AIR/LIGHT

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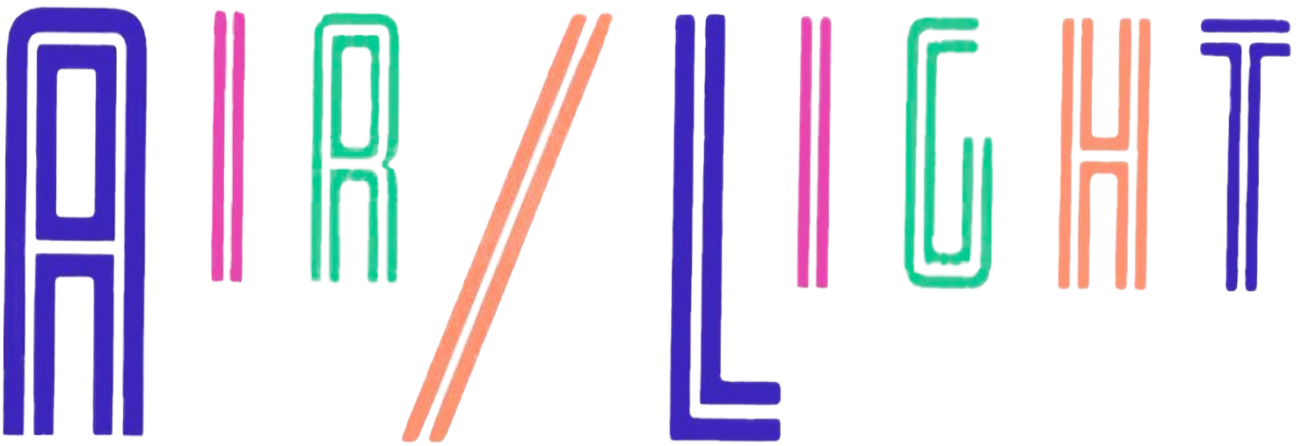

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AIR/LIGHT

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Air/Light logo created by Letty Avila and Dennis Lan

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Air/Light *is an online literary journal published by the English Department at the University of Southern California. We showcase both traditional and innovative works. We are firmly of California and the West Coast — the occupied land of the Tongva in Los Angeles, where we are based, and those of other indigenous peoples of the Americas — but also national, international. We mean to look out expansively from this place rather than to gaze narrowly back at it, to express a West Coast aesthetic, a West Coast sensibility, and direct that lens onto the world.*

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FROM THE EDITOR

Let's Just See What Happens

David L. Ulin

If the pandemic has taught me any lesson, it's to take nothing for granted; the result is not that I don't dream anymore but that I dream in a different way. Delta, Omicron, breakthrough infections—what they reaffirm is our utter inability to control the environment in which we live.

And yet, this does not mean we can't affect things. This doesn't mean we have no agency at all. Rather, it means that we have no choice but to embrace the conditional, to learn to see uncertainty as neither burden nor potential, but as the inevitable responsibility of being alive. *Let's just see what happens*, I have begun repeating, over and over, every day. You can read that as either a mantra or a reality check, although for me, it has taken on the weight of an affirmation, or even, in some elusive way, a secular sort of prayer.

The notion of seeing what happens, of course, is one with which every writer in this issue is familiar; how else, after all, does art or literature get made? This is not a matter of disengagement or disconnection; it is not about surrender or retreat. Once, thirty or so years ago at a family dinner, my mother's older sister lit into my wife and me, both young artists, for being too idealistic to understand the world. Artists live in a magic cave, she said, effectively dismissing us. *A magic cave? I wish the cave was magic*, I might have said or should have said. If I'm going to be honest, however, I must admit that I remained mute.

And yet, here is what I was thinking: In what magic cave would I spend so much time worrying about money, about the bills we were struggling to keep up with, about how to make the rent? This, of course, is the condi-

tion—or one of them—under which we work, our creativity always balanced by, and infused with, practical concerns. We must seek, or carve out, time for our expression; we must commit to art if we want art to commit to us. This is what is so exciting to me about the pieces in this fifth issue of *Air/Light*: all have been produced by artists, both emerging and established, who share that level of allegiance, not only to their own work (although that, as well) but also to the conversation, the colloquy that art necessarily provokes.

Something similar might be said about a new initiative at USC, which *Air/Light* is thrilled to help introduce with this issue: The Chowdhury Prize in Literature. Presented in conjunction with the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Foundation, *The Kenyon Review*, and Kenyon College, the prize is an annual international mid-career award for exceptional writers. It comes with a $20,000 purse. The inaugural recipient, the Greek short story writer Christos Ikonomou, embodies the commitment necessary to be an artist. His fiction focuses on working people caught in the vice grip of austerity while, at the same time, existing in the space between public and private—or more accurately, in a landscape where the public can't help but intrude upon the private, a zone of the interior and the exterior.

The Chowdhury Prize will be presented at a ceremony on the USC campus on April 21, 2022, and *Air/Light* is delighted to be publishing a short story in this issue by Ikonomou, translated by the remarkable Karen Emmerich.

Let's just see what happens, indeed.

FICTION

I Know You're There

Paul Tremblay

"I know you're there," Silas Chen says.

His niece Victoria, crouching in the doorway separating the hallway from the kitchen, calls out, "But you can't see me!"

Silas exchanges a weary half-smile with his sister Gwen. She is five years younger than Silas, a timestamp of permanent import on their relationship, even as the difference shrinks while their middle ages expand. When Silas was a child, he would hide on Gwen and pretend to be dead when she found him. Gwen would shake and tickle him, pinch his cheeks, and half-laugh, half-tear up while shouting, "This isn't funny!"

Silas imagined he played dead so well his arms, legs, fingers, and toes still wouldn't move when he would eventually send those secret bodily messages to lift, wiggle, or twitch. The longer he remained play-dead, the more convinced he became that his body was a cage and he wouldn't be able to move when he needed to, which both scared him and inexplicably thrilled him.

Gwen says to Victoria, sing-song, "Someone should be in bed and not eavesdropping."

Silas hopes Gwen won't be too hard on her daughter. Victoria doesn't know how to process the shock and grief any more than the adults do.

"I am not dropping!" Five-years-old, made of charged electrons, Victoria Muppet-rushes into the kitchen for the cover-blown, tickle attack of her uncle. Silas, still in his chair, scoops her up and airplanes her over his head.

While Victoria is airborne and giggling, her mom tersely ticks off the bedtime checklist: go to the bathroom, wash your face, brush your teeth, pick out one, only one, book for Daddy to read, and where is Daddy? Gwen falters, as though she said something she shouldn't have. Maybe she did. Hell if Silas knows. He cannot provide comfort or answers for anyone else, never mind himself.

Victoria offers her bed to Uncle Silas again, and he declines, insisting the couch fits his long body better. He presses the button of Victoria's nose and kisses her forehead. She wipes it away and her maniacal laughter turns to tears. She tells him she's sorry about Uncle David. He says, "Thank you. I am, too." He wants to ask if Victoria can stay a little longer. She would help keep the waiting trap of his thoughts from snapping shut. Silas swings her off his lap, her feet padding onto the kitchen tile, and says, "Bedtime, little Vee. Goodnight."

She wipes her eyes and says, "I am *big* Vee," and stomps out of the kitchen, toward the plaintive calls of her father.

Silas covers then wipes his face with one hand. Gwen asks if he wants more wine.

"Do you have to ask?" he says and exhales a shudder. He holds in all the other shudders, the infinite queue of shudders, ones to be doled out in the coming days, months, years. The very thought of future years without David is a purgatorial burden. There is no segue to what he says next because he shouldn't be quiet, not now when he is so ill-prepared for the looming contemplative intrusion of silence, one surely to feature an endless replaying of what happened when he returned home after work.

After Gwen refills his glass with Pinot Grigio, he says, "I knew something was wrong the second I opened the door." He pauses, honoring or damning what he will say next. "Do you want to hear this?"

"If you want to talk, I'm here. But you don't have to talk either. You don't have to do anything." Gwen satellites around the kitchen, carrying the empty bottle of wine, until she crashes it into the deep sink. She says, "Sorry," twice, quickly rinses her hands, then leans against the counter, her arms crossed.

He should wiseass a joke about how uncomfortable she is. The joke would help them both, but he's not capable of it. He says, "I came home, maybe an hour early. David wasn't at the dining room table. His laptop wasn't even open. Notebook and folders closed and neatly stacked. Right away, I knew.

Maybe he'd stopped working already, but I fucking knew that wasn't right. I ran around calling his name and I went into the TV room and he was just—he was on the floor, on his stomach, head turned away from me, toward the TV. The screen was blue." Silas waves a hand, as though pantomiming the previous detail be stricken because it wasn't necessary, or he didn't have the time or the want to explain the blue screen. "He does his exercise DVDs in the morning, okay? So, David was in his exercise clothes. T-shirt and compression shorts. And, you know, his heart gave out. It must've happened right after I left, not too long after I left. Instead of me getting home in the afternoon an hour early and however many fucking hours late, what if I stayed an extra hour in the morning? Why would I have? I wish I stayed. I should've stayed."

"Silas—it's not your—you couldn't have known—"

"He was dead. He'd been dead for hours, for the whole day. For what we call a day, right? It had been a long day for me at work, too. That's what I used to call a long day. I had no idea how long a day could be. No one does until you do. I haven't seen—I haven't seen many dead people. None, except for funerals. But David was dead, Gwen. I won't get into—he was so clearly gone. His body was there and he was gone. He wasn't there anymore. I didn't know what to do. I—I said his name over and over, and I ran back to the kitchen, to like—what—get him a glass of water or something? I don't know, I don't know what I was thinking. Except I wasn't thinking I could help him. I knew I couldn't. Is that terrible? Is that awful?"

Gwen shakes her head and whispers, "No."

"I didn't leave him alone. I would not do that to him, not while he was still home. I was in the kitchen, but I could still see him and if he could've, he would've been able to see me, too. I called 911 and when I was on the line, giving them his name and my name and address, I turned slightly and I cupped a hand around my mouth and the phone so he wouldn't hear, like I didn't want him to be worried. And I wasn't facing straight down the hallway to the TV room, I was turned, but I could still see him, but I wasn't really watching him either because I was trying to be all there, all together on the call. I didn't want to screw that up. The call was the worst and most important thing in the world and I couldn't fuck it up. And then I swear, right before I hung up, I saw—movement." Silas waves his hand by his temple. "I was facing this way''—he turns his torso so Gwen is on his hard right. "Like now. I'm not looking at you, but I can still see you without focusing directly

on you." He pauses and remains looking but not-looking at Gwen. "David was on the floor, already permanently on the floor like he will be in my fucking head forever now, but I was turned so he was a blurry, peripheral background shape, and then—then the moment before it happened, I knew it would happen. I mean, I didn't turn to fully see it, and I don't know if I saw anything, but then I saw it anyway."

"Saw what, Silas?"

"I was in the kitchen—again not really looking at him—and I saw him lift his upper torso and turn his head. I hung up and ran back to the TV room and sat next to him and held his hand and I watched him. I watched him until the ambulance came. His head was turned, facing the kitchen and not the TV and that stupid blue screen. He was facing me."

*

"Come sit with me on the bench. Share a pretend cigarette with me," David's mother, Janice Harrington, says. She hasn't smoked in over two decades, but never passes on a chance to remind anyone and everyone how much she misses it. A tall white woman in her late sixties, she keeps manically fit (her own self-description) via competition. Prior to the pandemic, she played in pickleball tournaments two weekends out of every month. The tournaments are due to return later this summer.

Janice grabs Silas's hand and gently pulls him toward a green, wooden bench under the shade of an oak tree's weary branches.

Silas says, "I should help with the clean-up." Friends and family gather trash, fold tablecloths, distribute leftover food, break down folding tables and chairs. His elderly parents, Fung and Catherine, oversee and coordinate the packing of Gwen's minivan. Ninety minutes earlier, they brought everyone to tears and laughter, telling the slightly-embellished-for-effect story of meeting their future son-in-law David for dinner. A lovely evening that had ended, unbeknownst to them at the time, with David rushing to the ER because he'd accidently ingested a small amount of shellfish.

Janice says, "Eh, let everyone else do it."

The memorial service was held at Lynch Park, a green space and rocky

beach jutting into Beverly Channel, and began with Silas kneeling on a seawall, emptying an urn of David's cremated ashes into the relentless, foaming ocean. The intimate procession walked to the picnic area adjacent to a rose garden for what Silas described as a casual reception meets eulogy. Silas knew his husband of twelve years and partner for fifteen didn't want anything to do with a religious ceremony, but David had shared no other final wishes or instructions in the event of his death. They believed they would have plenty of time to discuss such abrupt finalities later in their yawning, nebulous future.

Silas says, "We're lucky the rain held out."

"Are you feeling lucky, Silas?"

"No, not particularly." He smiles without smiling. He can't sneak anything past Janice. Never could. His using "lucky" was a subtle, cynical fuck you to the universe, one he wanted heard and tallied.

"Me neither. But it was a beautiful afternoon, Silas. You did my poor David proud. He was always proud of you."

Tears pool and spill, as they have all day, as they have since that afternoon—Silas can't do this. Not now. He'll further indulge in cherished memories, later, after. After when or what, he isn't sure, but he can't do it now. He's afraid his memories of David, his David, could be tainted by the now, by what's running through his head now, and by the fears of what's to come.

Janice says, "When David first told me about you—this was months before I met you in person—he showed me a goofy picture on Facebook. You were standing in someone's kitchen. Or was it yours? And you had that long hair and the waistband of your sweatpants hiked up to your chest. He pointed and said, 'Mom, that's the guy. *The* guy.'"

Silas wipes the tears from his cheeks and shakes his head, as though answering "no" to a series of impossible questions.

"You can talk. Or I can keep talking, like I do. Or we can just sit here and share a cry with our pretend cigarettes. On a day like today, Menthol and filterless."

"I knew something awful had happened to him the second I stepped into our house. It was like passing through an invisible barrier, and after I passed through, I could no longer remember where I was before—"

Janice doesn't fill the pause. Sometimes a pause is language.

"He was on the floor in the TV room, dressed in his workout clothes. His head was turned toward the TV, which was still on, but the screen was blue,

all blue. That kind of freaked me out. Is that weird? The fucking blank blue screen. His head was turned away from that, and toward the kitchen, toward me, like he was—was waiting for me to come home. Waiting for me to help him. But I couldn't. The other—the other weird part was his right arm, was bent at an odd angle—" Silas leans forward on the bench and demonstrates. "—so the back of his hand and forearm were pressed to his lower back, like he was reaching for an itch, or rubbing a sore muscle. He'd been complaining about his back lately and I told him to take a day off from working out every once and a while.

"I don't remember deciding to leave his side to go to the kitchen and I don't remember the walk to the kitchen, but there I was, with David now twenty feet away, me with the phone in my shaking hand. And while on with 911, I wasn't looking at him, but I could still see him. Like now, I'm looking or facing straight ahead but I can still see you out of the corner of my eye, right? Do our eyes have corners? I've been thinking about eye corners. Thinking it's bullshit. It's all bullshit. Everything. And right before I hung up, most of me looking at the red phone symbol, the one you press to hang up, and in my eye corner, I saw movement. I couldn't tell exactly what it was that was moving, but David or something near David moved. That's what I saw in the eye corner. I hung up and turned my head. Nothing was moving. I waited and watched but nothing. Then I went back to David and his right arm wasn't behind his back anymore. His right hand was next to his face."

*

"I haven't been home in over a week. I'm getting too old for couch surfing," Silas says. A bowl of microwave popcorn rests on the couch between him and his friend Michael. Baseball is on the television. Michael Lavoie is in his mid-fifties and is gregarious in the way that dares the world to say something to his face. Gray frosts his short, curly dark hair. He is a Red Sox fanatic and is equally obsessed with his floundering fantasy baseball team.

Michael looks up from his tablet computer for the first time since the second inning; he blinks madly behind his saucer-sized reading glasses and says, "Hey, the guest bedroom is not a couch."

"You know what I mean."

"Oh, and you're not that old."

"Nice save."

"You can stay as long as you need. I appreciate the company." Michael's husband Bob is a medical software consultant and is away on his first week-long work trip since the pandemic hit. Bob is due to return in four days.

Silas says, "Thank you, I really mean it." They became friends in the mid-'90s, meeting when Michael moved to Brighton, into the apartment across the hall from Silas. Michael has had jobs in advertising for as long as Silas has known him, and he once worked on a campaign with David, who at the time was a recent marketing hire for a small chain of seafood restaurants. Michael inadvertently introduced David to Silas when, after successful completion of the restaurant's campaign, Silas crashed their celebratory not-date at Fugaku's sushi bar.

"Unlike Bob," Michael says, "you don't complain when I have baseball on."

"I complain inside my head."

"Yeah, you can leave now. Thanks."

"The door *will* hit my ass on the way out." Silas lumbers into the kitchen.

Michael mutters to his tablet about his fantasy team's lack of innings and quality starts from the pitchers, then asks over his shoulder, "Are you ready for that?"

"Ready for what?" Silas returns to the couch and holds up his glass. "It's just water."

"Smart ass. I am delicately asking if you are ready to go home," Michael says.

"You have never asked anything delicately in your life." Silas appreciates his friend's honesty and bluntness, as off-putting as they can be sometimes.

"I am not pushing you to go or stay. When you do go, you can come back here if it's too soon."

"Thank you, again. The original answer I almost successfully avoided is 'no.' No, I am not ready. But I'm at the point where each day that goes by will make it that much harder to go back. Plus, I really need to get going on the probate stuff. Fuck. I have a lot of shit to deal with."

"Yes, you do. But do it at your own pace. If I can help with any of it,

please let me. I know you won't ask. Consider this a pre-ask."

Silas hugs the bowl of popcorn and slouches deep into the couch. "What if I walk through the door and it's like—it's like the last time I walked through that door?"

"You haven't been home since? Not even to—" Michael pauses. His bluntness has a limit.

"Gwen went in and got me everything I needed for David and for me. I had to make a detailed list and draw her a map."

"The next time you walk inside your house, Silas, it won't be the same. It might be harder, but it won't be like the last time."

