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. We at The Tishman Review seek to publish work that reflects these values, offers new insights into the human condition, finds beauty in the garish, and that when we read it we want 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, art, literary interviews, and book reviews accepted year-round. Please see our submissions guidelines on our website at www.thetishmanreview.com before sending us your work.

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Foreword

by Ani Kazarian

I woke up at about 5 a.m. this morning. I never wake up this early. I lay in the dark and listened to the rain. I can’t remember a time that it ever rained this heavily in Los Angeles at this time of year. But it’s October and anything can happen in October. That’s why it’s my absolute favorite month of the year. The wind blows differently and I can feel possibility in the air.

This is my second issue of TTR as the Art Editor and being here, a part of this team, feels like October. Like new beginnings and excitement and hope.

I feel like we’re moving forward because we’ve received so many interesting art submissions, even more so than we had for the previous issue. My first goal was to only use original art: not to pull from creative commons, but to display images that speak our language particularly. And here we are, our October issue with original art generously shared with us by many diverse artists. Which makes the fun task of choosing cover art a bit difficult. With so many creative and thought-provoking images sent to us, how do we select one to represent us at this time, this month—our first fall issue, our fourth-ever issue—who we are in this fleeting moment, can this be expressed in a single image?

I recently watched a movie—I know, I should have been reading, or writing, instead—Words and Pictures. The protagonists are an art teacher and an English teacher at an elite prep school who wage a playful war between art and literature: “Words Against Pictures.” Which expresses more truth? More beauty? More precisely? Which can do what the other cannot? Which is more important?

I had never thought of one against the other, or placed a specific value on either. What I’ve found is that many writers are artists and artists are writers. We are together on the same path, constantly seeking ways of expressing our particular perspectives within this place and time in light of our histories and in anticipation of our futures.

I read art in the same way that I read poetry and literature. In each of these we find the universality of expression, the language of our innermost shifts and, if we’re lucky, we lose the weight of ourselves and join a timeless dialogue. While a poem can stand alone, and an image can speak for itself, together they hold different possibilities. Perhaps especially in October.

Jennifer, Maura, and I decided on Brian Michael Barbeito’s MARGA for our October cover. A golden path with naked trees directing our eyes to whispering clouds beneath a blue sky. Isn’t the image fitting for our new magazine as it forges a path in its infantile existence?

Gratefully yours,
Ani Kazarian
Dave Marks *Where Are We Going*
The Doghouse

nonfiction by John Biscello

True story about my friend Frank. Frank was a down-on-his-luck painter. His work, mostly comprising jittery geometric swirls, was the visual equivalent to Bolero on speed. Or Edvard Munch with a severe migraine. The buyers he didn’t have in New Jersey, his hometown, had followed him to Taos. No sales, no gallery representation, no bananas.

Being an artist who wasn’t compelled to paint warrior porn or Southwestern wet dreams to corner the market didn’t make Frank exceptional. In Taos it made him a dime-a-dozen, and Frank, who enjoyed using his self-awareness like a toy whip, had once said—The starving artist myth as a badge of honor makes for bad theater. It’s a goddamned eunuch singing itself to sleep with a poor-me lullaby. You know what’s better than artistic integrity? Food. I fucking like food.

That being said, Frank couldn’t bring himself to paint mountains, blue doorways, or broken-down trucks. His demons drove him to paint jittery geometric swirls.

I like to think that even if Frank could have painted chamisa by moonlight, he still would have opted for nauseating spirals.

In the seven years that Frank lived in Taos, he cycled through a series of girlfriends and Mesa-mamas, surfed couches on a rotational basis, and skated the tightrope of lean times as best he could. Again, nothing exceptional there. Where Frank’s story diverges from other stories I’ve heard, or had myself lived through, was the day he got a phone call from one of his exes. Lucy had been Frank’s longest Taos relationship, almost five years. And Lucy had a nine-year-old daughter, Celia, who had just lost her best friend, her dog, Echo. That was what Lucy told Frank on the phone. Celia had never known her dad, and even though Frank and Lucy were no longer an item, he had remained Uncle Frank to Celia. He had a sweet spot for the kid. Or in Frank’s words—The kid makes me go soft inside.

Lucy invited Frank over for dinner. Frank wondered if maybe she wanted to get back together, and his present state of homelessness combined with leftover feelings of love made him think it was a good idea. But things didn’t play out that way, not exactly.

Here’s Frank explaining to me how Lucy explained it to him—She said, if you need a place to stay, you can stay here. But how do you feel about sleeping in the doghouse? I’m thinking she means the metaphorical doghouse because of shit I’ve done in the past, and I say, What, I’m still in the doghouse after all this time, and she says, Not the doghouse, Frank, the doghouse in the yard. Just temporarily.

You’re joking, right, I tell her, and she says—No, Frank, I know it’s a strange request, but I’m not joking. Listen, hear me out, okay? Echo was Celia’s best friend, she grew up with him, and his death has hit her hard. You and Celia always had a special bond and I thought, maybe, well if you stayed in the doghouse … it’s bigger than you think and I’ll make it up nice for you … if you stayed there, just for a little while, kind of took Echo’s place … it might help Celia adjust.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing and told Lucy—What are you fucking nuts? Me playing Echo will help Celia adjust? Why don’t you just get a new dog?

Because you and Celia have a special bond, she tells me. And you don’t have to act like a dog or anything, just sleep in the doghouse at night, so Celia knows someone, some thing living is in there. Plus you’re really good at pretending, so if you wanted to act like a dog … I know it sounds crazy, but really what is crazy?

This, Lucy, this is crazy, I tell her. This, no matter how you spin it, is the definition of crazy.
And she says—Fair enough, then it’s crazy. Big deal. Aren’t you the one who always told me this whole town is fucking crazy. So we’re giving a different wrinkle to crazy, so what?

She had me there. Actually she had me when she said I could sometimes sneak in at night and snuggle with her in bed the way Echo used to. That could be part of the role playing. Which made me wonder: Was Lucy really doing this for Celia, or was she wanting to indulge some strange fetish, man-as-dog coming out of his doghouse at night to hump her leg? I have to say, the leg-hump idea appealed to me. And I’d be doing right by Celia.

Three days later Frank moved into the doghouse. I needed to see it with my own eyes, so I paid him an impromptu visit. The doghouse, with its shingled slope-angled roof, the name Echo carved into the wooden crossbeam above the doorway, was situated in the center of the yard.

Echo, I called out, wanting to see if Frank would respond. Nothing. Chances are, since it was daytime, he wasn’t in the doghouse.

Anyone home, I called out louder, and was surprised when Frank crawled out headfirst, his disheveled hair flecked with dust and paint. He squinted, adjusting to the sunlight, and folded up to standing, like a cramped accordion.

I was in the neighborhood and wanted to say hey. Sooo, how’s the doghouse?

Not bad. I actually spend more time in here than I expected to. It’s got a womblike quality, you know? Frank smiled. Good mood was written all over his face. He said—Been working on some new art—then reached into the doghouse and produced a piece of paper, which he handed to me.

Bone-white blankness engulfed a darkened crop of Rorschach swirls. I was about to hand the page back to Frank, when something caught my eye. Inside the swirls were swirls, and inside those swirls another round of swirls, and I kept following what felt like a recursive plunge into a bottomless center, until Frank pointed something out to me—See that right there?

Where?
There?
Oh yeah yeah. Is that? What is that? That’s a dog. Sitting on top of a mountain.

I looked again, this time through Frank’s eyes. Holy shit. It was a dog sitting on top of a mountain.

How did you get that in there, I asked him.

Frank smiled and said nothing.

Over the next three weeks Frank reworked the piece obsessively, wanting to get it just right. When he finally did he gifted it to Celia, who saw cleanly through the storm of swirls, spotting the dog on the mountain. She titled the piece Echo.

Not long after that, Frank moved out of the doghouse.
Match

poetry by Erica Bodwell

Lit, struck. Made in heaven, made
of wood. Splinter, strike, sulfur, sizzle, snap, slap. Catch.
Asleep.
Smoker falls, ashes
fall. Catch.
Catch fire. Fire. Flame. Flames
lick. Tongue, tongues,
tongues
of flames lick, center blue, center
orange. Climb curtains, climb
walls, engulf ceiling.
Dance, hours before
we were dancing. Year turning.
After, a cigarette. A struck match,
Where’d you two meet?
Him. Her. Him. Asleep. We fell. Oh...
on Match. Lick, licking,
ashes fall, unnoticed,
smolder. Bed, bedspread, floor, drapes, nightdress, towel.
Lighter flicks, catches. We laugh,
run our fingers through the flame. Stop.
Let a blister form,
to remember. Run a finger.

Her. Him. Him. Lamp, lighter, little wheel
clicks. Snap. Cigarette,
lit. Red tip. We watch. He inhales.
Exhales.

A few inches over—
we. ignite.
Tinder

poetry by Erica Bodwell

The answer: it breaks your heart
every single day
every single day
you wake up
dream-mended, the metronomic cadence
of your love’s sawing breath
like trail blazes gashed red on trees:
the way through
is here
and yes you must
keep walking.

The twiggy lines at the corners of your eyes deepen
every single day
every single day
the silver
threading through your hair gains purchase
like hooves gripping mountainside:
you must follow
the cairns
don’t stop no matter
the blistering.

The moments your hands are free, start to gather
every single day
every single day
little bits of forest:
needles, cones, the tiniest bird-like branches, lift sticks
from the path:
you must stuff
your pockets
with each night’s warmth.

You’ll be astonished
how quickly
it burns.
Katie Kelleher *In the Vein of Things*
Dull Light

fiction by David Moulton

This was back in 199—. On a Friday night in January a teenage boy borrowed his brother’s ID and used it to get into a bathhouse in Chicago ...

1.
Crouching in the dull—a dull red enveloping haze ... He could never have anticipated this lighting. Of course everything here is strange, but that maybe most of all. That puts him in his place.
– Hi, my name’s Brandon—
Brandon Meador, I was born February 2, 1974. ...

He practiced saying this on the train, but now that he’s here he doesn’t need a name. Call him Seth or Brandon or whatever. Dull red, anonymous color seeping through his skin. Though he may not know it, he has a whole lifetime to adjust his eyes—time stretched almost to infinity.

The light itself appears to speak. It says faggot, and other things. Words that hover and circulate. Words his brothers use. His brothers like to talk, for them that’s all it is, talk. They have no idea. It’s breathtaking, their ignorance. He can almost see it. He feels nothing but that part of his cheek where that old man touched him. That queer left a residue.

A man old enough to be his grandpa who talked and held his arms like a thirteen-year-old girl. The one at the front desk. The first thing you see once you come in off the street.

“Welcome ... Is this your first time here? ... need me to explain? Twenty dollars will get you a membership that never expires, you never have to pay that again, you can keep coming till you’re as old as me if you like ... Heavens, you know I’m joking, honey. And after that, you can either get a locker or a room for the night. Lockers are ten dollars, rooms are twenty. Hmm? What was that, sweetie?”

He said he’d like a locker.

“All right, you know I’m going to have to see some ID ... thank you ...”

Once he had it in his hand he didn’t want to give it back. He kept looking from the picture to his face, apparently not from suspicion but sheer joy at holding a boy’s driver’s license. “Oh, wow, I see we’ve got a birthday coming up ... you’ll have to come back and celebrate with us, won’t you, honey?” making this long weird face, which must be the way these people smile. “Nice to meet you. Welcome to Man’s Country.” He started to explain their facilities and where to find his locker, but soon interrupted himself, “You know, honey, you’re here really early tonight—the boys probably won’t start trickling in for another hour at least. And once you’re in you can’t leave again without turning in your key for the night. Have you eaten yet? All we have is a vending machine with like some candy bars and stuff. There’s a cute little diner just down the block. The food’s cheap and edible. You could hang out there for an hour and, I don’t know, do some homework or something,” (winking at the word homework) “or just go ahead. It’s up to you ...”

“Yeah—yes ... I mean, I’ll go ahead now, if that’s okay ...”

“Of course it’s okay. Whatever you want, darling,” finally handing him back his ID and giving him a towel and key to his locker, “All right ...,” his smile faded and suddenly both were at a loss.

That’s when the old man touched him. Long fingers dribbling down the side of his face. “You take care of yourself tonight, okay, sweetie?”

He blinks.

He lives with his two older brothers in a suburb west of Chicago. Brandon is the oldest of the boys. If he really was Brandon he’d have punched the faggot in the face and run away as fast as possible.
Does that make him weak for not fighting, or strong for not running?

But that's exactly the point: Brandon would never be that close to a flesh-and-blood faggot.

The flier said nothing about faggots. It spoke only of MEN, REAL MEN, and displayed two bare torsos flaunting their manhood. One seen from the front—cut off just below the waist—pubic hair radiantly visible. The other from the back, showing off hairy butt cleavage.

He came on it totally by accident, on one of his walks in the city. A piece of trash the wind blew under his foot. He blushed once he saw it, and though he was alone he crumpled it up and shoved it deep in his pocket. That was over a year ago. All this time he's been living with it in his closet, hidden under a pile of childhood toys. He retrieves it only when he knows his brothers are out of the house. He's crumpled it over and over without ever managing to tear it to shreds or throw it away.

For a good solid year he's been crushed to a pulp. He quit the cross country team and other extracurriculars. This freed him to go on long, pointless walks in Chicago after school. Since he kept up his grades and stayed out of trouble, no one could complain. He didn't know what he was doing.

Even if he wanted to he couldn't tell his brothers. He doesn't have the words and besides they act like they already know. As soon as he makes the softest murmur they try and explain it all—*just shut your mouth, you have no idea what you're saying, this is how it is ...* and of course he wants to protest: *No, it's not, it's really not like that,* but, really, how would he know what it's like? At least they have explanations that could be true. He doesn't have anything at all.

When they're feeling generous they try and initiate him: *Aww—baby brother's growin' up, gots a big boy's needs.* They give him liquor, weed, old copies of Playboy and Hustler—*look this one's even got words, BIG words, that means you have to like it ... C'mon, it's not that complicated.* But again and again he fails to consume this stuff the way he's supposed to, without thinking. *Boy, you may have some book smarts, but when it comes to the real world you still don't know shit. The real world ain't some calculus bullshit—pussy ain't nuthin' to think about.* They like to go at it together sometimes, one-upping each other, baiting him to correct their grammar or object to their curse words. Which he'd never dream of doing. He listens like he's in math class.

Once he tried taking them at their word. They had to pry the bottle of Jameson from his hands, and even after he'd vomited he fought tooth and nail for more. He didn't stop till he was unconscious. At first they laughed. It was the funniest thing ever, but then it got to be kind of a pain in the ass when he practically died. Even then he didn't get it. Even when he was passed-out drunk he managed to overthink everything.

He crouches.

He did read the fine print, but only after about the hundredth crumple did it occur to him this was an actual place he could visit.

Brandon let him borrow his ID.

"All right, you can have it, but if you pass out somewhere stupid at 3 in the morning don't expect me to come save your ass. Ain't happenin'."

But now that he's here he crouches somewhere outside himself. Bathed in the light of pederasty. Some day this will all make sense.

2.

Other patrons have started filing in. A stream of men pass through the lobby to their respective lockers and rooms. Several stop to take in the statuary. There's the six foot plastic replica of Michelangelo's David with the exaggerated penis, and beside that a completely new kind of object. One goes so far as to approach. "Hey there ... You all right?" Under inspection it trembles to life and holds a blank, inscrutable face up to the light. "You okay?" Very slowly the boy
nods. “Oh, okay, well have a good night then.”

A middle-aged black man, didn't seem queer at all.

3.

On second look the light isn't all that red.

It is red, but it's other things as well. There are flashes of green, magenta, blue. It isn't any one thing.

He's in a large room, a foyer opening in all directions, with a disco ball and fog machine at the center.

There's music playing:

*Can't help fallin' in love—I fall deeper and deeper.* ...

A woman’s voice calls from far away as the beat pulses intimately through everything.

He felt confident when he first walked in—like he just passed a test, but in no time he got confused and had to retreat to the corner. This is not a stable position, crouching. He's got his key in his hand, lodged deep in the skin of his palm, and it's getting hard to ignore, not painful exactly, but just enough to keep him off balance. He really should find his locker. For one thing he's sweating profusely. He's still wearing his winter coat and long johns.

He starts off in a random direction. He takes a stairway up a winding passage. He can see no more than a few feet ahead. Space spirals out and folds in on itself. A dozen little enclaves in which he could rest. If he keeps walking it seems like he could end up somewhere so remote, he'll never get back. Yet, no matter how far he goes he comes back to the foyer. He's forced to conclude this space isn't endless, it's not even all that big. It's a fun house. Conscious of the illusion, he nonetheless wills himself to be lost. He's not looking for his locker. His winter clothes grow heavier and more uncomfortable, but in a way that's good. Like an extra layer of protection.

Space filling up with men. Who move until they find their spot then stand there quiet and still. No matter how many show up the silence will not relent. The only voice you hear is Madonna or some other diva wailing on about love.

On their faces sits a universal boredom. If they are faggots they don't seem to be doing a very good job of it. A faggot, you'd think, is someone who really likes being a faggot. Otherwise, why bother? He can't begin to fathom these rituals of boredom.

One day he'll devise his own private choreography for standing still. Not tonight. He must keep moving. He passes through their world without sinking into it.

This world contains three levels. The ground level where he came in, the grand foyer, plus rows of lockers and a shower room. The basement is where clothes become most cumbersome—the spa level. It includes a sauna and hot tub (unfortunately out of order tonight) and more showers. There's also a small lounge off to the side. Level two is where he does most of his wandering. The maze level—level of endless nooks and private rooms. The walls are decorated with watercolor paintings of extremely muscular men in lewd positions.

By maybe the twelfth circle he's completely winded. He pants and gasps. He tries walking a little slower, but that doesn't help. He's losing strength. This would definitely be a stupid place to pass out. He starts to see chinks in their boredom. Maybe he's delirious, but did that one guy just smile at him? Another go-round and he's still smiling. He opens his mouth as if he might actually speak.

He runs away in a panic, finding refuge in a random nook. He thought he'd been in every room already, but this one looks unfamiliar. It's not really a nook. A little too big for that. He's in a small theater. Porn projected on the wall. He comes to a seat in the front row. He can finally start to catch his breath. He takes off his jacket and drops it at his feet. *Whew*—the difference that makes. It's almost like thinking clearly again. He leans forward, assuming a posture of deep concentration. When he's in distress his first instinct is always to pay attention to
something. If he can do that he'll be safe.

Several times larger than life. He strains to be close, to absorb the images directly on his face. It's like seeing straight through the light to the meaning of the light. What that old queer really meant with all his mincing gestures. Not so much what he sees as the fact that he sees it, that's what he can't wrap his brain around. An enormous asshole quivers on the wall.

(At the same time it's getting hard to ignore the hum of the projector. That's annoying.)

It's an instructional video. A man works over an asshole, greasing it up, sticking in his fingers, getting it ready. The man slips a condom over his erection and pushes his way inside. Once in he does not let up. He grunts and grimaces like he's doing hard labor. He pounds that ass. This is what's called butt-fucking. After a certain point he no longer has to make an effort, he fucks on automatic. The face of the other one (the one getting fucked) dissolves in whimpering bliss, then dissolves some more. The camera lingers. Boredom creeps unmistakably into both their faces.

It's the same emotion he saw in the halls, raised to another power. He presses two fingers gently to his crotch. It's enough to make him convulse. He twitches everywhere in all directions. Thighs, groin, buttocks, everything itches intolerably, yet he can't scratch himself. Can't strip off his long johns. He'll have to make do. He pushes down harder with one hand and uses the other to stifle his face. This feeling's so big he doesn't want to breathe.

Next thing he knows the theater is full. Or maybe it was this whole time. No one looks him in the face. They pull up his shirt and stroke his nipples. It does no good to ignore them. They touch him more deeply than he dared to touch himself. They'll be the ones to tear this cotton graft from his legs.

–Hey baby
They touch him more deeply than he dared to touch himself. They'll be the ones to tear this cotton graft from his legs.

–Hey baby
They pull up his shirt and stroke his nipples. It does no good to ignore them. They touch him more deeply than he dared to touch himself. They'll be the ones to tear this cotton graft from his legs.

–Ahh!

They touch him more deeply than he dared to touch himself. They'll be the ones to tear this cotton graft from his legs.

–Ahh!

This feeling's so big he doesn't want to breathe.

–Ooh

He doesn't struggle at first, because it's a nice feeling, really nice, but when someone grabs his dick he screams like a girl and jumps to his feet.

–Ahh!

There are four of them swarming his skin. No one looks him in the face.

–Ahh!

–Ooh

–Ahh!

They touch him more deeply than he dared to touch himself. They'll be the ones to tear this cotton graft from his legs.

–Ahh!

–Ooh

–Ahh!

They touch him more deeply than he dared to touch himself. They'll be the ones to tear this cotton graft from his legs.

–Ooh

–Ahh!

Now what?

Those guys in the theater really liked him. If he goes home like this he won't be able to stop crying. He'll cry for two weeks straight. He had his chance. He blew it. Now he's invisible again.

He buttons his fly but leaves the zipper open. He carries his jacket in a bundle under one arm.

Another circle? He can't pass this way again without a nauseating sense of redundancy. Yet at the same time things have changed. While his back was turned the whole place came alive.

Observe.

By and large the men are standing in the same spots as before. Now they're not shy about clutching their cocks under their towels. It's possible they were doing this before. His senses have sharpened. Now he can barely hear the music over the sound of mouths. Not speaking—just opening and closing. No, it's not just him,
the place is definitely a lot busier. Objectively speaking. He considers asexual reproduction. The same man split into two identical copies of himself.

He has to shake a lot of stupid ideas out of his head.

The foyer has been converted to a dance floor.

There aren't many dancers. Over in the corner two men kiss and sway together softly. The one is tall and angular with a head of long beautiful hair. His body one continual flow. The other is squat and burly and more rigid. They hold each other like two souls destined to always be together, or else like strangers who'll never see each other again after tonight. Either way they're in love.

The music picks up:
*When we're out there dancing on the floor, darlin'-*

*and I feel like I need some more. ...*

Another man dashes to the center of the room and starts to dance passionately under the disco ball. He's fat and naked and every inch of him jiggles to the beat. Extremely swarthy, with thick black hair covering his body. He has a graying beard and is balding on top. His wire-framed glasses give him a professorial mien. You can tell he takes this very seriously. He dances in the spotlight, but doesn't necessarily do it for praise. His penis is a stubby little thing with a steel ring at the base. Occasionally he'll tug at the end or give it a smack with the back of his hand. When the song is over he reaches back to scratch his butt cheeks. He takes a long bow to no one in particular. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and shuffles off.

5.

