related to her family roots in Norfolk, England.

**Kate Bucca** (poetry) is pursuing her MFA at Vermont College of Fine Arts, where she serves as a reader for *Hunger Mountain*. She is the author of *Companion Plants* (Fomite, 2014). Her work has appeared in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Limestone, The Nervous Breakdown, DigBoston*, and elsewhere. Find more at [www.creaturesinminiature.com](http://www.creaturesinminiature.com).

**Jack C. Buck** (fiction) lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is a public school teacher. He is the author of the book *Deer Michigan*, a collection of 62 flash fiction stories.

**Alexander Chubar** (art) holds a BFA from Hunter College and an MFA from the Pratt Institute. His work has previously been published in the *The William & Mary Review, Blue Lyra Review, Pomona Valley Review*, and several other publications. More of his artwork can be seen at [https://society6.com/alchu](https://society6.com/alchu).

**Diana Clarke** (fiction) is a New Zealander currently living and writing in Indiana.

**Megan Dausch** (creative nonfiction) makes her home in New York, where she lives with her husband and guide dog. She loves to learn, teach, read, write, and spend time with family. Her work has appeared in *Third Wednesday, Promethean*, and the anthology *Two Plus Four Equals One*. 

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Y.L. Fein (fiction), holds an MA from Monash University and a Diploma of Creative Writing from Prahran College. She has had two adult novels (*April Fool* and *The Torn Messiah*) and one young adult novel published. She received an award in the Gotham Screen Screenplay Contest (New York) for a screen adaptation of *April Fool* and was a semi-finalist in the Rhode Island International Film Festival. She has written two full-length dramas for the theatre and edited *Generation* and *Melbourne Chronicle*—both literary journals. She has also edited an award-winning Holocaust memoir by survivors. Her short stories and articles have been published in Australia, America, and the UK.

Rebecca Fishow (fiction) is a writer and visual artist whose work has appeared in *Tin House Online, Joyland, Room Magazine, The Believer Logger, Smokelong Quarterly, Jellyfish Review*, and other publications. She teaches creative writing at Barbara Ingram School for the Arts in Hagerstown, Maryland, and has an MFA from Syracuse University.

Dom Fonce (poetry) is an undergraduate English major at Youngstown State University. His work has been published in or is forthcoming in issues of *3Elements Literary Review, Obra/Artifact, West Texas Literary Review, The Magnolia Review, Unlost Journal,* and others. He can be contacted at domfonce@gmail.com.

Kathleen Galvin (art) is a Georgia-based writer and documentary photographer. She has been exploring the state’s dirt back roads for more than a decade. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cimarron Review, Cowboy Jamboree, Georgia Backroads Magazine, Unlost Journal,* and *Xavier Review.*

Stephen Gibson’s (poetry) collection *Self-Portrait in a Door-Length Mirror* was selected by Billy Collins as the 2017 Miller Williams Prize winner from the University of Arkansas Press. Earlier collections include *The Garden of Earthly Delights Book of Ghazals* (Texas Review Press) and *Rorschach Art Too* (2014 Donald Justice Prize, Story Line Press).

Jim Gustafson (poetry) holds an MDiv from Garrett Theological Seminary in his home town of Evanston, Illinois and an MFA from the University of Tampa. He is the author of *Take Fun Seriously* (Limitless Press, 2008), *Driving Home* (Aldrich Press, 2013), and *Unassisted Living* (Big Table Publishing, 2017). He teaches at Florida Gulf Coast University and lives in Fort Myers, Florida where he reads, writes, and pulls weeds.

Alysia Nicole Harris (poetry) received her MFA in poetry from NYU and a PhD in linguistics at Yale University. Winner of the 2014 & 2015 Stephen Dunn Poetry Prizes, her poetry has appeared in *Indiana Review, Catch & Release, Solstice: A Magazine of Diverse Voices,* and *Vinyl,* among others. She was selected for publication in *Best New Poets 2015,* and her first collection, *How Much We Must Have Looked Like Stars To Stars,* was chosen as the winner of Finishing Line Press’s 2015 New Women’s Voices Chapbook contest. Alysia currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

L.M. Henke (art) is from another time and place.
Patrick A. Howell (craft talk) is an award-winning veteran of banking. His essays have been published by various publications such as Entrepreneur.com and the Huffington Post. His short stories have been published with the Mandala Journal and the Xavier Review. He is a contributor for The Tishman Review’s Craft Talk series. www.PATRICKAHOWELL.com

Ray Keifetz (poetry) has published stories and poems in Ashland Creek Press, The Bitter Oleander, The Briar Cliff Review, Kestrel, The Louisville Review, and others. His work has twice been nominated for both the Pushcart Prize and Best New Poets. He lives in northern California.