Silas nods as though he agrees, but inside his head, instead of complaining about the baseball game, he tells Michael he is wrong. He fears it will be exactly like last time. He says, "I knew as soon as I walked in. Part of the knowing was that I wouldn't be able to do anything. David was on the floor in the TV room, on his stomach. He never laid on his stomach. He slept on his side, or on his back if he'd had a few drinks, and then he would snore and I'd tease him about it the next day, text him snoring cartoon gifs. Anyway, there he was on the floor, on his stomach. He definitely wasn't snoring. The TV was still on. His workout DVD had ended, and the screen was a blank, dead blue. He wasn't facing the TV. His head was turned toward the kitchen and me, and his eyes were closed but—let's just say it was obvious he wasn't asleep. I called 911 and turned my back to him when I did, because I just couldn't. Not while I was looking down at him. I answered her questions and I told them to hurry the fuck up. I knew it was already too late, but I told them to hurry. Also, I didn't want to be there alone with him like that. And—when I hung up, it was like he'd heard my thoughts about not wanting to be alone because his eyes were open. He was dead and they had been shut and then he was still dead but his eyes were open."

*

Silas stands on his front stoop, overstuffed night-bag slung over one shoulder. It's early evening, twilight. The return home time. He wanted to be here in the morning, with sunlight on his back, projecting his shadow on the red

door. Instead, he stayed at Michael's, made the phone calls and the appointments he had to make. He answered work emails that could've gone unanswered. The next thing he knew, the morning and afternoon and this ninth day had passed. Time was accelerating and decaying.

Nine days ago, Silas opened the front door without pause or consideration. That's not to say he wasn't thinking anything. Like the rest of us during our waking, automatic moments, Silas buoyed within the flowing groundwater of subconscious thought. Perhaps in his mind he summarized his workday, tallying the anxieties and attempted normalcies associated with his recent return to the partially occupied office. As likely, he flitted through unconnected thoughts; what would they make for dinner, the exterior trim needed painting and should he do it himself, was it too late for a walk, the anticipatory joy of removing his work shoes. Silas walked inside into what felt like an empty house. If one lived with another long enough, one earned the ability to sense the other person's presence, or lack of presence. None of the lights were on. Had they lost power? David was not sitting at his semi-permanent workspace at the dining room table, hunched over his comically small laptop, flanked by stacks of papers and an oversized exterior mic he used for meetings, wearing one of his three pairs of reading glasses that made him look old and unbearably cute. The laptop was closed. His permanently stained coffee mug and plastic blue water cup (one David had measured how much it held to the nearest fluid ounce to track the amount of water he drank daily) were not next to the laptop, were not on the table. Silas stared at where David wasn't, as though waiting for him to un-disappear.

And there was the smell. Had Silas noticed David was not at the dining room table or the smell first? Initially, he thought it was a garbage smell, or had David microwaved Brussels sprouts? An ammonia sharpness and fecal tang intensified as he wandered into the kitchen. He rolled open the two windows above the sink. Had the septic system backed up? Did David leave, go to the hardware store? No, Silas had parked next to David's car. Silas didn't normally call out his husband's name when he entered their house, nor had he ever had reason to. Increasing dread forced the lilting, plaintive syllables from Silas's sinking chest.

"David?" The house remained quiet; listening-quiet. Silas hurried through the kitchen toward the hallway half-bathroom while checking his phone for text messages. There weren't any. He typed out, "Where are you?" He

called out David's name again while walking with his head down, watching for a return text or the three dots that meant he was responding. The suffocating odor and silence simultaneously narrowed and expanded his universe, and he was inexorably drawn to the new black hole in its center. He was a few steps away from the living room when he looked up, saw David, and dropped his phone.

Silas recounted this scene many times to friends and family. His own personal folktale, he's aware of how the story has changed, lengthened, shortened, depending upon who was receiving the retelling. He never purposefully embellished. If anything, Silas would insist he did the opposite. He believes he has lived through and continues to live through the event as told in each retelling. He believes what happened is now a never-ending, ever-evolving story with a truth that will forever remain hidden from him. Dicing up the what-happened into various tells and retells makes it easier to swallow, to digest.

However, there remain details Silas left out in his retellings and will continue to omit in future retellings: his gutturally repeating his husband's name upon first seeing his body; the blinding curtain of tears and how it has permanently transformed the hue and tone of his perception; pressing a shaking hand to David's neck and cheek; the coldness of his rigored skin; David's soiled shorts and the puddle of urine between his splayed legs; how before he left David's side to retrieve his phone, he already thought of David as a body, as inanimate, as the past; how when Silas was in the kitchen and talking on the phone, he wasn't looking at David, couldn't look at him, not even with the corners of his eyes, so his back was turned and his left hand was a visor over his eyes in case he would see anything by accident, and then in the other room David stood, David stood up, and Silas knew this even though he wasn't watching, even though his back was turned, and he knew because the living room floorboards creaked under David's shifting, repositioning weight, and more than that, Silas *felt* David standing up, and he didn't and won't include this feeling in any of his retellings not because he can't explain that instinctual, animal knowing but because Silas did not turn around, because he was afraid to turn around, and the horror of being afraid of his husband's reanimated body was what kept Silas turned away, and even after Silas hung up the phone, he didn't turn and wouldn't look until he knew David lay back down.

Now, the house is still and quiet like it was nine days ago. There are no

lights on. David's laptop remains closed on the dining room table. The windows are shut and the house smells of bleach cleaner. Silas opens the kitchen windows. His smart watch buzzes with a text from Michael and then a few seconds later, one comes in from Gwen, as though they'd synchronized, and he loves them for it.

He walks into the high-ceilinged living room and turns on the wall-mounted television. The volume is at an absurdly high level. Silas powers on the DVD player and switches to the HMDI feed. The workout DVD's main menu fills the screen. Electronic workout music, bass-heavy knockoffs of pop and dance hits pump through the speakers. David used the same set of DVDs for almost ten years. Silas knows the music by osmosis. He presses play and sits on the floor in the spot where he found David. The DVD whirrs through three sets of workouts, a blur of moving and contorting younger bodies. When the disk is completed, instead of returning to the disk menu, the DVD signal cuts out and the TV screen goes blue, the speakers silent.

Silas only planned this far, to this point. The blue screen is a detail he has included in each retelling, a detail that seems important, though he isn't sure why. As far as he knows, all the other Blu-Rays and DVDs returned to the menu when finished playing and not this blank blue screen. He doesn't believe in signs, but he wants to believe this technological hiccup means something or could mean something. Nothing as trite or absurd as his now being tuned to David's beyond-the-grave spirit channel. But at the same time, yeah, maybe that's what he wants.

There's a low frequency hum in the anxious speakers. Silas listens, then he thinks he might say something. What can he say? He is afraid of the silence, of the nothingness, of metastasizing loneliness, but he's more afraid that whatever he says, David or some simulacrum of David might answer. Nine days on from the initial horror, this is the newest one. Many argue ghost stories are inherently optimistic because they presuppose life after death. But what kind of afterlife awaits if the person he knew best and loved most would fleetingly return to haunt him, to frighten him more than he'd ever been frightened in his life?

Silas lays down in David's spot and presses the right side of his face to the floor so that he still sees the blue television screen. He imagines a spreading deadness within his limbs as the same blue color, and he wiggles a finger slowly, until it stops. He thinks of whispering, "I'm in here," like he did when young Gwen couldn't find him during their hiding games. Awash in guilt,

Silas indulges in the magical thinking of those past playing-dead transgressions being the reason why he found David the way he found him. As terrible and sadistic a thought as it is, at least it would be a reason, an answer to *why*.

The blue screen on the wall above him is implacable. Silas flexes a knee and readjusts his left arm. Then there's that feeling again, that feeling of knowing David is standing behind him. There is no doubt. No maybe. If Silas were to lift his torso and swivel his head in the manner that he described David doing in one of his retellings, he would see David standing only a few steps away. And David would see Silas on the floor. And David's arms would go slack and he'd drop his phone and his face would open and then avalanche.

Silas listens for the floorboards behind him to creak. He hears the silence before the creaks, those shaking, micro vibrations birthing soundwaves that haven't yet reached his ears. He holds his breath and waits and waits and he decides that he won't look, won't ever look behind him, and he will stay here on the floor until someone finds him, calls out his name, presses a hand to his cheek. Yet Silas does turn his head without deciding to do so, as though his body has a rebellious laugh by moving on its own.

In Silas's later days and years, the same feeling (if he were to describe the feeling for someone else, though he never will, he'd say it was a knowing and not a feeling), the same certainty will overcome him, the certainty that David is there, around the next corner as Silas paces their home, or David is there, behind a door about to open or the door that was just closed, or David is there behind the shower curtain or David is there, hidden by a tree only a few paces from the hiking path, or David is there, on the other side of the bed with Silas lying on his side and unable to sleep, and every time, when Silas turns with a whisper or a scream on his lips, he sees nothing.

POETRY

Child of Immigrants

Jia-Rui Cook

I.

My husband tries to throw away a pair of wool socks
I say no.
One has a hole eaten through its heel, but the other
can be paired with another sock that loses its mate.

I leave protective film on appliances until the corners peel up.
I've never met a plastic bag I won't save. I fill pockets
with names. *Bradford pear*: the tree rioting with white stars
in front of my childhood home; *curlew*: a kind of sandpiper;
a painting that leans into the starkness of light against dark:
chiaroscuro; a new story written over an old story:
palimpsest.

My name was the trip wire on every first day of school.
Teachers went down the roll, paused, tried out
unfamiliar shapes with their mouths. By high school I stopped waiting
for them to sew together vowels out of order, jumped in
Here is what to call me.

II.

These are things I can say in Mandarin:

Have you eaten? I am
full. The moon is round
like a plate. The car
has broken down.

Stupid people can be called *dumb*
melon. Dull egg.
Rice bucket.

I know the right words to greet
my father's sister, then
my mother's sister. I can ask
someone's age
                but only in the way a grown-up asks a kid.
I can gossip.

But I don't have the words to argue about the government,
make flattering speeches at banquets, or persuade
someone who disagrees with me.

When I was small, my parents beamed when visiting aunties
called me *guai*
                well-behaved
with harmonics of:
                obedient, gentle, respectful.
By high school, no one ever tried to offer me a cigarette
or invite me to a party when their parents were away.
If my parents talked about Ronald Reagan, it was
only at dinner, when we were alone
                What do you gain by sharing opinions in public?
The way their families got out of wartime China
was by saving cash out of sight, leaving at night.
When you're not watching,
        that lone man you see on TV
                in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square
                        will be crushed.

III.

I show up at my first protest without a sign
but I do have a cowbell,
a baby,
a stroller
to change diapers in by the side of the street. The others:
they've got megaphones,
rhyming chants,
liver-rumbling drums,
a papier-mache uterus with angry eyebrows.
Things I had to learn: Buy poster board in advance. If you want the kids to help with the signs, draw bubble letters
they can fill in with a Sharpie.
Get used to shouting.

I appoint myself chief civics officer: Let's talk
about the preamble to the Constitution.
The word *we* is sticky,
the word *justice* a gravity well.
Forget the time I wasted trying to turn more American
by drinking a glass of milk straight from the fridge every day.
Pay attention to the imperative
to *form a more perfect union* –
to try, and keep trying even as the rest of the world
rolls its eyes. Believe that if our caterpillar guts
dissolve into goo
there are groups of cells
that already have editing pens
~~*tiny legs muscles guts*~~
food for eyes

antennae
wings.

POETRY

“I’m Driving to Fresno (And I don’t care who knows it),” “Noir Confessions – with Evasions,” “Noir Stanzas”

Suzanne Lummis

I’M DRIVING TO FRESNO (AND I DON’T CARE WHO KNOWS IT)

The One-Ten to the Five then
up Ninety-Nine, Famosa,
Dinuba, past silos filled—
the signposts swear—with milk,
California milk. So much milk! So much
green, greens, jewel greens, edibles,
wearables, and those ones so new
they squeak. They almost

squeak out some words. Greens
bound over the earth, drip from trees,
an abundance, a goodness,
because rain—
the rains came! And those clouds—no,

not ordinary clouds, great, swallowing,
beastly things you could not drive through.
In such vapor, you'd vaporize. Like I said,

I'm heading to Fresno and don't care who knows it.
After the long drought, dry winters
followed by dry springs, aching
trees, roots weeping (some scientists
say that they weep), now wild,
disorganized flowers, and that road sign:
Cheese Factory. Many Cheeses.
If you can't find your cheese here

we don't have it. Mango Ice Mallow,
Storm Water Lotus… I'm making
these up—names of flowers, new
colors. Cadillac Rose Plant, Blue
Ink Pot. Like I'm trying to tell you,
to confess, to put you on notice—
I'm in a good mood
and no one can tell me I'm not.

NOIR CONFESSION—WITH EVASIONS

This story I'm about to tell?
It's not true, and that's the straight-up

truth. Except for some parts that are—so,
I lied.

This friend, she
needed a hardpack of *L&Ms*,

a gun that wouldn't jam, and a man that's
you know, like, you know—strong jaw,

broad shoulders, with brains as tough
as he looked but in the *right* way, and

funny.
Why not? She could use a good laugh.

O.K., so now we're in real time, present
tense, the Now of *It Ain't Over Yet*.

He feels her gaze on him—
the way neon light looks at a shiny car.

The way a dislodged gem stares at the hard moon.

He doesn't want to get involved, he just
wants. The crime is as good as committed.

And now for the pluperfect past (so needy

and imperfect)—she

had needed to bankroll her life, a life
that had not been going to be cheap.

It was all about something, something. But
this Something kept slipping away, like a dream—

you know, the way those small atoms,
the dream's, break apart and re-enter

the atomic age? She needed to finance
these words, and—like the mugs say—

words like hers don't come cheap.

Sex like being pushed from a high
window. I made that up. Like it?

How much?

Half-moon, quarter-moon… Came then
The Night of No Moon. It cameth. But,

really, you want the truth?
Crime or no crime, caught or slipped

outta there, running like raggedy water,
there's no escaping the moon.

Obviously, it worked out.
Clearly, it all went wrong.

NOIR STANZAS: PIECES OF ADVICE, AFTER VIEWING…

Kiss Me Deadly

i.

Don't crack the chest of devouring light—
it will bite through bone, meat, hand that frees it.
Hell blown open blows a shrieking medley.

ii.

Why do you think it's called *Kiss Me Deadly*?
He treats women like *sh*—Guess! (Rhymes with "it.")
Don't kiss a jerk named Hammer, first name Mike.

*

Night and the City

i.

Quit working all the angles—you're one piss-poor angler.
Your scams, ruses, that greyhound racetrack thing? Up in smoke.
And now? Control of wrestling in all of London town.

ii.

When they drop you in the Thames you'll be too dead to drown.
Grifter, you staked your life on a promissory note,
and forgot that rule: don't cross guys called *The Strangler*.

*

L.A. Confidential

i.

Racketeering, murder—no one's cracking down.
The cop or robber, who's the biggest thug?
Let's keep the answer L.A. Confidential.

ii.

Hard to live up to your full potential
when your liver's pierced by a well-aimed slug.
Stay home, dreamers, dream in your measly town.

FICTION

Deliverance

Janet Sarbanes

I guess this is supposed to be a speech, to get you to cough up a few dollars to help the women down there. But nobody ever asked me to deliver a speech before, so I'm going to tell you a story. I'm going to tell it just how it happened and leave you to figure out what to do.

They come up to the house, the two of them, like they own it and I'm only there to answer the door. It's fall, technically, but it's yet another summer day, and the air they push through the screen is thick and hot. Am I sick of these men coming to my house! I was sick of it when Carl was still on the Force, but I'm really sick of it now.

What do you want? I say, but they say they have to come in, they need to talk to me, and it's not anything I'd want my neighbors to hear.

They make themselves comfortable on the sofa in the living room and I lean against the wall with my arms crossed, waiting for them to speak. They know I'm not going to give them anything to eat or drink, so they get right down to it.

Your daughter came to school with bruises this morning, the stocky one says. I know his name, but I don't care to use it. The young one I've never seen before.

We're required to investigate, he says, showing me his palms sorrowfully.

And? I say.

And we need you to tell us what happened, the stocky one says.

What did she say happened?

She says she fell.

I shrug. Well then, I guess she fell.

The young one looks past me up the staircase. That where it happened? he asks.

Usually is, I say. She's a clumsy girl.

We can take her away from you, the stocky one says quietly. Put her some place she'll be safe.

I remember the last time you took her, I say. That worked out great.

His face turns purple, like he's choking on something. We told Carl, he spits. It didn't happen on our watch.

I know what you told Carl, I say.

If it had been me who went to confront them instead of staying back with her, smoothing her hair as she puked and sobbed, I wouldn't have let that fly. Wouldn't have let one of them kick me over a chair, wouldn't have sat in it and heard them out. If it had been me, I'd probably be in jail right now.

You should be happy for her, the stocky one says. And for yourself, you're going to be a grandma. A baby is a gift.

Not always, I say.

The young one jumps up from the sofa, all excited. We can take her in for that, right? he asks the stocky one.

But he ignores him, as do I.

I pick the mail up off the side table and pretend to look through it, but the stocky one just sits there staring at me until I give up and meet his gaze. My legs are starting to shake.

Seems like you had it pretty bad, he says, pretending to be nice.

The young one looks over, interested. Anyone who hasn't had the virus yet wants to hear all about it from those that have.

I've got some things to do today, gentlemen, I say. If this part of the investigation has concluded.

The stocky one gets up finally and comes over, bringing his lips to my ear. You're lucky you're married to Carl, he hisses. Cause you're a terrible mother. She shows up with bruises again and we'll take her. Her and your grandbaby.

After they go, I fall down on the sofa. The knobby fabric's still warm where they sat, and I hate lying there in their heat, but I've got to get my strength back before she comes home from school. The fact is, I didn't know she was going to throw herself down the stairs, but I didn't try to stop her either. It was her dad who kept her from going a second time. That's not going to do what you want it to do, I heard him say out on the landing. That

only happens in the movies. She went back to her room without a struggle, but oh, what bitter tears.

*

If I hadn't been so sick, I never would've let them take her away to begin with and do God knows what to her, whatever it was she wouldn't talk about when she got home. But when school let out for the summer, Carl had just started his job at the Verizon store, and we had no relatives in the area to help us. Her alone all day in a dark house, with me upstairs in bed, that was no kind of plan. So when his old buddies let Carl know about the Bible camp and offered to drive her up there, I went along with it.

I see Carl looking at her sometimes–it's a worried look, but there's no horror in it like there is with me. That's because deep down he thinks there's no reason to stop this train, it'll all work out okay for her, the way the virus will for me. He'll steer us through the tough times. That's what they tell him in Men's Group, and that's what he likes to hear. Maybe it makes up for being let go when the Force consolidated, or for having to work at the phone store now, selling something everybody needs but nobody really wants, except teenagers.