Crouching again. Back to where he started, only more so. Here the light really is pure—dull and red, and nothing else. He's escaped to the basement lounge—the farthest he can go and still be inside. He tries sitting on the leather sofa, but that isn't good enough. Or else it's too good. He crouches in the corner next to the sofa. Ball ed-up, straining to be as small and inconspicuous as possible. He thinks of his failure to collapse earlier. Why'd he stop himself? Now he'd welcome the opportunity. There's really no helping him, he thinks. Forehead to knees, legs fused together. His penis aches. He thinks about his penis aching. His thoughts ache, too. It's very painful to be alive. Maybe it'd be a little less so if he could stop thinking.

When he thinks of all the men tonight, from the girly old queer to the porn stars to the fat dancer, he's sure he'll never know what they know. It does no good to try and pay attention. Certain things can't be learned that way. Here, of all places, the problem is the same it's always been. His whole life the male body has been a threat. He was potty-trained at a precocious age, especially by the standards of his brothers, and unlike them he never wanted to go back. They loved to belch and fart as he was eating, just to upset him. They weren't satisfied until he started to cry. Then adults might intervene, or they might not. The important thing is he would cry and they would laugh.

Is he crying now? Has it come to that? What time is it? The last train home leaves by 12:24. It may already be too late. He may be spending the night. He raises his head and looks for a clock.

Squirming like an antsy school boy—like a worm on a hook, does he have any idea how funny he looks? Poor thing. Weighed down by tears he can't seem to shed. The rest of him twitches compulsively, as if his whole body and each individual part were trying to solve an impossibly complicated problem. But really it's simple. So simple, honey. If he only knew.

"Ha!"

A guffaw breaks out. Lightness and joy. Forget about time.

There's a naked man reclining on a leather bean bag chair in the opposite corner. He appears perfectly at ease, totally assured of his looks. He basks in self-regard and the warmth of his own body. Neither young nor old, lithe and muscular, with a Superman S tattooed on one bicep. He has dark features: a military haircut and well-trimmed goatee. Both nipples are pierced, one with a simple
barbell, the other with a large gold ring. Occasionally he plays with himself, pinching his nipples or squeezing his genitals. He lets it be known he's in no hurry. He'll stay like this all night if he has to. Leisurely trying on suitors. They come and go, and anyone who wants to can suck his dick or kiss his ass, but it takes a very special someone to share his orgasm. He's had the same courting routine for years, and in all that time he thinks he's never seen such a pure and tender klutz.

Their eyes meet. He holds the child expertly in his gaze, until the child finally has to blink. Rivulets come flowing down his cheeks. The man grins as broadly as possible, flashing his white teeth. He lifts one arm and beckons. Come.

He sits up to greet him. All his suspicions confirmed as soon as they touch. This boy isn't even high, he really is that clueless. "HA!" he laughs again, this time directly in his face. "Here, let's get you out of this, into something more comfortable," and he wastes no time stripping him of his clothes, tossing each item carelessly to the floor. Far from a passionate undressing, more of a tedious process, as the boy offers no help at all. He does no more than lift his arms or legs when instructed. The man even unties his shoes for him. Still, he doesn't lose interest, each article strikes him as amusing in a new way. He keeps up the steady volley of laughs. "Jesus, did you sauna in your winter clothes ... are we ever gonna get to skin?" Really, it's extraordinary what he has to go through: under this shirt, another, and two pairs of underwear beneath his jeans. Each new layer brings out a fresh aroma. He keeps digging for that pure, adolescent musk.

Until he has him down to nothing but a pair of droopy boxers. He savors the moment. He kisses the moist, hard spot on his underwear. One, two, three—he yanks them off and the boy's organ jumps fitfully in the air. It's a long, veiny thing, butchered at the top like so many others. Skinny and slightly lop-sided, not beautiful, but that doesn't matter. Just like his eyes, leaking raw emotion.

He bunches the boxers in his fist then releases them with a manly hurl. They come unfurled and float softly in the air. In the time it takes for them to hit the floor, the boy comes inexplicably to life. All on his own, without any prompting, he falls to his knees and takes the man's genitals in his mouth.

Simply by lifting his arm this man has the power to give mercy, and every motion that follows brings more forgiveness, until, stripped bare, he may even be innocent. His skin shivers with gratitude and relief. He could never have done this by himself. Another chance. Don't mess it up. Cock sucker! That's another word his brothers use without really considering the implications. He tries swallowing the man whole, balls and all, but soon he's gagging and has to pull back a little. The truth is he doesn't know what he's doing, but he's doing it, right? There's no question that's a cock in his mouth. Strange object. Feels like he should be able to drink from it. He's extremely thirsty, when's the last time he had any water? A headache, too, pounding behind one eye. Little trifling things that won't shut up. His needs. His mouth too parched to suck. ...

The man thinks he's never received such an incompetent blow-job in his life. Either he can't feel anything at all or he's wincing in pain. All that nervous, twitchy energy now concentrated in his mouth. That tongue roots and scrapes like it's trying to find something. He feels his penis go limp—definitely not the one, not tonight, come back in ten years maybe. But even so his affection for him deepens.

He's going to be nice.

He brings two hands to his chin and eases him off his cock. He lifts his face and grins down at him. For a moment he's on the verge of laughing again, but refrains. That might seem cruel. "You're adorable," he says. His words have their precise effect. Fresh tears spring to his eyes, and when he reflexively tries to wipe them
away the man stills his hand. He can do nothing but blush and smile with awkward joy.

“Ha!” He allows himself another burst of laughter, and this time the kid joins with a giggle.

He lifts his head and guides his mouth to his left nipple—the one with the barbell. “There. Bite down. Harder,” he instructs. “As hard as you can. Use your teeth. You’re not going to hurt me ... Oh, yeah,” he groans.

Generously, he lets the boy bring him real pleasure for a minute or two before picking up his face again. He heaves a sigh. “Yes, you’re a good boy.”

“Ohh,” at that he can only whimper.

“Shh,” the man hushes him with soft little kisses all over his face.

Before things get too quiet he’s manhandling the boy, flipping him around so he’s lying with his crotch in his face. With a greedy slobber he takes that long, thin member in his mouth. He comes up briefly for a gulp of air.

“Go on. Blow your load in my mouth, I wanna swallow every drop.”

It doesn’t take long. He stops thinking. Later on he’ll marvel at how easy it was.

“Mmh—Yum-yum-yum,” the man makes loud smacking sounds with his lips and tongue. He licks the corners of his mouth, making sure to get all the sperm from his whiskers. He pats his belly and smiles. For a minute they lie together cheek to cheek. There. Now he better send this one on his way. His night isn’t anywhere near done. He has some serious business to get back to.

“Come on,” he says, “let’s get you cleaned up.”

He decides to wash the boy as one final act of kindness. He leads him to the shower, wiggling his hairy ass on the way. From behind he looks just like one of the men on the flier.

He adjusts the knob to find a comfortable temperature then pushes the kid into the stream. He does a thorough job on his front, lathering him from his face to between his toes. He twirls him around, thinking nothing of it, but is stunned to find so much acne. Whole colonies spanning his shoulders, back, buttocks. He didn’t see it before. His face was relatively clear and spotless. The man had no warning. Though he never agreed to this, he proceeds as planned. Scrubbing pimply skin is way more intimate than sucking dick. Stupid brat. For some reason people love to romanticize youth. Really it’s just gross. There’s a huge boil on his left butt cheek. The man has an urge to spank him violently and gouge it out. He restrains himself, letting the boy go with a simple pat on the behind.

6.

“Brandon,” as he never even had the chance to call himself, gathers his clothes and leaves.

Only 10:49, more than enough time to make his train.
A fat purple pigeon roosts in the tangled branches of the white birch: a heart protected by a ribcage. The bird is the amulet resting on my friend’s breastbone, hiding a long scar. The amulet I see now, is a heart that holds all the secrets of February. Something in the dark takes aim, the snow illuminates the night, the light froze two weeks ago, on St. Brigid’s Day. The arms of the white birch have runes carved into them: hearts and arrows so deep the papery bark grows around them. We decide on a white ink tattoo around her scar, white with the shiny pink rose line. The bird heart is an amethyst so all her decisions will be sober and sound. The snow-light reflects off the gem’s facets, gives it a tricky shape. Sometimes a baby fist curled around a bow, a bird, a heart. She will not eat anything cooked, just: raw oysters, chocolate. She will learn to breathe.
Steamers

poetry by Jennifer Martelli

A silver pail of light black butterflies filled with salt water and shiny nacre: the steamers are all open, the film over the slit, intact still,

open with a small smile. And inside, the tiny pouch of sand and guts, the stomach the size of a lima bean,

tasting like the ocean. All of Salem Harbor is illuminated tonight, out past the pier, to Beverly and up to Cape Ann.

The black skin of the neck sticks under my fingernails—when you taste them later, I hope you taste the beach.

I am not ashamed to eat in front of you. I am not ashamed for you to see my hunger.
Jones Creek, Gloucester, MA

poetry by Jennifer Martelli

When the tide goes out, the sedges form
a waterway maze for a few good hours
of prayer.

Then the tides come back,
again and always.

I stepped off my board,
into water so warm to my waist
it was like I wasn’t alive yet.
Here, I think a ghost could float
even in the hot sunlight.
1. Walking back from a day at the beach, you climb the dunes and find a shady place to make love. You don’t need words to say that you’re both feeling damn good about life, love, and each other. After walking a bit farther in the dunes, he tells you about his young cousin who was found murdered a few feet from where you just made love. Nothing feels like love after such a horrific story. “She was twelve. Lived in the house down the hill. They found her right here.”

2. You’re feeling light-hearted, giddy. You’ve been joking about how sex is a better workout than a long bike ride. You don’t feel your true age, you feel young, almost as young as your daughter who sends you a text saying: Did you know Randy has herpes? You look at Randy, your lover, and then the next text arrives. Daughter explains that his son has just told her because they had that father-son talk recently, the lover-lover talk you should have had long ago.
AN INVASIVE SPECIES IS TAKING OVER OUR NEIGHBORHOOD
Rachel had begun to regard the George Washington Bridge as a kind of god. She viewed it again, as she had from the roofs of several Upper Manhattan buildings in the last twelve years. The man she was dating had brought her to his roof to watch the fireworks. “It’s free and the view is excellent,” he said. “No crowds.” They stood on the top of his co-op building called The Elms, a name written in elegant script on the green awning below. Several nights a week for the last two months, she had entered under that awning in the evenings and exited beneath it in the early mornings before the sun came up.

The bridge stretched west over the Hudson to New Jersey. It gave life in providing passage to work, school, and play, and took it in the fact that a handful of people jumped from its girders every year. Rachel often went on walks in Fort Tryon Park and found herself inexplicably praying in its direction. The Palisades, a giant wall of rock rising from the river, served as her Mecca. She mumbled into her hand so that people passing her wouldn’t think she was a common schizophrenic. Every supplication, every wish, was sent out to the bridge. She pictured the words leaving her mouth and being released, flying with the seagulls over the West Side Highway and across the river to the glittering silver span where they would be considered and likely rejected. She found it hard to stop praying, even though she didn’t believe in a real God anymore.

The man was a gracious host. One of those men whose generosity, hospitality, and lavish treatment were all balm to an innate and stubborn resistance she failed to understand. He lacked any desire for devotion beyond what was immediately available to him: a happy scavenger emotionally unable to store up for a winter that wasn’t far away. The hair at his temples had long since turned white and the colorlessness was starting to spread along the crown of his head, wherever hair still existed.

On their first date, he couldn’t see the menu at his favorite sushi restaurant without putting on a pair of reading glasses and holding the votive candle up to the words. His face was so young, almost boyish, with only a few tiny wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. She had believed he was forty-three, like his online profile said. He could pass. But seeing him struggle to read the small print, she figured he was a liar, and it was too late because he was handsome and the type who held the door open for her and touched the small part of her back in a protective way. “Who was president when you were born?” she couldn’t help but ask, toying with the pendant at her throat.

He put down the menu and twisted up his mouth. “Eisenhower.” He looked at her with a crooked grin, both worry and resignation in his eyes, until she shrugged. She was only thirty-four, but the problem wasn’t that he was in his fifties. It was the lie. There would be others, she guessed. The small lies always amassed and stood arm in arm, climbing on each other’s shoulders until there was a pyramid of lies hiding the large ones, all the deal-breakers. But in her wide and disappointing experience, men like him seemed to be what was available. In New York City, they were as common as half-sour pickles.

The man had set up a small card table on the roof and decorated it with a shabby white tablecloth and botanica candles from the corner bodega. He explained that he had no proper tapers and had run out to buy those before Hurricane Sandy, a year before. Fortunately the lights never went out; uptown, all the power lines were run...
underground. “Still, I felt I should have them, just in case.”

His rooftop wasn’t intended for parties and she believed it was illegal to be up there, but the man was the type to take small risks. The heels of her shoes sunk into the soft material covering the ground and the chair was unbalanced, its back leaning away from her. She was forced to sit on the very edge of the seat in order not to fall backward. At times, she wondered if the roof wouldn’t collapse beneath them and send them hurtling down, slamming into the auxiliary floor below.

She watched the light flicker, illuminating the painted faces of the Blessed Virgin and el divino niño Jesus. He had made it clear to her that he was not religious. A quarter Jewish, but that was merely cultural. Still, she asked if it would be okay to pray before the meal, and he consented, even saying he found it charming. They held hands and she watched the lights twinkle on the bridge as she blessed the food.

They ate Chilean sea bass with roasted tomatoes and fennel, a side of quinoa, and artichokes doused in lemon. They drank red wine, because the white had turned sour.

The sun dipped low until it disappeared behind the Palisades. When it became very dark, fireworks exploded in several directions in the sky, in the east over the Bronx, in the south above the distant Empire State Building, and in the west, in New Jersey, over the Bridge. There were gold curlicues spinning overhead, bright green bursts that sizzled and popped like grease in a frying pan. Fat worms of color silently uncoiled before a distant bang sounded above Yankee Stadium. He reached across the table and took her hand. It was impossible not to want to touch him. He wasn’t a terrible man, and she enjoyed the way he stroked her fingers with a tender urgency.

“The other Rachel and I used to play a game,” he said. He had a habit of ruining moments this way, mentioning this other Rachel, an ex-girlfriend who clearly occupied a good deal of his head space. She didn’t fight with him about it. Her curiosity usually won out. “Oh?” she said, abiding it, nodding, encouraging him to continue.

“We played Truth. Not Truth or Dare. Just Truth. Telling each other a scary or private thing, a humiliating thing that we don’t like to share.”

“Sounds like fun.” He squeezed her hand and laughed, moving his chair closer. She noticed that he liked her sarcasm. The other Rachel hadn’t had much of a sense of humor, apparently, which might be the reason it didn’t work out. She was an actress playing Christine in The Phantom of the Opera. At one point, earlier in their relationship, he talked about the other Rachel so much she wished he would go down into the basement of the Majestic Theater, put on a white half-mask and wait for her for eternity.

“You start.” She put her hand on his knee so he wouldn’t protest.

“Well, okay, I will.”

“You must have something in mind or else you wouldn’t have suggested the game.”

“Well.” He was dying to tell her something. This had been going on for weeks. He struggled to find a moment to break some news to her and she consistently waited, silent, expectant. It was cruel, but she didn’t help him. No encouraging words. Go ahead, you can tell me anything. Nothing like that. Because, really, could he? Should he tell her anything?

He took a deep breath and let it out. “I was married before,” he said.

She tilted her head to the side and said, “Yes, I know.”

“No, I mean before that one, there was another.” He smoothed the hair tossed around on the warm wind. It was blowing harder now and bits of grit were getting into her eyes, into her mouth. She had crunched on them with the forkfuls of fish, and realized she had eaten small particles of the city.

He was distraught. It seemed his confession was dire to him, even though it
was such a small matter, nothing so unusual. “Humiliating, isn’t it?” he said.

“Not really,” she said. She almost asked why it was so worrisome but stopped herself then wondered if her reaction to the news shouldn’t have been stronger. Maybe she should pretend to be incensed so as to gain ground in appearing more righteous than he. But more human than that, to share the gravity of it, as it was such a heavy burden to him. She didn’t want to take on the burden, though. To her it was nothing. This is one of those things that he should have dealt with and processed by this point, by now, like this other Rachel girl. “How long has it been?” she asked.

“It’s been well over ten years,” he said. She saw tears forming in the corners of his eyes. It struck her that she had absolutely no sympathy for him, and she was afraid she was incapable of feeling anything, because of the structure, the nature of what they were. More than friends but less than partners. She had no stake in caring. Still she felt obligated to do something to comfort him. She reached out and put her arm around him and rubbed his shoulders. The finale of the fireworks show played out above them with a militant patter: bombs and gunfire. She held him for a moment then turned and got up to find the shawl she brought with her.

“Are you cold?” he asked. She wasn’t but she nodded anyway.

“It looks like it might rain.” Lighting flashed within distant clouds over the Bronx, but it was heat lightning. She knew it wouldn’t rain. “Maybe we should go inside.”

“Wait, it’s your turn,” he said. “Aren’t you going to tell me your story?” She tossed the shawl over her shoulders and gripped the back of the folding chair. This was permission, and she was always looking for permission to talk about Eddie. It was so rare that the opportunity came about. And on a few occasions, when she had told the story and seen the excitement, the eyes dilating, the lips parting, the love and need of a juicy tale to spice up life among her friends, she hated herself. It was like sharing a disease. The confession cast a garish light on her. She could never just say the words without a litany of “Poor Rachel.” Or worse, “You are the strongest…” Blah blah blah. It drove her insane. She was not the strongest anything. It was not brave. There was nothing good about what had happened in her youth, with Eddie, and no one came out of it any better than they had gone in, least of all, herself.

“I’m jealous of a dead person,” she said. She turned around and sat back down next to him. He didn’t hear her and so she said it again, louder. This was a true story, one she was willing to share.

He leaned his elbow onto the back of his chair and faced her. “I don’t get what you mean,” he said. “Who is it? Someone famous?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. She explained that there was a grave at Trinity Cemetery. She liked to walk there on Saturday afternoons, and on the Day of the Dead when people in her neighborhood would come to pay their respects and leave bouquets of flowers. Once she saw a woman performing a Santoria ritual, using a log stump as an altar, burning sage and speaking prayers in a blend of Spanish and another language she couldn’t identify. “At the edge of the cemetery,” she said, “near Riverside Drive is a cross. The top half is cracked. At some point it will break off altogether, but now it hangs on, even more beautiful in its resilience. There’s no name on the cross. The only word is Cherie. Whenever I walk near that grave, I stare at the cross with tears in my eyes and feel the burning of an intense jealousy. This was someone’s dear. Somebody loved her. I believe it’s a she. The style of cross with the curling border of flowers struck in marble, the feminine script. I can only imagine a woman, so loved, very loved. And when I see the grave, I wish to be her, to be there under the ground and considered a dear one, more than I want to be alive.”

The man listened with his mouth drawn down. She could tell the story made him uncomfortable. Join the club, she thought. Did he really believe she wanted
to feel this way? Did he honestly think his revelation was more important? He didn’t shed a single tear during her story. He only sat there, coughing from the smoke and gazing at his hands. But from the corner of her eye, Rachel could see the bridge lighting up in red, white, and blue, beaming with color, and she knew that her offering had been accepted.
Kendra dropped her phone and ran. Two-year-old Lulu tottered on the end of the diving board, her red tutu quivering as she backed away from the brown and gold rattlesnake. “Mommy!” Lulu’s chubby arms reached up to no one. The snake hissed.

Kendra called for help, but it was useless. Even if her voice could carry across Aunt Sheila’s rose garden and over the tennis court, everyone was inside with the air conditioning, listening to Kendra’s perfect sister play her perfect cello. They’d never hear Kendra.

Lulu stamped her feet, the board shook, the snake buckled. Lulu couldn’t swim. Lulu would fall. No. Wait. “Lulu jump!” Kendra jumped into the deep end and kicked her legs hard, letting her sandals sink to the bottom, her cheap dress spread out, bleeding purple streaks in the water. She stretched her arms up like Lulu’s. “I’ll catch you.” The automatic pool sweep hissed water into Kendra’s eye. Kendra squinted. “It’ll be fun.”

From underneath, Lulu’s red tutu looked like a hibiscus the snake would pollinate. “I’ll give you ice cream.” The fat legs trembled; the snakehead bobbed. Kendra grabbed at the diving board, thinking to yank her cousin in by the ankles, but the snake snapped at Kendra’s hand and she fell back into the water. She tried again. The snake rose as tall as Kendra’s knee.

Kendra could knock Lulu into the pool with the long handled net. Kendra pulled herself out of the water. The net was just inside the door of the pool shed; Kendra had been too lazy to hang it properly. She could get there without taking her eyes off Lulu. It was only five yards? Two? Not far. But snakes were fast. Kendra walked sideways, her skirt sticking to her legs, steam rising off her footprints on the paving stones, her eyes glued to Lulu.

The pool sweep hissed again and the snake answered. Kendra leapt toward it. She put a toe on the board, not sure what to do. The creature was all spine. Undulating. Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka-Kaaaa, the rattle soft like an old-fashioned winding sprinkler.

Lulu stopped screaming and started panting in what had to be hyperventilation, but seemed like a pretty good survival instinct. Slower than the rattle, Lulu’s panting slowed the snake. Keeping her toe in place, Kendra plucked a rock from the edge of the hosta bed and shifted her weight onto the rough surface of the diving board.

The board vibrated, but the snake did not turn. It fixed on Lulu. Its browns and ambers shamed the false turquoise of the pool. Kendra raised the rock over her head. She could smell the earth dampening its underside. Chlorinated water dripped from her bangs and burned her eyes. It didn’t matter. Almost fourteen, Kendra couldn’t hit a dartboard. She couldn’t shoot a basket. She couldn’t kill a snake with a rock; she could just make it angry enough to bite her cousin. “Everything’s okay,” Kendra said. Lulu’s nose was running so hard that she choked on her own mucus. “It’s okay,” she repeated.

Lulu spit.

The mucus glistened and spread in the sunlight, hanging in the air before splatting the creature. Dense bubbles of spit slid off the beaded skin as the snake rippled forward. Scents of pool chemicals and earth lifted away leaving only sun-heated diaper and the meaty warmth of the snake. The wind swished leaf by leaf through the laurel trees. The rattler’s jaw unhinged—its mouth wide as an open bible. The quick tongue flicked between curved daggers the same dirty pearl as the diving board. The mouth waved forward, aiming at the dough of Lulu’s thigh.
Kendra fell in slow motion on top of the snake and grabbed Lulu by both ankles. Under her belly, Kendra felt the vertebrae pulse together and pull apart as the snake writhed free, streaming between her breasts and stapling two purple welts into the base of her thumb before arcing backward into the pool.