Cody Kucker’s (poetry) writing has appeared in publications including Juxtaprose Literary Magazine, The Opiate, Immersion Journals, and Oklahoma Review. He received his MFA from the University of Alaska at Fairbanks and currently lives in northeastern Massachusetts.

Linda Lamenza (poetry) is a literary specialist in Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in Muddy River Poetry Review and The Comstock Review. She published her first short story at age eleven in the North County News out of Yorktown Heights, NY.

Jennifer Lang’s (craft talk) essays have been published in Under the Sun, Assay, Ascent, The Coachella Review, Hippocampus Magazine, and Full Grown People, among others. Honors include a nomination for a Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays and a finalist in the 2017 Crab Orchard Review’s Literary Nonfiction Contest. She is the CNF Editor at The Flexible Persona. Find her at http://israelwritersalon.com/.

Lisa Lebduska (fiction) directs the College Writing program at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, where she teaches academic writing and works with colleagues to incorporate writing into their teaching. Her work has appeared in such journals as Lunch Ticket, The Gateway Review, bioStories, and Narrative, among others. She is planning a collection of short stories set in Fort Hamilton.

billy lombardo (fiction) is the author of three books of fiction, including How to Hold a Woman. He is the co-founder and managing editor of Polyphony H.S., a student-run, international literary magazine for high school writers and editors. He teaches in Chicago.

Cameron Morse (poetry) taught and studied in China. Diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2014, he is currently a third-year MFA candidate at University of Missouri-Kansas City and lives with his wife, Lili, in Blue Springs, Missouri. His poems have been or will be published in over 50 different magazines, including New Letters, pamplemousse, Fourth & Sycamore, and TYPO. His first collection, Fall Risk, is forthcoming from Glass Lyre Press.

Ryan Napier (fiction) holds degrees from Stetson University and Yale Divinity School. His stories have appeared in Entropy, Noble / Gas Qtrly, Queen Mob’s Tea House, minor literature[s], and others, and a chapbook is forthcoming from Bull City Press in 2018. He lives in Massachusetts. Twitter: @ryanlnapier.
Louis Arthur Norton (creative nonfiction) is a University of Connecticut professor emeritus and has published extensively in maritime history. He was awarded the 2002 and 2006 Gerald E. Morris Prize for maritime historiography and received several writing awards from the Connecticut Authors and Publishers Association. His latest book was a finalist for a 2011 Eric Hoffer Book Award.

Cait Weiss Orcutt’s (poetry) work has been published in FIELD, Prelude, Chautauqua, and more. A PhD candidate in poetry, she teaches creative writing in Texas for Writers in the Schools, University of Houston, and Inprint. Her book, Valleyspeak, won the 2016 Zone 3 First Book Award for Poetry judged by Douglas Kearney and will be out November, 2017.

Mickey Revenaugh’s (creative nonfiction) work appears in Chautauqua, Catapult, Louisiana Literature, Lunch Ticket, and The Thing Itself, among others. She was recently named Finalist for the 2017 Diana Woods Memorial Award in Creative Nonfiction. Mickey has an MFA in Creative Writing from Bennington, an MBA from NYU, and a BA in American Studies from Yale. She lives and works in Brooklyn.

Susana Roberts (poetry) has been listening to Led Zeppelin since their first album came out in 1969; she was 10 years old. Despite continued mocking from her sisters, she knows the words to every song of every album. She lives in Boston where she teaches writing and literature at Boston College.

James Scruton (craft talk) is the author of four collections of poetry. A recipient of the Frederick Bock Prize from Poetry magazine and other awards, he has work appearing in recent or forthcoming issues of Common Ground Review, Comstock Review, Connecticut River Review, New Madrid, and Poetry East.

Kathy Stevenson’s (craft talk) essays and short stories have appeared in a wide array of newspapers, magazines, and literary journals including The New York Times, Newsweek, Chicago Tribune, The Writer, Clapboard House, Red Rock Review, The Tishman Review’s blog, and many other publications. She has a recent MFA from Bennington College and lives just north of Chicago.

Though she does not really see herself as a photographer, Amy Still-Pepper (art) senses when to capture an image worth remembering. And images worth remembering make great photography.

Laura Theobald (creative nonfiction) is a writer and mother in Lakeville, Minnesota, with an MFA in creative writing. A former reporter, editor, and freshman comp instructor, she now works at Carleton College.

Dimithry Victor (art) is a young artist from Florida. He started drawing at the age of four and hasn’t stopped since. It has been thirteen years since he first started drawing, and he now aims to make art that will move and influence people in some way.