Besides, what's the alternative, really, we live in a sanctuary state—a sanctuary for unborn babies and nobody else. They won't even let you drive over state lines to get help. You probably know about that already, the border controls. The thing you don't know is how everyone watches everyone here, like one great big eye of God.

So I see it differently from Carl. She's not on the train, she's in the path of it, and if she can't stop it in its tracks—isn't allowed to stop it—she'll get run over and become somebody else, someone who things just happen to.

I hear the screen door slam and get ready to see her. It's something I have to prepare myself for these days, so I don't tear up. *Mom*, she'll say then and go to her room. Today I keep it together and fix her a plate of apple slices with peanut butter. I notice she only eats the tiniest bit—whether she's nauseous or she thinks it's a way out of her situation, I don't know. It's you

who will suffer if you stop eating, I want to tell her. You can't starve out a pregnancy. But do I really want to tell her that?

I do tell her about the visit from the Force, and she ducks her head to show she understands, like I've had her do ever since she was little so that I know we're on the same page.

I wore long sleeves and leggings to school to hide the bruises, she tells me, and Ashley kept bugging me about it. I told her it was cold when I got up this morning, but she wouldn't let it go. Then at lunch time I saw her in the principal's office, and after lunch the nurse pulled me out of class.

Why're you still talking to Ashley? I say. She's the one who told on her in the first place, her best friend since kindergarten. The one she beat out for Dorothy in the middle school play last spring. Ashley got cast as the Wicked Witch, and a wicked witch she became. That was a surprise to me, I always had a soft spot for Ashley. But you know what they say, the heart wants what it wants.

I couldn't not answer, Ma. Everybody was listening.

If only I'd seen you before you left, I say, tearing up. I was just so tired, sweetheart.

It's okay, she says quickly. She doesn't want this to escalate, again.

I press my hands to my mouth to keep my volume down. I never wanted any of this for you, I say through my fingers. Any of it, you understand?

Yeah, she says, ducking her head. But she says it in a heavy way, like it's no real consolation.

*

It's that heaviness that drives me to the virus boards. They don't monitor those discussions like the rest of it—I guess we complain too much. Every symptom under the sun, and no cure in sight.

Around the time the sanctuary bill passed, I started seeing comments on one board from a woman named Jane. *Want to get away? Call Jane*. And then a phone number. *Need a change of scene? Call Jane*. Stuff like that. People kept telling her, you're in the wrong place, plus you're going at it the

wrong way, sign up with Airbnb or Vrbo or something, and eventually she went away or got blocked.

But now here I am, going back through the threads trying to find that number. This Jane character showing up right at that moment—it couldn't have been a coincidence, could it? They say the virus affects your mind, too, worms its way in and makes you paranoid, gives you crazy ideas, but what if those crazy ideas are right? I find the number around three in the morning, but I wait until six to call.

Hello? says a sleepy voice.

Is this Jane?

The voice perks up. This is Jane, she says. She asks if I need help and I say I do but it's for my daughter.

How many weeks, she says. Her voice is younger than I expected. College girl.

I hazard a guess of nine or ten. It was a weeklong camp.

How old is she, she asks. Bastards, she says, when I tell her.

My throat seizes up at the unaccustomed sympathy.

At least that'll make it easier to get her over the border, she continues. They're not on the lookout for girls that young.

I don't have the money, I finally manage to choke out, once she's filled me in on all the details. My husband's in a new job that pays less than his old one and I haven't worked since—

Understood, she cuts me off. Just get here as fast as you can.

*

Carl stops in that night to pray with me before going on to the guest room. We don't share a bed anymore, the official reason being that I'm up at all hours with the pain. He comes in to pray with me even though he knows I don't care for it and certainly don't believe in it. He chalks all that up to the virus, too—and it's true, this is one thing I'm surer about now than ever before, because what god worth groveling to would want this life for me, or her? But when you're sick, you're a captive audience, and everybody

thinks you want them to lay hands on you.

He sits on the bed, causing me to roll into him. He's a big man, always has been. I used to take some comfort in it. He prays for me, that I may be healed, and for our daughter, that she may see the error of her ways. I take his heavy hand off my shoulder and throw it as far from me as I can.

The night I had her, I almost didn't make it to the hospital. She came fast and sure and by the time we got there, she was pushing her way out. I was an older mother. I'd spent years wrestling with the idea in spite of Carl's pleas and finally, command, and that doubt stayed with me till the very end. Not because I didn't want a child, mind you, but because I did. I remember standing in the hallway outside the swinging doors under the big, lighted sign that said LABOR AND DELIVERY, thinking, this is how it is, we labor and deliver, and then they take them from us and make them theirs. Which if it was true then is even truer now. I had half a mind to turn around and stagger back out of there, I don't know where to, but then the doors flew open and Carl and a nurse lifted me by the elbows and carried me onto the ward. And I felt cheated, and I felt scared, but like all the other mothers, I guess, I went ahead and brought her into this world, hoping it could be another way.

*

I'm surprised by my daughter's reaction when I tell her. I wasn't expecting pushback, but then again, why would she trust me? Why would she trust any woman who acts like she knows what to do and how to do it? We're all re-learning the lessons of my mother's generation: who's in charge and who's not, who can make things happen and who can't.

This Jane, she says, wrinkling her nose. How do you know her?

I don't know her, I sigh. I don't even know if that's her real name or if she's one woman or a group of women who're using Jane as some kind of password.

Then how do you know it's not a trap?

Easy, I say. If it was a trap, the Force would already be here.

You only need to say one true thing to win over someone who wants to believe you. I lay out the plan: We'll leave on Saturday after Carl goes off to Men's Group. She'll wear the dress she wore when she played Dorothy, the high-waisted one I sewed for her with plenty of room to grow. If the pattern worked to hide Judy Garland's budding curves during filming, like the magazine said, then it should serve our purpose here.

What about after? she asks.

After is after, I say. It sounds better than I don't know.

*

In the two days leading up to our departure, I'm laid out with break-bone fatigue. They call it that because it's like somebody's snapped every bone in your body. She looks in on me with a worried face when she gets home from school and I whisper that I'm making it out to be worse than it is. The second night, I insist on dragging myself down to the dinner table and the three of us eat a warmed-over lasagna somebody sent home from church with Carl. I struggle to bring the fork to my lips.

Small wonder he looks surprised to see me moving around the kitchen the next morning, making coffee and waffles. His gray eyes land on me softly and then on his daughter in her sweet blue and white-checked dress and he hums a little tune—well, it's a hymn, but it's still a tune. When we tell him we're going to the mall, he's glad to hear it. Stop by Verizon, he jokes sheepishly, I hear they're having a helluva sale. He sits down carefully at the table, like he's in a dream he doesn't want to wake up from, a dream in which his wife isn't sick and his daughter isn't pregnant and he lives out his days basking in the warmth of their smiles. After breakfast he lingers on, till I remind him the Lord's work is waiting, and that makes him even happier.

*

We've packed our bags, with only enough clothes for the three-day weekend we'll tell Border Control we're spending in Chicago, and she carries them out to the car. When she comes back, I'm lying on the sofa.

I knew you weren't playacting, she says hollowly, standing over me. I knew you were never going to make it.

Just resting my eyes, I say, but a little part of me agrees with her, and it gets bigger the longer I lie there. I was never going to make it.

Mama, she says after a minute. I don't want this. Do I have to have this?

I open my eyes. She's pulled her dress up so I can see the thickening in her belly, the way it's starting to round out from below. I haven't seen it before, she wears so many layers, but I see it now and I can feel the bile rising in my throat like a life force, pulling me to my feet. I made my bargain, but I never thought to see my slim-hipped child carrying that weight.

*

When the close canopy of trees that has lined the highway for miles starts to open up onto fields, I can tell we're near the border. We've been driving for five hours and the bile's all gone. I'm a husk at the wheel, but somehow we're making good time.

What do we do after we cross over? she asks, breaking the silence.

We stay on the highway, I answer firmly, more firmly than I feel, and not too far from the border, there'll be a town. At the first crossroads, there'll be a drive thru Starbucks, and Jane will be waiting for us in the parking lot.

She ducks her head and plays with the hem of her dress, counting out the squares on the gingham. Follow the yellow brick road, she says softly, and her voice already sounds a little lighter.

Not long after, I spot the low white buildings of Border Control and pull up alongside the first one. We're the only car out there. The only people, too. When no one comes right away, I start to ease forward, thinking maybe they don't have the manpower to guard this checkpoint. But then a man

comes stumbling out the door, fumbling with his fly, followed by a pinched-faced woman. If they weren't wearing uniforms, you'd forgive me for thinking they'd been partying in there.

I hand over our papers and he passes them to the woman. She looks at them and then back at us in a way that makes me jumpy, like she wants something to be wrong.

Hey darlin', he says, leaning down and staring straight across at my kid with his bloodshot eyes. Going on a trip?

She nods and bares her teeth. Only I know it's not a smile.

The woman kind of shoves him then, or I don't know, something happens back there and he moves out of the way.

You, she says to me. Where are you on your way to?

Chicago, I say. Long weekend.

Pleasure?

Pleasure for her. Some doctoring for me.

She gives me a closer look. What kind of doctoring?

Can't get past this virus, I say. Town doctor says there's nothing more he can do.

The man comes back into the frame and leans in so close I can smell the liquor on his breath. That's all up here, he says, tapping his temple. Don't talk yourself into it.

Sure feels like it's down here, I say, moving my hands in the direction of my body.

Nah, he says. That's what they want you to believe.

The woman's still studying me, which is good. She's distracted.

Yeah, she says finally, I'd say that's a waste of a trip. And I can't think why you'd want to take your grandbaby to that dirty city.

She tells me to wait and disappears inside. I rest my forehead on the steering wheel, trying to catch my breath. How did I ever think we were going to get past her? Past him, maybe, but not her. There's a sudden pounding in my chest and I think about flooring it out of there—my heart too wants what it wants.

It's only when the woman taps me on the shoulder and hands back our papers that I realize her mistake, and mine. I have to laugh. Sitting there hunched over the wheel, gray with fatigue, maybe I really do look like my daughter's granny. The man waves us on with a bored expression, and in the rearview mirror, I see the two of them passing a bottle back and forth

under the floodlights. Maybe they weren't even on the Force, maybe they were only a couple of vigilantes, who knows—all that matters is we got past. Night's falling over the fields and she laces her fingers through mine, our hands resting on the console. That hasn't happened in a while. Look, she says with a squeeze, as the lights of a town come into view, beating steadily in the darkness.

PORTFOLIO

Days of the Dead: Shrines for the American Dream

Harryette Mullen

My inspirations for this collage art series are ofrendas (offerings, shrines, and ephemeral art installations) that individuals, families, and communities create for Día de Muertos, a holiday devoted to remembering the beloved dead. Ofrendas combine indigenous and post-Columbian religious symbols in exuberantly aesthetic displays. They typically include special foods and beverages—such as pan de muerto (bread of the dead), calaveras de azúcar (sugar skulls), tequila and other spirits or soft drinks—as well as decorative papel picado (cut paper), votive candles, and flowers, especially cempasúchil (marigold) and flor de terciopelo (celosia or cockscomb), along with portraits and mementos of lost loved ones. In the spirit of the holiday, Days of the Dead memorializes the dear departed with symbols representing death in life and life in death.

"Days of the Dead: Shrines for the American Dream" envisions the deflated American dream of equal opportunity and abundance, as well as the dimming allure of the USA as a destination for aspiring immigrants. "Shrines" feature variations on family, food, and flowers, integral elements of ofrendas for Día de Muertos, incorporating contemporary images of everyday life in Los Estados (Des-) Unidos, with Wonder Bread, McMuffins, and Dunkin' Donuts (for example) as pan de muerto. In addition to Mexico's customary marigold and cockscomb flowers, my ofrendas include the iconic American Beauty rose and substitute the star-spangled banner for Mexico's

colorful banners of papel picado. In several collages, human teeth or dental prosthetics appear as a synecdoche for grinning skulls and skeletons, merrymaking calaveras and calacas that celebrate life in traditional ofrendas for Día de Muertos. This series engages with critical topics such as nutrition and hunger, environmental degradation, health care and drug dependence, evictions and homelessness, immigration and border patrol, violence and incarceration.

–Harryette Mullen

Wonder white Harryette Mullen, 2022

Punch (Hi-C) Harryette Mullen, 2022

Crib cheet (freakin' hot) Harryette Mullen, 2022

Pink 'n' blue Harryette Mullen, 2022

Red 'n' white Harryette Mullen, 2022

Chronic pain Harryette Mullen, 2022

Baloney sandwich Harryette Mullen, 2022

Hungry Harryette Mullen, 2022

Nursing grievance (essential work) Harryette Mullen, 2022

Skin (mask/ink) Harryette Mullen, 2022

Spent Harryette Mullen, 2022

Remember El Paso Harryette Mullen, 2022

Borderline (tortilla curtain) Harryette Mullen, 2022

Gold rush Harryette Mullen, 2022

Out of the frying pan Harryette Mullen, 2022

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

Last Home

Debra Monroe

I'd take my father's fishing boat across the lake, down a creek, to other lakes, a chain of lakes. Then I'd cut the motor and drift to study cabins, most of them owned by people with year-round houses like the one in a nearby small town where I lived in winter. Lush grass extended to shorelines. Lake weeds swayed. For two months, the sun shone, intricate bugs shimmered, and my body felt interchangeable with air. I'd dip my hand in water and watch fish investigate its white flickering at the lake's surface, the fish's ceiling. I'd ignore a gaudy boathouse or striped beach umbrella—incongruous in that landscape of green trees, gray stones, opalescent water, and silver piers that seemed like sidewalks leading to doors. Some cabins had names. Tanglewood. Shangri-la. Cloud Nine.

Our cabin was filled with curious old furniture, bed linens, oddball kitchenware. We'd bought it furnished when its owner died. Mauve—for chairs, lamps, vases—had been a popular color. In the shed, I found paint cans with labels that read "Rugosa Rose." Our lake had taverns with docks where my parents tethered their boat and went inside to drink while I ran to swings in big trees or wandered the edges of forest as fireflies blinked.

Some days, motoring across wide water, I turned on my dad's gadget, The Depth Finder, to learn the lake. In one spot, the depth plunged to eighty feet. In the middle of the lake, I found a plateau, and I'd get out of the boat to wade, waving at people on shore, hoping to startle them by almost walking on water. Once, in a cove fringed by tall pines, I dove out of the boat to swim, and a fish as big as I was, a muskellunge, flashed by in the deep.

By day I wanted to go far and wide, at least across the lake and down the creek. But at night, wrapped in a mauve blanket, dropping off to sleep, I'd scare myself awake. Maybe I'd steered the boat into brisk waves at steep angles, the hull making choppy warning noises as I hit surges that, mismanaged, would have flipped the boat and I'd have floated or sunk. Or maybe I'd trod unknowable water. I was a daredevil in the daytime.

At night, the lakebed seemed like my deathbed.

Still, every morning I'd want back outside: wilderness rising up around me, my own.

Strictly speaking, it's not nature if I've arranged it with my perspective, finding landmarks, placing rocks and branches in sand or soil, making outdoor rooms. Or, after I grew up, planting borders and trellises to mark the edges of lots I owned. But when I was a girl, I thought lakes and trees and birds and fish and sky were mine and I was theirs. Then I'd come back inside to civilizing conversations at the family dinner table and, in the autumn, when geese headed south, when grownups put on waders to dismantle piers and move them ashore so winter ice wouldn't crush them, back into town, back to school with its complicated strictures and fiefdoms. Contentment—whether sunlit or misty or magisterially somber under cloud cover, every familiar color deepening and lustrous—lasted for single moments or hours or, when I was perfectly unscheduled and lucky, entire days.

*

Recently, I made two lists with the idea I might use them to visit a goal-oriented psychiatrist recommended by a friend who'd developed acute postnatal anxiety. According to medical classifications, she'd been a "geriatric mother," or young enough to give birth to a child but old enough that, in her case, her sleep-deprived body had produced unhelpful hormones. I, on the other hand, am merely old, though not yet geriatric. Whenever my age gets mentioned as it pertains to a situation at hand, friends or colleagues, or maybe a ticket-taker adding a senior citizen discount, rush to say: oh but you could be in your fifties! One flatterer insisted that I could be in my for-

ties. People deflect mentions of my real age because we all know that aging leads to irrelevance then death.

I've had my own surges of unhelpful hormones. Adrenaline swells.

Yet it seems to have always swelled. By now I see my body as a container for memories of experiences I'd have preferred to avoid in the first place, so memories I'd like to delete—some violent, some intimating violence, some life-changing, some intimating unsettling life changes—and the container seems nearly full, just a few inches left.

I stopped sleeping.

Sleeplessness compounds itself, then magnifies fear, fear-fog blurring life's outlines. Then hope, belief in improvements pending, goes missing. Whenever I'd stopped sleeping in the past, I relied on busyness. I earned degrees that led to better jobs. I added onto a house—built half a house—working alongside my carpenters, electricians, and plumbers who bid low, worked shoddy, and required hypervigilant oversight. I wrote books, planted gardens, moved rocks into retaining walls, tackled stacks of paperwork. Project completion is distraction. Distraction is analgesic: symptoms relieved and root causes unaddressed. If the project involves physical labor, your body relents and lets you sleep.

Bonus effect: months later you have a new line on a resume, better living space, organized files, a book with your name on its spine. Meanwhile, the idea that the project requiring every thought, muscle, and iota of resolve will ward off future reasons for worry is placebo-like. Even if you don't trust Robert Frost's idea that the best way out is through, which implies you're stalled but aimed forward, not believing in somewhere else is bleak.

This time I couldn't locate a new rationale for busyness.

One list for a psychiatrist—years made into phrases—would be my neuro-relevant history.

The other list would be real and recent reasons for worry.

Lists might help a psychiatrist work more quickly, I felt.

Because who has much time?

*

I left intermittent paradise behind when I moved to attend college in a small city. My parents divorced and sold the cabin, not that as a young woman curious about my future I would have stayed so absorbed by local lakes, creeks, swamp, sky, firmament. Yet so far I hadn't liked "town," so at college I scuttled between my dorm room, classes, and dining hall, no eye contact. When other students went to the library, the sandwich shop, the beer joint, the gym ("it's relaxing," someone explained), I walked off-campus. I studied three-story houses with cupolas and multiple porches built in the early twentieth century by lumber barons and the merchants who'd served them; trim bungalows that looked like stage sets for black-and-white movies; stolid houses with big porches and leaded glass window panes; and off-kilter, shingle-covered boxes at the edge of town. On short winter days, when the sun moved below the horizon, lights came on inside and windows cast golden parallelograms onto the snow. I gazed indoors at the wallpaper, curtains, edges of upholstery, and flashing silhouettes of people settling down for the night.