When Kendra described all this, the emergency room doctors worried about neurotoxins, but her sister pointed out that Kendra’s hyper-clarity happened before the bite. The alarming thing was the way Kendra took a pen and outlined the welts, the way Kendra smiled when she closed her eyes and saw the snake weaving cool and untroubled through the water.
The only child decides the housekeeper is her best friend

micro-fiction by Kathleen Brewin Lewis

The only child decides the housekeeper is her best friend

one mild June afternoon. They are watching Days of Our Lives on the black and white TV in the sunroom, one of them ironing while the other stretches out on the sofa. Neomie sprinkles the laundry with water before she presses it, sets the iron down on an old pie plate as she reaches for the next rumpled napkin. The only child breathes in the clean aroma, relaxes to the shink, shink of the sprinkle bottle, the plak of the tin plate.

If you help me get my work done, Neomie promises, we can go fishing. So the only child folds the clean towels, puts her father's shirts in his closet, sweeps the front porch. Neomie has brought a pocket knife to work, along with a spool of fishing line and some hooks, and they go into the lane behind the house to cut bamboo for poles.

They walk with their poles to the park, where there is a man-made lake stocked with brim. They bait their hooks with bread balls, sling the fish onto the grass when they feel a bite, catch a bucketful, carry the bucket between them. Her mother will not be happy to come home to find her kitchen sink full of small brown fish gasping in the tap water. But she and Neomie are feeling proud and do not care.
The sea at body temperature (too warm), and brown, too, 
like river wash from a mountain in the spring. Not

travel-market blue or azure, but the mud-brown 
of poverty, of the village itself after a storm

pushed through it last year. 
Waiters and bar owners cajole us from doorways—

langosta, vino, bueno! They smile, beckon, laugh, 
etease, their brown eyes wary with contempt—

for our naïveté, our emptiness; for having so much 
and not knowing what we have.

We lounged away the afternoons in beach chairs, 
drinking G&T’s and diving into the tepid waves.

Women in long skirts weaved between the chairs 
selling necklaces and sarongs while bare-chested young men

hawked jet skis and snorkeling tours from the water’s edge; 
we rarely lifted our sunglasses to meet their eyes.

No breeze at night, not even a star in the sky—
the air hung too heavy for that; buoyant

like salt water, only the clouds could float. 
At 4 a.m. we sat on the beach, nursing gin.

An iguana happened by, grinning. “Hey, Amigos!” 
he said, “You want to buy a hat?”

Might have been the booze talking, a figment 
of our weary ennui, mentally slumming as we were,

as distant from the damped-down longing in our hearts 
as we were from each other; as distant as the moon was 
from the sand between our toes.
Dappled by the leaflight
that sifted sun through green,
she moved—and the morning followed
in a kaleidoscope of skirt,
that swirled about the flash
of legs, as she danced discalced
upon the burning street,
and felt each stone, each bit of glass
beneath her calloused feet.

Interrupted by the music,
I stood among the crowd
and paid witness to her song.
A shuffle step, a toss of head
swung the tangle of her hair
to keep uncertain time.
I was challenged by that Cajun tune:
the saw of fiddle, the washboard's scratch,
and her own contralto croon.

The accordion wheezed and coins
were flung, stars upon an asphalt night.
She stooped to pick them up.
And as she rose, she regarded
me, perspiring in my suit.
She cast me back a curl of lip,
a smile meant to bruise.
I checked my watch, and turned away—
embarrassed by my shoes.
Clinton Inman *At the Window*
The Apostle

poetry by Stephen Thomas Roberts

I could sense the Christian witness coming on,
Riding, as we were, like Elijah
Through the clouds,
Seven miles high and halfway there,
The Mississippi snaking
Somewhere down below.

My companion, with his apple face,
Round and bright, burnished like a cherub's,
With wings for ears,
Marched the conversation back to God
As we crossed the desert plains.

He asked: Do you know our Saviour?

And I thought: Should I admit
To that most secret place,
My private ark, sweet with blood,
To where the sacrifice is led?

Should I confide I spoke in tongues?
Cast the coins and read the hexagram?
Should I confess I dealt the Fool
And the Hanged Man
And saw myself?

Or should I command: Look out my window!
Regard the Holy Name
Written in the smears of jet trails!

I would rather talk of sex
Or money
Or even
Sports.

I am afraid that once I begin
To speak of the divine
I will display the stigmata
Of my wrists,
When the miracle had proved too much.

He sat, patient for response,
Quiet as a vigil
Expectant as the angels
That dance around the Throne.

I smiled.
Apologized that I was tired,
Turned my head into the Sun,
And dreamt of angels
Descending from on high.
You could disappear here.

If there are any lawless places left in America, any scraps of the Old West, one of them is definitely Taos, New Mexico. There are more disappearances here than in most parts of the U.S., more unsolved arsons. People shoot their neighbor’s dogs and each other for seemingly no reason at all.

I could disappear here.

Especially on a moonless night like this, the desert behind my house stretching into a darkness so deep and vast it seems to swallow everything. I look through my window to the west and there is nothing besides my own house light shooting a small yellow cone into the blackness. All I know for sure is the sound of wind rattling dry sage as it blows west where, somewhere out there, the earth suddenly drops away for a thousand feet. Nothing but emptiness plunging down the Rio Grande Gorge. The rocky canyon floor where that tired thread of water pulses south toward Mexico, and eventually the Gulf.

Some say Taos is a sacred, powerful site. A place of high vibration. An energetic vortex where people come to find meaning. Hippies and yuppies. Most of them white and looking for a more enchanted existence. Like Crestone, Colorado or Sedona, Arizona, they flock to these places. And it’s crazy to me. Energy. Vortices. Vibrations. I can’t begrudge them. In some ways I’m one of them. And I don’t blame anyone who looks for meaning in their lives in 21st Century America. Where we are micro-managed, most likely in cubicles, working soul-shredding 9:00 to 5:00ers for the rest of our lives.

America. Where any Google search will yield page after page on Beauty and almost nothing on Truth. America. Where Trust is a noun not a verb?

Can you blame them when they come searching for meaning?

Can you blame me?!

Looking back from my window, from the darkness outside, I spot my bottle of Captain Morgan on top of the fridge. I told myself I wouldn’t drink tonight and gaze back down at the notebook on my table where I have tried to write for hours with nothing so far but scribbles.

It was the Day of the Dead when I finally got the guts to move to Taos. I didn’t realize it at the time. Not until I arrived with everything I owned stuffed into my car. A coincidence, I thought. No. More than a coincidence. Fate. The old me was dead. I’d sluffed him off. This was a metamorphosis. I’d also come to find meaning and in doing so considered all the Taos clichés:

Camping outside the Hanuman Temple until I reached enlightenment.

Pilgrimage to Chimayo for Easter, walking all the way from Taos on my knees.

I could learn to build Earth Ships and take my message of ecological sustainability around the globe.

I could disappear.

I could go native up on the Pueblo, try to find an American Indian elder who would teach me how to perform sweat lodge ceremonies and show me how to say I’m an asshole in Taos.

I could join a commune and preach world peace.

I could get a Zia tattooed to my fucking forehead!

Or. I could start writing poetry again. Become the latest, hottest Southwestern poet. And when I recite my poetry in public I could read it sensitively. Finishing each line with a lilt, as if I’m always asking a question. Like this? Like, am I the biggest asshole in the world?
But see, I'd already tried all that. Or some version of it. And anyway my restlessness, my search for meaning. These are First World problems. You have to be privileged to even have them. Angst drawn from a deep well of boredom, a nameless restlessness. And only the ultra-privileged get to even experience boredom. Or know what it means.

Only the ultra-privileged get to disappear.

I disappeared to Beirut once where I taught English to pay the bills but volunteered in Palestinian refugee camps out of curiosity and the misguided idealism and hubris that told me I could actually help. It was my first job after school. Well, that’s not true. But it was the first job I cared about. The first one that mattered. My students didn’t know what boredom was. In the camps where they lived, kids were electrocuted by improper wiring. Refugees carried guns and frequently used them. They wondered from week to week if drinking water would reach their camp. There was not only no plumbing but nowhere to pump out or ship all the waste. The camp smelled like shit. Like Hell. They called it the Fourth World because they needed an entirely new category to describe it.

Being bored? The Palestinians I worked with didn’t know what “bored” meant. Explaining it to them would’ve been useless. And obtaining it, for them, was unthinkable. Like going to the moon.

And here I am. Years later. Safe, back in the U.S. So safe, I’m bored and have to wander the country looking for that place that would bring meaning. How about surviving the Middle East? How about having your freedom and your health? How about the privilege of knowing boredom?

There’s your fucking meaning.

For me, it was doing both at the same time.

What happens when this place is done with me? When the restlessness comes back with a vengeance and it hurts so bad I can’t sit still? Talkeetna didn’t work out. Fairbanks didn’t. Pueblo. Salida. Nowhere has ever worked out.

First World problems, I tell myself. Not far from here there are so many people who don’t know where their next meal will come from. With that thought, I push up from my chair, walk over to the fridge, and stare at the bottle of rum. The pirate face on the label stares back. A challenge. Gleaming from his one good eye. Let go. Just let go.

If the First World is so fulfilling, why are anti-depressants the fastest growing industry in America? We have lost something along the way. Some of us have. I have lost something. I think. And I came to Taos to find it. But all I’ve found is that a place doesn’t fix you. You fix you. Because all of these things—the happiness, the meaning, just like the restlessness and depression—come from inside you. You have to choose what to tap into. And with that I give in, grab the bottle from the top of the fridge and crack the cap. Sitting back down, I lift it to my lips and that first swallow shoots down hot and bright as a rocket.

A few more sips and I’m back to the notebook, no longer scribbling, but actually stringing together sentences. A couple more swallows and I feel there is meaning again and though it’s an illusion, after another long gulp or two even the illusion becomes real.

Well below the neck I’m already bored with writing and just want to go outside. Out in the darkness. From my window I can see that some of the stars have flickered on.

By the time I get halfway down the bottle I pull on my boots and flannel, grab the rum, and head for the door. Now I am more than buzzing. I’m drunk. I don’t even lock up. Let the screen door yawn in the breeze. Creaking back and forth as I stagger down my driveway, turn west on the unmaintained dirt path.
and keep walking. My headlamp is in my pocket and I stretch it around my head. Just in case.

As I pull away from my porch light, the desert sky shows itself. A night sky choked with stars and colors. You have never seen the Milky Way until you watch it stretch out above a New Mexican desert. Blue and green. Purple. A river of ancient gas and dust flowing, centuries away, above your head.

I’m wasted now, I know. I’ve lost the path and keep heading west, making sure Polaris stays above my right shoulder.

Here and now it seems all too easy to disappear.

Out here in all this emptiness. When I trip over a coyote hole I flip on the headlamp to see where I’m going.

Sagebrush glows ghostly in the moonlight. Immaculate. The rational side of me says to turn around. Go back inside. Just sleep this fantasy off. But the rest of me, pickled with rum and romantic notions, urges my feet on. Rationale, as always, is outnumbered. Voted down.

For a second, I wonder how much juice is left in the headlamp. But the thought is eclipsed by a shooting star, ripping across the western sky. Keep going. Just keep going, the voices tell me. This is where you’ll disappear. Just finally disappear.

I hear a rattle near my feet and pray it’s just wind shaking sagebrush. The light starts to fade. The battery must be nearly dead. But for some reason even I don’t understand, I keep going. The headlamp flickers and goes dark. I keep walking. Brushing past sagebrush, the only thing reminding me I exist.

Suddenly, miraculously, the light flickers on again. Briefly. A final cone of light washing the wedge of desert white in front of me.

Then darkness. The light flickers one last time then dies for good. And when it does, I disappear.
1942, When My Father Was a Boy

Poetry by Nicole Yurcaba

Most of us spoke English,
but some of us didn’t.
It didn’t truly matter, either,
because all of our fathers
— fresh from the boat, citizenships in hand —
became drafted, enlisted, trained
and returned to the European theater
from which they originally hailed.
Our mothers drew the blackout curtains,
sat at scarred kitchen tables
fretting about ration stamps:
Would there be enough sugar?
How could one feed herself and a child?
Should one find a job in the war factory?
We children played outside,
kept war plane identification cards
in our trouser pockets,
and when a plane engine’s low rumble
interrupted our play
we ran to shelter, pulled the cards and asked ourselves
“Is it one of ours or is it German?”
Loose lips sank ships,
and when our fathers sent home letters
from overseas
stating “Happy Birthday, son. Love, Daddy”
the letters were snipped to pieces by the censors.
At least the censors were kind enough
to leave “To my loving wife” still intact
on those pieces addressed to our mothers.
Eventually our fathers returned home
from front lines, from work camps,
from hospitals after performing their patriotic duty.
They returned
hollow-eyed, hollow-souled
shrapnel-filled, shell-shocked,
tight-lipped; hell, fury, horror
engrained their faces and aged them
to twice and thrice their years.
Our mothers quietly wept in the kitchen,
and we children were sent outside to play.
Marichka

poetry by Nicole Yurcaba
for my great-grandmother

Our Hippolyta, queen of the steppes: Marichka. You were as beautiful as the bold sun -

flowers in bright Ukrainian summer, as gorgeous as the bent willow tree

in Spring, and as graceful as the pussy willow that blew there in the April wind.

With hips as strong as the Dnieper, you delivered eleven Lemko dity

into this world, and only a handful survived to see their American adulthood.

Bearer of the Virgin’s name, faithful, hallowed girl, did divinity or fate define

your role and cast you—respected prababysya, Ukrainian beauty, eyes darker

than Donetsk coal—as the backbone of an immigrant family escaping communism, starvation, genocide. Oh, Marichka, you bore the same burden as the girl

Virgin whose name you held. Your struggles and persecutions greatly, vastly differed.
Dad towered over us like Prometheus.
With a burning cigarette at his lips he seemed to carry fire down from the heavens as he exhaled long, wispy tendrils of smoke.

Mike and I stood entranced as the white clouds rose in the air, beckoning us with visions of majestic, mysterious mountains. Wanting a taste of his magic, we pleaded, Can we try it?

Thinking perhaps to teach us a lesson, he held the unfiltered cigarettes up to our young lips. We swallowed those first puffs; our initiation tarnished and tempered by fits of violent vomiting. Mike and I looked at dad, our eyes bloodshot and teary. The fires sputtered out and died, and a god fell from the heavens.
Years ago I drove by the levee of Old Shawneetown. Cruising down the pot-holed, abandoned streets, past glass-shattered storefronts and eyeless, tooth-gapped houses, I rode uptown and saw the flood stains etched high on the tall Corinthian columns of the Old National Bank.

Some townspeople tried to save their memories, raising up levees of earth and clay to hold back the waters, but most of the residents packed up their dreams and moved to higher ground.

Years later I saw on the news, pictures of a new and greater flood—the Ohio River cresting at Old Shawneetown, a river swollen by days of rain rising two feet over flood stage.

Levees and dikes weren’t enough to hold back the deluge as the river surged in a 100-year flood, breaching dams, scouring old towns and bottom lands, mocking the great walls of America.
April’s Fool

*poetry by Gail Eisenhart*

Emotions thicken like yesterday’s gravy as we squabble. Unable to agree, we slam each other with abandon. I grab a sweater, stalk outside. With my back to the door, arms hugging my chest, I coddle my dignity.

The man in the moon watches, a wisp of cloud veiling his sly smile as if he knows there’s something about April when starlight shoots silver streaks through cobalt blue and the air is sweet with possibilities that morphs a stubborn woman to a docile lamb—

no match for a featherweight touch on my shoulder and a steaming cup of cocoa offered with a lopsided smile.
Bob McNeil Angel
They say you’re not supposed to drink Listerine, but people are people and they still do it. Under bridges. Behind bodegas. Derek does it as he prepares for work each morning. Swills. Swishes. Spits. Swills. Swishes—looks himself in the eye—swallows. It’s become routine. And as he would on any other day, Derek takes a moment to observe his pale visage in the mirror, sullen and unkempt, his red stubble growing in all the wrong places: mid-cheek, tip of the chin, neck. His ochre eyes are ochre enough to steal attention from the burnt crimson overgrowth on his chest—to help him ignore the permanent thinning well underway atop his forehead.

They say not to do a lot of things, he thinks. But they never seem to be there when you need them most, always out of sight, out of mind, completely incapable of intervening.

Derek grabs at his cotton shorts to adjust himself then goes into the bedroom to slip on his favorite grey sweatshirt, the last stop before his modest living room and the overnight chill he knows will linger late into the morning.

They call this “June gloom,” the way the marine layer comes in before the city awakes, a perpetual grey that welcomes summer to the region with a cold shoulder. It stays just long enough to give the tourists a healthy scare and for residents to refresh their coffee cups, settle into the armchair by the window, and finish the books they’ve been reading—to forget work until the cloud cover finally burns off.

Still, and much to the delight of those worried vacationers sojourning in what the pamphlets tell them is America’s finest city, the sun prevails toward one o’clock and rarely with exception. Its rays seep into the blanket overcast, fragment its hold over the airspace, and slowly reveal a clear blue sky and warm yellow light that brightens the streets below.

It’s precisely then that Derek closes his own book and looks out his second-story window, sees the city alive and moving for the first time this day, and realizes he’s once again failed to appear at work.

The next day, after the same routine in the mirror—attended as it usually is by an internal dialog in which not showing up for the second consecutive day is rationalized in every way available to Derek’s mind—he decides to go to work, where he’s promptly called into his supervisor’s office for a closed-door meeting.

They must be wretched things, these formal one-on-ones, the way they make Derek squirm inside.

“How are you doing, Derek?” asks Lorraine.

“Me?”

“Yes. Listen. You’ve been here a long time. You do good work. But lately it’s as if something is off.”

“Really?”

“Is everything okay?”

Derek thinks back to the way the morning started, to him standing in front of the mirror—thinks about how each day inevitably starts that way. He wonders why a considerable fraction of these seem to end up in the armchair by the window, far from the office chair at work, as if the progression is entirely beyond his control. But Lorraine’s gaze is still fixed on him, so he sits up and plays the game, well aware that losing his job would be an unwelcome consequence of his confused demeanor.

“Of course. Just a little tired in the mornings is all. I haven’t been sleeping well.”
"Do you know you have a heap of unused paid time off?"
"I do," replies Derek. "Just can't find a good reason to use it."
"Well," continues his supervisor, "we're asking you to use it now. Take a week and recharge. Wipe the slate clean." She leans in. "Whatever it takes to keep your place on the team."

And by the look on his face, he must be saying to himself, Oh shit! Clean? You hear that? Some time to wipe yourself clean.

"Did you hear what I said, Derek?"
"Yes, Lorraine. Of course. Please excuse me. I'll put in for seven days. The paperwork will be on your desk by the end of the day."

It has been proven, when it comes to overcoming deep-seated routines (especially those related to daily bodily intake), that weaning oneself carries a higher probability of eventual triumph than does the cold turkey approach. Proven by who, wonders Derek as he gargles his mouthwash and gazes into the mirror on his first day off, is a different question entirely. They again, or some obscure entity just like them. They're right, though, whoever they are. It works.

Smoking cigarettes, for example. He was smoking ten a day the first time he made an attempt on the q-word—a hard, tortuous stop to years of romantic jazz-age drags and all the wasted money that enabled them. And it wasn't long after that the second voice in his head, Kid Nicotine, unwelcome houseguest to internal dialog, came back to wake Derek up in the morning—well before the Listerine—and started rationalizing for him like it did before he decided to quit. So when he caved, he bought ultra-lights instead of the usual 100's, cut down to five smoke-breaks a day, always with a mind to quit again. It was only after his third time around, during which he managed to cut his habit to two a day, that he was finally able to quit the Kid for good.

"See?" he says, with the Listerine bottle still in his hand. "It works." He takes another swig, swishes it around in his mouth as long as he can stand then spits into the sink. He returns the bottle to the medicine cabinet and closes it, draws a breath through clenched teeth to declaw the burn. He's looking in the mirror again, as if this time he sees lean and wiry instead of plain and slim—full mane instead of severely eroded widow's peak.

Day one and he's making progress already.

They say the same approach works for certain compulsions too, though Derek has his reservations. He's convinced that if strength of will really is enough to overcome irrational fears, he'd be content with the high probability that the order of the books on his shelf is the same since he checked it last night before bed—that he wouldn't be checking it again while on the phone with his mother.

"Why are you not at work?" she asks.

Balzac. Bradbury. Dostoevsky. Good names and their order is satisfactory, though Derek remains troubled by the gap between the last two authors. Where's Baldwin? he thinks. And the women? That alone is enough to keep him coming back to the shelf.

"Hello? Derek?"
"I've taken a week leave, Ma."
"Are you unwell?"
"Just in a funk I guess." He walks to the chair in the window and sits. "Boss requested I take some time off to recharge my battery."

"Oh. Is that it then?" asks Ma.

"More or less. Yeah. I'm being paid for it, so there's that."

The sun is shining and it's bright in Derek's apartment. It will remain that way until evening, until that singular time of day when the sun dips down past the backside of his building, down to its westward terminus, and paints a portrait in the sky. He ponders the likelihood that
he’ll be sitting in the same chair, nearing the end of the book he holds now, when darkness finally falls over the city and sparkling lights illuminate the skyline.

"I'm worried about you, Derek."
"Don't be," he says.
"Promise?"
"I just need some time, Ma. Just a little time to myself."

Derek doesn’t remember falling asleep.

Okay, he thinks now, wobbling in front of the toilet and trying to bring the wall tiles into focus as he relieves himself. Swish the Listerine, but don't swallow. Don't even look at the bookshelf—everything is in the same order it was the moment you drifted off last night.

A phone call from Grams interrupts his thoughts.

"I spoke to your mother," she says.
"Why aren't you at the work?"
"At work, Grams. No ‘the.’"
"Why?"
"You said you talked to Ma, didn’t you?"

Derek opens the fridge, cradling the phone on his shoulder, and thinks that too early to swallow the Listerine is probably too early to drink the beer.

"Yes."
"Then she probably explained it better than I ever will."
"Derek."
"It’s nothing, Grams. Promise."
"You not still think of Sasha, do you?"

Oh, thinks Derek. Sasha. Maybe I’ll go see her at the coffee shop today.

Order a double espresso and watch her from a safe distance.

"No, Grams. Of course not. That was weeks ago, and it was amicable. Let me call you tomorrow, okay?"
"What’s this word, amic ‘ble?’"
"It means we’re still friends, Grams. Tomorrow, okay?"
"Okay, Derek. Be good."
Minutes later, he’s gliding down Fourth Avenue and can barely keep an eye on the road because there’s a rattle somewhere near the rear hub of his bike.

Not really gliding, he thinks. It needs a tune-up, and he can’t recall the last time he went for a ride.

On Broadway, down by Sixteenth, is the place where Sasha has worked since Derek has known her, one of those coffee shops with a hackneyed name like The Bean, or something with the word “buzz.” Every goddam coffee shop, he thinks. It’s absurd. He pulls up across the street and sees Sasha in the window. She’s leaning over a table taking an order, a black apron tied over her white shirt and jeans. Her uncolored auburn hair is tied up the way Derek always liked, high to reveal the tattoos behind her ears. Easy, he thinks.