Carol Wellart (art) is an expedition artist and Czech native who is constantly on the road. Exploring the everyday outside world, the wilderness, and animals and their survival in the earth’s oldest reliefs is what makes her work come alive.

Kirby Michael Wright (art) won the Gold Fox Award at the 2017 Calcutta International Cult Film Festival for his treatment of an animated special. His plays have been performed at The Secret Theatre in New York.

Dominika Wrozynski (poetry) is Assistant Professor of English at Manhattan College in New York City. Her poems have appeared in journals such as Crab Orchard Review, Slipstream, Spoon River Poetry Review, Saw Palm, Rattle, Five Points, Nimrod International Journal of Prose and Poetry, Birmingham Poetry Review, and New Madrid Journal.

Nicole Yurcaba (craft talk) is an instructor of English at Bridgewater College in Bridgewater, VA. She is the author of Hollow Bottles, a chapbook reflecting on nature, human futility, and music. Her poems appear in Chariton Review, The Lindenwood Review, West Trade Review, and in many other unique places.
Sheila Arndt (fiction reader) is a Ph.D. and MFA candidate living in New Orleans. She cares about the modern and postmodern, critical theory, Americana, saltwater, garlic, canines, old blues, and new dreams. Her poetry and prose has been published in The Tishman Review, Gravel, and Literary Orphans, among other places. Follow her: @ACokeWithYou

Much of Mary Ann Bragg’s (copy editor) written work can be found scattered all over her kitchen table in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She’s pursuing an MA in English at UMASS Boston and worries about the economic health of her hometown in southern West Virginia. Visit maryannbragg.com.

Lauren Davis (associate poetry editor) is a poet living on the Olympic Peninsula in a Victorian seaport community. She holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars, and her work can be found in publications such as Prairie Schooner, Spillway, and Split Lip Press. She teaches at The Writers’ Workshoppe in Port Townsend, WA.

Glyn Edwards (copy editor) lives in North Wales, UK, and works as a teacher. He is the co-editor of Cheval, an anthology collecting entries for the Terry Hetherington Young Writers Prize, and attends an MA at MMU. His debut collection, Conversations, will be published next year by The Lonely Crowd.

Aaron Graham (associate poetry editor) is a military veteran and was the Cecilia Baker Memorial Visiting Scholar for the 2016 Seaside Writers Conference. His work has appeared in Cleaver Magazine, Print-Oriented Bastards, SAND, The Rising Phoenix Review, The East Bay Review, Zero-Dark-Thirty, and F(r)iction. His chapbook, Skyping from a Combat Zone, was shortlisted for Tupelo Press’s 2016 Sunken Garden Poetry Prize. His first full-length collection, Blood Stripes, was a finalist for Tupelo's 2015 Berkshire Prize; his poem "Olfaction" won the Seven Hills Literary & Penumbra Poetry Prize; and "PTSD Poem #12" was nominated for the Best of the Net. Aaron recently received an English lectureship appointment at Kennesaw State University and is finishing his PhD in Literature at Emory University.

Jesse Holth (poetry reader) is a freelance writer and editor based in Victoria, BC. She is a contributor for Huffington Post, Thrive Global, and Seaside Magazine, and her writing has been featured in over half a dozen international publications. Her poetry was recently selected for a gallery exhibition, has appeared in several literary journals, and will be included in a forthcoming anthology from the University of Regina Press. She is currently working on two full-length collections of poetry.

Emily Huso (assistant fiction editor) is pursuing her MA in English with a creative writing emphasis at California State University, Chico. She was a participant in AWP's spring 2017 Writer-to-Writer Mentorship program. When she isn’t working on her latest story, she enjoys freelance copywriting, coffee dates with friends, and, of course, reading.
Stephen Jackman (fiction reader) is a graduate student at Wayne State University for Library Science. His work is forthcoming in *Burnt Pine Magazine* and *Ellipsis Zine: One*.

Tyler Jacobson (copy editor) holds a BA in English and in Spanish from Walla Walla University. He is primarily a professional circus artist specializing in handbalancing and contortion (@tylerarykwat on Instagram) but also enjoys editing copy.

Sarah Key (craft talk editor) is a ceramicist, ESL instructor, and VR/AR optimist. Her work has appeared in *The Greensboro Review, Tricycle, Kudzu, NAILED Magazine, HeartWood*, and elsewhere. She is the founder and director of a secular organization, Nashville Women in Atheism, and performs research on misophonia. Follow her (@serahki) on Twitter.

Tasslyn Magnusson (community outreach coordinator & fiction reader) lives in Prescott, Wisconsin just outside of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area with her husband, two kids, and two dogs. She has an MFA in Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She writes poetry for adults and poetry and fiction for children.