I used to think gazing inside meant I wanted a home for myself.

But I gazed after my own windows cast light, after I lived behind them with people I love, my husband, daughter, stepson, one of us hanging up a coat, setting the table.

In my twenties, I gazed into other people's homes too long after dark because my own home was unsafe, occupied by a volatile ex-husband I was figuring out how to leave. My route sometimes wound back before he was asleep, and I kept walking while looking inside. From outside and lit up—though I was unhappy in it, each day a puzzle to be solved, each conversation a looming menace—my domestic inland looked idyllic. A creaky floor lamp cast a hazy glow over otherwise shabby armchairs encircling the fireplace, and my ex-husband, sequestered in back, watching action movies, pleasingly erased.

Around this time, I imagined I was a poet. A line that came to me all at once, a line that seemed right, was this: "If it happened once, it's a lie." It seemed like life's great truth, but when I tried explaining it to my writing teacher, he said it didn't make sense, that many true things happen over and over. Pressed to explain what I thought I meant, I couldn't.

I might have meant love. Love must present itself in new ways for me to believe it.

I might have meant that a workable life plan was one that hadn't failed yet.

At the time, if a house had happened to me once—by chance I'd occupied it, claimed it, left it—there'd be more houses and better houses because they'd be future houses.

*

I've lived in six states, eight cities, at two dozen addresses, and I dream about finding secret rooms in my former homes. Once, I opened a door leading to a twinned, second apartment, big, empty, another new start. These homes were records of how I'd accepted what was and then repaired or added on or renovated according to what I could contrive. In one dream, I've been too careless, too carefree, and someone has knocked down walls, trespassed with crowbars. Rooms in these homes fuse with rooms in my current home, and I see people I used to know, faces, clothes, hairstyles from a bygone era. I'd once struggled to answer people who'd politely asked what these men I used to know did for a living. *Living off me. Sinking in debt. Spending my money. Making illegal deals*.

In one dream in which past and present fuse, men sit in a row on my sofa. My worst stepfather is there, too, tilting on one of my dining room chairs, the look on his face daring me to contradict him. I spent years studying these men, anticipating their moods, hoping to placate. They eye my rooms, better than any of us had back then, pieces of new furniture mixed with the best of my thrift store finds, and I introduce them to my husband because my current home is our shared home. They take surly notice of my husband's courteous ways, his interesting face, the bits of evidence that he's good, not to mention solvent. He shakes everyone's hand, says pleased-to-meet-you. Then takes me aside to say he hopes they'll leave because they'll be hard to explain when the kids get home from school.

After I'd been married to one of these men, and before I married another, I lived alone in an apartment above an old store, in what used to be shopkeeper's quarters, big rooms, each one heated with a match-lit stove. I was on the lam from a bad apartment in town where I'd lived above drug dealers who'd played loud music every night, and I couldn't sleep. I became a

silence-fetishist. From the windows of the new apartment, I stared at silent wheat fields that by midsummer were a windswept yellow ocean, by fall a shorn panorama, by winter an undulating field of white. Inside, I used every shop class skill and hopeful whim to revamp, to move the line of vision here, not there, because living with imperfection means a trick of the eye that edits, improves. I sheltered there for years.

Once, I lived in a jerry-built apartment in an old house, my bed with its bird-pattern bedspread fitted into a breakfast nook with an arched doorway across which I'd draped a gauze curtain. I loved my time there, even during a month when the next-door apartment was rented to a drunk who sat by his door half-naked and cursing, until he made a liquor store run, smashed cars, and police hauled him away; even during a month when pipes to the house broke, and I leapt across the boggy yard with a towel and soap to a neighbor's across the street to shower there; even though olive-green shag carpet clashed with mauve knickknacks I'd amassed to match a mauve sofa I'd brought from the cabin.

Once, I lived in the middle of weeds and woods in a dank house first built in the 1970s by a libertarian DIYer who'd believed worst-case predictions about the energy crisis, and he'd put cheap paneling in "the great room"—this is realtor code for a room that serves as both kitchen and living room—and in a narrow hallway, where the cheap paneling buckled, excess insulation. I painted everything a color named Dream Light, and I tamed weeds. Rooms gleamed. Moonlight woke me, and I'd wander the yard at night, where white flowers gleamed. I lived in the center of preferred and amended shapes and colors.

Later, I moved to the fastest-growing city in America to be with my husband, who lived there with his son in what once was a small house in a working-class neighborhood, but the expensive city grew, and the house grew. Our iteration—a renovation for our blended family—would be its fifth, the one to complete and harmonize the previous. "Is this old or new?" someone asked a few years later, walking through our commodious home.

Daylight shone into every room and—one of the house's best effects—through leaves on a banana tree near the dining room, spackling the walls in green-tinted shadow. Halls and short flights of stairs led to surprise alcoves. On the ceiling of a narrow passage, a skylight snapshotted the changing sky. Our children, adolescents becoming adults, sometimes left me droll notes on the kitchen counter. When my husband texted them that dinner was

ready, they thundered downstairs, hungry, spilling news of the day. Once, walking in the neighborhood, I rounded a corner and a handsome man on a bicycle called out, and my heart thrilled involuntarily before I quite realized he was my husband. When my father-in-law came to dinner, we'd carry him in, his wheelchair too, and stream Czech polkas as he sipped beer from shorty bottles. My father-in-law died. The kids grew up.

Then the house was big. We discussed moving. I pictured a newlywed cottage in which to recoup lost or suspended time, the initial besotted weeks when we'd managed four dates before we'd brought along the kids. My husband pictured the tidy house he wished his father had moved to before he got sick. We ventured forth, home-hunters. This is the first scaling-down, downsizing, which, people insist, is not another word for loss.

*

Two lists for the goal-oriented psychiatrist.

One, my neuro-relevant history:

A sometimes frantic childhood. A sometimes violent early adulthood. Years of surviving on what I could earn or, when I was with my ex-husbands, earn plus borrow, or, after I left them, earn minus debt I was paying back, budgets so contingent that any unforeseen outlay—parts and labor for a car, a medical bill, a plumbing repair—required an iffy new budget to keep home a gracious shelter from distressing possibilities pressing in.

Last, but persistent, oversensitivity to loud noises like drunk men yelling. It's irrational, but I can't help what memories of stimuli my hippocampus retains. Also secondhand loud music, bass line minus melody. I might be hardwired to hate this. I might hate it because of that long-ago year I lived above drug dealers, their bass line minus melody arriving through heat ducts shaking the imitation-brass bed in which I lay awake. I'd go downstairs, knock on the drug dealers' door, and they'd turn down music long enough to laugh at how unexpected and negligible I looked, knocking while wearing a winter coat over my nightgown, my face arranged into conciliation and hope. My heart races.

Two, some recent reasons for worry:

Though my husband and I moved to a perfect-sized house with tall windows that make some rooms into radiant chapels, a yard with majestic trees and boulders with indentations that I filled with soil and planted with flowers, and we moved without movers, the two of us carrying boxes, chairs, beds, tables, disassembling a 900-pound futon frame to carry pieces inside to reassemble because we like projects, problems to solve, and though we had the advice of a famous realtor who always sold my husband's previous homes, and though this was a city where houses sell as soon as they're listed, our lovely old house with the flickering banana tree leaves inexplicably did not sell for months.

Months and months, no big deal. But these were also the months doctors said my husband had incurable cancer and ordered a scan, and I rejoiced at cancer-free results until I understood they'd ordered more scans, which were cancer-free, too. But he stayed mysteriously sick. One doctor noted that a medication my husband took months earlier can, in rare cases, cause a rare illness, which he recovered from, months turning into a year during which he slept in a chair I'd reupholstered in gold-flecked fabric in a once-cheerless room I'd repainted. Then, without warning, he lost most of his hearing. Next, he awoke one day and saw only darkness punctuated by bright arch-shapes, light from elegant arch-shaped windows in our home (downsizing without loss a problem I'd solved). He had surgeries, then injections that turned his eyes blood-red, and his vision improved.

I wear earplugs in bed at night to drown out noise. Some days I leave them in and go outside to garden. My husband comes, too. From what I can tell while listening and lipreading, we hear each other the same if I wear earplugs while he wears hearing aids. This feels intimate, all others' noise muted. Leaf blowers. Shouters. Shrieking children, a happy sound. I also can't hear birdsong or wind in grasses. One day I asked him if, in a few years, when proximity to my job won't matter but proximity to hospitals might, we'll move again. We sometimes drive through the country, where house after house looks like home in the future-perfect tense. Home in the past is what I found and improved, haphazardness converted into intention. Home in the future is revived faith in better luck ahead.

Sometimes I wake in the morning, grateful I've slept.

At night, I lay in bed next to my husband, our bed a sleep-raft on wide water, and I'm floating, floating, everything beyond or above that might crush

us passing me by, trees, firmament, the water below and the sky above forever unknowable, the lakes and trees and birds and fish—the sky is my ceiling—visible for now. And I'm becoming theirs, theirs.

I drive home from work on country roads at night, black highways with one or two remote lights beckoning, and the world once again seems bigger, some of it surely mine if I arrange my place. But after all the work and optimism, what the luckiest of us will get in the end, and I've been lucky, is not the world but space inside four walls. In time, one story, no stairs to manage. Then smaller, assisted living. Then smaller, your hospital room. Then the smallest. Drowsy, wrapped in a mauve blanket, I scare myself awake.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Our Bodies, Our Grief

Ashley Perez

The day I went to pick up my papa's ashes, I didn't know what I was supposed to do. The box was surprisingly small, and when I touched it, the tips of my fingers pulsed as if with a live current. I put the ashes in the complimentary tote bag and held it to my stomach; I absorbed the weight of the mahogany-colored plastic box and felt it sit there like a heavy stone. After dropping it off with my dad, I stopped at a burger place near the house where I used to live. I ate as if the world was ending in five minutes. I wanted to throw up. I couldn't understand why people were walking in slow motion, why there were no sounds coming from them, even when I could hear the birds. Everything smelled rotten. Everything looked like a desaturated photo.

The 1931 movie *Frankenstein* opens with Edward Van Sloan breaking the fourth wall to give a warning: that we may endure a fright so bad it may make us reconsider our continued presence in the theater. After the warning, we see Dr. Victor Frankenstein sneak around a wall in a cemetery with his assistant, Igor. They are preparing to uproot a body we have seen hanging, the corpse of a violent murderer. This is one of many bodies that will soon be used to assemble our monster. Dr. Frankenstein is described as a specialist in electrobiology, with an "insane ambition to create life."

I feel a small kinship with the doctor. I am obsessed with bodies. I love the delicate, resilient, and incredibly complex structure that is the human form. Our bodies for all their wonder and durability can be incredibly fragile as well. We so easily bleed and scar. Our bodies are houses for physical sen-

sation, while our brains are houses for emotions. The body tends to know things before the mind catches up, but it is the brain that ultimately controls the body, telling it what to feel, electricity dancing through our neural highways.

The day after my papa died, I was on autopilot, my brain quieting my emotions so my body could function. I picked up my dad and we went to the mortuary. My previous experience working for an estate attorney enabled me to subjugate my feelings and attend to the business of death. This was my first experience with it up close, but I didn't want to fall apart. I wanted to be there for my dad.

My compartmentalization enabled me to function; it did not, however, enable me to feel.

I wonder often about grieving when watching *Frankenstein*. I see the soul as a patchwork blanket of the emotions that live in our bodies. When grief and anxiety overwhelm my system, I feel like several different bodies attempting to function as one. My legs can't seem to walk in coordination with one another. My torso twists to one side, and then to the next. My right hand twitches while my left grips itself until my bones feel like they are about to break.

If many men can be taken apart and pieces of them stitched together in a mad experiment, brought back to life through the awe-inspiring intercession of lightning and science, can we also not stitch together pieces of our emotions, our soul, and make out of them something else? A new neural highway of emotions and thoughts.

While grief drips from my brain, down my spine, solidifying in my stomach, other emotions manifest differently. When I am hurt, a cord of tension shoots from the corners of my collarbone straight to the center of my chest. I think again and again of the Monster and the different emotions, the many people, from which he was constructed. Do we have the capacity to think of the weight of feelings in our bodies? The heart is described as "shattered" when we are bereft. Can we reclaim what was torn from us into separate pieces and make it function as a whole? Or do we adapt, move forward, find new ways? Do we end up monsters when we put ourselves back together to survive?

In the film, we see that the Monster has awakened when he walks into the room. His assembled body now works as one. His father rushes to greet him as he slowly shuffles forward. He looks up and reaches, ever so gently,

for the sun. His hands are bent out at odd angles, a small indication of a body at odds with itself; he is holding his hands up toward light and warmth, a body trying to mend itself. He reaches toward his father; he looks at his own hands. His father backs away, inexplicably scared of his own creation. The Monster does not get the love he so visibly seeks.

The development of our emotional selves includes the process of change. Without the ability to change, we won't survive our environments, our relationships, or ourselves.

Change is one of the scariest parts of life to me. After my papa died, I had to change.

My papa lived with my dad the last eight years of his life, so it was easy to see both of them at once. Most of all, I missed the routines I had with him. No more coming over with a new tattoo for him to say, "Why do you keep doing that to your body?" No more coming over with a minor cold for him to say, "You got the spots!" No more coming over to catch him snoring for him to say, "I was just resting with my eyes closed."

I didn't come over to my dad's house for a long time after that.

The Monster is sedated and strapped to a table. Dr. Frankenstein's mentor is examining him. The mentor looks away at the wrong time, and the Monster reaches up and kills him. He does what is in his control to do, even if he doesn't know the consequences of his actions.

I stitched myself together once. I was fifteen and living with a friend because my home life had imploded. More than anything, I wanted control. One time, I was sitting in the backseat of a musty junker of a car, owned by my dealer's friend. A package of fresh razors was passed around so we could share our recently acquired cocaine. A line or two went up my nose, and on the inside, I waited for the delicious sensation of elation. On the outside, I started to numb, first the face, then down my limbs. I did the only thing I knew to do when I needed to end numbness. I swiped the blade across my skin.

What I didn't realize was just how sharp new razors are. My skin split open like paper; blood and fatty tissue spilled out. Holding it closed, I went home, and with the items from a first aid kit and a tool kit, I put myself together again. At that moment, I became Dr. Frankenstein, desperate to keep the life in my body. I also became the Monster, a piece of flesh reassembled for the sake of the creator's obsession with life.

The villagers fear the Monster for more than his outward, scarred ap-

pearance. They don't understand him, so they seek to hurt him, to destroy what they cannot know. They drive the Monster inside a windmill. He has kidnapped his father from his own wedding. The mob throws torches at the windmill, setting it on fire. In his fight or flight, the Monster stands at the top of the windmill. He throws his father into the night, and a laughably obvious dummy—a stand-in for the actor—hits a blade and tumbles to the ground. The Monster has shucked off his maker, although he survives, as we learn in the next scene.

This is the act that leads to the Monster's demise.

I have a confession to make: I have read thousands of pages about the novel *Frankenstein*, but I'm afraid to read the actual words that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote. Fear is the emotional opposition to change. I grew to love the story of the Monster from the many film adaptations. I have a tattoo of him standing before the burning windmill. I have another tattoo of him on my back.

I hesitate to give something I love a chance to change, to change the love I carry for it in my body, because I am afraid that this might make me a monster. It doesn't always. If I'm lucky, the stars align, and the permutation is something greater than it was before.

POETRY

Unsolicited

Deborah Kuan

The married man, when he was nearly
mine, gave me advice once

on who to marry. *Not*
an intellectual, he said in the shower,

so nearsighted he kept his glasses
on. *Never an intellectual*.

It wasn't airy, a slip-up. I knew
because his face darkened

like an age passing. I withdrew
to an untouched corner, moth

singed by a false moon.
For longer than I can bear to tell you,

his words fanned down
on me—a light mockery,

a falling house of cards.

FICTION

Man of the House

Laurel Doud

I got a job. I got a girl. I got a license to drive. I got *all* pumped up. Well, maybe not like Schwarzenegger when he was a beast, but I got definition. It seemed the right thing to do, you know, now that I'm the man of the house. At least, that's what the cop said as he drove away, his face glowing ghostly green in his dashboard lights. *You're the man now*.

I hadn't thought about it before, not until that night, that night the guy next door threatened my mom. Todd. A redneck from the Valley. A defensive lineman from a state college who bragged he could still lift twice his body weight, now a security guard with a plastic badge and a mail-order bride, Grace. Even his name was stupid.

The fights between Todd and his wife had been getting worse as if she was finally figuring out she didn't have to take it anymore. They had a little girl, and I wondered whether she could ever sleep.

That night, it was close to midnight and still warm. All our windows were open. My bedroom looks across Todd's driveway into his kitchen and, when my room's dark, as it was then, it's like watching TV. He was yelling at Grace as she was doing dishes. She screamed back, the words coming so fast I could hardly understand them. Well, except for *beer* and *late nights* and finally *divorce*.

Fuck marriage. Marriage drives people crazy. My parents never fought. Never.

I saw Grace turn from the kitchen sink and, facing our house, call out in her high, accented voice, "Claire!"

Todd froze as Grace pushed past him and out of the kitchen, the swinging door, just like ours, bobbing back and forth until it settled. He glared across the driveway—I sat completely still—before he followed her.

As if her name had been some sort of signal, my mother shut off the water in her bathroom. Grace had never involved her in their fights before. But she and my mom talked. At least across the front lawn. Just the day before, they had been going on about what a three-year-old could get into.

My mom flashed past my room and headed down the hallway toward the front of the house. I followed, passing my sister's room—empty since last month, her college poster pinned to the wall over the desk like a blue-ribbon award—and then my father's study, abandoned in June, stuffy air escaping from the cracks around the closed door, the vents shut down to save on the AC.

I came into the living room to see my mother on the porch, the overhead light making her spiky red hair glint. On the sidewalk, Grace and Todd argued by her Toyota. The anger had seeped out of Todd's voice and he sounded whiny. Grace strapped their sleepy daughter into the car seat.

My mother stood witness and I didn't know whether she was being brave or stupid. She was different now, prickly like her hair. Some nights, though, I heard her crying and, in the morning, her face looked stretched and her eyes puffy. I didn't know what to say, so I pretended I didn't see and, honestly, she seemed relieved.