Don’t get so worked up. Remember how she said it three weeks ago?

“You swing, Derek. You swing and I never know what to expect. Sometimes it’s really great, you know? And other times you’re gripping the wheel with both hands and calling slow traffic a cunt.”

"Sashinka."

“I’m sorry. I like you. But wondering when you’ll get worked up again, how bad it’ll be, what you’ve been up to since you woke up, it’s not what I want,” she said. “And please, please stop coming to the shop. Can’t you have your muffin and double espresso somewhere else? It makes me uncomfortable and I have to make rent, no matter where I’m at with anyone in the world, including you.”

"Why you no good b— "

No, he thinks as he pushes off and starts back up the road toward home. I shouldn’t have said that and I shouldn’t have come here. Not yet. Better to leave it for another day.

“How did you hear about me?” asks the boxing instructor the next day.

“I live near the park. I see you out here training her,” says Derek, pointing to the exhausted woman perspiring near one of the elderly fig trees that shade Sixth Avenue. The boxing instructor is taking off his training belt and throwing his mitts into a canvas duffel bag. “I couldn’t find
you anywhere online so I thought I’d ask in person.”

“Right. Well, I only keep a few clients because I like to see a progression,” explains the instructor. “A commitment sustained over time. Why do you want to learn boxing?”

“Clearly,” says Derek, very comfortable within the confines of self-abasement, “I need to get into shape.” The boxing instructor shrugs. “Really though, I have this deep soreness, a kind of deep dark, that I’d like to channel into something more productive, like stepping into it and punching an inanimate object. Maybe break a few bad habits that way.”

“Aha,” says the boxing instructor. “I see.”

“Will you work with me?”

“What’s your name?”

“Derek.”

“I’m Jimmy Rights. We meet here tomorrow at dawn for conditioning. If you make it through that, we’ll talk about regular instruction.”

“Deal,” says Derek, and judging by the way he shakes Jimmy’s hand, he’s already looking ahead to tomorrow, a luxury he hasn’t allowed himself in months.

Despite all the weight and willpower he’d lost since entering the workforce three years ago, Derek had little trouble passing the conditioning test. In fact, it was so early that he didn’t even pause before the mirror, or at the bookshelf, before rushing off toward the park. And when he finished his final set of twenty burpees, the marine layer was already breaking up, and Jimmy Rights agreed to take Derek on for weekly instruction.

“In the afternoons, of course,” he said. “So we can have the sun.”

That was the easy part. The hard part comes after, back in the apartment. It’s only mid-month and the sun is shining before noon and Derek is thinking about bookshelf words like emolument and recompense, or at least feeling out their meanings at some subconscious level. Words fit for Kid Nicotine, these two, the way they whisper in his ear and pat him on the back for his hard work, always quick to remind him how cold the beer in the fridge is and how deserving he is of its contents.

Come, they say. You’ve earned it, what with your up-at-dawn, knock-em-dead attitude.

But Derek hears Sasha’s voice too and reaches for the creamer instead, decides he’ll make coffee in the French press so she won’t have to wonder.

The phone rings and Sonja is on the line.

“Derek, hey. How are you, kid?”

“I’m well.”

“So I heard,” replies his sister.

“Talked to Ma and Grams yesterday. Both in the same day, imagine that. Both mentioned your leave, too. Is everything alright?”

“I think so, yeah. I’ve taken up boxing.”

“Boxing?”

“Yes. To replace a few things that were getting in the way.”

“I see. That’s good. I’m no stranger to welcome reprieves, as you know. It’s good to break the cycle once in a while.”

“Thank you, Sonja. I know.”

Derek surveys the bathroom, the bookshelf, the kitchen. He looks out at the city and the city looks back.

“Just take care of yourself, okay, brother?”

“Okay, Sonja. I’ll try.”

On day five, Derek is looking at himself in a different mirror, a vintage Jameson promotional item framed in thin finished wood and hanging in the bathroom at Charlie’s Tavern and Tap. It’s noontime on a weekday and he wonders why the hell he took his mother and her mother to such a place for lunch.

“It’s too dark in here,” complains Grams when her grandson returns to the booth. Ma is looking at the menu. Three hardened men are at the bar, drinking
their third round, pausing only to look over their shoulders at this curious trio from time to time. Their attention is hardly lost on Derek as he nurses his cranberry and soda.

“Not much of a menu,” says Ma. Derek wishes he’d ordered a proper drink in the first place, so that by now he might be well into his second and less aware of the danger. He wants to be home.

“What’s wrong?” asks Grams for the second time since arriving.

“Nothing. I hear the fish and chips are good.”

“Are you sure you’re allowed to take so much time off?” asks Ma. “Won’t they be upset?”

“Yes, Ma. It’s fine. My super—”

“Have we decided, ladies?” asks the waitress. She is skeptical and impatient and her eyes look like they’ve a string of long nights hidden behind them.

“Have we decided, ladies?” comes an unkind echo from the bar. Derek reddens a bit as he orders the fish and chips to split with the table.

“It’s all okay, Ma.”

The man who said it is taking a shot and standing up. He’s looking over now.

“Derek.”

The waitress comes back.

“Was that three orders of fish and chips? My mind is in the clouds today.”

Derek can feel the man’s eyes on him. “Just one,” he says, and moves his hand over his silverware.

“Okay.”

“Derek.”

“Ma, listen—”

“Hey kid,” says the man from the bar. His companions make a half turn to watch the exchange. Derek faces the man but says nothing. “Are you deaf?”

Derek reddens a shade deeper and grips his steak knife.

“Derek,” whispers Grams.

“No,” he replies, ignoring his grandmother’s plea.

“Are you stupid, then? This is no place to bring dates.” The men at the bar have a laugh at that one. Derek is silent.

“Oh? Not a date you say? What are you then? Some kind of red-haired faggot?”

Ma and Grams look at their boy. He says nothing for a while then looks away and the man just laughs, turns back to his craven cadre at the bar.

This is the world without swallowing the Listerine, thinks Derek, and entertaining Kid Nicotine, and reaching for the cold things in the fridge. He returns the knife to its place. And the books are still in order—the books are still in order and the sun has already set when he finally gets home and puts day five behind him with a sigh.

On the sixth day he resolves to make amends. It starts much like the preceding three, in open defiance of those detrimental routines that landed him on leave in the first place, and picks up quickly with each push of the pedal toward the coffee shop downtown.

“Derek,” whispers Sasha. She can no longer feign to ignore him. “Get out of here.”

“When is your break?”

“No. We aren’t doing that.”

“Sashinka, please. I won’t waste your time.” She sees how he means it and lets up with her eyes the way he hoped she might, and in fifteen minutes she is out front of the coffee shop, facing her once-love with her most practiced frown.

“What.”

“Listerine.”

“What the f—”

“I swallow the Listerine after I rinse. I check the books too much.”

An ambulance goes by, its loud urban wail crowding out any dismissal Sasha might have otherwise mustered.

“I’ve been asked to take off work because my record has become sporadic,” continues Derek. “And that for no good reason. I sometimes drink before noon. I get so angry at the unfair people.” He pauses. “I can hardly make it through lunch with my family when I’m straight.”

“Derek, what am I suppo—”
“Nothing. I had to say it is all. I had to tell you, and tell you that I plan to tell others.”

“Okay,” says Sasha, and she looks at the cars passing by on the freeway. She shrugs and says, “Okay, Derek. Maybe it’s what you needed all along.”
Derek mounts his bicycle.
“Yeah,” he says then pedals toward home.

On the seventh day, Derek is part of the workforce again.
“You’re a day early,” says Lorraine. “How was it?”
“Good. Yeah, I think it was good.”
“I’m glad. Are you refreshed? Are you back to you?”
Derek takes a deep breath.
“Yes,” he says. He’s looking at Lorraine, his boss, and looking in the mirror on the far wall, the way he does in the morning, and he’s recounting his time off. “Thank you for giving me a chance to collect myself.” The way it was before is still fresh in his mind, a cruel but familiar refuge, and he wonders how soon it will beckon him to return.

Day seven is also Derek’s first full session with Jimmy Rights. It’s after-drill work and they are talking form.
“Stay square, guard up. That’s it. Left jab like this, straight and extended from the shoulder, see?” Derek nods.
“Right straight like this,” continues Jimmy. “Same idea, but maintain a good stance so you aren’t caught off balance. That’s key.” Derek tries it. “Ah. See?” Jimmy says. “Overextend and you leave this open,” and he taps Derek’s jaw down by the chin where a good straight will take the muscle out of someone and crumple them like chopping a load-bearing strut in a dilapidated room. Derek nods again because he’s seen it and it makes sense now. “Good. Now put them together, jab, jab, straight. Jab, jab, straight.”
Derek breathes.
Jab, jab, straight. Jab, jab, straight.

“Good. That’s good for today. Practice that at home, okay?” Jimmy Rights zips up his duffel. “Now, twenty push-ups, sprint down and back, repeat, and you’re finished.”

Afterward, after Jimmy Rights has loaded his equipment and gone, Derek sits in the grass and regathers his wind. The sun is setting on the park, and each tree casts a long shadow that grows longer with the waning light. One for each day, he thinks.
Jab, jab, straight. Jab, jab, straight.

He stands up and begins to drill it again, jab, jab, straight, practicing his footwork, jab, jab, straight, and it feels good. It feels good, truly good. Derek throws punches well into the evening—well past the point of exhaustion and toward the rising sun.

Gina Williams Crow
For years, Adam counted the beans. Each morning, at eight o’clock sharp, he took the pot from the cupboard, placed it on the countertop, withdrew exactly eleven raw beans, and placed them in his hand. The beans were smooth and variegated, like small eggs of a beautiful bird. It pleased Adam to look at them for a moment before putting the eleven in one of the plastic bottles that he always found in the alley next to his house. Eleven, he liked to say, because it is the only number that resembles the betrothed as they approach the priest. Some said that this number was the number of times that Adam had been in the hospital, but they were simple people who had never aroused a divine experience of their own.

When I have counted all beans, I will be happy, Adam would say. But it seemed doubtful that he could continue his mission. The house was full of bottles: all of the shelves, each nook, and each corner exhibited a grand assortment of labels and colors that reflected the pitiful light into bizarre figures that seemed to dance on the ceiling. I have the bathroom, Adam said one day when the authorities at last knocked on the door. I still have my sock drawer.

The ambulance made the sound of knives when they fall on the floor. A dog sadly barked. A long way to go, said Adam from the back window. We still have a long way to go.

translated from the Spanish by the author
Walking in the desert, he arrived at a rope. It was thick, woven of coarse fibers—and hung from the sky as by an invisible hook. The air was clear, not a single cloud, and although he raised his head as if he was preparing his throat for the sacrifice, he could see nothing except the rope that shrank and disappeared into the heights of the sky. I wonder, he said to his hands, if it is possible to climb. But his hands did not answer him. Nor the desert, which had quarantined its opinion, as if its opinion could contaminate the pure certainty of the phenomenon.

Hesitantly he touched what seemed a miracle and the rope changed its position a little, perhaps the width of an ant. It seemed to shimmer, as if it contained a single silver thread. He touched it again, this time with more confidence, with both hands, and circled it with his fingers. I think I'll give it a tug, he said to himself.

Despite her few years, the girl in the city knew that her brother was dying. The doctors had shaken their heads and backed out of the room. The world was not so old and one more death would not fill its ample cave of bones. Meanwhile, a drop of prayer fell into the barrel of prayers and you could hear the girl's voice in the splash. At the same time, a bell shook the air and the brother sat up in the bed. I was a man, he said. A man with thirst in a land devoid of sky, of salvation. Through my fingers, I saw that the world is a wheel with so many spokes—and someday I will grow to roll it.
reconnection

poetry by Roger Bernard Smith

in an effort to get re-connected
I began going to funerals
scanning fuzzy viewing rooms
gauzy with remembering
there is spiritual risk
risk to the spirit
when you cannot care for the dying
when it’s too late
the brother-in-law of a neighbor’s deceased neighbor next door
invited me to post-burial buffet
there is music for the deceased who would have hated it
had he been there
but the others are / I am
I chose a table with a lamp with giant lampshade
its orange glow prevents me from having to answer
the inevitable question
how did you know the deceased
at long last there is coffee
white cream cake with pearl frosting like granite
a woman I’ve never met says
I remember you
Here’s what I know, I tell myself each morning as I walk: There’s a little boy four doors down chained to a doghouse in his backyard. There’s a little boy chained up behind a house in my neighborhood. I let the sentences repeat in my mind as I take each step, the way children repeat rhymes as they jump to the next square in hopscotch. As if it will propel me forward. As if saying it does anything for anyone at all.

I start my walk to campus down a hill of broken sidewalk, a reminder that it’s earthquake territory. I count the houses as a kind of mantra—one, two, three, four—as if it will bring luck, which sometimes it does. Sometimes I don’t see him. But what do people in houses two and three think? What kind of comforting rhymes do they tell themselves?

House four: a sickly light green, shades always drawn, the dog run along the side leading no doubt to a back yard filled with overgrown weeds, mangled tree limbs, swirls of silt leading upward but not in any optimistic kind of way. Sometimes I make out his little legs, ending in a pair of imitation Keds tennis shoes.

There’s a little boy chained to a doghouse in my neighborhood. And I’ve done nothing about it, I whisper to the stop sign at the corner.

I’m the kind of person who’s done nothing about it, I say silently to the crossing guard, who’s too busy to notice me anyway.

But I’m pretty nearsighted. I once mistook this very stop sign for that very crossing guard when some kids put an orange jacket over it at Halloween. With my vision, the figment of my imagination on the dog chain could well be a German shepherd. A smallish one.

A German shepherd in imitation Keds. The pictures do not soothe me.

Plus, there’s this weather. San Diego’s annoying, smoggy mornings; afternoons that can heat up beyond expectation. The dryness—it causes hallucinations, fantasies. Drought and destruction and cracked-up sidewalks. Face it, it’s a desert, a mirage in itself.

That’s right, Patty (I say this to myself a lot, along with, Wake up, Patty; It’s good for you, Patty; and, Just don’t think about it, Patty). That’s right, Patty: There’s (maybe) a little boy chained to a dog run on the side of a house. In this heat. A little boy imagining mirages, dreaming fantasies, trying to escape his leash in imitation Keds.

No wonder I’m always so sweaty by the time I reach school.

I sit in my teaching cubicle—not an office, just a couple of closely placed partition walls, a desk, and a highly valued window—watching unexpected rain fill up the library pit. It’s not really a library pit, of course, but a construction ditch for what’s known as the new Library Center. No one’s announced when it’ll be finished, just as they haven’t announced why it’s called the Library Center instead of just the Library. The rain isn’t that hearty, but it’s increasing its presence—although I’m not sure how weather can change so quickly and if it means we’ve done something indefensible to the environment. There’s a coolness in the air that wasn’t there four hours ago, something not entirely unwelcome but still a little alarming. The rain taps against my window like a shy student who needs to ask a question but is worried I’ll remember how badly he’s doing in class. This rain (and any rain is unexpected here) has begun to muddy most of the
campus. If it doesn’t let up in a few hours, the streets will be flooded and traffic accidents will be in the double digits. Plus, it’s slowly, hypnotically, putting me to sleep.

I’ve fallen asleep before, after teaching my back-to-back freshman English courses. Most of the graduate teachers come into our shared area all springy and wired, babbling of peer editing groups and issues debated: abortion, euthanasia, racial integration. As for me, I tend to go straight to my cubicle, look out the window at the pit, checking to make sure no progress has been made, and fall into dreamy sleep. I have probably failed to find my proper calling, and not for the first time. More than once, students have had to wake me to ask questions, but often they just leave little notes on my desk. “Came by to see you!” “Hope you feel better!” “Need help with essay when you’re well!” I find these touching. Although sometimes I do have a headache, sleeping is just my natural reaction to teaching.

But today I’m not just tired from classes as I’ve gotten a disturbing memo, although you’d think it would get my heart pounding. It announces that the Samsons, both English teachers, both about sixty, with his-and-hers short gray haircuts (the kind of cut that’s so short it looks prickly, like one of those things you wipe snowy boots on) have taken early retirement. The Samsons, my sometimes advisors (I never ask for much advice), my all-the-time landlords, have no doubt been forced out. They love it here, decorating the place each Christmas with sprigs of fir, each Easter leaving little chocolate eggs for all their students. In the autumn they go out to the mountains and bring in fallen leaves then scatter them through the halls for us to crunch our way through. They even clean up afterward.

I hold up my memo until the words start to blur. A voice wakes me. “So much for Grandpa and Grandma,” says a fellow graduate student, a dark, curly haired guy several years my junior (they all are). I think his name is Mark, but for some reason, he’s always referred to as Anti. He’s part of the group known as neuro-postmodernists around here. Their name for themselves, but many of us consider it a euphemism. “I’m very fond of them,” I say.

“They’ve always been nice to me,” which is true. They’ve hinted at wanting to sell me the house when I get a real teaching position, which they’ve hinted they want to make sure I get right here. It’s the most natural, familial gesture anyone’s made to me in years.

“You’re just buying into the sappiness of the status quo,” the Anti-Mark says.

“You’re just young and don’t know anything,” I think but don’t say. Age is relative, of course, and I am old to be a graduate student, but I can’t take seriously a twenty-two-year-old with neuro-postmodernistic tendencies—whatever they may be, and I do have a feeling something sexual is involved—and sneakers that cost over a hundred dollars, although I’m estimating.

“I run toward sap,” I say, turning away. The rain picks up, rattling the windows. I wonder if the neuro-postmodernists have thought up some progressive, advanced way to get home in this rain without an umbrella, but I doubt it.

I walk home quickly, a San Diego Union Tribune over my head—I picked it since it’s a little thicker than USA Today, which of course is also in color and might run onto my clothes. I pass by house number four without looking up, afraid of what I’ll see, or what I might think I see. I do slow down and listen (my hearing is far better than my eyesight), but all I hear is rain—drops hitting the ground, the deeper sound of drops hitting that doghouse. My grandmother used to say that not knowing was worse than knowing, and she may be right, unless what you find out is that there’s a muddy boy in a splintering doghouse waiting for something else you can’t imagine. I try to picture my grandmother’s face, what she might say to this, but for some reason, she won’t look up.

Patty, you may need another nap.
But no, today something different is planned for me. I get home and change my wet clothes then get in my car and head for the local Hilton hotel. I’ve never done this before, and I can’t be sure why I agreed to do it now.

You may already be a winner, Patty, I tell myself, driving carefully so that (a) I don’t hit anyone and (b) the windshield wipers don’t put me to sleep. I’m headed for a perfect rainy day activity, I tell myself, although I’d be embarrassed to tell anyone else.

The invitation came in a phone call, the kind you get at dinnertime, the kind you know better than to answer, but when you live alone, you don’t always have your best long-term interests at heart. Besides, I told myself, it’s bad to eat dinner in front of the TV. Much better to eat while talking on the phone, which means you can talk to strangers with your mouth full, breaking two parental prohibitions at once. I surreptitiously took bites of chicken as the guy talked, telling me that I’d filled out an entry form to win a new Camaro, reminding me (of course) that I hadn’t won the new Camaro but was a prizewinner nonetheless. Something electronic. Something electronic and new and free, if only I’d come to my choice of breakfast or late-afternoon lunch and listen to a presentation on a new planned community. Or a planned new community. I probably swallowed at this point and missed the real order, but it may not really matter. As any underemployed graduate student knows, the words lunch is included have a certain appeal.

The hall is warm and cozy at this Hilton, something I hadn’t expected. It’s the kind of room that’s usually freezing with air conditioning, but somehow they’ve one-upped the weather, and this place is toasty without being too warm. I settle into an overly cushioned blue chair—there must be hundreds of them—and discover that it rocks slightly and is the kind of soft I must have always been looking for in a chair, without even realizing it. I now know how Goldilocks felt.

I’m almost too comfortable to get up for the buffet, but the sweet smells of Danish, warmed turkey, mashed potatoes, and steaming chicken soup lure me. There’s something to admire in a place that serves you chicken soup. Maybe they know more about me than I think. It’s not even Campbell’s, but something someone has chopped and stewed personally. The meal embraces me and those around me as we each eat in our slightly rocking seats pulled up to tables covered in deep blue cloth. The napkins are orange—real fabric, not paper. I realize that this moment is everything I’ve always wanted from Thanksgiving. Whatever has led me here, I’m thankful.

I snap out of it only a little as the lights dim. Somehow, I expected an old-fashioned slide show, someone clicking away at a rickety projector, the occasional slide turned upside down. But welcome to the information age, Patty, where everything you need is digital. (Unless you’re a graduate teacher. We’re still using mimeograph machines.) No distracting clicking here, just the sounds of Windham Hill–like music behind a soothing woman’s voice, the kind of voice that would anticipate your every need, offering you a second Danish before you’d finished the first. The kind of voice you’d want to accept from. Yes, thank you so much. I do want a second pastry, a warm cinnamon roll. I hadn’t even realized how important one could be.

And I want to live in Santa Vallejo, I tell the voice, of course I do. Now not only does the room contain all the scents of home, the presentation fills our eyes with visions of needs fulfilled, needs met by the new community of Santa Vallejo. Parents hug little children and send them to play on the shiniest of swing sets. Grandparents cook up a stew in the kitchen of a house that could be yours, Patty, although it was cleaned by someone a little more attentive. In the kitchen’s background I see the same pastries we’ve just consumed. Freshly baked. Smelling of cinnamon. Seconds and thirds. Back in the town center, low, tiled office buildings blend into the community. “Community,”
the woman’s voice repeats at us, “community,” although I’m not really registering the words as much as waiting for Grandma to reappear, waiting to see what lies beyond the next playground. Teachers lead bands of children dressed in clean primary-colored clothing, some holding balloons. Malls greet you and fit into the architecture. Cleanliness. Godliness. All the comforts of home. Not too big, not too small. This place is just right.

After the show I find I’ve been asleep in my chair, the room quieted. Others are asleep, too, but not out of boredom. We’ve been rocked to sleep by the grannies of our dreams, by those with the power to say yes, yes you may. As I rise a person hands me a brochure entitled Santa Vallejo—the Promise of Community and a little black-and-white traveling TV. As she hands me the TV I feel like I’ve been given an assignment, but then I remember that I had won a prize. For a brief moment I’m unsure which I value more, the TV or the brochure with its promise. It’s a nice brochure: four color, thick, serious. With my arms full, I feel fulfilled, as if I’ve gone home for a visit to a loving family and they’ve loaded me up with packages to take home. And promises they intend to keep.

The feeling lasts all the way home. I take my treasures into the house and find a note stuck under my door. It’s from the Samsons, my somewhat adoptive family and sometime advisors, sharing their thoughts with me. I feel truly full, sated. I want to hug everything that is mine. Oh, the power of the written word, Patty. Savor it, Patty.