Melissa McInerney (nonfiction reader) earned her MFA in fiction from Bennington College in 2015 and her BA from the University of Texas Austin in 1981. She has written a series of short stories about growing up in boomtown Houston, blogs about living with Lyme disease at [http://lifeandlyme.net/blog/](http://lifeandlyme.net/blog/), and is working on a memoir. She has been published at [http://www.fiftiness.com](http://www.fiftiness.com) and her work has appeared in *Logophile Magazine* and *Jet Fuel Review*. A late bloomer, she tolerated the south and its unrelenting heat for years. Now she thrives in Colorado with her grown daughter, three dogs, and a cat. She hikes, swims, and avoids skiing.

Alison Miller (fiction reader) is a fiction writer and freelance editor. Her work has appeared in *The Tusculum Review, Edifice Wrecked*, and elsewhere. She grew up in Ohio but now calls the Sunshine State her home. When she’s not writing, she enjoys biking with her family.

Colleen Olle (assistant prose editor) spent her childhood summers climbing trees and reading books and sometimes reading books in trees. At the University of Michigan, she won a Hopwood Award for essay writing and from the Bennington College Writing Seminars she earned an MFA in fiction. She works as a freelance editor and lives with her husband south of San Francisco.

Katie Phillips (copy editor) lives (and writes, works, bikes, and walks dogs) in the Chicago suburbs with her husband and their ancient Alaskan Malamute. Her chapbook *Driving Montana, Alone* (Slapering Hol Press) was published in 2010 and the title poem was later read by Garrison Keillor on *The Writer’s Almanac*.

Sean Pierson (poetry reader) studies English and Philosophy at Trinity College Dublin. He is currently deputy editor of *Icarus*, TCD publication and the oldest literary magazine in Ireland, and will take over as editor in Autumn 2017. His work has been published in *Icarus, The Battering Ram*, and the short-lived *Pocketknife*. He is from Massachusetts.
Jennifer Porter (co-founder, prose editor) is a Michigander who lives in a possibly haunted historic house. She is currently studying the life and work of William Morris, the father of the English Arts & Crafts movement. If she counts herself, she can verify that at least one person is waiting with bated breath for the release of her novella, “The World Beyond.”

Meaghan Quinn (associate poetry editor) lives and teaches creative writing at a boarding school in Massachusetts. She holds an MFA from the Writing Seminars at Bennington College. She was nominated for Best New Poets 2015, a 2015 Pushcart Prize, and was a recipient of the Nancy Penn Holsenbeck Prize. Her poems are forthcoming or have been published in A Portrait in Blues: An Anthology, Off the Coast, r.kv.r.y., HeartWood, 2River, Adrienne, Triggerfish Critical Review, Free State Review, and other journals.

Maura Snell (co-founder, poetry and art editor) lives and works in New England.

Tricia Theis (nonfiction reader) is a writer living in Baltimore.

Alison Turner (associate prose editor) is a PhD student in Literary Studies at the University of Denver. She was born in the mountains of Colorado where she learned to spend large amounts of time outside. When travelling, she insists on visiting public libraries.

Gene Turchin (nonfiction reader) recently retired after 12 years of teaching electronic engineering technology and mechatronics in West Virginia. Prior to teaching he worked as a network engineer and telecommunications technician before stumbling into the academic life. He has published how-to articles in technical magazines including Servo and Tech Directions in addition to poetry and short fiction in literary journals. He spends the winter months in Florida where he is currently working on a science fiction novel and comic book scripts. Most recent published works can be found in VerseWrights, 365 Tomorrows, With Painted Words, Aurora Wolf, Literary Hatchet, The Ginger Collect, Eye to the Telescope, and The Broadkill Review.

Catherine Weber (website developer) is an award-winning poet and artist who works with encaustic, photography, paper, and textiles. She was raised in upstate New York, Indiana, and Connecticut and now lives in Massachusetts. She holds a BA in Communications from Emerson College and an MA in Critical and Creative Thinking from the University of Massachusetts.
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Major Jackson is the author of four collections of poetry, including Roll Deep, which won the 2016 Vermont Book Award and was hailed in the New York Times Book Review as “a remixed odyssey.” His other volumes include Holding Company, Hoops, and Leaving Saturn, which won the Cave Canem Poetry Prize and was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. Jackson has published poems, essays, and book reviews in American Poetry Review, Callaloo, The New Yorker, The Paris Review, Ploughshares, Poetry, Tin House, New York Times Book Review, and in several volumes of Best American Poetry. A recipient of a Whiting Writers’ Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, Pew Fellowships in the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, among other honors, he is the Richard A. Dennis Green & Gold Professor at the University of Vermont. Jackson is a core faculty member of the Bennington Writing Seminars. He serves as the Poetry Editor of The Harvard Review.