Grace held her hand out, palm up. Todd gave a shifty-eyed glance in my mother's direction, then slammed the car keys into the flesh of her hand. Grace barely flinched, just got in the car, my mom waiting until she was down the street before turning back into the house. I slid silently into the hallway, listening as Todd opened his gate and came up the driveway.

He was shouting, but it took a few seconds for me to realize that it was at my mom.

"Come out of that house, you redheaded bitch," he yelled. "and I'll give you something to take back in with you. I'll teach you to stay out of my business. No wonder your husband left, the pussy was probably no good."

The police—two squad cars, lights flashing but no sirens—were in front of our house in ten minutes. I hadn't consulted my mother. I'd just dialed 911.

I figured I knew then who had left the message *lets fuck* tucked underneath the windshield wiper on my mom's car a couple of days before. "The lack of the apostrophe eliminating many a suspect," she had said, laughing

it off. But I think the note bothered her more than she let on, because she pinned it to the kitchen cork board with the date and time she found it. Like it was evidence.

I met the police on the sidewalk. My mother stayed in the house and they didn't ask to speak to her. I was the one who had made the call.

I told them what happened and that it was just me and my mom now. One cop left to knock on Todd's door and the other pulled out his notepad.

"That gray truck his?" the officer asked, pointing the tip of his pen in the direction of the beat-up Nissan Frontier spotlighted by the streetlight.

I was watching the other cop out of the corner of my eye, but Todd's porch light didn't come on and the door didn't open. "No, that's Matt's truck."

Matt's been my best friend since we were kids, and he lives on the other side of Todd. I gestured to the truck behind the Nissan. "The blue one's Todd's. The Ford 250."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure they're both gray," the officer said.

Recently I found out I'm color blind, but I'm not anywhere near as bad as my grandfather. He has to read the labels Grandma puts on his sock drawer, so he knows whether he's pulling out blue, black, brown, or red.

The cop told me that since Grace and the kid had left and Todd had only verbally threatened my mother from the sanctity of his property, there wasn't much he could do. There was no way to prove Todd had written the note.

"I'll write up an incident report," he said, pulling a business card from his breast pocket and handing it to me. "If he does anything else that alarms or concerns you, call us and make sure you document the day, time, exact wording. For now, I'll send a patrol car around every couple of hours for the next week, but stay vigilant." He got into his car, powered the window down, and added, "You're the man now."

I sent my mother to bed as if she was a tired and cranky eight-year-old. She didn't argue, only asked in an exhausted voice, skin around her eyes tight and blue-ish, "Are you staying up?"

I felt a stab of what she might have been going through these last couple of months, how her life had changed without her consent.

"Yeah," I said, and watched her disappear into her room.

She looked small.

I locked all the doors and windows, turned off the lights, and adjusted my

night vision to the perimeter of the house. I stood sentry in my room with my baseball bat, the Louisville Slugger my dad had bought me a couple of summers ago, braced behind my neck, my wrists dangling over the grip and barrel. I watched Todd mutter and curse, drink and pass out at the kitchen table, head in his arms, empty beer bottles like pinball bumpers around his ears.

In the morning, my mom woke me up with a hand on my shoulder. I was slumped in the leather chair I had dragged from my dad's office, loving and hating that it still smelled like him.

"How late did you stay up?" she asked, trying not to look into Todd's kitchen.

"I don't know," I mumbled, stretching out my cramped shoulders. I hadn't meant to fall asleep at all. "What time is it?" My room was dark, but the morning was brightening.

"It's still early," she told me. "Go to bed and sleep a couple more hours."

Just before she closed my door behind her, she added, "Nathan, I can't thank you enough. You were a real hero last night."

*

So working the job at the coffee shop's easy peasy, as my grandfather likes to say. I press a couple of levers, clean a couple of pots, make change.

When I first got the job, I was scheduled with this girl—Erin. I liked working with her. She was friendly with people and I got braver. I tried harder to be funny and nice to the customers and sometimes they'd laugh and drop another quarter in the tip jar. Even now on the weekends, when we open before dawn, she's quick and funny. Not that she doesn't have her bad days. She can be silent, almost pouty, and then no one, not the customers or the rest of us, has any fun. But when I can get her to laugh, she's herself again. Sometimes I wear mismatched socks just to make her giggle and tease me. For some reason, she finds my color blindness amusing.

I was too scared to ask her out in the beginning, but then a group of us decided to hang out one night and I planned to stay as close to Erin as pos-

sible.

It wasn't hard at all. I said really annoying and obnoxious things all night and she punched me, slapped me, pinched me. I kept at it. Anything to make her touch me. After a while, I only had to open my mouth and her hand was on my arm.

I didn't tell my mom about Erin right away. She'd have been happy for me, but it didn't feel right.

I didn't tell my dad either. When I see him, he's always pumping me for details about my life. "Any cute girls?" he'll ask, all jovial, as if we're just two cool single dudes out on the town.

I wanted to tell him about Todd. I wanted to tell him that I had taken care of it, that I had done his job. But that didn't feel right either because it wasn't true. Because I hadn't taken care of it. Because the next day when I left the house to go to Matt's, Todd was out front, mowing his lawn. He loved that lawn. You could putt on that lawn. He gave me a head nod, all *Howdy, Neighbor*-like, as if nothing had happened, nothing was different, like there was nothing I could have done about it anyway, and I just kept thinking, if I was a real hero, a real man, I'd have shoved his stupid ass down on his stupid lawn and buried my foot up to his kidney.

Parents and teachers say you should walk away from a fight, but I don't know. Matt and I talked about it that morning. I told him everything, all the gory details.

He listened and then said, "No problem. I'll get Trent and Urs and we'll hold him down and you can kick the crap out of him."

Having Matt lay it out like that—four-on-one—made it sound, I don't know, chickenshit.

"What about a gun then?" Matt asked, like it was no big deal.

He was just messing with me, but I'd been thinking about that too as we sat on his bed, tossing a nerf football between us. "Nah. A gun's too…impersonal."

He looked me over and snorted. "Well, dude, if you wanna go mano-a-mano, you're gonna lose. You'd better come to the weight room with me. We gotta pump you up."

At first, it wasn't any fun. I was pretty pathetic and the jock-strap stink of the place, the old school posters of Arnold and Lou Ferrigno and Ronnie Coleman peeling off the mossy walls, made me want to spew. Eventually, though, I got to like it. There was something about the sweating and the

grunting and, my favorite thing, the punching bag. Mrs. Parker, my English teacher, would probably have some metaphor about it. You know, something about the bag taking all my rage. It felt like that at first. I saw Todd's face in the leather and I gave him a straight right to the nose, splintering the cartilage, blood streaming from his nostrils. Sometimes another face flickered on the surface, an older version of the one I see in the mirror. Him I gave my knockout punch until he was kissing the canvas.

Still, after a while, it felt, I don't know, like calculation, like Spiderman learning to use his spidey-sense. Testing what worked, what the best combinations were, how the sting of my hand could tell me how good the punch was.

At night, when I watched Todd alone in his kitchen like it was my favorite TV show, I realized no fucking way he could lift twice his weight anymore. He was only getting older and slower and I was getting stronger. Even Erin mentioned it, stroking my biceps and saying teasingly, but not mean or anything, "Look at those guns."

I was all pumped up.

But an annoying thought kept creeping back into my brain. Being strong, was that enough to make you a man? According to some of the guys at the gym, it was sex, but I couldn't see that being right either.

One afternoon, Matt dropped me off and a U-Haul trailer was in Todd's driveway, the metal ramp out on the cement. My mom was heading toward our front door, grocery bags in hand.

"They're leaving?" I asked. I couldn't believe it. All this work? All this sweat?

"Grace got her stuff weeks ago. She's already moved to LA. I guess she's got relatives down there. He's moving, I suppose, to a smaller place."

"Good." I hadn't seen Grace since the night she left, but I didn't know for sure she had stayed away.

A grimace twitched my mom's face. She looked up at me—I hadn't realized I was so much taller. "Was it good for you when your dad left?"

My mom didn't talk much about him leaving and it was like a punch to the gut. I didn't know what to say but after the pain of the jab faded, I asked the question I hadn't wanted to ask, because I didn't want to know the answer. Because I thought he'd come home. "Why'd he leave, Mom?"

She stared unseeing across Todd's front yard, teeth biting down on her lower lip. "He stopped loving me."

"Seriously? Just like that?" I wasn't calling her a liar or anything. It just seemed too easy.

She nodded and shrugged all at the same time.

"Did you stop loving him?" I asked, surprising myself that I really wanted to know.

"No," she barely breathed, the skin around her eyes tightening in the way that was becoming so familiar.

"Well, that sucks."

The snort that burst out of her was like the sound of a balloon rupturing, a strong pop that fizzled out, the pressure finally released. Her eyes softened and I thought maybe she wasn't so different from Erin.

I didn't care about Todd then. He was leaving. He was already gone. Hasta la vista, baby.

"Come on. I'll help you make dinner," I said, taking the grocery bags and pressing them into a couple of bicep curls. I stepped forward and asked, "Like my socks?"

We both looked down. I had purposely put the socks on that morning. For Erin. Their color looked the same to me, but I could tell there was a difference in the depth of it. I figured they were good enough for a chuckle.

My mom laughed, a real one this time, the sound making me happy, and she gently shoved me up the front steps, into the house.

POETRY

“In the Beginning,” Containment,” “The Scene,” “Poem Beginning With a Line by Wayne Koestenbaum”

Randall Mann

IN THE BEGINNING

I am sorry. I am sorry. But I am gone.
—Laura Jensen

There was a man.
Who spun saccharine
turns of phrase,
burns on the lips.
A lapse in judgment
occurred, he half
inferred. Never meant.

Who peeled ailments
off pill bottles

on a shelf,
swallowed
more than allowed,
to show safety.
Because it was safe,

he slaked his thirst
with ache—but not
at first. The cause,
a stiff knot. He gifted
a scarf with strings—
Whatever you say,
he sings—and some new

little boots.
Like *Caligula* (1979)—
stiff upper art;
Penthouse Pets—
he gets it both ways.
Monstrous and hurt,
another Robert Lowell.

A man is the owl
on the clock
in the corner.
A man of the house
for sale by owner.
In other words,
lay down

your flesh cards.
A man is clues,
broken news.
In the beginning,
a man is sewage.
And the beginning
is always.

CONTAINMENT

November 2018

This is an attempt
to contain a wildfire.
Mistakes will be repeated:
Look elsewhere for measure.

To contain a wildfire,
against myth,
look elsewhere. For measure,
remains are a number

against myth:
counts of manslaughter.
Remains are a number
set forth by Pacific Gas & Electric.

Counts of manslaughter,
aka, Camp Fire.
Set forth by Pacific Gas & Electric
a *liability*,

aka, Camp Fire.
It isn't easy to see
a liability.
Ash falls upon us all.

It isn't easy to see.
This is an attempt.
Ash falls upon us: All
mistakes will be repeated.

THE SCENE

1.

I weigh in
like a boxer.
I prompt.
A split lip
of simile;
a formality.

Then say
done and done,
post-money—
redundancy
the poverty,
the tea

closer
to role play.
Disparity,
what pulls
away:
American

money!
So green
and dull—
but as we all
know,
dullness wins,

eventually.
One nation

of hydration,
bluffs,
and rotator
cuffs…

2.

Later,
my slightly
younger
neighbor
will come
over,

in character
and shorts.
He calls me
Coach—
the scene—
reveals a patch

of itch
under his jock.
I'm no fool.
Ketoconazole,
we'll never
break.

A performance
where every
nobody wins,
mild-
to-regret
my statuette.

It isn't even
all that fun.

(Fun ends
when
you let
them in.)

3.

Men like us
are forever
grieving.
Loss
isn't loss,
it's a limited series:

episode one,
sequins;
two,
a bruise;
number you
know the rest.

Garishly shot,
like never.
I have
a small
window.
It's not bird

time yet, but
it is bird weather.
My wingspan
cuddlesome
(gross).
And my own

special
motiveless

malignity. Dignity,
I'm here
for fun
and friends.

4.

Near beer,
tight ends.
Night bends.
I know
it's late
for a love game.

Which isn't
sadness,
or freedom,
it's a feeling
that precedes
feeling, a narcotic

urge of mythic
injury.
I'm a coach
without advice.
The balm?
Go on.

POEM BEGINNING WITH A LINE BY WAYNE KOESTENBAUM

Airports are gay bars in denial.
Look at how I saunter in:
gripping my name-brand totes
(behind the security rope,
the handsy agent);

proving I am myself.
The slow walk, where somebodies see me.
The sidling up to the bar to kill time.
The obsession: uniforms.
The repetition of the word *terminal*.

The repetition of the word *terminal*—
the obsession. Uniforms
sidling up to the bar to kill, Time
the slow walk where some bodies see me
proving I am, myself.

The handsy agent
behind the security rope:
gripping. My name brand? Totes
look at how I saunter in…
Airports are gay. Bars, in denial.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Pecking Order

Rishi Reddi

In 1971, when I was almost five, my parents and I moved to Hollywood, California from Hyderabad, India via London. But our first stop in the United States was a friend's home in Yonkers, New York. We landed at JFK during a municipal workers' strike, and the streets were filled with trash. Recently, my parents recalled to me the stench from the plastic bags that lined the streets and sidewalks. The rats were out; our friend's home was visited by a healthy population of roaches every night.

"How are we going to live in this country?" my parents wondered. "Why did we move?"

During that time in New York, my mother found herself—she does not remember why—at an outdoor payphone making a call to a friend. A man approached, heavy set and fair-skinned, and started speaking to her in a language she did not understand. She was probably wearing slacks, although it could have been a sari; it was a time of wardrobe transition for her. I recall a turtleneck with broad purple and brown stripes, 1970s style, that she wore often. In later days, she would freely move between clothes and styles with an ease we all would learn to do with identities.

What she remembers about this encounter is a sense of alarm, of offense: "I don't know what you are saying! What language are you speaking?"

"You don't speak Spanish?" the man asked.

"No, no," my mother said.

When she told me the story recently, she laughed at the woman she must have been.

I think I recall the incident, or it may be that I remember my later imagining of it. The distinction does not matter much. The memory has stayed with me for reasons I have sought to understand over several decades. I even used a version in the opening pages of my historical novel about the early South Asian immigrants in the United States, Passage West. In that early scene, my elderly Indian protagonist, Ram, is approached in a grocery store by a Mexican man who speaks to him in Spanish. Ram has lived in California for sixty years and was once married to a Mexican woman whom he loved dearly, but still—he is offended by the man's presumption and pretends not to understand. In a broad sense, the novel is an explication of this action, an exploration of social hierarchy in the United States.

The person my mother was in 1971 had also responded with indignation to the man who approached her. Maybe she did so because she was raised in a culture, and an era, in which "respectable" women interacted freely only within their extended families. Perhaps, as a Commonwealth subject who had lived for several years in Great Britain, she believed in the western European version of how the United States was formed and did not realize the country would be populated by so many people with roots in Latin America. Like a great many South Asians at that time, she had deep sympathy for indigenous nations, but little recognition of the western United States''s complicated ties with Mexico and Mexican suffering at the hands of the Conquistadores.

Already, she understood that Latin Americans were not an elevated group. Perhaps she was startled that the color of her skin and hair could be a detriment in New York, as it had in London. In India, she had been part of a recognized and privileged class—her father had served as a member of Parliament in New Delhi. But in Yonkers, people did not even know what language she spoke, what her ethnic origin was. Where did she belong? On what rung did she stand on the ladder of American society?

I am sure she said to my father, later, "How can that man just approach me and start speaking? Who does he think he is?" The simple statement would have conveyed complex feelings around race, gender, status, and class. These are not laudable sentiments, but they infuse our culture and our communities; to deny their existence is to lie. At that outdoor phone booth, standing amongst uncollected bags of garbage, people did not know who she was.

*

The issue of where—or whether—South Asians fit into the American narrative has always been ambiguous. Are we "white adjacent," benefitting from the perception of being a model minority? Are we "people of color," partaking in some shared experience of Black and Brown people in the United States, deferring to the norms of the white majority, succeeding only to the extent that we can accommodate? Historically, the ambiguity resulted in strange legal ramifications, sometimes codified into American law.

What is not ambiguous is mainstream culture's portrayal of Asians as recent arrivals in the American story; we are the perpetual foreigner. This is true even though significant numbers of Chinese-Americans have lived in the United States since the early 1800s, and Japanese-Americans since the 1860s. The timeline becomes more telling when compared with that of other immigrants—Polish, Greek, Italian—and other southern, eastern, and central European populations arrived even later, between 1885 and 1925, yet those histories are written into the American story in ways that Asians are not. (The number of times that I—raised in the United States, a primary speaker of American English, a holder of two degrees in English literature from American schools, a published author in the language—have been told that I speak English "very well" is too high to mention.)

The term "Asian" is so general as to define almost nothing, a "monolithic other" that encompasses, geographically, people from Turkey to Japan, Russia to Indonesia. Yet when we address Asia culturally in the United States, we think of East Asia and Southeast Asia—Japan, China, Vietnam, maybe the Philippines, maybe Cambodia—only adding South Asia when circumstances warrant. "Asian" forces a kinship that exists only in the simplified world of our collective American imagination. When my mother was standing at that payphone, she would not have thought of herself as Asian—East Indian certainly, perhaps Oriental in the old colonial way—but not Asian.

Within the category of Asian, South Asians often feel excluded, dismissed, or minimized. Our roots are different from other parts of "Asia," evolving from a mixed, complicated, and multifaceted culture that flourished within the bounds of the Himalayan mountain range and two vast seas. There were ancient indigenous religions in that space, as well as Hinduism and Islam and Christianity and Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Jainism and Sikhi, and the Buddhists whose beliefs flourished for a while and were later exported.

This geography is unknown, unconceived of by mainstream American society in the past and today. In the 1910s, during the time of the British Raj, this vast and complicated population of South Asians was called "Hindus" in America.

In May 1919, Bhagat Singh Thind, an immigrant from Punjab in British India, was granted U.S. citizenship by the United States Court for the District of Oregon, "over the objection of the Naturalization Examiner for the United States." In 1923, he was required to defend that citizenship in the U.S. Supreme Court because the administration of President Warren G. Harding, through the Bureau of Naturalization, appealed his award. Mr. Thind had served in the American army in World War I and lived in the United States for a decade; he sought to keep his citizenship by arguing that he was "a free white person." This ridiculous argument was necessitated by the fact that, at the time, only "free white persons," former slaves, "aliens of African birth," and "persons of African descent" were eligible for citizenship, by naturalization law. Such statutes were first enacted in 1790 and continued to be refined throughout the nineteenth century; in them, race was always a factor in the ability to naturalize.