Dear Patty,

You’ve probably heard that we’ve accepted the Golden Handshake and are retiring. Well, life does hold its surprises. We’ve loved teaching and are so glad it has brought so many people into our lives, and we include you among our most treasured students. We’re so sorry to say that we’re going to need the house back. We’ll need to consolidate our finances for our retirement, and we plan to move back into our small house that you’ve been so kind to care for. We’ve loved having you as a tenant and, we hope, as our friend. We wish you luck in every endeavor. Won’t you please be out by the fifteenth?

Love, Elizabeth and George Samson

December fifteenth. Two days after the end of the semester. One week from yesterday. I think about all these numbers and passages of time as I go into the living room—with its nice old-fashioned moldings and working fireplace—and put all the wood I’ve collected into the fireplace. It’s not really cold enough for this, but I don’t care. I light the fireplace and watch the flames overcome the logs. On top of the fire, I place their letter. Warm as the room gets, I can’t completely regain the feeling from this afternoon. But I still feel a little something hopeful. I can still picture the grandparents from the video, their arms open, offering sweets and something deeper. They look nothing like the Samsons.

In the morning I stop at door number three. The dream house, the color of strawberry Häagen-Dazs, as clean and tidy and welcoming outside as the cottage Hansel and Gretel approached. The front door mat has bluebirds on it.

I knock softly, even though it’s 8:45 and the neighborhood is up and hopping. I can hear the crossing guard down at the main intersection. She sings Do Re Mi today. It makes me glad I don’t live nearer to the intersection. No one answers at the pink door, so I knock a little more forcefully, although I can’t get the picture of Julie Andrews spinning around on that mountaintop out of my head. I know it’s not even the right scene for the song. Finally, through a small square window centered high on the pink door, I see the top of an older woman’s head. Many of my neighbors, I’ve been told, have lived in the area for years. Doe, a deer, a female deer—

“Yes,” the gray top says through the door.
“Hi,” I say, “I’m Patty Grant. I live in the Samson’s house two doors down?” I point in my direction then circle my hands over my head as if describing my house as a large mushroom.

“Yes?”

“I’m your neighbor?” I wait. Nothing much happens. *Me, a name, I call myself.* “I was wondering if I could talk to you about the child next door?”

“Oh?”

“Could you open the door, just maybe a crack?”

“No, dear, we don’t do that.”

“Well, have you noticed the child? Does it seem mistreated to you?” I lower my voice slightly at the word mistreated. I’m not sure if the whisper makes it through the door. *Far. A long, long way to run.*

“I’m sorry, dear, we really prefer not to buy anything door-to-door.”

“I’m not selling anything.” I raise my voice and stand on my tiptoes so I can see better into her small window. I can only make out to the height of her eyebrows. I’ve seen the woman before, of course, gardening. But she’s never waved or greeted me. I don’t know her name.

“The child next door?” I put my hand above my head and point in the doghouse’s direction. “Have you seen one?”

She shakes her head. “Sorry, dear. I can’t say that I have.” And she’s gone. *Which will bring us back to Doe.*

All’s quiet at house number four, but from the street I can see the chain that leads to the doghouse. Swaying. I cannot bring myself to knock at house number four’s door, partly because I can’t imagine what I’d say.

“Excuse me, is your child chained to the doghouse?” What if they answer Yes? What if they answer No?

Them: Yes, that’s our [boy/girl] by the doghouse.

Me: Shall I come by after school and take him [her] for a walk?

No, of course I wouldn’t say that.

Them: No, there’s no child by our doghouse.

Me: Oh. (The door slams here.)

Or ...

Them: He’s just playing. You know how children are. Or don’t you have children? (Slightly accusatory voice here.)

Me: Playing with a leash on him?

Them: Safety first.

Me: What about the splintering wood, the rain?

Them: Children enjoy being outdoors. It’s better for them than television. (The door slams here.)

But wouldn’t a good neighbor find out more? Someone living in Santa Vallejo, say, in the midst of the closely knit community with its shiny swing sets, wouldn’t a neighbor there be bound by some sort of community pledge to take matters into her own hands?

What if they don’t open their door, Patty? What if they do?

When in doubt, consult a text. Like the good graduate student I am, I head for the bookshelf in the TA offices. Actually, consulting the research librarian might be the thing to do. I approach her in my mind. “Hello, one of my neighbors has his or her child tied to a doghouse. Can you recommend a book or books to consult on this subject?” Instead, I grab the phone books. Yellow or white? Is this a case for 911? Is it an out-and-out emergency? Is it a time-critical matter? How could I explain that I’m calling only after noticing this for weeks, maybe longer?

The White Pages. A to Z. I try the Easy Reference List at the beginning of the government pages. And it really is easy. I only have to go to the C’s—Child Abuse Reporting—the county social services department. I dial the 800 number and wait for the recorded message. The voice asks me to consider which button I want to push for which service. Please press one to report a probable case of child abuse in your area. That sounds like me.

Please hold, the voice says. On comes some music I used to work out to at aerobics, back when aerobics seemed necessary and wise. All she wants to do is dance, the music says, dance, dance. I’m not sure it’s appropriate music, but it does have a strong bass.
Every few seconds I hear a click that sounds like someone’s coming on the line. I get prepared to tell my story (should I mention the rain? The heat? The shoe?), but it’s just another operator’s voice telling me to please stay on the line and that my call is important. Your call is important, Patty. Finally, as the song plays for the second time, I get transferred back to the main menu. I’m a little alarmed at this. If I want to report a probable case of child abuse, press one. If I want to inquire about adoptive services, press two. If I want information on an existing case, press three. To speak to a representative, press the star key. I press the star key.

Your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please try again.

Silence.

But I do try again, because my call is important.

I press two this time. I get the same song. I find it annoying that all she wants to do is dance. I put the phone down on my desk, where I can still hear the music, and try to read a student’s paper about the similarities and differences between lesbianism and Judaism. The bass pounds. Toward the end of the song, I pick up the phone again. With the last beat, the recording hangs up on me. If a recording can do that.

I try a few more times, trying to keep track of which buttons I’ve pushed and which I haven’t. The student paper has completely misrepresented Judaism, but all the words are spelled correctly.

I dial 911. A real voice answers, surprising me, as I’m waiting for a recording to tell me which numbers to press.

“What is your emergency?”

“Yes, I’d like to report a possible case of child abuse in my neighborhood?”

I’ve written the sentence down by now so I can just read it.

“You need to call child social services at 800-455—”

“Yes, I’ve tried, but their recording seems broken and won’t transfer me to anyone.”

“They might be busy and you have to be patient.”

“I think the recording’s broken, though.”

“Then you can call the local office directly.” She gives me the number.

Progress. I thank the real voice.

“Use 911 only for emergencies,” the voice says, confirming my fear, that a little boy in a doghouse is not considered an emergency.

I dial the new number. A different computerized voice answers, instructing me to please wait and my call will be answered in order. It doesn’t say in what kind of order. It doesn’t mention that my call is at all important. A different song by the guy from the Eagles starts to play. It’s slower and doesn’t have anything to do with dancing but makes me wonder if someone got a Best of the Eagles CD on sale. Maybe each county agency takes one song. Still, I refuse to listen to the words—I don’t want to memorize them inadvertently like I did the last song. So I stare at my watch and try to hum randomly, fill my ears with a kind of blurriness. The song plays four times for a total of fourteen and a half minutes. I start pushing buttons, which has no effect, but the push button sound does at least drown out the music. After the fifth version, I hang up.

I check the phone book for the downtown office address and get my papers together. I give the Judaism/lesbianism paper a C+. It does occur to me, looking around the office, that I wish I could confide in someone. I’ve seen other TAs gathered round one another, chatting about penmanship and boyfriends, and I’ve even joined into a few discussions on the values of plus and minus grades, whether a topic sentence is overrated, and how to properly tone down your enthusiasm for the really cute boy students. But I don’t feel I can confide something like this to any of them. This seems more the thing to tell a total stranger.

I leave campus and walk as quickly as possible back to my house for my car. The crossing guard yells at me to
slow up, although I think she means slow down. For some reason, I listen to her, as if she were an authority figure instead of just a woman in orange. She has one of those forceful kinds of voices, I have to admit, especially when she isn’t singing show tunes. Once out of her sight, I run again, directly past house number four, and get my car going. I head in the direction of the local child abuse office. I will not be intimidated by any more answering machines. I prepare to be intimidated one-on-one.

But a sign on the door informs me that the office is closed until further notice. Other offices can be found in San Ysidro (this is far from here) and Riverside County (this is farther). Our local office may reopen if the new state budget is passed. It says this in professionally printed letters, as if trying to persuade me to take some political stance, some political action, which I might consider if I knew what could possibly help. I just have no idea. I try not to think about any of this.

On my way home I stop at Ralph’s to get some good packing boxes, even though I still have a few in the garage, having moved too many times. I have boxes from my days in Mission Viejo working for the Letters to the Editor section. I may even have a few boxes from old family days in Los Angeles, the brief visit to Orange County, the mistaken journey back to Los Angeles, although I don’t always like to see the old markings: Kitchen, bedroom, living room. The words seem ambiguous enough, but they bring back memories. I prefer my boxes unmarked.

Next to the big trash bins behind the store I find some really good boxes—they’re from canned goods, bottled water. No stains, no rips, no funny smells. I probably look a little odd standing there smelling boxes. I pick up a nice smallish V8 box but something scurries out of it and runs behind the bin, startling me so that I throw the box back as fast as I can. It was something’s home, I berate myself. I step back and feel a little dizzy.

Get a grip, Patty. Tell yourself what a nice set of boxes this is. Altogether I’ve got five really good boxes, maybe more than I need given my previous collection, although you never know what will become of cardboard left too long in the garage. I fumble with the boxes, like a clown juggling items never intended by nature to be juggled, and try to load them into my car. My very old Toyota wagon, beige fading to a sickly skin color. I look up to see a woman in a bright blue car slowly approaching me.

“You can ask for boxes inside!” she yells at me angrily. She gives me a sneer as I lift two of my boxes from the ground. The woman’s about my age, although her car is much nicer and she’s wearing noticeable makeup, pink lips and cheeks, although not the same shade. Complementary shades, if you like pink. She drives away with this look of disgust, her car eerily making almost no noise at all. I guess that’s an attractive quality in a car these days, stealthiness, but I find my thudding old Toyota comforting. I like to hear it roar as I press the gas, whether it’s supposed to or not.

At home I find myself sorting and stacking belongings, unearthing long streams of dust-mite ridden material. When it gets dark, I stand out in front of my house, looking out into the street. The neighbors are all inside, so the only sounds are cars from the distance, plus the rattling sounds of animals rustling through bushes. Occasionally a skunk will come up to the back door, brave and fat, hunting around the garbage cans. The possum are far less attractive—I tend to make a lot of noise in hopes they’ll run off, but they’re fearless and dumb. Creatures braver than I pad around the trees as I examine my street, not looking in that certain direction of that certain green house. I turn to look back at the house I’ll be leaving, wondering how long before the skunks need to move on, too. Something that lives out here ate my tomatoes right off the vines last summer, waiting until they were a perfectly ripe, deep red. I can’t see the Samsons putting up with this,
although there might have been a time when I’d have thought they would.

I spend the next days packing and grading final papers, writing little comments in the margin for the students who’ve been nice, and turning in my grades. Taking breaks, I go room by room evaluating my belongings: Little of the furniture is mine, just books and blankets, mostly. Clothes, a few of my grandmother’s pots and pans. The dishes belong to the Samsons, along with the silverware. Even the computer is theirs, old, the screen fading on one side. I have my aging small TV and its new little traveling TV offspring from the presentation, plus my tiny stereo. Folders and folders of schoolwork that I don’t want anymore. Throwing things away at a time like this may come back and haunt me, I know. But I load up a few garbage bags anyhow. There’s not even much in the fridge to part with. Living alone means I don’t have much that’s too heavy for me to carry by myself, that everything I have seems condensed enough to fit into the compact car. Even my TV seems oddly light, as if it were made out of Styrofoam. When I’m through packing up the car, the house looks pretty much the same, so that I wonder whose life I’ve been living. I don’t even like the pictures—flowers painted in periwinkle, not even a real flower color. It makes me wonder if I ever liked it here. I thought I did.

On the fourteenth I open my mail to find a package from the presentation. A full-color notebook filled with Santa Vallejo postcards, bumper stickers and a ten-page brochure. I go to put the brochure from the presentation lunch inside this one, but find it’s gotten itself lost in the moving mess. It may be trapped inside a garbage bag, soon to be nibbled by skunks of various weight, heft, and aroma. It may turn up five years from now in a box with no markings.

Late that night I stand outside, since inside seems like a house that I might have once lived in. The air feels as if it desperately needs to rain, but some other element won’t let it. Something angry bites me. I trip walking along the sidewalk as I have dozens of times—I’ve always thought that it’s my nearsightedness that makes me trip, but these cracks would attack anyone. Tripping makes the right side of my head threaten to ache, but it decides against it. I turn up the street, but not with a great sense of purpose. It’s a little surprising how purposeless I feel, unless I’m just hiding it from myself. I think back to Goldilocks—now, did she have a certain determination, looking from bowl to bowl, bed to bed? Was she actively pursuing that thing that would be just right? Or was she just wandering? No, Goldilocks was starving, exhausted, desperate, not just for food and sleep but for the right food and sleep. The loving sense of food and sleep, rest, warmth (community, the presentation’s voice echoes in my mind, nodding, urging me on).

Outside house number four I hear yelling. It’s coming from way inside the house. A bathroom, maybe, because there’s that funny reverberating you get from tile all around you. I can just picture the tiles—green with bathroom mold and crud blackening the spaces between them. The porcelain tub with orange drippy-looking rust stains. I hear an odd woman’s voice, slurring words—just garbled sounds without meaning. The way dogs supposedly hear us. But these are angry sounds. Threatening. And outside, I see the chain leading into the doghouse.

Wake up, Patty.

It’s after midnight. There’s a little boy chained to a doghouse after midnight, bitten by angry insects, definitely without the right kind of food and sleep. I let myself into the dog run—it’s locked, but the lock is so dilapidated it springs open in my hands. It’s not much bigger than the cheap lock you keep on a diary. I see an old dog bowl next to the house as I approach, and this bowl, with its dirty white outside and scratched up inside, this bowl is, I think, the worst thing I’ve ever seen. I once saw a woman with her head cracked open in a car accident, but this is worse. This one ten-inch bowl is worse, and I want to tear it apart, bludgeon it with a hammer, blast the hell out of it.
But I can't move. The stupid bowl has me paralyzed.

I finally turn to look. A light from the side of the house shines directly into his eyes. What's around his neck isn't a dog collar, as I'd imagined, but a thick piece of rope, like a curtain sash, tied to the chain. Double-knotted. He looks at me sleepily, sucking on one hand, the other grasping one of those blankets people take to picnics or football games, only they wouldn't take this one. They wouldn't give this one to a dog. I'm a little afraid to approach, as if he were a scary stray dog. But he's a little boy, three or four, I can't tell. Curled up on an old pillow. This is a little boy, Patty. There's no such thing as a stray little boy.

Getting the string off is hard—I finally have to cut at it with the doll-size scissors from the Swiss Army knife I have on my keychain. Although I worry briefly about him striking out, he stays still as the rope binds and pinches his skin. I hear a few squeaks that must come from him, but he continues only to grasp at the filthy blanket. When I take it from him I expect a little fight, but he lets go of it easily, as if he had no claim to it at all. I pull him out of the doghouse, his ripped imitation Keds hanging half off. He's so light. I carry him and try to figure out how heavy he is in comparison to other things, but I can't really imagine the weights of the usual standards. A sack of potatoes? I'm one person—I don't buy a whole sack. They'd go bad.

He fits perfectly into the last free space in the car. I place him next to a soft blanket and my unused guest pillow. The look on his face confirms what I already suspected, something about the vast difference between greed and desperation. He sinks into the thickness of the blanket and that plumpness I'd found so annoying in my extra pillow—I can tell they feel just right. I place the Santa Vallejo notebook between the front seats—there's a little map inside—and start driving my way out of this storybook.
Eleanor Leonne Bennett Someone Lived Here, Someone Stood by Me
Penny Candy

*micro-fiction by William C. Blome*

The fruit I didn’t think would ever be growing ‘midst tropical hardwoods gave me sexual ups and downs each time I bit into its soft, red flesh, and I couldn’t not think of Mary the Burmese and her odor that blends honeysuckle and nickels. Mary’s breasts hang an inch or so below the buttoned pockets of her shirt and, as I’m coming to understand, I’ll need to be ticketed all the way through to Yangon if I want to soak my fingers in a pool between her thighs. But then word arrives that there are no more red sweets to be had under or between the huge trees, and suddenly Mary’s tonguing me in one ear and slobbering in the other and giggling all the while about the day before yesterday, when she swapped her chain and crucifix for one humongous bag of penny candy.
We danced. We set flames to the gathering of twigs and flags. The brass trombone moaned low from the garden: that strange childlessness calling, calling. We smelt the static in the streets. Some of us had bare feet on the pavement. Some of us watched astonished at the red glare and the planes that dawned on this city-state-oasis from which we could never escape. Not raw iron but transparent weapons in the blank faces of children. To slash the arts one thing, but not the only mistake. We lived knowing we would never escape. So we danced. And we set fire to the memory of that which won’t be named.
How Jeopardy Got Me Wrong For So Long

poetry by Gerard Sarnat

Linguist well as leftist well as pop culture media persona,  
Noam Chomsky perhaps argues free speech  
has been shut down for the hundred thousands of years  
humanoids have tongued it ...

That virulent volatile Je Suis Charlie Hebdo  
carnage—sad as it was, as many conflicted tears as I’ve shed—  
gets my unruly beard’s dander up to set sociopath mullahs straight.

Flowing dresses, flowered see-through chemises  
playing hide & seek inside a Paris suburb meat locker,  
kosher mothers of day-school hostages who earlier kicked  
pigskin soccer balls, were frozen tipsy with fear.

Crying out loud, after gazillions of rowdy game shows  
& cartoons besmirched my human name—Clue: Born  
in a manger outside the City of Lights, Who is Je Suis Christ?
If Bird

poetry by Elizabeth Weaver

You would be my loon
calling long past light,
my mourning dove, my
sweetest finch flashing
sun from black as night.

If my bird you were I’d
feed you nectar from my
palm and plant thick trees
for you to rest and nest until
I could transform my arms
and hands to feathered limbs—
our hearts remade as song.
Gina Williams *Midnight Owl*
An Interview with Matthew Nienow

by Lauren Davis

Matthew Nienow is a poet and business owner living on the Olympic Peninsula. He is the author of three chapbooks and has received multiple awards including the Ruth Lilly Fellowship, a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a scholarship to Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. His poetry can be found in publications such as Poetry, Best New Poets, and New England Review.

I met up with Matthew Nienow in his woodworking shop in Port Townsend, Washington, where he stood hunched over his latest creation, surrounded by tools, scraps of wood and sawdust, and beautiful half-finished paddle boards. When he looked up to greet me, his smile was unguarded, like that of an old friend. The conversation that followed was just as open.

Lauren Davis: How have you tied your poetry into your woodworking?

Matthew Nienow: Well, for a long time I thought about the similarity between approaches to writing and woodworking. Essentially, you take an interest in something, take something that is in a more raw format, a form whether it’s language itself or a stack of wood and you have to have a vision for it and what it might do. You have to have an understanding of the materials and how they are going to react to the tools that you apply to them. There is a need for revision. There is a need for just practice and waste. And all those things side by side lends itself to a lot of meditation while I’m working with wood. A lot of times the work can be slow, sometimes tedious, sometimes exciting. But you get to see something come together. You get to see a shape created. And it’s very similar, the way that I approach writing poems or essays. Sometimes it’s a delight in the material. A delight in the capacities of language and the capacities of the wood to make something that seems worth spending time with.
And beyond that, this particular company that I am working on, this came from a long time dream. This company is called Good Story Paddleboards. And not only have I tried to live a story worth telling about, partly because I think it’s an interesting way to approach life, but I wanted these boards and woodworking itself to reflect my love of writing and belief that language can really make impacts in people’s lives. So each board carries with it a sort of emblematic quote, a little snippet of language, often from a poem or essay, but something that’s pocket-able, that kind of aphoristic piece of language that that you can look down and see artfully put onto the board.

**LD:** You have a wife and two kids, a full time business, and you’re a writer. How do you balance all of that?

**MN:** I don’t. I try. I’ve been more successful at certain points. Up until we had our second son I was able to maintain a lot of what potentially looked like balance. Writing, earning some money, writing, spending time with family, submitting work a lot of the time. We had our second son about three years ago and I just got even busier. Life got crazier. And my priority was being a good father and so I worked on that, and that’s meant a lot less time for writing. Trying to make enough money. That’s hard to do. It’s also meant a lot less time for writing. So basically family and work have been taking the priority for the past couple of years. Poetry doesn’t have that kind of timeline. It’s not worth doing for September publication. It should be there and be able to last whether happens in five years or ten years, later in my life even. I’m not trying to do something to be popular. Even though it’s hard to wait. I just try to remind myself that what matters more is the accumulation of events and successes that make a good life, not just being successful this year or next year. Balance is not here now. Maybe in a couple of years.

**LD:** The Olympic Peninsula, where you live, has a reputation for being wet and dreary. Does that influence your work?

**MN:** Occasionally. The landscape definitely has found its way into some poems over the last several years. Less so the dreariness. But there are elements of that dreariness that come in, that feeling. I am definitely a gray person. My favorite color is gray. But I do love summer. I love the sun, the blue sky. Even though I grew up in this region, in Port Townsend you are so much more immediately faced with those elements. The sea is right there. The mountains. Though I love Seattle, it’s different. It takes a long time to get anywhere. Even if you can see it in the distance, it’s going to take you an hour to get there. In Port Townsend, all you have to do is turn around and you’re right there. You’re faced with the mountains. It’s kind of hard for me not to focus on those things. Not that I would necessarily try to escape that.

**LD:** You were part of a very unique program, Writers in the Schools, that places professional writers in grade school classrooms. What was that like for you?

**MN:** That was really interesting. So, during my time while I was getting my MFA at the University of Washington I had already been publishing for a little while and pushing that side of things hard. So I thought I might as well give it a try and apply to that program, which in Seattle runs through Seattle Arts and Lectures. I ended up getting one residency at an urban middle school which was really challenging. I had taught in some other places and not necessarily had formal training. So the piece that I found most compelling about that was that I could step in as a practicing professional and not consider all the other areas that teaching required. I could just focus on content. So every class I would go in and bring to them an opening to a poem, an invitation, an angle to try and I’d get them writing. It was really hands on so that they could make something right there. By the time I left the room they had a product. But it was really challenging and
stressful and I knew this was not something I wanted to do everyday forever. And then I had another even more challenging residency at Seattle Children’s Hospital working with kids in the palliative care unit. And that was even harder because I had to show up to a room without introductions. I’d have to go introduce myself. Sometimes suiting up in scrubs, depending on what these children were facing and go and meet someone wherever they were—often in very poor health—and try to get them to write. Sometimes they wouldn’t feel up to it. Sometimes they weren’t sure what I was talking about. Other times they were somewhat interested. But I never knew if they were going to be there the next week—and a lot of times they weren’t—and if they were in a different facility, if they were no longer living. So it was very powerful but draining experience. I had some magic moments. And I only did that for one residency. But a couple of wonderful Seattle writers have continued to do that.