In its ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Mr. Thind was "Caucasian" but not "white," and therefore unable to naturalize as a citizen. In his 2006 book, White by Law, Ian Haney Lopez discusses the absurdity of this manipulation of language and how it was used to create the falsity of racial distinction. The ruling itself outlines a continuing obsession in America with the White/Black dichotomy: Blacks and Whites are siblings who define the country's terrible infighting, those in the Latin American community are like neighbors or extended kin, but Asians are not part of the family at all.

Here is a sobering thought: by the 1930s, Nazi Germany was the only other country in which race played an explicit part in the right to naturalize as a citizen. Because Mr. Thind was not from Africa and had not been a slave, the only argument he had—short of challenging the constitutionality of the statutes themselves—was that he was "white." Decades later, many liberal South Asians criticize Mr. Thind's choice of argument for playing into the prevailing racial hierarchy, abandoning the moral high ground of social equality in order to win the prize of citizenship and stay in the United States. But that is akin to blaming a victim for the crime.

America's obsession with the White/Black dichotomy pervaded not just the law, but also lived in the minds of everyday citizens, employers and la-

borers, husbands and wives. In the mid-1920s, seventy social researchers, funded by the Institute of Social and Religious Research and supported by the California state and county farm bureaus and twelve university research councils, conducted interviews of employers, workers, and members of non-white communities in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and northern and southern California. Their findings were formally presented in a "Survey of Race Relations." The survey provides "ground-truthed" information about the complexion of American life during those years. It belies mainstream mythologies of a White population conquering the "last frontier" of the contiguous United States.

Dr. E.E. Chandler, an absentee Imperial Valley landlord and employer of South Asians, detailed how Southern White transplants transferred their prejudice "against the Negro" to other races in the Valley, how Japanese restaurants were one of the few places that Hindus could eat. He described the antagonism between Mexican and Hindu men. Despite his recognition of the many facets and faces in the Valley and his friendships with South Asians, he could not adapt a nuanced worldview. In response to one survey question, he stated, "The Hindu resembles us except that he is black—and we are shocked to see a black white man." America did not know what to do with the South Asians; we have always been betwixt and between.

The Supreme Court decision regarding Bhagat Singh Thind was rendered forty-eight years before my family entered the country. Despite what my parents believed about the lack of discrimination in the United States, my family's right to naturalize had been restored only twenty-fiveyears before our move to Hollywood.

*

In *Passage West*, I wrote about Mr. Thind's era in American history. I based the novel on real events in the Imperial Valley. The time and setting were emblematic of the displacement, isolation, and non-belonging felt by Asian immigrants. I also explored the jostling for social position, the alliance and competition between the Japanese, Indian, and Mexican communities.

One reason the Imperial Valley fascinated me was because it was a microcosm of the United States. As William T. Vollmann observes in *Imperial*, his exegesis of the Valley and its history, "Imperial is America; Imperial goes beyond all four horizons." What happened in the Valley happened in the United States: the theft of land that had been under the care of indigenous people, the settlement by White colonizers, the erasure of the history of the "Others" who were also there, tilling the soil and building the businesses and attending the schools that, together, comprised the community. The Others were not just Asians, of course—they were and are all sorts of Blacks and Browns and in-betweens. These are despicable ways to refer to living and breathing humans, yet the manner of referral is made necessary because so many consequences emerge from skin color in the United States.

When the Imperial Valley was still the last frontier, there was a chance for it to remain unstratified, perhaps. Black families moved from Texas and the South in the late 1800s and early 1900s, but segregation was not in effect until the early 1910s. Men of various backgrounds, including Swiss, Japanese, Chinese, and Indians, might be found socializing together. The Japanese, in particular, established their own banking institutions and shipping logistics and were making profits in an economy parallel to that of the White farmers. But more families began to move in and middle-class White values, "protection of women" among them, were used as easy rationale to recreate the social stratification that defined most established areas of the United States.

By the early 1920s, large corporations and agribusiness leveraged political influence to remove the Asians who were long-term lease holders, taking control of the land. In *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley*, Benny Andres writes that once the stratification started, it took a form common to America, based on race and color. "Employers exploited racial discord whenever possible," he notes, "by pitting groups against each other to inflame racial antagonism, discourage labor unity, and encourage ethnic and racial competition for jobs." Coveted jobs in the packing sheds were reserved for White men and White women, while hard field labor was often left to Mexicans, many of whom were recruited from across the border. The stratification was accomplished socially, without question, but most powerfully through the laws. Federal immigration and naturalization statutes worked in concert with California's Alien Land Laws to divest Asians of their landholdings. That is what was most intolerable in America: the Asians' in-

dependent success, which invited envy. The only recourse for the nativists and xenophobes was to restructure society according to race, and place themselves on top.

African-Americans were segregated in the eastside of El Centro and other Valley towns, and the Asians were kicked out.

*

In the months leading up to the 2020 election, it may have appeared that the American White/Black dichotomy had been subverted. The election of Kamala Harris, daughter of a Jamaican immigrant father and an Indian immigrant mother, as Vice President of the United States provided a factual counter-narrative to America's stratification, a nod to the better angels of its nature. Then came the rally in Washington, DC in mid-November. A sign declared: COMING FOR BLACKS AND INDIANS FIRST — WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD ORDER. To see the sign on my Twitter feed was shocking, in part because of the raw sentiments it provoked, but perhaps as much because Indians finally had made a big enough splash, loomed large enough on the national stage, to be identified as a threat. South Asians had finally been seen, but the reward was envy, menace, and threats of aggression.

Kamala Harris is only a couple of years older thant I am, and no matter what I believe about her specific political views, I am enchanted by this fact. During my childhood and maybe still today (I don't know), if a person of color mentioned race in a conversation, a White person might say, "Why does everything have to be about race with you? What does it matter?" The answer is simple: to so many people, so many things in their life—perhaps most things—have been determined by race.

But during the 1970s, my parents absolved American culture from this reality. They told themselves, and anyone who asked, that *England* was where they experienced prejudice and discrimination, which was why they chose to leave. In America, they insisted, one could be whomever one wanted to be. Only later would they concede a feeling of alienation, coupled

with hopes that I would have the opportunities they were denied because I spoke with an American accent, or because I had attended American schools. When seen in this light, my mother's consternation upon her arrival in America becomes clear.

Over the years, I have grown more curious—not only about the woman my mother was but also about why the incident with the man at the payphone was such a big deal to me. I think I might know: On that day, my mother, even if she didn't know it, had begun to learn about the pecking order, the ways our family would survive in the United States. In this, I do not fault her. Why blame the victim of the pecking order instead of the pecking order itself and those who established it? It's why I do not blame Bhagat Singh Thind for his Supreme Court argument.

ESSAYS/NONFICTON

Exile in Desire

Lynell George

Between Storms: New Orleans Lynell George

Queued up in the vestibule of a centuries-old New Orleans gallery, I sank my arm into my messenger bag. Fishing for my wallet, I asked about admission. Behind a marble counter, a gentleman, Black like me, attired in an oyster-gray, three-piece suit, shook his head, then followed brightly with, "Just need your zip code."

I recited the numbers. The five crisp digits rang out in the chilly, high-ceilinged room. I waited for proof of admission—a sticker, a badge—a token to

sanction my presence, but instead, the gentleman passed something unexpected across the brief distance separating us.

"You're one of those Great Migration families."

It wasn't a question. It was an appraisal.

What did he just say?

What does that even mean?

I didn't detect any trace of acid in his tone, no shade or attitude. His smile was easy, if quick; his body fluid. He'd only made an assessment, articulated a fact. Then added: "Califor*ni-a*," breaking the last syllable into segments, a flourish like filigree.

But that "fact" knocked words out of me. I felt spreading pins and needles of something akin to guilt. I didn't know if I should laugh, or protest, or deflect, or . . .

Just *what did he see?*

*

In the Lower Nine Lynell George

For almost a decade now, I've been flying back into the cradle that holds generations of my maternal family's memories. I've sat in the icy quiet of Louisiana archives, tracing their trail in census rolls, the city directory, and, with less success, in telephone books, until they vanish. By the late 1940s, the family story shifts, redirects, when my great aunt and uncle break that trailing branch and resettle in California: One branch bends its way to Oakland and the other to Los Angeles—both journeys intended as end-of-the line escape.

Though I've never lived in New Orleans, over the last few years, these visits extend, first by hours, then by days, then by weeks.

I now discern a pattern.

Day one is an exhale.

Day two is a syncing up.

Time is ahead of where I left, but in its own signature.

Somewhere along the way, I shed one me for another. Not in airspace over the Mississippi River or Lake Pontchartrain as the jet makes its descent, but someplace less romantic. Perhaps it happens as the airport jitney drags across the interstate, rattling over the graveyards, or while listening with a musician friend to a crackling Johnny Hodges LP on a Bywater roof-

top, watching the winter sky take on a liquid iridescence, or late evening, walking along Esplanade with a tangle of friends I've fastened together, some so freshly acquired we still feel a need to fill up all silence with avid chatter.

It's a transformation that I never discern with my own eyes, but mirrored in the eyes of others: It speaks back to me in a glance or a question. Somewhere in the streets, when I'm out wandering beyond the tourist maps' borders, I shed Pacific Time for Central. It is more than resetting a clock. Something shifts and people on whom I've never laid eyes think they know me: They leap into conversation in the middle of a thought, as if the circle from late last night needed to be closed. "You forgot to holla at me!" They'll call me by a name that isn't my own but with so much soft familiarity I don't have the breath to correct them—something old-fashioned that feels as if it should be printed tenderly beneath a sepia pocket portrait in someone's tattered family album. They may ask me questions or directions in a rapid-fire New Orleans ornateness that I haven't heard since my grandfather left me in form but not in spirit. When I look up and, without hesitation, offer a confident answer, I know I have broken away: I've escaped the place that I call home, and I sink into the place that calls *me* home.

This reclamation has been important for reasons that, at first, I didn't know I needed to enumerate—namely for myself. I had been away from Louisiana, the storied ground of many generations of my family for more years than I could track, out of a desire to avoid melancholy: My grandparents gone,; my mother gone, New Orleans was, however, a place that has shaped me. But with each re-entry, more questions formed about belonging, about the possibility of who I'd be here. Which place is home? Which one is "roots"? Which one feels most part of me?

The gallery transaction didn't require legal tender, but it did extract a cost. In that brief exchange, decades of sealed-off secrets silently passed between us—the desires of those who ventured out, and the dedication of those who tended to the rituals and memories. It was as if a door to a long-locked room flew open only to shut tight again. I glimpsed something that maybe I wasn't meant to see. His sentence—in dual meanings of that word—hovered over me for hours, for days—now months.

*

Hometown Los Angeles Lynell George

I know that my family's piece-by-piece uprooting was an escape, though they might not have called it such. In small, verse-like dalliances that grew into long, extended chapters, those early trips west were fact-gathering expeditions. In a slow, devotional fashion, my family made their migration—from New Orleans to the Pacific Coast, lifted on one of the largest waves of the Great Migration beginning in the late 1940s—my great uncle, my great aunt, my mother, my great grandmother, my grandmother, in that order, packed what they needed and, as I do as a writer, struck out a ragged, displeasing line and began to write another.

How did California come to occupy their minds? Who first saw the promise in it?

I know my great uncle had it seen up-close on his railroad job as a Pullman porter. He brought those glimpses home to New Orleans, shared them as verbal snapshots, passing them around the dinner table. It helped to have something of a picture—some sort of backdrop—when you dreamt up your

new start, your pocket of peace.

What are the stories told about the people who leave? Are they brave or are they deserters? Are they heroes or are they scoundrels? Hearing the gentleman in the gallery let me know that there were indeed conversations had, judgments pronounced, and resentments nursed in some corners. Did people still hold antique grudges?

If our home folks felt abandoned, that line of cant—as my Louisiana relatives would label this type of "talk"—didn't make its way into polite conversation. I do wonder what we are not carrying—upholding— but because of that splintering, I remind myself that these were my mother's choices, not my own. If she had not liberated herself, who would she have become? I would have been, if I existed all, an entirely different me.

*

L.A. in LA: Decatur Street Lynell George

I have been nurturing a tiny seed of thought. Each time I return to Louisiana, it sprouts another tendril of something akin to desire. As that city becomes more alive to me, I've begun to feel more distanced from Los Angeles. That distancing has only grown as areas of the city are reworked by thirsty developers with a carelessness re-framed as expediency. With it come lost rituals and stories, yes, but they can only truly be told by those who bore witness, in their pauses and stresses.

The city fades in vividness with those absences, becomes a memento not a map.

I was born and raised in Los Angeles, a region full of exiles: people who had fled atrocities, dictatorships, wars, poisoned waters, natural disasters, slim chances, and the consequences of bad decisions. California wasn't simply a random dart on a map; it was breath. A chance to stay alive.

*

Dreamscapes Lynell George

The children I went to school with didn't speak of their families' escapes, didn't shed light on their survival stories or the details of the far-flung homelands I saw in footage on the evening news. Images that reporters spoke over with words like "war torn," "conflict," "refugees." Instead the decisions to flee their countries remained private, that was family business, stories for home—as too were ritual and language. The way students spoke about their lives (or pasts) was swept up in vagueness, half sentences, or silence. They found, or were carelessly sired with, new first names, or nicknames. Eventually many of them eased into those names like a role. They minimized the distance between past and present by editing it or erasing it altogether. They'd created a safe island. They were committed to their pockets of peace.

Very occasionally, and always unexpectedly, something would abrade some wound, spark and spill over. Little Rorschachs. It might be a figure in a poem or a point on the atlas. As clear as yesterday, I remember watching old news footage of the moments leading up to JFK's assassination in a junior high social studies class. As the Presidential motorcade appears, the somber narration slows, a hero's story, the music builds. Then, moments be-

fore the historic chaos, a girl from a family of exiled Cuban nationals, shoots up her hand. Her mouth opens. At first, nothing comes out. This quiet, retreating girl with the sea-green eyes and blue-black hair shaped into a feathered shag, she is transformed; she has found a voice we'd never heard. "All of this," she cries. "This. *This* is why we can't go home."

She didn't finish the story—which, we learn as a class, much later, is about the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. But I sensed even then that she understood the space as "not safe." Writing now, I am trying to locate her name amid the messy shelves of my memories, but the fire-light of her rage and pain obliterated it.

*

Patois Lynell George

My uncle Harvey didn't return to the South. Nor did he trot out adjacent emotions. My cousins remember a man of quiet pride. As a rule: "You don't talk up ghosts. Or the devil." His silences were deep, calm valleys. Whatever he'd witnessed, he sealed it away, stiffened his back.

In my household, the story was framed differently. My mother spoke frequently and vividly about the home she'd left. It was a full-on romance—joys and heartbreak. But she'd filed away humiliations she couldn't shake. Feasting bed bugs in the segregated movie balcony seats; the Jim Crow partition on the streetcar. My mother wasn't a hair-trigger sort, but she spoke her mind with conviction and precision. Would her sharp words and brazenness endanger her? I understood fully why she chose to step out of those pages, but I also knew how much the city still marked her, still prompted flashes of wistfulness. Consequently, unlike my Northern California cousins, I made frequent trips to New Orleans and found my place inside it. She'd escaped the south physically. The leave taking was as clean as it could be, but not complete. She carried that place within her, even in exile. She passed it on to me.

*

West Coast Cool Lynell George

Los Angeles was not my aspiration; it was my inheritance. Currently, a restlessness has descended, locked itself in. Perhaps the man in the oyster-colored suit intuited this. Maybe he knows something about how emotional roots work, how they spread and tangle.

This "flattening" that I currently witness in Los Angeles has to do with another shade of escaping. My parents' generation pushed into neighborhoods that had been off-limits to people of color, Black people specifically. As white flight found its momentum, the neighborhoods gave themselves over—sometimes with a great, protracted fight, sometimes in a blink.

Early in the 1990s, as a journalist, I began tracking the rising incidents of out-migration or "Black Flight"—residents fleeing these pockets for which we'd fought. I wanted to know where people were heading and why. Some tried again in the desert or the Inland Empire. Others circled back to ancestral homes.

Some continued to chase; others decided to box the devil they knew.

Defiant in spirit, some residents held on, but I used to wonder if, deep

down, they suspected that the dream had collapsed around them; that what they were staking claim to was the shadow of something that never quite materialized. Now, though, in clearer moments, I perceive that these men and women, who took unimaginable risks, are simply biding their time, expecting the wager will eventually pay off. Still, I know the question has to circle: Was the severing of the past, this pressing forward, worth it?

In Los Angeles, as these pockets of peace, so hard won, are threatened daily by aggressive erasure, I know that those long timers, who ruminate some evenings in the vestibule of their sun porches amid the night jasmine, are holding on not to hope but to a sense of being victorious. On balmy evenings, I hear the lacework of their Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi accents dancing across the driveways of their California bungalows. They refuse to be pushed out of the story, pushed out of possibility, pushed out of a narrative that they are still, doggedly, writing, trying to get to the triumphant close.

I too am that figure in the shadows, lingering in the vestibule. Do I step back inside or do I break out? Do I interrupt the story, make a new escape—or, more accurately, a reclamation? Who is that alternative self that others glimpse in passing, and how might she fully exist if I could calibrate it just right? I look to these elders as examples of fortitude, who know how to frame desire. I crave to understand that pull, to want something as much as they wanted California.

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

Married in a Hurricane, Divorced in a Drought: On a Loss of Nature, and the Nature of Loss

Erin Ruffin

I remember the weather.

The abundance of rain on the day I said, "I do," and the distressing lack of it eight years later when I said, "I can't anymore."

We were married in a hurricane and divorced in a drought.

Our love stretched from London to New York, the cities from which we long-distance dated for the first part of our relationship. We were in our twenties, still carving individual shapes within the world, aware of our negative spaces and keen to fill them. Opposites were attractive then, and we found ours in each other. Where I was dark—the roots, he was light—the fruit. Where I thought, he felt. Where I doubted, he believed. Where I stepped carefully, he ran ahead. We gave to one another an opposite but equally necessary element for growth: my rain for his sunshine, his sunshine for my rain. Our collision was natural and inevitable and our dependence on each other grew.