**LD:** Do you think that for those children that were able to write that it helped them with their illness?

**MN:** I think that’s the hope. It’s hard for me to say with certainty whether or not it helped. I know maybe in one case I was pretty certain. In other cases, I think I tried to make a genuine connection with the kids and bring some of my passion to them and hopefully give them an outlet for situations that are difficult, but I really don’t know. That the program has continued and gotten stronger is probably a good indication that it is helping people. I admire people like Sierra Nelson who continue to go back and back and back. At least at that point in my life I was really tapped by that experience. Perhaps not totally ready for it. And yet I am still glad I did it.

**LD:** In your woodworking shop you have a Walt Whitman quote, “All truths wait in all things.” What does that mean to you?

**MN:** I love that one. I have grandpa Walt in my head. Walt on my arm. I have him a bunch of different places. But that, “All truths wait in all things,” I like in particular because in this space I work with things. A poem ultimately becomes a physical object. Even to read it requires some sort of physicality. Then it becomes more thing-like. As I’m in here, grabbing from a stack of lumber or working with any given tool, using my hands, my body itself, that, the things that I seek, the things of value that we call our meaning for our lives, those pieces are already there. It’s kind of being ready to receive them. So it’s a good reminder. I think it should be bigger. It’s kind of small. It should take up half the wall to say that.

**LD:** Can you finish this statement for me? I am a poet because...

**MN:** I don’t know. I’m a poet because I can’t help it. I don’t think I set out to be a poet. I think I found myself in poetry, as I found myself in music, as I found myself in woodworking, in cooking, certain types of adventure, travel, relationships. But something that is a weird thing to say is that you are a poet when you aren’t always making poems. I’m not reading as much as I’d like. Or writing as much as I’d like to. But I find myself still in it. And find myself making poems with sincere hope that they will live outside of me.
The Story I Will Never Tell My Son

fiction by Austin Eichelberger

“I thought you said you could take care of this, Sean.” I hold the smooth, tri-folded piece of paper in my hands, the typewriter marks crisp and apathetic next to my pink fingernails, the paper’s sharp corners vibrating with the rumble of my little Dart’s engine. I told him this would happen. A bubble of stomach acid creeps up my throat and I swallow it back down.

“I did, baby, I am,” he says, his words running into one another. “Olivia, there’s nothing to worry about, don’t worry about it. I’m not going to Vietnam, baby, no matter what that letter says—I’m not getting shot by some goddamn communist.” He grips the steering wheel until his knuckles glow white on his chapped, red hands. Sean hunches forward, a bulging blue lump of ski jacket with a brown cap on top, glaring through the lazy falling snow as if he hasn’t been driving through weather like this since he was fifteen, even if he is six years younger than me. I watch him reach up to wipe the fog from the windshield with his puffy sleeve. “Goddamn hippies in Ohio. I wrote essays for them, hundreds of essays, and now those goddamn draft dodgers don’t remember my name. They said we all believed in the same shit, that non-violence could overcome a war, and then they apparently all forgot who the fuck I am.” He hits the steering wheel with his fist, wipes the windshield again, and fumbles to light a cigarette as another acidic swell gurgles in my stomach. “Not even goddamn Tommy Hill, the one whose dad is a general and could cross anybody’s name off the goddamn list.” He exhales a roiling ball of smoke and cranks down the driver’s side window. “Not even that fucker, who promised I’d be fine.”

Frigid air stings my face as I lean over to rest my forehead on the window and look up into the falling snow and at the tops of the tall pines on the edge of another town. I could really use another beer—the last six-pack died an hour and a half ago and a salty, dry taste is creeping through my mouth. I glance over at Sean, his eyes wide and agitated. I’ll be thirty in two months. Why am I doing this? We’ve been driving for three hours at least; he wouldn’t tell me why at first—“Just want to drive”—and didn’t even give me time to change clothes after work. But I knew what was wrong once I saw the military emblem on the torn envelope on the floorboard.

The last road sign told us we had just entered Troy, a hundred and sixty miles from Providence and our little apartment with the peeling floor tile in the kitchen and the tiny bathroom he painted blue last August; from Scooper and Tramp, who are probably yowling with hunger by now. I set the clean-white letter on the floor, swallowing hard as a cold sweat coats the skin of my neck and face. I lean back in the seat, grit my molars together and tap the fingernails of my right hand on the cool glass window. Click, click, click. Click, click, click. Click, click, click. Click, click, click.

“Will you fucking stop that? Please.” Sean tosses his spent cigarette out the driver’s window, the air frosting his breath.

I sniffle, wipe the cold bulb of my nose along my wrist, and pull my green coat tighter, fastening the zipper right up to my chin.

“Not that cold.” He shakes his head, streaks the fogged windshield with his bare hand and reaches for his cigarettes. “But maybe this is best, Oli. I mean, goddamn, it’s how we survive, by being scared, by feeling like we don’t really know what’s going on, you know? Maybe it’s the only thing that keeps us moving.” He lights a new cigarette, the first acrid, hazy breath filling the car,
before slapping his palm against the curve of the steering wheel. “That’s it, Oli,” he says, not looking at me, “there has to be fear inside your heart for you to keep going—there has to be.”

The bitter smell of smoke reaches my nose and my throat spasms as I turn from Sean, his face flushed and smooth, to rest my chin in the hollow of my palm. I force myself to smile as I look past the dark gray dashboard and busted radio, back to him. “I love you, kiddo.” My left thigh sits just beside the front seat crevice and I picture him reaching over to clasp my knee while he smiles at me like he always does and tells me he loves me too.

His eyes flicker toward me in the shallow reflections from the headlights, and he breathes smoke out hard through his nose. He grips his cigarette in his front teeth, both hands on the wheel, his clumsy lips slurring his words: “No room for love unless there’s fear, baby.”

I hold my eyes closed for a second, lifting my head from the cold zipper pinching against my neck as I shift to face my reflection. A quiet, burning belch rises in my throat. I watch the snow fall in clumps that collect in the corners of all the windows, framing my face and dark curly hair, Sean’s silhouette behind me. He could’ve at least said it back.

When we first moved in—back when he convinced me we could save money living together and would surprise me with dinner or shelves he built for the bathroom, back when he crawled into bed when I did to hold me—those first few years. We haven’t had the chance this year to wander out to the picnic table in the little fenced-in back yard and hold each other, all bundled up in our coats and scarves and gloves, as the snow slowly erases everything around us. My stomach knots up, this time tighter and higher up, as I think about the heat of his arms and breath on those snowy days; I remember waiting until the numb prickles rose to my knees to go inside and warm up. Feeling small beside him used to be so natural.

I drop my face into my hands, dragging my fingertips through the thin sweat on my forehead to my jaw, resting my fingers along the smooth boned line. The low grumble of the engine and the sound of wind through Sean’s open window fill the small, cold space between us. The last time we had a good conversation was weeks ago. He writes to so many papers and articles about the war that there’s hardly any of him left for me. He hasn’t even noticed my skin, how clear and soft it is, or my good mood, how cheery I’ve been for at least a few weeks, almost a month, or how I take longer to get ready in the bathroom each morning, coughing quietly. He might never notice; might not get the chance now. I let out what sounds like a small laugh and rub my knuckles against my eyes, wiping away water. I guess I have to tell him, but he won’t want to hear it anyway. He’ll tell me I must be wrong.

“Hand me another pack of cigs, eh, Oli?” His right hand sits out, upturned, waiting.

I lean forward to the glove box and tug the handle, opening the smooth, cold little door. “Where are they?”

“No more in there?”

“No.”

“Look in the back, there should be some in a bag back there.” His hand jerks toward the backseat, thumb extended. “Behind my seat.”

His seat. Sometimes I think he forgets whose car this actually is. I turn around to look and, as my vision turns from the road, my stomach goes cold and coils up again, grinding tighter this time. I push my feet against the floorboard to wiggle into the shallow space between us and reach the plastic bag I can see peeking out from beneath the driver’s seat. I pull back and set my jaw as I push my knees onto my seat, stretching over the back support and down to the floorboard in the back, the top of the seat round and firm against my queasy stomach.

“What the hell are you doing? Can’t you just squeeze your small ass between the seats?” He snorts and flinches away as my hip grazes his shoulder.
I get a hold of the thin, crumpled bag, pull it from under the seat and toss a pack of Camels over my shoulder into his lap. “There,” I say, dropping the crinkling bag back onto the floor. I bend and maneuver back down to a sitting position, huffing as I put a hand on my seizing gut and pull my hair back from my face.

“Open it for me,” he says, not even asking.

I stare at him for a second and then snatch the box from his lap, peel off the cellophane wrapping and place it in his outstretched hand. I look out the window again, at the glow of a city just on the other side of the dark pines, at the slowly falling snow. Maybe if I just don’t say anything, we can go back to how we were—before this letter to him and this change in me.

Sean’s lighter flicks in front of another cigarette and the flash illuminates my small car for a second, defining the door beside me, the stippled dashboard and, in the edge of my vision, the small space between our seats. We could just drive, maybe head south where it’s warm, and make our way to Mexico, hopping from resort to resort and beach to beach, drinking piña coladas and changing our names in each little city. A gas station sign shines ahead, the snow around it turning red and orange, the 76 white and clear. My stomach squeezes taut, hollowing itself out, and I swallow back another sour burp. I can drive when he gets tired and he can drive when I do; we’ll always keep moving, and just forget about the world and the war, stay on the road as far as it goes. “Sean, pull in here. I want to get a beer.”

He pulls right up to the building, headlights searing the red brick wall, and turns off the car. He begins steadily tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and the sound fills the quiet space like a drumbeat in an open plain. “Hurry, Oli.”

I take a breath, my stomach still and settled for a second, and push open the car door, squinting as the bitter breeze pushes my hair into my face. I get out with my purse and walk around the car to the door of the store. I turn back to my Dart, the heavy glass door to the shop halfway open. There’s Sean: this kid driving my car, his hazel eyes showing yellow in the fluorescent light as he stares ahead, zoned and scared. He looks addicted, or at least manic, off somehow.

I walk slowly down the aisles, pausing in front of the glowing beer freezer along the back wall, the white lights shining off of colored glass and curved labels like streetlights across the bottles clinking in the floorboards. I bite my lip and push my hair behind my ear before moving further down, past the alcohol, and tugging a green pop bottle from a little cooler brimming with crunchy ice. I wander through an aisle of candy and cheap toys up to the cashier and show him the drink. As I hand him a ragged five, I glance around for the metal racks they always have just by the door. When the grinning man hands me my change, I smile back widely and thank him, moving toward the exit. I glance out at Sean—his glossy eyes not even seeing me. I swipe a free copy of Northeast Real Estate, Inc.—the pictures of empty houses on the front fuzzy but bright—and stuff it in my purse with the money in my hand.

“Sean,” I say, knocking on the driver’s side window.

He quickly rolls it down and looks up at me, his eyes open too wide—showing too much white—his mouth slightly open, silent.

I swallow hard again, the burn easing quicker now, push my hair behind my ears, and motion with my head toward the store as I speak. “Hop out. My turn to drive.”
Lina’s car was a liquid candy sports coupe fresh off the lot, a dream gift from her father bestowed before she was able to legally drive. It was the type of car designed exclusively for teenage girls—abrupt, sleek, and playful. It was the color of sweetened cherries and lipstick shades I never had the courage to wear. Having a car like that would’ve changed my life. My hair would have bounced instead of hung, my skin would have glowed instead of flared up. A car like that bestowed on its driver a new charisma and a graceful stride, a keen fashion sense and natural rhythm. I would have been a better version of me in that car.

Early in the fall of your senior year of high school, your father will give you a car. Perhaps he’s feeling pinpricks of guilt for not being around to stroke your hair or put iodine on your scraped knees. Perhaps the car is cheaper than getting caught up on missed child support payments. Either way, the consolation prize is a 1983 Buick Regal, a car the color of thunder-capped skies in August, a car that looks like it could navigate the Atlantic while you fished from its hood. A car designed for a broad-shouldered man with telescoping legs who appreciates ample legroom. It won’t be the car you want, but the car you get.

Lina was the first girl I knew to have her own car. At the time, my mother drove me to school in the mornings, later I’d take the county bus two miles north to my part-time job making sandwiches. Afternoons I stood alone at the stop in my oil spattered uniform, brown apron wrenched in my hands, eyes on the pavement and my canvas sneakers. There was nothing pleasant about riding public transportation. I hated how the bus groaned to a halt, how it coughed black exhaust as it lurched forward, how the plastic seats shone with unidentified oils. The recycled air was sweat comingled with diesel fumes, but the ride was cheap, direct, and beat walking by a fair margin.

It will take you several days to come to terms with the fact that you are not getting a cute red sports car with a back seat that only fits toddlers. Instead you’re getting an old Buick that can seat a tribe of Amazonians or a herd of giraffe-people. A car bigger than anything you’ve ever driven. You will wonder if you can steer it without plowing into a building, you will worry about making a three-point turn or God forbid, parallel parking at the beach. You will hate the car’s massive hood, you will loathe its sneering grill, but you will accept the car and be thankful for it, even as you disparage it to your friends.

When Lina rolled up during my shift one day, a passenger in her own feisty new Mazda, I was dumbstruck. Her burly father was hunched over the steering wheel, grimacing as his daughter darted inside the restaurant.

“It’s mine! Don’t you love it?”
Her glee gave me an ulcer. How I coveted that car, the sheer coolness of it.

My family had never owned a new car. Not a single vehicle parked in front of our house could boast the luxury of air conditioning, power windows, or a working cassette deck. Even our home lacked the amenities offered by Lina’s coupe. My grandfather refused to update our cramped three-bedroom home with central a/c for fear it would skyrocket his electric bill. Summers turned the brick structure into a kiln, mild Florida winters into a meat locker.

I could have lived inside Lina’s car.

You will have a love/hate relationship with your ugly Buick, but because it liberates you from bus rides and parental intrusion, you will love it far more than you hate it. You will discover that just having a car elevates your status. In the parking lot before homeroom, friends you never knew you had will shuffle drowsy-eyed to your gray monstrosity, where they will hang out until the first bell rings. They will lean their elbows on the driver side window. They will slip into the backseat and listen to old Beatles cassettes with you, even though you only have one working speaker. On cool mornings you will all fill the car with your warm collective breath. One day, someone will dub your ugly car the “Illegal Regal” and you will all laugh knowing that you share this intimate joke, which becomes almost a secret handshake between you.

My resentment toward Lina drifted through my bloodstream like a dormant illness. Lina’s parents bought her everything she wanted, her father doled out money like sticks of gum. I’d just turned sixteen and had already been working a $4-an-hour job for an entire year. I couldn’t imagine Lina ever mixing a gallon of mayonnaise into the tuna salad with her bare hands, or coming home with hair that reeked of vinegar, fingernails brittle from pickle brine. Lina bought all of her makeup at a department store counter. She only wore Guess jeans and designer sunglasses. She did not need to slice crates of yellow onions for minimum wage.

One day as you are sitting in a choice parking space near the school entrance, someone in your car will convince you it is a perfect day to cut class and have pancakes at Denny’s. Everyone in the car will agree that this idea is inspired because everyone’s stomachs are caved with hunger. You will agree too because you want to make everyone happy, because you want to be the hero of breakfast day, but also because there is a power in knowing you can just start your car, put it into drive, and go anywhere at any moment. This is a new power, an untested power, delicious as maple syrup.

When Lina was finally able to drive her pretty car, she was reckless. She zipped through traffic hands-free as she applied her mascara, knees controlling the steering wheel, occasionally glancing from the vanity mirror to the road ahead of her. But it was hard to summon the appropriate terror when riding with her. The vulnerability of my anatomy was not something I considered. People my age didn’t die. Her driving antics were part of the carnival ride, a thrill with built-in safety. Sometimes if she veered too close to a parked car or if she failed to notice the flash of brake lights ahead of us, I would yelp as she overcorrected, relieved not because we’d escaped bodily injury but because she’d averted front end damage. “Oh God,” Lina would say, “My father would kill me.”
Because the “Illegal Regal” has two bench seats, you will cram more teenage bodies in it than you have seatbelts to restrain them. You will think, “Who needs seatbelts?” Your car is a battle tank. You will take your giant Buick, replete with stacked bodies, most of them smoking cigarettes they are still too young to purchase, and you will drive in the opposite direction of school. Your favorite English teacher will be angry because you hardly show up to his class anymore. You won’t care because it will be easy not to. You will tell yourself you can’t afford to go to college anyway. You already have enough credits to scrape by and graduate, so what does it matter if you fail one or two classes. You won’t think about your future, because your vision will only extend to the edge of your car’s hood, you will only plan as far as the next tank of gas will take you.

Lina loved her car like a long-awaited child. After our friendship fragmented over a tall chinless boy with bony knees, I fantasized about vandalizing her car. How I would sneak over in the predawn hours to carve profanities into its hood. How I would funnel granulated sugar into the gas tank. I would shatter the windshield with a cinderblock. I would impale every tire with a steak knife and bash out the headlights with an aluminum bat. I would set her car ablaze with a bottle of lighter fluid and a flick of my Zippo. This, I knew, would kill her.

The ugly Buick will change your perspective. You will move from simply accepting the car as a mode of transportation to viewing the car as a vehicular representation of your deepest self. Its slate gray exterior will reflect your cynicism, its angled corners will mirror your incongruities. On the road, your car will be painfully self-aware, it will take turns too fast and knock into things, it will have no expectations. Perhaps things will never come easy for this car, some of its systems defective, some of its panels dented, others bubbled with rust. You will accept the Buick with all its imperfections and in doing so you will love yourself just a little bit more.

I had been jealous of Lina before the shiny red car. It was not just her family’s financial security, but her ability to flit across the social spectrum like a monarch butterfly. My shyness was a handicap, making friends a gargantuan feat that could span the course of weeks and months. Lina made friends with the same ease she slipped on her jeans. But the situation with the boy was emblematic of our dysfunctional friendship. As much as I envied her life and her personality, she was terminally insecure. She was Snow White’s tortured queen, she needed to be the most beautiful, the most sought after. The mirror she held up to her face was always a teenage boy, preferably one already dating one of her friends. I’d watched it play out plenty of times with other girls. Our infatuation triangle followed a precedent, still it came as a surprise.

Your Buick Regal will be instrumental to your growth. It will be hard for you not to notice this, even your friends will comment on the fact. You will have become more confident, more daring. You will agonize less over the things you say in conversation, you will make jokes people laugh at, you will attend concerts and parties. You will think perhaps it is the car’s ample legroom that allowed you to stretch past your limitations, or maybe the trunk space you were able to stuff all your anxieties into. Maybe in being so different from the car you envisioned for yourself, the Buick challenged your superficial
ideals and taught you something about living authentically. Or maybe a car is just a fucking car.

I never vandalized Lina’s Mazda, though one day I pulled up next to her in traffic. When I noticed her, I leaned my entire weight on the horn as my friends and I hurled obscenities through her open passenger window. Poor Lina was terrified, she made a quick left and sped eastbound, hoping, I’m sure, we wouldn’t follow. My heart was a frantic pigeon. I was non-confrontational by nature, but seeing her slippery Mazda on Fourth Avenue had been too much of an invitation. I had stopped grieving the boy by then, who had never been much of a trophy to begin with, but her betrayal still stung. Despite the jealousies, she had been my friend. Her outgoing personality and wicked sense of humor had always had an energizing effect on me, one that I missed dearly. Years later she called me to apologize and I accepted with sincerity, though our friendship never progressed past that single, pleasant conversation.

You will not drive your ugly Buick forever. Eventually you will save up for a car with air conditioning and a CD player. The “Illegal Regal” will be inherited by your younger sister, who will have it stolen one day from the parking lot behind a local pizza joint. It will be found abandoned not far from your house, though the trunk lock will be destroyed and her Morrissey cassettes missing. She in turn will pass the “Illegal Regal” down the line to her lanky boyfriend, the lead singer of a band nobody will ever hear of. He will run it through town without motor-oil until the engine seizes, then leave it to rust in his front yard until his father pays to have it towed away. It will be a tragic, undignified end to your Buick and you will find yourself quietly mourning the loss of this relic, a tangible piece of your history lost to the junkyard, to be picked clean for its parts.

Katie Kelleher Becoming
Marble City Breakdown

poetry by Bethany Bowman

My faith is not a winner. It smokes in root cellars,  
earns community cash at a “this-n-that” sale,  
cash that demands attention: prestige of talc-miners  
mumbling out the corners of their mouths  
short words, to the point, saving black lung  
for their families in case the Army Base pulls out.  
It tacks plastic over rose windows in winter,  
sprinkles rock salt onto the steps of St. James'.  
It’s a mustard-seed sub at Anamelia’s;  
needs one new business to last.  
Still it’s clapping in our pews, getting his hair cut,  
ragged nails cleaned in case the Promised Land  
is kicking in a pregnant girl, in case someone important sees.
Mohawk Valley

poetry by Bethany Bowman

Bees in the cupola, moles in the garden,
sugar maples for climbing and tapping,

ponds that aren’t man made,
fish that aren’t gold,

guitars and mandolins
bluegrassing, square dancing,

light strings that pop,
porches that tilt,

sinking foundations,
bobcat skeletons,

deer scat and muskrats,
Doc and Merle,

Woody and Huddy
with Emmylou Harris,

harmonies, lullabies,
long gray hair, big dark eyes,

clothespins that point to Polaris,
dippers to make the throat dry,

whisky to wash my prayers in,
Mohawk Valley when I die.
The Pinecrest Years

*poetry by Bethany Bowman*  
*for Katherine*

Shaking the sheets with Estella,  
cold-sound patter of bare feet

returning from the cellar—  
bedtime palace of little girls too old

to snatch pancakes from the stovetop,  
too young to hate spiders in their nets.

But we killed them,  
braided them into our hair,

wrote them into our heroes,  
fed them to gray squirrels asleep in the snow.
She has the room above him, and he has the room next to her

fiction by Peyton Burgess

Kyle, this malihini from the mainland, wakes up mid-dream with his sweaty head hanging pale over the side of his bed. He thinks for a moment, terrified, that he’s still looking at those wawaes. The younger sister, Mele, stomps with the same feet through Kyle’s bedroom. She calls out to him that there’s a beach; she’s going to the beach because it’s early and sleeping is too hard, and then she opens the curtains. Mele always leaves the room with the curtains still swinging.