When I was 25 and he was 28, we got married—so young!—just as Hurricane Danny blasted the coast of New Hampshire. We said yes to forever in a tiny white church at the base of the White Mountains. I moved from my

beloved New York to London and oh, we were ablaze with the endlessness of our shared future, only dreamable by hearts as young and full as ours. We started a company together, traveled Europe together, made a perfect baby girl together. We laughed all the time; we barely argued. We were good together. Too good. But our hearts were hungry, and hunger is not relative. Hunger doesn't care how well you travel together, or how little you argue. Hunger folds in on itself and before you know it, you're in a shape you didn't carve, malnourished and moving to Los Angeles.

We arrived in California at the peak of the worst drought on record, and we bought a little house the next year, an El Nino year that promised relief in the form of rain. But the rain never came, just the sun. Day after day after day. We went to the beach on Christmas, left our winter coats and umbrellas untouched in closets. After years of gray, rainy days in London, this should have been a welcome change, but in truth, the dryness made me nervous. There was nothing to shield us from the sun and I was exposed.

Los Angeles is pretty good at hiding itself, even in full sunlight. It is a giant city of echoes. A sprawling urban chameleon, artificial and authentic all at once. Our beaches should be coastal dunes rich with flowering plants and shrubs, but we turned them into something flat and sandy because we wanted tourists to love us and we had tons of extra sand to dump on them anyway. Palm trees were never supposed to be here, but we liked how they looked in the French Riviera so we planted them up and down the boulevards. Now we can't figure out what to do with this parasitic flora that is everywhere, taking and taking and giving nothing in return: no wood, no fruit, and next to no shade. We stole water from the Owens Valley, fundamentally changing its DNA, because we didn't have enough water to support all the people who were moving here. We played god and swapped identities and now even that stolen water is threatening to run out.

A city of ten million people needs a lot of water.

I became obsessed with figuring out the truth of this place at the same time I started questioning my own. What is the real Los Angeles supposed to be? Is something wrong with my marriage, or is something wrong with me? Water-guzzling grassy lawns, tropical landscaping, started to piss me off. Those lawns aren't honest, they're just imitation; they need water we don't have to grow. We were in a record-breaking drought, our snowpack was at 7% of what it should be, and why was I so unhappy in my marriage? Los Angeles can't afford to pretend anymore that it's not a desert. It is a

desert. A desert in a drought. And I was dying of thirst.

I needed a refuge from the fear that we'd moved to a place that was breaking down, which meant it was not a safe place for me to break down. So I started running. I went into the city's forests and its mountains, places we haven't changed into something else. Places that remain exactly as intended. I ran miles and miles on as many trails as I could. I was a raw nerve in running shoes, alone in mountains that are six million years old. They aren't going anywhere—anytime soon, at least—and that was the steadiness I needed so I could fall apart.

What I was sensing in Los Angeles on the outside—nature changed in untenable ways; a place imitating itself and other places—was happening on the inside, too. I was a microcosm of the macro. That's why I was obsessed with it, why it made me so damn mad. I went into the woods as often as I could to feel something honest. Where Los Angeles pointed out all the ways I wasn't being true to *myself*, running in the mountains felt like coming home.

I guess I needed both to see the truth about *us*.

Our love had reached its maximum distance. It was real—is still real—but the strength of it could only take us so far. We had to look at this love honestly and recognize that we could not go further with what we had. If we were to stay together, we would have to stay right where we were, the same. Or we could allow our love to set us free, from the end of our rich and scenic road together and into the space we both needed to be our true selves, which would mean apart. The thought took my breath away, but I knew I couldn't stay in the marriage. Nature is forever seeking itself out, and I was turning into someone else to make this work.

The green lawns, the flat sandy beaches, the palm trees, Los Angeles, and me.

On a hot dry evening, I told my husband I couldn't stay married to him. Grief ripped through me like a thunderstorm that had been building for years. A storm we had unknowingly seeded on the day we were married. I had no back-up plan; I had no plan. But I knew what I was saying was true: together, we could only be versions of ourselves.

The next month it started raining. Not enough to pull California out of drought, but relief anyway. I drove up the coast to one of my favorite places to run, Montaña de Oro. On the trails, I passed three women around my mother's age. We said hello and they, having seen me from a distance earli-

er, asked how far I was running that day.

"I've got 12 miles planned," I said.

"Wow! You're on a mission, what brings you out here?"

I hesitated, not knowing how to explain that I'd just ended my marriage without knowing why, that I was so devastated I could barely breathe, and that running in mountains was the only thing that felt right.

"A broken heart," I said.

"Oh, honey … You'll find a lot of broken hearts out here. And you know what? This is the best place for them to be," one of the women replied with a confidence that left no room for doubt. I was in the company of women whose hearts had also been found and fixed in these mountains. And I would be okay, too.

A year and a half later, my then-ex told me he was gay. "I know," I whispered, not as a statement of fact but as one of recognition. It came from somewhere deep inside. It felt the way it does to run through deep wilderness that is too big and too powerful to be changed by me. I have no choice but to accept those humbling but beautiful things.

Nature always returns to itself.

Nature always brings us home, even if that means two instead of one.

RESPONSES

Struck or Shaken

Elda Maria Román

1.

The first time a white man punches my brother in the face, he's at a red light. It's the early 2000s in Providence, Rhode Island, our hometown. A man comes up to the window, strikes him, and walks away. My brother, stunned, can't leave his car.

*

The second time, I'm visiting my brother in Kentucky, where he moved to be with his partner and their newborn son. He's been having a rough year. He started out in Los Angeles selling insurance to Latino small business owners. Kentucky is a harder place for him as a tall, broad-shouldered brown man. *Why would I give my information to you?* he hears.

I want to cheer him up. I visit around his birthday, which coincides with the week of his office party. Afterwards, he and I go to a bar playing '90s hip hop. As we dance, a white man walks by. He punches my brother in the face.

I see my brother knocked backwards, hear his head hit the ground.

*

Earlier, in the Muhammad Ali museum in downtown Louisville, looking out a window at the Ohio River, my brother reminds me of the time when we were kids and he fell asleep on an inflatable donut in the ocean. When he woke up, he was far from shore. My mom and I saw him, but she couldn't swim. I ran into the water and swam until I reached him. I had forgotten this memory until he tells it. I remember how my arms ached.

*

He's getting up. Slowly.

I'm sobbing. We are rushed outside by security. A young white police officer gets frustrated as we try to describe the assailant. It happened so fast; we don't know exactly what he looks like. We plead with the officer to question those still in the bar. He snaps his notepad shut, calling over his commanding officer.

If you go to shady places, you can expect shady things to happen, the superior says. My brother is bleeding from his face and I'm shouting: *This is Why People of Color Do Not Trust the Police*. My brother is yelling now, too. The commander arrests him. My brother spends the night in jail on charges of disorderly conduct.

When he gets out the next morning, his face is swollen. His medical treatment has been ibuprofen and a cotton swab . He has a loose tooth and a split lip. He tears up and asks me if he did something to provoke that guy. I cry and say no. He came out of nowhere.

We never find out who or why.

A month before, a new president had been elected, promising a return to greatness and a wall around it.

*

2.

"Please don't get upset," she said. "But when I go to my neighborhood park, it's all Mexicans now. And I don't want to feel like I'm in Little Mexico."

I was confused at my friend's words as we had dinner and drank wine in my apartment in Los Angeles. She is a white friend from high school in Rhode Island who moved to California for college.

She studied abroad in Brazil. Went to Mexico regularly for spring break. Including me, all her bridesmaids except her sister-in-law had been Latinas. She worked as a nurse and once told me she appreciated how the Latino families visited their loved ones in the hospital the most.

She and her husband had two kids and bought a house in Orange County on a street with the kind of lawns and wide streets that made me think of the movies.

Taking a sip, she waited for me to respond.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked.

*

Demographic projections that the United States will be majority minority by the middle of the twenty-first century have sparked fearful responses among voters and racial extremists. Social scientists have found that in response to such forecasts, some Americans are more likely to support conservative socioeconomic policies, believing their place in the social hierarchy might be at risk. Studies have also found that news outlets and media platforms can "activate whiteness," prompting a reactive racial identity.

A 2018 *National Geographic* article—part of its "Race" issue—is titled "As America Changes, Some Anxious Whites Feel Left Behind." It quotes white people fearful that their Pennsylvania town is becoming majority Latino.

A bartender remarks, "We joke about it and say we are in the minority now.... They took over the city. We joke about it all the time, but it's more than a joke." A coffee shop owner says she avoids certain areas now because they are "too scary." But she feels reassured that things will change

because "we have one of us in that White House… We are going to make America great again."

In addition to these folks, the article quotes an English professor from another state who expresses his begrudging acceptance of the demographic changes:

> In the 20th century, the white man was the best deal that anybody ever had in the history of the planet. I mean, in America you could feel like you were at the center of everything. You didn't have to justify yourself… People of Color are moving into the mainstream now; "White" is no longer the default setting for "American." And though it's clear that this process is inevitable—it's just a matter of numbers and demographics—a lot of the time, to be honest, I'm sad about it. The country is changing in ways that aren't very good for me, and I've got no choice but to adapt.

These responses, ranging from anger to reluctance, nervousness to nostalgia, indicate that *demographobia*, which anthropologist Sami Alim has defined as "the irrational fear of changing demographics," gets expressed through an array of emotions and from people across class and education.

To me, it's not irrational to fear change.

It's irrational to think the change would be a negative one.

*

The fear of changing demographics is not new. There's always been a fear of cultural and racial change, and attempts to preserve existing hierarchies.

There's too many… Germans… Irish… Chinese… Mexicans… Muslims… Haitians! You will not replace us!

The task of right-wing populism, Corey Robin explains, is to "harness the energy of the mass in order to reinforce or restore the power of elites." It speaks in the voice of the outsider, "to and for people who have lost something, whose aim is recovery and restoration." Fearing an upset to the status quo, conservatives use the language of empowered victims. As an ideology of reaction, conservatism was marshaled against the French Revolution, for example, and in the United States more recently, in response to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The end of de jure segregation in this country led to seismic cultural and

economic shifts, an opening up and a retrenchment. Admittance to workplaces and institutions of higher education has occurred for non-whites in unprecedented numbers. Yet a restructuring of the tax system also enabled wealth to balloon upwards. The opening of quotas in the 1965 Immigration Act allowed greater immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In the post-1970s period, however, more of the social safety net has been cut for everyone except those at the top.

*

For some, there's the sense of a grave loss, the end of an era in which whiteness was a winning lottery ticket. As Claudia Rankine writes in her 2016 poem "Sound and Fury":

In the old days white included a life, even without luck
or chance of birth. The scaffolding had rungs
and legacy and the myth of meritocracy fixed in white.

"White is living its brick-and-mortar loss," she goes on, addressing a vulnerability intensified by the economic state of

foreclosure vanished pensions school systems
in disrepair free trade rising unemployment unpaid
medical bills school debt car debt debt debt.

The poem presents "white" as an identity, a set of expectations, a structure, a color, a state of being, and an actual being. The personification continues as white can no longer distance itself from the "day's touch." Increasingly aggrieved, white hardens its eyes, jaws, hands. Unable to see its own oppressiveness even in the daylight, white is unable or unwilling to "strike its own structure," instead doubling down on supremacist rage.

*

A 2019 Pew Research Center report finds that a majority of Americans are pessimistic about the future.

Among people's fears are widening wealth inequality, automation, and ter-

rorism. When it comes to the issue of changing demographics, the report finds that "42% say this shift will be neither good nor bad for the country, while 35% believe a majority-minority population will be a good thing, and 23% say it will be bad." However, responses vary by race and ethnicity: "nearly half of whites (46%) but only a quarter of Hispanics and 18% of Blacks say a majority-minority country would weaken American customs and values."

Nearly half of whites.

What happens to that pessimism, that fear, that resentment? How many walls, cages, bans are required to soothe, allay, appease? When white men issue cries that whiteness lies in precarious balance, in danger of extinction, that white people will experience genocide, will be replaced.

Will this lead to more violence and preemptive measures, gerrymandering and policing and detaining and underpaying and controlling everything from algorithms to wombs?

*

My friend revealed that she didn't feel comfortable with so many Mexicans (they might not even have been Mexican) in the park near her house because she thought they were judging her. Her three-year-old son was exhibiting behavioral problems, would hit other kids at birthday parties and throw tantrums on the playground. She felt the park-goers were staring at her, silently calling her a bad mother for not being able to control him.

I love this friend, and ultimately, she came to see that she was making assumptions based on her own fears. But I know projections like this are being made, softly, loudly, explosively, all over.

3.

I saw the movie *Manchester by the Sea* when it came out in 2016. Starring Casey Affleck, the film follows one man's emotional journey after suffering a grievous loss. After getting drunk and high one night, he leaves the fireplace

burning while he walks to a minimart for beer. The house burns down with his two children inside. His marriage collapses and he ends up alone in a one-room apartment, working as a janitor. The first time I saw *Manchester by the Sea*, I cried. The second time, I cried again. Its portrayal of trauma and the inability to cope made me think of all the people I knew who would never acknowledge a need for help, let alone ask for it or accept it.

*

Once called the "Walt Whitman of advice columnists," Cary Tennis wrote the "Since You Asked" column for Salon from 2001 to 2013. In one letter, he was asked how to help a friend struggling with alcoholism. As someone who had battled alcoholism and depression himself, Tennis responded that people have different thresholds for pain, and some people are willing to die before they ask for relief.

I thought about a much-loved friend who took her own life, leaving us, without a note, without an answer to the question we will always ask.

Pain had become enough of a reason not to stay, Audre Lorde understood.

When I read Tennis's letter years ago, it was the first time I encountered the idea that rather than be tougher, to withstand more, one could pinpoint and lower one's threshold for pain.

*

Affleck's character is unable to process his emotions. He is so bottled up that, in two separate bar scenes, he starts hitting people left and right. I first watched the film several months after the assault on my brother. This film asks us to sympathize with a man who could just throw punches in a public place without any repercussions.

Media socializes us to how much White Feelings Matter: white tears, white fragility, white rage.

I think of all the people like my brother who could never express their feelings publicly. Futures would be arrested, pain compounding in a human cage.

4.

When my brother was in high school, we were sitting in his car, waiting for fast food. I made a joke about how ugly he was, low-hanging sibling fruit. He punched me in the face.

I covered myself. *I didn't know you were that insecure!*

Maybe I am!

What could I say to that? We had both grown up in the same place and time, ideas about love and attention hitting us harder than our parents ever could.

We learned early on in Catholic school to sit with our hands clasped. If we sat quietly, teachers would think that we were good. We could go to recess more quickly or get dismissed and go home. My brother and I still do that when we sit, as passengers, in an audience, while waiting, our hands clasping by default. Keeping everything inside until we can't.

When I remind my brother that he hit me, he denies it ever happened.

*

Americans in love with the fantasy of a racial democracy must live with a perpetual forgetting. Must forget that every white star on that flag is a marker of land taken, people displaced. That the United States still has colonies and people who bond over bondage, then and now. That we love redemption stories, as if treaties were honored, proclamations led to full emancipation, or past wrongs could be remedied with holidays, month-long programming, representation over redistribution.

Karen Tei Yamashita writes in her novel *I Hotel*: "A group could act as a single fist or as an open handshake."

Many of us don't know if we will be struck or shaken by American love.

*

"We are a dark people," my father told me, "and your mother was so light."

This was his answer when I asked what attracted him to my mom, who he first met when they were both teens living in the same pueblo in the mountains of Guerrero, Mexico. A place, like many others, where people have nicknames like Guëra, India, Negra. Hierarchies and intimacies intertwined to preserve power long after the era of colonists and missions.

In my twenties, I dated a guy whose family nickname was Feo, meant as an endearment, though he never felt endeared to anyone, let alone loved as the darkest one in his family.

He was the first man outside my family I had seen cry.

Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about, he had heard, as did so many of us.

*

When embattled history and banned books signal an investment in amnesia—in the willful not knowing of why so many live with inherited pain, strike out, or are on the move—how can we honestly discuss past and present links between systems of power?

Colonization set in motion the class dynamics and political circumstances that would ultimately lead the global south to migrate to the global north. After centuries of extraction, uneven development, and political destabilization, millions on the margin headed toward the center.

Capitalism set in motion the class dynamics and political circumstances that would ultimately lead climate refugees to migrate to...

5.

When I moved to Los Angeles, a stop in my own migration, I Googled my new neighborhood and came across a Twitter page for Koreatown. "It's a

misnomer," the profile said. "We're all Latino."

I don't know who made that Twitter page. In my experience, the community remains Korean but is very diverse over all. You can eat at Korean BBQ restaurants where you cook your own meat on the grill in front of you. Or you can find places that sell poke bowls or veggie burgers with tater tots. Vendedores on the street corners sell tlayudas, pupusas, tacos. Boba and artisanal coffee shops sit next to panaderias where you can get 50 cent coffee in a Styrofoam cup. There are karaoke bars and at least one speakeasy, which puts its passwords out on social media. Bars that play banda and cumbia. There are huge malls with grocery markets, furniture stores, spas, while down the street, discount stores sell everything from cooking utensils to makeup to party supplies. Folks in suits walk next to students and laborers. High rises and million dollar homes sit alongside homeless encampments.

Every day, I pass men and women hauling groceries or pushing carts filled with jugs of water. Water stores abound in Koreatown. On my way home, I pass Asian and Central American women carrying umbrellas to shade themselves from the sun.

After growing up in New England, Los Angeles is the first place I've lived where I haven't felt wrong.

At the same time, living in this neighborhood and having my water delivered by a company, I wonder: *Am I a gentrifier?*

I also wonder why we are all buying our water.

*

Recently, I taught a graduate seminar on "Race and the Novel." One of the questions we explored was whether it was possible to decolonize the novel, which is traditionally regarded as a European narrative form. We read authors including D'Arcy McNickle, Gayl Jones, and Daniel José Older.

One of the student evaluations I received made me fearful. A student accused me of asking about sex until he snapped, of allowing other members of the class to harass him with insults and accusations of racism, of filing complaints against him with the university. He said I was a good teacher until these things started to happen. He believed I had been enlisted by inter-

est groups outside of the university.

None of this happened. I suspected the comment came from a person who identified as a literary conservative. He wanted to study Anglo-Saxon culture and was protective of the canon. I wondered why he had signed up for class. He was mostly quiet, and because we switched to Zoom midway through the semester due to the pandemic, we only met in person a few times.

I sensed I was an outlet for anger that was not about me. When I talked to department administrators about these comments, I learned he had withdrawn from the program.

I didn't feel less afraid.

*

But you're white, my mom has told me.

You're white presenting, a Latino friend has said.

Both say it with amused insistence, wondering why I am so angry at racial violence, when, to them, I haven't been harmed.