When Kyle tries to retreat back under his sheets, Mele likes to scream “Kyyyylllllle,” with an operatic shrill as she stomps to the kitchen then stirs her single serving of Nescafé. This is Mele’s morning routine: being loud, she stirs her coffee, making clings against one of the many mugs she stole from Denny’s then she slams the microwave door a couple times in the process of reheating some rice pudding she made earlier in the week. And because she misses her sister, the one who had a mean spike, Mele sets her volleyball to herself and kills it against Kyle’s white-painted cinderblock walls until she’s dripping sweat and her hand throbs with the pain of the hits. Bam—thunk. Bam—thunk. Bam—thunk.

Kyle’s eyes tear up as they adjust to the sunrise that aches its way through his bedroom’s salt-crusted window. He tries to explain that he doesn’t feel well enough to get up. He had stayed out late and drank on a local’s discount at the Honuz Bar. “Sorry about that, Mele.” But Kalani, this am-surfer that tends bar for rent, can serve a mean White Russian, and that’s a hard thing for Kyle to say no to. Really though, Kalani suffers Kyle’s indulgence more because he’s into Mele and her buxom okole, but Kalani’s afraid of the way she bosses him around without even paying attention to him, so all Kalani can do is serve Kyle drinks and hope it brings him closer to Mele; which, it won’t because Mele hates it when Kyle stays out drinking and she knows Kalani is the one doling out the drinks. Whenever Kalani serves Kyle his fifth drink Kalani will mention Mele’s buxom okole, which bothers Kyle. But the malihini can’t figure out if it’s because he’s being protective like a brother might be or if he’s jealous.

“Why do you do this to yourself?” Mele yells from the bathroom. The toilet flushes.

“I’m not doing this to myself. I’m doing this with myself,” Kyle says. “That doesn’t mean anything. It sounds cute, but it means absolutely nothing.”

Mele comes back into his room, holding her volleyball and wearing her sister’s green practice shorts from UH. She flexes angry thighs that would make a masseuse cry. Her sun-streaked black hair, stiff and wavy with yesterday’s sand and salt, reaches down to her elbows. Kyle rubs his eyes.

“I don’t like it when you look at me that way,” she says.

“I wasn’t looking at you in any way. I was just looking at you,” Kyle says. But this malihini was admiring her thighs, so Mele hurls the volleyball right by his head and against the wall, causing Kyle to cover up. She snatches the ball as it bounces back. “So can I borrow your board since you’re obviously not going anywhere?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t patched up that ding,” Kyle says.

“Man, still?”
“Fix it for me.”
She stomps off again, but not angry. She just stomps all the time, like not wasting time waiting for Kyle. She has a way to handle things. This is the way Kyle remembers it: Mele had kicked another girl’s ass after the girl called net and said something about her being too short to hit, that she should stick with digs and sets. After the beat down Mele walked away, calling the battered girl out on her camel toe. “Who plays with that shit hanging out?” she yelled, strutting down the beach to lay on her towel—where she’d throw little shells at unsuspecting tourists, not going back to the game. After that, a lot of people kept a safe distance, never wanted to let things get too serious with her. All the other players thought the bruised-up girl was just trying to give Mele helpful criticism. Moke, a real big and tough dude from down-the-way Waimanalo, called Mele—the moke. Not only is she a badass at the net like her sister was but she’s aware of her good looks too. She’s had a lot of boys telling her about her, and they all say the same thing, but she’s not into a guy that can only tell her something she already knows.

Mele grabs the board, a sky-blue, 6-foot Town and Country surfboard, and starts for the door. “Well, don’t blame me if it doesn’t seal before I hit the water with it. I mean, it’s your board. Also, you’re getting fat. And I mean that as a warning, not a criticism,” Mele yells as she walks out the door. But Kyle had broken the most basic leash law: left the leash dangling free from the tail of his board. So when Mele walks out, the leash gets caught in the door as it closes. Mele curses, fumbling with her keys to open the door, calling him a moron. He gets out of bed, but as he nears the door, Mele drops the board on the ground. “Fuck it,” she says.

He hesitates to open the door, and when he does Mele is already walking down the street. His board wobbles between the last step and the landing, the nose grinding against the concrete.

He tugs the leash out from under the door. He admits that he’s gotten a little heavier around the gut, maybe a little under the chin, but not enough that “fatter” is accurate. Kyle goes back to bed.

At ten he gets up again. He has an appointment with a man named Dr. Ho who wears the same kind of flip-flops as Kyle, which makes it easier for Kyle to feel comfortable enough with Dr. Ho to argue with him. Kyle has been talking to Dr. Ho for a few months, ever since his boss at the Star-Advertiser had convinced him that his job, along with everything else Kyle might consider important in his life, depends on coping with and surviving the death of his girlfriend, Ailani.

She’d been killed in a car accident the previous year. Kyle and Ailani were together for four years. Kyle had come to Ailani a tender-footed haole, a refugee from a flooded city back mainland. Ailani had promised him that he’d never have to go back. And so far, he has not gone back. Whether it’s because his grief froze his ability to make decisions or because he wants to stay in Kailua to feel closer to Ailani, Kyle has not gone back.

Mele, Ailani’s little sister, moved in with Kyle six months after the accident, saying she was sick of city life in Chicago. She was studying politics at Loyola and playing for their volleyball team. “I hate indoor,” she said the day she walked into Kyle’s house, throwing her backpack on the floor. “I miss the sand.” She bought a blow-up mattress and took over Kyle’s office.

A lot of people, everybody actually, think it’s a bad idea for Mele to be living with Kyle. Nobody will say it’s a bad idea, discussing it makes their friends feel too uncomfortable. But Dr. Ho likes to be a bit more direct about his concerns.

“Are you sure she stomps just like her sister? Or do you just think she stomps like her sister?” Dr. Ho says. He’s squinting at his snorkeling mask as he rubs it clean with an old, ripped up t-shirt. Dr. Ho is not a counselor or a psychologist or a therapist. He’s a marine biologist and
spends a lot of time kicking around the reefs, recording evidence of the decline in ringed rice coral.

“I’m sure of it. Mele stomps just like Ailani used to. And there’s nothing wrong with me appreciating that.”

“What I’m saying is, maybe indulging in the similarities makes it easier for you to deal with losing Ailani. The problem might be that you allow yourself not to differentiate between them.”

“Obviously there are similarities. She’s her little sister, same blood, and we’re helping each other deal with the death.”

“But your relationship with her has turned into a companionship, and that could—this is just a worry I have—lead to the kind of shared habits you had with Ailani. Daily rituals, simple stuff like walks for coffee after you wake up. Or television shows that you always watch together, even little things like that, you could end up doing those things with her little sister.”

“What’s wrong with us depending on each other?”

Dr. Ho tosses his snorkeling mask into a duffel bag and looks at Kyle. He taps Kyle on the shoulder. “I think you should try to find other people to spend time with.”

Last night Kyle had tried to spend time with other people and he thought that meant drinking at Honuz, meeting another girl and going home with her if she wanted him to. Lisa was a photographer on assignment for a real estate magazine, taking pictures of property in and around Kailua. In his desperation to try and connect with another person, Kyle answered Lisa’s questions, told her where to eat, and where she’d find the best beachfront property.

Kalani stood by the cash register shaking his head when he heard Kyle mention the Kailua favorite beach -------. “Hey, Kyle. Kulikuli!”

“What?” Kyle said.

“Cool it. Shut that spout of yours,” Kalani said slowly.

“I’ll be right back,” Lisa said, looking at Kalani as she walked to the front of the bar.

Kalani made his way down to Kyle.

“What the fuck, Kyle?” he whispered, handing Kyle another beer.

“I just got carried away. You’re right. I’ll shut up,” Kyle mumbled into the cool lip of the beer.

“Yeah, that’d be smart. You think I like wearing this fucking shirt, pouring drinks for all these people?” He tugged at his faded Hawaiian print shirt. His broad shoulders stressed the seams of the shirt as he leaned forward and got in Kyle’s face. “It pays the bills but anymore of it and I’d swim for the Philippines. You gonna let her sell it out.”

“Alright, alright,” Kyle said.

When Lisa hinted later that it was time to go home together, Kyle insisted they go to her place. He couldn’t bring another girl home in front of Mele. Or he wasn’t sure if he could. At Lisa’s hotel they undressed, but then Lisa stopped when she saw the fresh, pink scar that stretched down the right side of Kyle’s chest where his rib had snapped and was forced through his skin at impact. Kyle told her about the truck and the heavy rain.

Lisa was quiet for sometime before she got up and put her clothes back on. Kyle got up too and slipped on his shirt and found his flip-flops.

Mele would probably still be awake if Kyle went home. She’d give him hell for drinking. So he stayed in Lisa’s hotel room with the idea that he’d leave once it was late enough for Mele to be asleep.

“I’m going to open this,” Kyle said, pulling a bottle of champagne out of the fridge. “Is this on the company account?”

“You opened it before you asked.”

Kyle slammed the champagne down and watched the bubbles cascade to the blue carpeting. Lisa waved her hand at Kyle to forget about the mess.
“There’s this tiny fish, it’s only found off Ustica, it’s called the Atargatis,” Lisa said. “The males are small, about the size of a matchbox. The females are about the size of a pack of cigarettes. When a male fish sees a female fish, most of the time, he’ll flee, swim for his life. But when he sees a female that he likes, and he’s sure of it, he’ll swim in front of her. He’ll float in front of her until he’s filled with so much excitement and passion that he suddenly bursts, creating a cloud of insides and, of course, cum. The female, sometimes she swims through it with her eggs hanging from her belly. Sometimes she decides, No, she never liked that guy, and she swims around the cloud like somebody avoiding a pothole in the street. Either way, the male fish never knows if the woman of his dreams, his one and only love, ever loved him back.”

Kyle stared blankly at Lisa. “That’s it?” he asked. “You know that’s a load of shit, right? You just keep that little gem around for people like me?”

Lisa shrugged. “Yeah, yeah. But what I’m saying is that the world can only handle so much good fucking.”

Lisa took a long drink of the champagne and walked out to the balcony to smoke a cigarette.

“If you’re getting more champagne just bring out the whole bottle. I want some more too,” Lisa said without turning around.

But Kyle was leaving. As he headed for the door he saw Lisa’s notebook poking out from her shoulder bag. He grabbed her notebook and read the names of the places he had told Lisa about, places where he had hiked and camped with Ailani, places where they’d been allowed some lovemaking, places where they’d been allowed some fucking. Then Kyle finally felt angry, and it felt good to be angry. He tore out the pages where she had scribbled his advice. But “shit, why not?” he then said and took the whole notebook. He walked out the door, and on the walk home he tossed the notebook into a trashcan outside of Long’s Drug Store.

“She does a lot of things differently,” Kyle says.

“Of course,” Dr. Ho says. He’s cleaning the straps and buckles on his fins with a different old t-shirt and a little bit of lubricant. He explains that the lubricant keeps the rubber straps from drying and cracking.

“Ailani had some pretty strange habits. She was so earthy she would save her used dental floss, and I would complain about it when I’d walk in the
bathroom and see it dangling on the edge of the sink. And now I find myself doing it.”

“You’ve adopted some of her behaviors. That’s okay though. It may be a better way to feel closer to her instead of always being with her sister. All I know is that when I tell you to hang out with other people I don’t mean you should be trying to get in some stranger’s arms. You’ve got to figure out some stuff by yourself.”

For Mele and Kyle, after the first initial flood of sympathy, a change occurred where the friends they loved didn’t recognize them anymore, and with enough time might have even mistaken them for strangers on the street. They felt like their old friends didn’t know them anymore because of the amputees they’d become, and that new people in their lives could never be their friends because they never knew Ailani. So Kyle and Mele withdrew into themselves and each other.

Sometimes it felt temporary. Kyle had bought all new linens. But he kept the old ones, folding them neatly and putting them in airtight storage bags he bought at Wal-Mart. He did the same thing with all of Ailani’s clothes, as if he was just preparing for a seasonal change. When he wakes up in the morning, lint from the new fabrics is all over his body, clumps of sweaty cotton in the pockets of his knees. His bath towels are new too. When he gets out of the shower and dries off, he has to pick the lint from his body all over again.

Kyle and Ailani had the same-size feet so they shared six different pairs of slippas, all Locals brand purchased for four dollars a pair at Long’s Drug Store. Then they were just Kyle’s slippas. When Mele moved in with more of the same-size feet she brought two more pairs of the same-size slippas. Now there are eight.

After returning home from his appointment with Dr. Ho, Kyle puts on his board shorts, then picks one blue slippa and one white slippa from the pile, slips his board under his right arm, and goes to catch a bus to the beach and meet up with Mele. He gets on the 70 which takes him down to the park, from there Kyle can walk down to the nets and stumble on Mele playing volleyball or resting between games.

Mele’s lying on her towel, sunning, and setting her volleyball to herself. She can lay still, her head and back flat against the ground, setting the ball up against the wind at the perfect angle so that it’s blown back to her fingertips where she sets it again. She hardly has to move. Kyle used to watch Ailani and Mele lie next to each other, setting the ball back and forth to each other. Kyle would allow himself to be hypnotized, watching them set to each other like that for twenty minutes at a time, so effortlessly, while they tanned.

Kyle is not that coordinated. He feels goofy and a bit dizzy just walking through the deep, dry sand, his slippas kicking sand against his calves. He flings his slippas off and sits down next to Mele.

“You made it,” she says, continuing to set the ball to herself.

“Tide is super low, but the waves are clean,” says Kyle.

“Yeah, you should seal that ding and take the board out.”

Mele crosses her legs under herself and stands up. She walks to one of the courts, throwing her ball by the back line. Then she wipes the sand off and joins a game.

Kyle rolls on his side and looks through Mele’s backpack for the Sun Cure. He grabs it and squeezes the gooey fiber on the hole in the surfboard. Then he smoothes it down with a plumeria leaf he finds in the sand. When he’s finished he angles the board at the sun so the fiber can dry.

Mele’s yelling, calling hits, calling sets, celebrating kills until her voice goes hoarse.
One More Reason Not to Sleep with People You Don’t Know Very Well

micro-fiction by Jesse Sensibar

I’m sorry I couldn’t stop to chat right there in the frozen pizza and ice cream aisle. But my head was in a different space—not so well-lit. I would have had to tell you about the crosshairs of Allah dancing on my shoulder blades like a ditch I couldn’t reach.

You wanted to tell me about Buddha and reincarnation—I saw it in your brown eyes. But all I could hear coming from your pink-lipsticked mouth was Sitting Bull saying: “Today is a good day to die.”

So I bought my frozen juice bars and went back to my pony.
Because it is a good day to die but tomorrow might be a little brighter.
If I had told you all this, would you still say I had an old soul?
Horse Lubber

poetry by Carrie Naughton

Texas, empty me of me so that I can be filled with You.  
Fill me with crude oil, bituminous pitch, 
mare's tails and contrails, taxidermy chemicals.  
Your interstates run like veins through me, 
pulsing with grasshoppers and dead butterflies.  
I am your vehicle in tow, drag me 
beneath Black Oaks and heavy skies, 
falling leaves and branches thwacking the eaves.  
Roof me with Ritz crackers and melted butter.  
Sink into me the way historic hotels settle into red clay 
foundations, buckle down like sloping hallways 
with the smell of carpets exhaling history's stale breath.  
Texas, sing to me a thirty-ought six song, booming at dawn.  
Open-mouthed turtles breach in brown water, 
the heron and the egret standing sentinel.  
Texas, convince me that Jesus is tougher than hell 
and all this flatland Southern hospitality is meant for me, 
your megachurch billboards and dry counties, 
these horse lubbers crossing hot tarred roads 
willing to be sacrificed underneath my rolling tires 
sailing ever eastward to the next filling station.
We’re nearly done packing. My job is the library. I’m supposed to remove the books from their shelves and divide them into two groups—separate the sheep from the goats. I don’t have enough boxes or space in the U-Haul for the herd worth saving. I should have finished this job hours ago, but it’s hard to say good-bye. A categorical break would be faster—chuck the whole lot and go. But ripping the bandage off is too painful, too deliberate. Better to wait and hope the wound will heal on its own. This is why we haven’t left sooner. We should’ve gotten out years ago, before it came to this. Before we had no other choice.

Looking out the window doesn’t help either. I keep remembering how it was those first several years, when the bookshelves were filling up. The pasture used to have grass, now it is mostly dirt. Topsoil blown away from a lack of rain to wet it down or roots to keep it there. The horses are partly to blame, their prehensile lips scanning the ground, grabbing at whatever green things sprout. Of course, they only sped up the process. This landscape could have happened without them. It has happened before. Prairie turned to dust. Giant dust storms, haboobs, covering entire states. They say our soil once reached the Capital building in Washington D.C.—a million grain march. But that was a lifetime ago—someone else’s lifetime.

Many families left back when drought and our own thirsty agriculture first turned the Bible Belt into a Dust Bowl. They followed the Joads and their dreams farther west, past a natural desert to California. Those that stayed dug deeper wells. That’s what we did. Five hundred feet deep: past caliche, rock, clay, shale rock, and more clay, finally reaching the Santa Rosa aquifer—an underground sea deeper than the Ogallala. We thought it would last.

Two summers ago I helped my neighbor remove three withered shade trees. Trees as old as her homestead that had finally grown tired of drought. I should have listened better when she told me that even the native mesquite trees were having trouble. She has two wells, three if you count the ancient wooden windmill—a spinning ornament of the Old West with roots too shallow to serve any practical function today. She employed a water witcher to determine the best location for her newest well, where the underground water table was deep enough to sink a PVC pipe. The old man, with his face as weathered and cracked as the ground, followed his crooked stick all over her property. He told her where to dig—in the southeast corner—but he couldn’t tell her how long the well would produce. This summer my neighbor installed a water catchment system: five hundred gallon drums positioned to store the water that falls from the sky when no more can be drawn from the ground.

We thought of moving back into the city. They seem to have plenty of water, enough to soak their lawns every other day. Enough to sell to a hydraulic fracking company with headquarters in Tulsa. Enough to drink if you don’t mind drinking recycled waste water. That’s a headline the city would rather forget. They also have wells in the Ogallala, but like me they’ve had to dig deeper. Now they’re taking the Santa Rosa for their own. But soon, two decades maybe, there will be no more digging deeper. That’s a headline the city willfully forgets. We thought of moving to the city, but moving once is hard enough. Besides, what would we do with the horses? A few more residents in an already overcrowded and underfunded horse rescue.
So we pack up, we leave behind. We don’t go farther west this time. There’s no more gold out there or, even more valuable, water. Maybe we can retrace our ancestors’ tracks and move back east or to the Midwest? But who will take us? What city wants refugees? Maybe we could sneak in and pretend we are local. Make a new home somewhere near a river, but not too far downstream. Or maybe they’d see us for what we really are—the first wave.
An Interview With Nicole Santalucia

by J. Adam Collins

AC: Congratulations, Nicole, on winning the 2015 Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize for “Central Pennsylvania” [reader, see our last issue for this excellent poem]. Let’s start there. Can you talk about what the route you’re describing in “Central Pennsylvania” means to you? You write as if it’s familiar.

NS: Thank you! This is a great honor. I started writing this poem about a year after I moved to Central PA for a teaching job at Shippensburg University. The route described in the poem is my current commute—most of it at least. When I first moved, I had a hard time adjusting to a longer commute (25 miles each way). Most of my life has been in upstate, NY and NYC where things are much closer and more accessible.

At first nothing made sense in this new environment, not just how long it takes to get from point A to point B. And I felt I was missing something; all I could see was empty space, traffic, cornfields (more empty space) highways (more empty space), factories, warehouses that felt empty, and in the distance, farms. This contrast of open fields/emptiness and traffic had such an impact on me.

Also, I live near one of the largest trucking hubs in the country. It’s as if I moved to a very big truck stop. The house that my wife and I rent is three miles from the Pennsylvania Turnpike, a huge Petrol rest stop/CB shop, a Mac truck wash, and it is about a mile from Rt. 81. We live on a busy road in a small town, and the trucks rattle our windows and floors. Every time the house rumbles when a truck passes we say, another angel lost its wings.

But once I started teaching and connecting with my students I gained more insight. One of my students grew up on a dairy farm about five miles away from our rental house, and my wife, Deanna, and I spent a day with this student and her family. They work hard and tirelessly, and it was an honor to see their drive in caring for their land and animals. I was witness to the energy and exertion that I was searching for since the big move. When I was standing on this piece of farmland that borders the PA Turnpike (Rt. 76), I realized where I moved to.

We live in a place between fresh milk and a new pair of shoes from Amazon.com (there is an Amazon warehouse in Carlisle). We live in between the trucks carrying loads of internet orders and the farmers that can’t afford to fix their equipment. We live in the culture that has developed around the truckers, hence the sex shops and rest stops that I write about in the poem.

It took me almost a year to absorb these new surroundings. It took me about a year to write this poem. It took me that year to see what is here. When I finally
met the humans behind the landscape, I made stronger connections.

AC: Setting and subject seem chained together in your poetry. Are your subjects a product of their environment? Or vice versa?

NS: Yes, setting and subject are often linked in my work. Setting motivates many of my poems. I tend to emotionally respond to places and these responses influence what I write about. Sometimes the setting inspires the subject. Other times it becomes the subject. I am working on a series of poems inspired by central Pennsylvania, its history, its landscape, its people, its churches and prisons, its traffic patterns. All of these things are in the new poems.

AC: Why did you start the Binghamton Poetry Project? And how is it doing?

NS: I started the Binghamton Poetry Project in 2010 when I was a graduate student at Binghamton University. During the first two years in the graduate program, I was a Teaching Assistant for literature classes, and I wanted to be teaching poetry. So, I decided to reach out to the local community and set up shop. I was motivated, in part, by my desire to connect with the people in the place where I grew up, too. I lived in this place, moved away from it for 10 years, and then moved back to go back to school.

Poetry is community in a lot of ways, and I wanted to connect with the greater community beyond the university. I wanted to mend that gap between the school and its environment and the town and its people. I also have a lot of personal history tied to Binghamton and my perspective has changed over the years—writing poetry and teaching poetry in the community also helped me process and evolve and make amends for the trouble I got into when I was a youth growing up there. The Binghamton Poetry Project has now been passed on to other graduate students at BU and it is thriving.

AC: I enjoyed your piece “Married Bitches” for Best American Poetry. At that point, gay marriage was not legal everywhere. If you were to write a poem for the next national LGBT struggle, what would the topic be?

NS: Acceptance. I’ve been experiencing, noticing, and listening to the struggles surrounding acceptance that the LGBT community faces; let’s not forget the QQIA, too. We need acceptance for all of the LGBTQQIA community.

My wife, Deanna, and I have had too many experiences and stories of discrimination and a lack of acceptance. I wish I were more confident in the way that I respond and react to acts of discrimination, too. I worry that my neighbors notice my wife and me. I think they are confused that there is not a man and a woman living next door. When we moved in last year there were men working on our house and one of them asked me where my husband was—he was flirtatious. It was as if he was trying to find out if I would be living in this big house alone. My response was: my husband gets here tomorrow. He is on a business trip. I said this out of fear. I felt that if he knew I had a wife and that she was the other woman carrying boxes that he’d treat us differently. Because he thought my wife was my sister, I felt safer, less vulnerable, letting him think this. We’ve been targeted in similar scenarios many times. The lack of acceptance is everywhere. We are the Other.

Another recent experience happened at a dog boarding facility. The place is wonderful and the people are kind and generous. It took us a couple of months before we were considered regulars. We’d often drop off and pick up our dog together. Then, our routine shifted. One evening when Deanna was picking up our dog, Luca, the woman asked if the other
woman that's usually with her was her sister. Deanna said, **oh, that's my wife.** The woman’s response: **oh, well, look at you just saying it like that. People like you make great pet owners.** She was sincere and nice and in a way it was a kind sentiment, but, **people like you**, really? We are gay pet owners separate from straight pet owners. The lack of acceptance that we’ve experience is not nearly as scary as what other LGBTQIA people experience, but discrimination is discrimination and it needs to stop.

Contributors

Lisette Alonso (creative nonfiction) is a south Florida native and currently a third year poet in the University of Miami MFA program. When she’s not writing poetry, she’s raising children and catching up on two decades of missed sleep. On a good day she can do all three with her eyes closed.

Iver Arnegard's (creative nonfiction) work has appeared in the North American Review, Gulf Coast, the Missouri Review, and elsewhere. His book, Whip & Spur, was published by Gold Line Press last year after winning their 2014 Fiction Award. He lives in Taos, New Mexico.

Brian Michael Barbeito (cover art) is a resident of Ontario, Canada. A poet, writer and photographer, he currently has work at CV2 The Canadian Journal of Poetry and Critical Writing, and is forthcoming at Fiction International out of San Diego State University.

Eleanor Leonne Bennett (interior art) is an international award-winning artist of almost fifty awards. She was also the CIWEM Young Environmental Photographer of The Year in 2013. Eleanor's photography has been published in British Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar. Her work has been displayed around the world consistently for six years since the age of thirteen. This year (2015) she has done the anthology cover for the incredibly popular Austin International Poetry Festival. She is featured in Schiffer’s Contemporary Wildlife Art published this Spring.

Originally from Brooklyn, NY, John Biscello (creative nonfiction) has lived in Taos, NM for the past thirteen years. He is the author of the novel Broken Land, a Brooklyn Tale, and a collection of stories, Freeze Tag. His new novel Raking the Dust is scheduled for Fall 2015 publication.

William C. Blome (fiction) writes poetry and short fiction. He lives near Baltimore, MD, and he has a master’s degree from the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has appeared in fine little mags such as Amarillo Bay, Prism International, Laurel Review, Salted Feathers, and The California Quarterly.

Erica Bodwell (poetry) is a poet and attorney from Concord, New Hampshire. Her poems have appeared or arc forthcoming in PANK, HeART, Barnstorm, Hot Metal Bridge, Stone Highway Review, Cobalt, The Orange Room Review and other fine journals.
Bethany Bowman’s (poetry) poems have appeared in *The Comstock Review, Ascent, Art House America, The Cresset,* and *Rock & Sling.* Originally from the Mohawk Valley, she now lives in Indiana with her husband and two kids and works in Taylor University’s art department.

Peyton Burgess (fiction) lives in New Orleans where he works at Loyola University’s library and teaches creative writing and composition. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fiction Southeast, Xavier Review, 3:AM Magazine, Exquisite Corpse, Salon, Queen Mob’s Teahouse,* and *Chicago Quarterly Review.* See more of his work here: www.wordwordwordwordwordwordword.com/

Jennifer Doerr (fiction) is a jazz amanuensis living in New York City. She earned her MFA from The New School, teaches writing to high school students, and mentors with Girls Write Now. Her work is published in the GWN *Voice to Voice Anthology, A Quiet Courage,* and on her blog wordandservice.wordpress.com.

Austin Eichelberger (fiction) is a native Virginian who happily teaches as much English and writing as he can manage in New Mexico. His fiction has appeared in over 50 journals, including *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine, Extract(s), Eclectic Flash,* and *First Stop Fiction.* More of his writing lives at austineichelberger.wordpress.com.

Gail Eisenhart’s (poetry) poems have been published in *Assisi, Diverse Voices, Alive Now, The Centrifugal Eye* and other online and print journals. A retired Executive Assistant, she currently works part time at the Belleville (IL) Public Library and travels in her spare time, collecting memories that eventually show up in new poems.

MFC Feeley’s (fiction) novel *Birdie* was a 2013 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Quarterfinalist. Recent work has appeared on line and in print. She is currently at work on a collection of short stories. See more of her work at: facebook/MFCFeeley.

Brad Garber (interior art) has shown his drawing and paintings since 1997, in the Portland and Lake Oswego, Oregon area. His photographs have made it onto the front cover of *Vine Leaves 2014 Anthology,* and in *Gravel Magazine, Poor Yorick Journal, Off the Coast, Quail Bell, The Grief Diaries, Livid Squid, Mud Season Review, Crab Fat Literary Magazine, Dirty Chai* and *Foliate Oak.*
Elizabeth A. Gibson (poetry) holds a B.A. in English and Creative Writing, and an M.A. in American Studies, both from Michigan State University. She works as a senior technical writer in Atlanta. Her poetry has been published in Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts, and an anthology called Autumn Leaves, published by Barnes and Noble.

Clinton Inman (interior art) was born in Walton-on-Thames, England, graduated from San Diego State University, and has been a teacher all his life having recently retired from the Tampa Bay area where he lives with his wife, Elba.

Abriana Jetté (poetry) is the editor of the #1 best-selling anthology, 50 Whispers: Poems by Extraordinary Women. Her poetry and nonfiction have been published in dozens of journals including The Iron Horse Literary Review, River Teeth, The Moth, Poetry Quarterly, and many other places. She lives in Brooklyn, where she teaches for St. John’s University and for the City University of New York. For more visit: abrianajette.com.

Katie Kelleher (interior art) is a freelance artist and photographer living in Asheville, North Carolina. She spends much of her time searching dumpsters, scrap piles and alleyways for scenes or materials with the potential to become something beautiful. She tends to casually overlook this mention when first meeting people. Her work has been featured in publications and galleries internationally. When not creating art, she can usually be found hiking with her dog Journey, rock climbing in the beautiful surrounding mountains, playing soccer, or wondering why she sounds so much more interesting on paper.

Linda Lenhoff (fiction) is the author of Life a la Mode and Latte Lessons. Her latest novel, *Your Actual Life May Vary*, delves into suburban life, toxins, theme parks, kidnapping, and homes built on land that tends to give way. It’s a comedy. Find out more about her work at lindalattelessons.wordpress.com.

Kathleen Brewin Lewis’s (fiction) chapbook, Fluent in Rivers, was published by FutureCycle Press in 2014 and she has new work forthcoming in Menacing Hedge, Cider Press Review, Broad River Review, and Southern Humanities Review. She lives in Atlanta where she is Senior Editor of Flycatcher online journal.

Dave Marks (interior art) is from Merseyside and now lives in north Wales. He has had a varied career working in industry, on the railway, in horticulture and as an academic. Photography has been his creative interest throughout all this time.
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Anthony Martin (fiction) can be found in *Squawk Back*, *Flyleaf Journal*, *Quiddity*, *The Austin Review*, *Watershed Review*, and up the Nung River in search of Colonel Kurtz. Always getting off the boat. Find him on twitter: @pen_tight.

Bob McNeil (cartoon) tenaciously tries to create artistic stun guns and Tasers, weapons for the downtrodden in their effort to trounce oppression. His illustrations and verses want to be fortresses against despotic politics. After years of being a professional illustrator, spoken word artist and writer, Bob still wants his work to express one cause—justice.

Daniel Miller (fiction) is a Texas-based writer and teacher. He holds a PhD in theology and ethics from the University of Edinburgh. He has published one book, *Animal Ethics & Theology* (Routledge). His short fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *New Blackfriars Short Story Sunday*, and *Modern Theology*.

Frank C. Modica (poetry) is a retired special education teacher living in Urbana, IL with his dog, Nero. In his spare time he volunteers with a number of local arts and social service organizations. His work is forthcoming on the website of *Black Heart Magazine*.

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David Moulton (fiction) grew up in the Midwest and currently lives in San Francisco. While he does a variety of things to make a living, he’s able to devote most his time to reading and writing. He recently finished a novel and is looking for a publisher.
Carrie Naughton (poetry) is a freelance bookkeeper who writes speculative fiction, environmental essays, book reviews, and poetry. Her work can be read at freezeframefiction, Luna Station Quarterly, and Silver Birch Press. Find her at carrienaughton.com - where she blogs frequently about whatever captures her interest.

Diane Payne (fiction) is the MFA Director at University of Arkansas-Monticello. She is the author of Burning Tulips, Freedom’s Just Another Word, and A New Kind of Music. She has been published in hundreds of literary journals.

Stephen Thomas Roberts (poetry) resides with his wife in Dutchess County, New York, commuting daily on the train to midtown Manhattan where he practices insurance law, not unlike Wallace Stevens. His work has appeared in Poetry Salzburg Review, TRINACRIA, Third Wednesday, Blue Unicorn and BAGAZINE 5, among other publications.

Victor David Sandiego (poetry) lives in the high desert of central México where he walks the cities and mountains, plays drums with jazz combos and in musical / poetry collaborations, writes, and studies. His work appears in various journals and on public radio. His web site is www.victordavid.com.

Gerard Sarnat (poetry) authored critically-acclaimed 2010’s Homeless Chronicles from Abraham to Burning Man, 2012’s Disputes, and 2014’s 17s. He’s a physician who’s setup and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised, a CEO of healthcare organizations, and a Stanford professor. For Huffington Post reviews, reading dates including Stanford and more; visit GerardSarnat.com.

Jesse Sensibar (fiction) loves small furry animals and assault rifles with equal abandon and still has a soft spot in his heart for innocent strippers and jaded children. In 2014 he earned his MFA in creative writing while teaching Freshman Composition at a large southwestern state university in the mountain town where he has lived since the late 1980s. His work has appeared in Ray’s Road Review, Fuck Fiction, Corner Club Press, Grey Sparrow Journal, and Niche.

Andy Singer (cartoon) is a freelance cartoonist and illustrator. His cartoons appear in a small number of alternative weekly and monthly publications in the USA, Europe, and China. Occasionally, they make it to more mainstream publications like The New Yorker, Esquire, or the Washington Post. Check out more of his work on his website at http://www.andysinger.com/.
Roger Bernard Smith (poetry) studied painting at the Art student's League, New York, and the San Francisco Art Institute. His chapbook, *did music die*, was published in August, 2014 by Tiger's Eye Press, Denver, CO. His poems have appeared in two dozen journals during the past three decades. He lives in New York.

Gina Williams (interior art) lives and creates in the Pacific Northwest. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Okey-Panky, Carve, Tiferet Journal, The Sun, Fugue*, at the Whidbey Art Gallery and in *Whidbey Life Magazine, Palooka, Great Weather for Media, Black Box Gallery, and The Newer York (TNY)* among others. Learn more about her and her at GinaMarieWilliams.com.

Elizabeth Weaver (poetry) is a Squaw Valley Community Writer and two-time semi-finalist for “Discovery”/*The Nation* award. She received her graduate degree for poetry. Her work appears in several journals and anthologies, including *Rattle, 5AM*, and *Quick Fiction*. Elizabeth’s art and writing is at elizabethweaver.wordpress.com while photographs by her novel-in-progress’s main character are at bonegirlpix.wordpress.com.

Nicole Yurcaba’s (poetry) work has appeared in *VoxPoetica, The Atlanta Review, Philomathean, Bluestone Review, Floyd County Moonshine*, and many others. Her first poetry collection titled *Backwoods and Back Words* is available on Amazon. She serves as English faculty at Eastern WV Community and Technical College.
Staff

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**Charlie Crossland Lewis**, Craft Talk Editor, has been a business and technical writer and editor for more years than she cares to admit. She holds an MFA from Bennington College and is still in the long, slow process of putting together the pieces of her life lived in the back seat of a series of Fords, Chevys, and a pink-finned ’62 Cadillac while following her steel-guitar playing father around the West Coast.

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Jennifer Porter, Co-Founder and Fiction Editor, lives in metropolitan-Detroit. Her fiction is forthcoming in Old Northwest Review and has appeared in Gravel, Ray's Road Review, The Dos Passos Review, Jet Fuel Review, Sling Magazine, Apeiron Review, and others. Her nonfiction has appeared in drafthorse, This Zine Will Change Your Life, and others. She earned an MFA at the Bennington Writing Seminars. See more of her grumblings on her blog at: butterflymilkweed.wordpress.com.

Meaghan Quinn, Associate Editor, lives and teaches creative writing and English literature in Northampton, Massachusetts. She is a recent graduate of The Writing Seminars MFA program at Bennington College, and she is currently working on her first manuscript, The Scriptures They Left Out. This summer, she studied poetry at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and hopes to return next summer. Her poems are forthcoming or published in Triggerfish Critical Review, Adrienne, Free State Review, Cargoes, and The Album.

Laura Jean Schneider, Assistant Editor, is an MFA in Writing candidate at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She won the inaugural Big Snowy Prize in Fiction in 2014. Her essays about living on a remote working cattle ranch appear regularly in “Ranch Diaries,” her ongoing web series for High Country News.

Maura Snell, Co-Founder and Poetry Editor, has published poems in Inside the Dome, Red Paint Hill Quarterly, The Bennington Review and Brain, Child Magazine and forthcoming in The Golden Shovel Anthology (University of Arkansas Press 2017). She holds an MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars and when she is not reading or writing poetry, she works with incarcerated teen girls teaching poetry writing and critique. She lives in rural Massachusetts with her husband, daughters and two rescue mutts.

Alison Turner, Reader, was born in the mountains of Colorado, where she learned to spend large amounts of time outside. She has an MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Alberta, and an MFA in fiction from Bennington College. She lives, works, and plays in Denver.

Catherine Weber, Website Designer, is an award-winning poet and artist who works with encaustic, photography, paper, and textiles. She holds a BA in Communications from Emerson College and an MA in Critical and Creative Thinking from the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She regularly performs poems and short stories at Wake Up and Smell the Poetry in Hopkinton, MA.
Why Is It So Hard to Kill You?

poems  Barrett Warner

I cut things down,
When things are down I cut them up,
After I cut them up I consider my options.
Tillie Olsen Short Story Award

Tillie Olsen was the author of the short story collection “Tell Me a Riddle,” the story “Requa I” as seen in Best American Short Stories 1971 and several journalistic pieces from the 1930s about the struggle for economic justice. All of these works have been newly gathered by the University of Nebraska Press – Bison Books.

Olsen was born in 1912 on a tenant farm in Nebraska, the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants. Early in her life, she began crusading for worker rights. She continued working as an activist her entire life, especially in her San Francisco community. She and her partner Jack Olsen suffered under McCarthy’s witch hunt. Olsen died at the age of 95—a mother, grandmother, award-winning writer, feminist, and human rights and anti-war activist.

Olsen’s family has graciously given The Tishman Review permission to name our short story contest in honor of one of our heroes, Tillie Olsen.

The Tishman Review is looking for the best story that captures the spirit of not only the writing of Tillie Olsen but her work to make our world a better place.

Entries should consist of unpublished (including online and personal blogs) short stories not longer than 5,000 words in length. Manuscripts and file names must not contain any identifying information. Please double-space and paginate your entry. Please use only one space after a period. All entries must be received through Submittable with the $15.00 entry fee per story. Writers may enter as many stories as they wish, but each one must be entered separately and with the $15.00 fee. Entries will be accepted between February 25th and April 25th of 2016. Simultaneous submissions are allowed—please withdraw your story immediately if it is accepted elsewhere for publication.

Please only include a cover letter in the Comments Section area on Submittable. In the cover letter, please identify your work with title, word count, and include a short third-person bio of no more than 50 words. Please make sure you submit your entry under the proper contest entry tab on our Submittable page. All entries received in the general submission boxes will be treated as such and NOT as a contest submission.

The final judge will be announced in February 2016. Contest winners will be notified by July 15th, 2016. The winner will receive $500.00 and publication in the July issue. 1st runner up will receive $100.00 and publication and one honorable mention $50.00 and publication. All entries will be considered for publication. For more information please visit our website: tishmanreview.com

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THE RESTLESS BOOKS PRIZE FOR NEW IMMIGRANT WRITING

- Fiction submissions accepted September through December, 2015
- Nonfiction submissions accepted fall, 2016
- Winner receives $10,000 and publication by Restless Books

INTRODUCTION

The ethos of America is defined by its immigrants. Their stories have always been an essential component of the nation’s cultural consciousness, from Isaac Bashevis Singer to Jhumpa Lahiri, from Jacob Riis to Maxine Hong Kingston. In novels, short stories, memoirs, and works of journalism, immigrants have shown us what resilience and family devotion we’re capable of, and have expanded our sense of what it means to be American. In these times of intense xenophobia, it is more important than ever that these stories reach the broadest possible audience.

With that in mind, we are proud to announce the first Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing. We are looking for extraordinary unpublished submissions from emerging writers of sharp, culture-straddling writing that addresses American identity in a global age. Each year, a distinguished panel of judges will select a winning manuscript to be published by Restless Books. We can’t wait to read what the new voices of America have to say, and to share it with the world. —Ilan Stavans, Publisher

SUBMISSIONS GUIDELINES AND ELIGIBILITY

The Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing (hereafter referred to as “the Prize”) will alternate yearly between accepting unpublished fiction and nonfiction submissions, beginning with fiction in 2015. Fiction submissions can take the form of a novel or a collection of short stories. Nonfiction submissions can take the form of a memoir, a collection of essays, or a book-length work of narrative nonfiction.

Manuscripts must be complete and submitted in English (translations welcome).
Candidates must be **first-generation residents of the United States.** *First-generation* can refer either to people born in another country who relocated to the U.S., or to American-born residents whose parents were born elsewhere.

Candidates must not have previously published a book in English. We encourage applicants to look at the other books Restless has released and previous contest winners to get a sense of our aesthetic.

We will only accept one submission per candidate per submission period, and submissions must be under the author’s real name, not under a pseudonym. Agented submissions are welcome.

Candidates may not submit the same manuscript for the Prize in subsequent years unless specifically invited by Restless.

Restless reserves the right to invite writers to submit for the Prize.

Restless reserves the right to consider any Prize submission for publication.

Submitted manuscripts may be simultaneously under consideration for publication by other publishing houses. Once a manuscript has been selected as the winner of the Prize, Restless will contact the author and ask that the manuscript be withdrawn from consideration elsewhere. A publishing contract between the winning author and Restless Books must be signed before the winner is announced.

* Please note that while Restless Books welcomes all submissions for the Prize, we do not accept unsolicited manuscripts for our publishing program.

**THE PRIZE**

The winner will receive a **$10,000 advance and publication by Restless Books** in print and digital editions. We expect to work closely with the winner and provide editorial guidance.

Five finalists will have selections of their work included in a digital chapbook published by Restless Books in conjunction with the Prize.

The winner and finalists will be honored at an award ceremony in the Summer of 2016.

**REQUIRED MATERIALS**

Candidates are asked to submit a CV and a one-page cover letter as the first pages of their manuscript. The cover letter should address the candidate’s background as a writer, experience as an immigrant, and inspiration for the submitted work.

Restless will accept only electronic submissions by way of our submissions manager. The manuscript should be a PDF or Word file (.doc and .docx), and the text should be double-spaced, in twelve-point font, and with numbered pages. Manuscripts must be a minimum of forty-five thousand words.

There is **no fee** to submit a manuscript for consideration.

**SUBMISSIONS PERIOD**

Submissions will be accepted from **September 1 until December 31, 2015.**
PROCEDURE

Restless will accept open submissions in addition to soliciting nominations from authors and professionals in the field. The Restless editorial staff will review submissions and recommend a shortlist to the judges, who will select the finalists and winner. Finalists will be announced on April 15, 2016. The winner will be announced in May 2016.

THE JUDGES

Maaza Mengiste is an Ethiopian-American writer. She was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and lived in Nigeria and Kenya before settling in the United States. Her debut novel, the award-winning Beneath the Lion’s Gaze, was named one of the ten best contemporary African books by The Guardian. Mengiste is a Fulbright Scholar and World Literature Today’s 2013 Puterbaugh Fellow. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, The New York Times, Lettre Internationale, Granta, Collaloo, The Granta Anthology of the African Short Story, among other places, and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. She was runner-up for the 2011 Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and a finalist for a Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize, an NAACP Image Award, and an Indies Choice Book of the Year Award in Adult Debut. Mengiste writes fiction and nonfiction dealing with migration, the intersections of photography and war, and forgotten moments in world history. She has completed a documentary project, Girl Rising, with 10x10 Films, that focuses on girls’ education globally and features the voices of several noted actors, including Meryl Streep, Anne Hathaway, Alicia Keys, and Cate Blanchett.

Javier Molea has stretched his title as bookseller to its absolute limits. In the process, he has positioned himself firmly at the crux of a burgeoning New York Spanish-language literary community. On the side, Molea has launched a bilingual publishing company, DiazGrey Editores, showcasing titles by Lina Meruane and Enrique Winter (and looking forward to a new book of Alejandro Zambra poems in the fall). Molea’s most recent project is La Universidad Desconocida, a series of writing and literature workshops. Originally from Montevideo, Uruguay’s only city, Molea earned an advanced degree in literature from la Universidad de la Republica.

Ilan Stavans is the Publisher of Restless Books and the Lewis-Sebring Professor in Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College. His books include On Borrowed Words, Spanglish, Dictionary Days, The Disappearance, and A Critic’s Journey. He has edited The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature, the three-volume set Isaac Bashevis Singer: Collected Stories, The Poetry of Pablo Neruda, among dozens of other volumes. He is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, Chile’s Presidential Medal, and the Jewish Book Award. Stavans’s work, translated into a dozen languages, has been adapted to the stage and screen. He hosted the syndicated PBS television show Conversations with Ilan Stavans. He is a cofounder of the Great Books Summer Program at Amherst, Stanford, and Oxford.
Support Us

You can support us in several ways. Your support goes toward paying the writers and artists for the work you enjoy in our journal. As do all organizations, TTR also has operating costs and production costs, relating to producing the journal in three formats: online, e-book, and print-on-demand. Currently, we have an unpaid, all-volunteer staff, but we hope someday to compensate our staff (in some way) for their tireless devotion to TTR.

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