*

If whiteness offers so much, "a public and psychological wage," as W.E.B. Du Bois put it, why would white people give it up?

What would they gain?

"Solidarity dividends," argues Heather McGhee: a way out of the zero-sum game while offering widespread gains. A way to stop hurting everyone by preventing the draining of the pool of public resources.

Would that be possible?

If not, whether swinging the fists or struck by them, everyone stands guard. Fear makes people want to protect their own small box of goods and gains, so concerned at preserving what they have that they don't ask who made the box or why.

They also don't ask why the box contains and is contained by enclosures

such as *Man* and *Woman*, *Queer* and *Straight*.

Or why intimacy is difficult in and across the boxes.

White supremacy distracts, distorts.

It makes people think others need to be knocked down or kept out, foreclosing a future that could be expansive and shared.

*

I've tried to talk to my brother about what happened and he doesn't respond.

*

More and more people are listening to what's been hard to speak and hear.

I've been listening to what people say about trauma. Studies reveal that it's embodied; even if the mind forgets, the body does not. Trauma affects one's worldview and informs our narratives. It makes people hypervigilant, defensive, and fearful of what's coming next.

Colonialism—Capitalism—White Supremacy—Heteropatriarchy—

Catalysts of traumatic effects.

A 2022 *Vox* article notes that trauma is the keyword of the decade. More people than ever are searching for ways to understand it, in all its various forms. Collective trauma, historical trauma, intergenerational trauma. The article cites researchers who worry the term has become a catch-all, applied to events that aren't necessarily traumatic, leaving people to believe they have no agency.

Yet, if trauma represents a framework for understanding, the rise in people searching for the language to describe it signals agency to me.

It suggests a route to the oppositional, an impulse to historicize. To learn and unlearn, to storytell, to make sense of what happened then, now.

To ask: why are we so stuck, afraid, and is there another way to be?

POETRY

“Ode to Billy Joel,” “Prayer to St. Anthony, Patron Saint of Lost Things,” “Ode to my 11-Year-Old’s Shadow of a Mustache,” “Gwyneth Paltrow’s P*ssy,” “They Teased, If you Love Your Do So Much, Why Don’t You Marry Him?”

Sonia Greenfield

ODE TO BILLY IDOL

Billy, tell me I’m punk
enough that I could
puke in my mouth a little
because I once wore

a pin of my boyfriend
on the left quadrant of
my jean jacket as if he were
the keeper of my heart &

not you who stayed
pinned on the right. At 15
desire sends a body down
a dark lane without a flashlight

so it blindly gropes or
gets groped. Let's conjugate
this failure of tenderness, this
ignorance for touch. I knew

nothing except how need
sent me hurtling like
a self-driving car toward
what would break it. All I ever

wanted was my MTV
a boyfriend & your primal
Elvis thing, the bleached
incubus of it whispering

hard thrust & long stroke
in my ear until I could hear
blood beating in my head,
until I was feverish with

the sound of it all, so I
pinned a stupid boy to my
left breast as if he deserved
me. As if my virginity were

a dirty note to slip into

his back pocket, like he
could pay me for it with
bong hits then cross

his heart, hope to die &
lie about everything to
our faces. Mine a hot mess
of mascara & baby fat,

yours sneering from faded
denim where you surveyed
every mess I made yet
always deemed me worthy.

PRAYER TO ST. ANTHONY, PATRON SAINT OF LOST THINGS

St. Anthony, who received from God the special power of restoring lost things, grant that I may find that which has been lost.

Grant that I may find my mojo, misplaced
in middle age and replaced with progressive
lenses and a penchant for Sunday crosswords.
How much mojo have you restored, and what
does it look like, and is it usually in the couch
cushions with the Apple TV remote? Tony,
how many millions of earrings have you
found since the beginning of Catholic time?
A theoretical glimmering mountain of baubles
that reaches your cloud? Is it knobby with pearls
and woven through with gold wires? You must
manage one helluva spreadsheet, patron saint
of relief, of signs for missing cats, of hopeless
pleading for new hymens. Have you any helpers
or does the nervous sweat bead unbidden on

your pate, and do you wipe it with the hem
of your brown robe? Do the voices clamor and
clamor like cathedral bells ringing in your ears?
Tony, do you cry when you can't find a boy
because he already sits by your side, and the boy's
mother keeps you up all night with her begging,
but you are powerless to return anything besides
ashen flesh? Do you search in such instances
for your own mojo, convinced you're better off
restoring heirloom brooches and fountain pens,
better at bringing a corgi back from his wandering?
Would you like to switch jobs with Francis
and frolic for once with the lambs instead of just
sending the lost ones home? On the news I saw
you bring a body back from Nam and saw how
you reunited birth mother with daughter. We're
always losing, Tony. St. Anthony, who received
from God the special power of restoring lost
things, where are all the socks, lighters, and wallets,
the hair ties, lip balms, and iPhones? Do you
keep collections to count in heaven, some calm
in the careful numeration of unclaimed car keys?

ODE TO MY ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD'S SHADOW OF A MUSTACHE

Said to predict how long
the howl of winter, I find
the wooly bear caterpillar

on the patio—of ursine
I see black and russet band,
setae like fur, it like everything

I want to touch. Meanwhile,

October's wind closing in
like walls squeezing summer

into commemoration, small
enough to fit in my pocket.
I don't see how its pelt and

how it sprouts let me know
what to weather; only that
I will it through to the season

of tender cotyledons. I've seen
the moth it molts to—silky
grey and more muscular—

but prefer the soft thing
making its way from the lip
of pavement to the last

remnants of green grass,
as if I had any power to hold
back what time takes forward

and toughens.

GWYNETH PALTROW'S P*SSY

Now that I have your attention, consider,
instead, the tomato, so much like the texture
of a pussy if you've ever had the privilege
to tongue one. The gravid weight of it, bright
yellow or streaked through with rays of marmalade,
she sends her squad to the farmers market to weigh
each heirloom for worthiness, each cupped

and hummed over in the palm of an assistant's
hand. Consider the hard flesh of the lesser
specimen, how it is gassed pink with ethylene
and stacked in the corner of the dollar store
or fed to kids collecting at the border the way
sorters weed out the unsightliest of fruit.
Consider the jade mines of Myanmar,
the extraction of ore by men seldom spoken for—
pickaxes tink tink against a hill that sometimes
rolls its invaders under in an industry that makes
unearthers into insects and makes you wonder
whether, when another anthill falls, if any ants
can be saved. Consider the slow process
of refinement, from earth to calloused hand
to cart to plant to polisher to warehouse
to privileged twat gently squeezing the smooth
Nephrite egg to her pelvic floor. Consider
Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and the cave smells
of expensive candles. Consider Gwyneth Paltrow's
pussy. We goad each other to delve its darkness
like kids high on triple-dog dares. Bring a flashlight
and spelunk the cave ringing with drips from
stalactites to puddled ground. Can you hear how
any echoing tweaks the bats' frequencies, and they
stir the darkness sucked up to the ceiling? Rumor
has it that when you make it in far enough, you can
find the skeletons of those who lost their way,
their bones rattled by mysterious breezes
entirely unrelated to the winds of change.

THEY TEASED, IF YOU LOVE YOUR DOG SO MUCH, WHY DON'T YOU MARRY HIM?

& so I did, in a small ceremony under a gazebo
by the water he ran into (new suit ruined)
& onto our reception heavy on meat, heavy
on his extended relations with their poor
decorum & crotch sniffing—so many things
we bear for love. You could say we were
in heat that night, *the* heat that night hot
with the breath of August & after spins
on the dance floor & so many bowls topped
with champagne, we all flopped to the floor
panting with joy

or an inability to sweat. That night
I dreamt a whelp half his shepherd's shaggy coat
of russet & black & half my human dignity,
but being hybrid, the boy was loyal
only to himself, so let's say we kept things
chaste. Let's say there is such sweetness
to wed for all the right reasons, like a partner
beholden unto me, his brown eyes, if not
undressing, always asked that we stroll
the streets & through his short years we did—

how he pissed a perimeter of safety
that we lived within, a ring of neighborhood
trees marked as ours, how his muzzle
grayed only six years in.

FICTION

A Dreadful Consolation

Christos Ikonomou, translated by Karen Emmerich

Three weeks earlier I'd been chucked off the job and now the raindrops were crashing onto the windshield like skydivers betrayed by their parachutes.

It was Friday evening, there was a protest at the university, and the road was blocked off. Stuck at the traffic light by the Attica department store, I looked out at the people on the sidewalk and in the other cars and wondered how another week had passed and how the next one would, too, and if on Monday, say, I'd manage to be a man, an antras, and tell Antriana the truth—and what kind of name is that for a woman, anyhow?—to be an antras and tell Antriana the truth, to stop hiding, to sit her down across from me, look her in the eye and say here's how things stand.

Because it's been nearly three weeks since I was fired and I still haven't told her a thing; I leave the house every morning as usual, only I don't go to my job since I no longer have a job, I just get in the Micra and roam the city for hours, one end of Athens to another, and even beyond—Lavrio, Perama, Rafina—and of course I know this can't go on much longer. What kind of antras hides from his wife, lies to her, refuses to face reality head-on, to say so it goes, water under the bridge, moving on—and besides, I'm not doing myself any favors, I've already spent a fortune on gas.

I looked at the crowds around me and the red tail lights flickering on and off up ahead and listened to the whistles of the traffic cops and the shouted chants from the protest in the distance. Real men, proper antres, don't just sit there chewing the cud, don't get stuck in the past. Real men have long legs and a short memory; they forget and they run, they forget and run

straight ahead. Real antres keep moving forward, they don't drive around in circles. Proper antres are practical, with square minds and triangular hearts. Real antres think practically, act practically, feel practical pain. Proper antres are practical practitioners of practicality.

Then, watching the raindrops crashing onto the windshield like skydivers, etc., I wondered if maybe I should sign up for a creative writing seminar or something, so I could sit down and write something to Antriana. Instead of telling her face-to-face, I could write it, in a letter or piece of flash fiction—what a ridiculous phrase—a tiny bonsai of a story, though the way my mouth and mind run it would probably come out a baobab or sequoia.

Then I wondered if maybe I should sign up for one of those group therapy sessions for the unemployed. I saw myself sitting in a room surrounded by strangers—"Good evening, I'm so-and-so, I'm unemployed, and I'm pretty sure I'm going nuts." Then I pictured the clinical psychologist who'd be running the group. She's around forty and has, as usual, an unusual name—Adamia or Zambia, stress on the i, or Rigo, stress on the o. She's got her hair tucked behind her ears and is wearing tortoiseshell glasses, a knee-length skirt, skin-colored tights, and black ballerina flats. She nods along as I talk, encourages me to keep going, and whenever she starts talking, stray words in English slip out now and then—empathy, compassion, that sort of thing. I picture her standing in front of a TV camera and declaring: "I love people and want to make a difference, that's why I became a psychologist."

Then the blockhead interviewing her asks three times in a row how she spells her name, and of course when the footage airs it'll still be spelled wrong: Edemea, Zambea, Rego.

Then I picture myself on some island. My name is something heavy and islandy like Sifis Alogaris or Manousos Avgerinos or Yiakoumis Nichteris, but my wife is still Antriana—and really, is that a name for a woman? I'm still driving around in the Micra, but now it's to places called Sirmata or Apato or Kleidonia or Tichari. It's still Friday evening and there's a vicious wind blowing, a murderous wind, a delivorias, a crazy north wind, as the locals say, and I'm driving in circles from one end of the island to another and wondering how the week already passed and how the next one will, too, if I'll find the courage on Monday, say, to be an antras and tell Antriana the truth, and so on and so forth.

Then I tell myself we're no longer living only in the culture of self-reliance but also in the culture of then, of afterwards, of meta, as we say in Greek,

so I should probably change the terms of the narration accordingly. "Meta-good metaevening, I'm metaSifis metAlogaris. I'm meta-unemployed and I'm pretty sure I'm going metanuts." And the clinical psychologist Adamia or Zambia or Rigo follows my lead: "I metalove metapeople and metawant to metamake a metadifference…"

Then I think how at some point we need to sit down and have a serious conversation about what to do when the meta comes before a word that starts with a vowel. What are we going to say? Meta-unemployment or metunemployment? Meta-occupation or metoccupation? Meta-affection or metaffection? Meta-adoration or metadoration? Foreigners don't have this kind of problem, they just stick a "post" on everything and call it a day. Then I wonder if maybe we could import that into Greek: for postun-employment, posttruth, or postlove, we'd have postanergia, postalitheia, postagapi. Then I make up a few tasteless and politically incorrect puns: poustagapi, poustalitheia, poustanergia: faglove, fagtruth, fageunmployment. We could probably keep it going in English, too: haglove, hagtruth, hagunemployment. The culture of post, of what-next, of then.

And then, sitting there stuck at the light outside the Attica department store, I hear the rear right door of the car open and see a woman climb in, carrying a red duffle bag. She sits down, sets the bag beside her, and gently shuts the door.

—Good evening. To Piraeus, please. To the port.

A few moments pass with Sifis/Manousos/Yiakoumis swiveled around facing the back seat, not knowing what to say, because the car is blue, not yellow, and he isn't a cab driver but merely a metunemployed, post-unemployed, meta-laid-off metantras, and if push came to shove even a child could tell you that there's no such thing as a Micra taxi.

Then he turns back around and shuts his eyes for a moment, and when he opens them, he straightens the mirror and puts the car in first, second, neutral and lets it roll gently over the wet pavement, over that small swatch of pavement between it and the car ahead.

—To the port?

—Yes, to the port, the woman says. Thanks so much.

*

The raindrops are crashing onto the windshield like skydivers betrayed by their parachutes—I turn left on Omirou to avoid the bottleneck and then turn again on Stadiou. I keep glancing at the mirror, trying to catch her eye, trying to figure out if she's cracked or plastered or both. But the woman seems neither crazy nor drunk. The only incongruous thing about her is a red mark like a burn on her neck. When I get caught at the light at Kolokotroni, I consider turning around and telling it to her straight—"This isn't a cab, ma'am. Look, there's no meter or anything." But then the light turns green and I keep going, and she's quiet back there, she doesn't have any tics, she's not talking to herself, doesn't smell bad, she's a woman like any other. Just sitting there looking out the window at the people shaking themselves like wet dogs now that the rain has stopped—one hand on her duffle bag, the other on her knees.

—You're going on a trip? I ask her.

—Yes, a trip.

—Where to, if you don't mind?

—Crete, Hania. It's a trek by boat but I'm afraid of planes.

—Is that where you're from?

—Yes, from Hania. And you? Where are you from?

Hm, good question. I miss a beat.

—Not too far from there, I say. Ierapetra.

—Oh, amazing! How did you end up in Athens?

I glance at the mirror, start to say something, change my mind.

—Forget it, I say. It's a long story.

For a while we don't talk. My nerves are stretched taut, ready for anything. I keep thinking she'll lunge forward and grab me by the neck or plunge a razor blade into my back or ask me if I want to drive her to some hotel—"Twenty an hour for a strapping man like you, whatever you're in the mood for."

And then:

—Ierapetra. The southernmost city in Europe, right?

—It depends, I say. It depends on what you mean by Europe.

I look in the mirror.

—So, you're headed on winter holiday?

—A winter wedding. I'm getting married on Sunday.

She smiles. She's around the same age as the clinical psychologist, but she doesn't wear glasses and her hair is pulled back into a ponytail. When I wish her a happy wedding day—what else am I supposed to say?—she lowers her head and thanks me, gently brushing an invisible layer of dust off her knees with her hand.

—Is it love? I ask, trying to meet her eye again in the mirror.

—Of course, she answers. Love. But it's also our names. His name is Avgerinos and mine is Poulia.

I glance back up at the mirror and then, thirty meters down the road, I pull into the shoulder and stop. I turn around and look her straight in the eye.

—Poulia, I say.

She smiles, nodding her head.

—Poulia and Avgerinos, I say.

She smiles, nodding again.

—Unbelievable! I say. Poulia and Avgerinos. Unbelievable!

I don't take my eyes off hers. I'm waiting for her to break, to start laughing, to tell me she's joking. A man named Avgerinos fell for a woman named Poulia and they're getting married this Sunday. Sure, great, what else've you got? The maid of honor is Little Red Riding Hood and Tom Thumb is best man? And the wolf and seven little goats are the ring bearers? Poulia and Avgerinos. No way, not a chance. That kind of thing just doesn't happen.

—It's true, she says. Of course, it's a little strange. But we'll see.

—How did it happen? I ask. How did you meet?

She suddenly turns serious. She glances out the window, strokes the red mark on her neck. Then she turns back around and meets my eye. She finds her smile again.

—Forget it, she says. It's a long story.

*

When I got home, Antriana was putting away the Christmas decorations. I helped her pack them into their boxes and then we carried them down to our storage space. In the elevator I started to tell her the story, changing things or leaving them out as needed. I changed the ending, too, I don't know why. I told her that when we got to the port, the woman realized what had happened and started to cry. She was shaking all over, couldn't catch

her breath, and I didn't know what to do, I was afraid she might faint. When she calmed down, she pulled out her wallet to try to pay me, but of course I didn't take the money, I just left her on the jetty and drove off. In the mirror as I pulled away, I saw her spinning and looking around in a daze, like a compass needle in a world with no north.

Later, in bed, Antriana climbed on top of me and let her hair fall into my eyes. I had drunk a whole bottle of tsipouro, and I shattered her.

—You should keep that bit about the compass, she said. I mean, keep it all. Don't change a thing.

—I don't know, I said. I'm not even sure about your name. The terrified husband who has to man up, to be an antras and tell the truth to his Antriana… I don't know, it seems too easy. In general I'm wary of using names as symbolism. It's the kind of thing they talk about in creative writing seminars and then everyone goes off and writes about Zoes and Joys and Odysseuses and Penelopes.

I lifted her hair, holding it in both hands, like—

—Stop! she told me. No similes. Just let it flow, like the Micra over the wet pavement.

—But you used a simile just now.

—That's different. I'm not the one writing the story.

—What are we going to do? If the three weeks turn into three months and the three months into three years, what are we going to do? How are we going to get by?

—We'll manage. Don't worry, I'm here. Something will happen, you'll see.

We looked at one another and started laughing.

She went to the bathroom to wash up, then brought us hot cocoa with cinnamon and a plate of grape molasses cookies. We sit there cuddled together, looking at the narrow slice of sky showing through the glass of the balcony door, she licks up whatever crumbs fall onto my chest. I tell her

that one of my new year's resolutions is to start shaving my chest—I hate seeing all those white hairs. Forget it, she says, because if I start shaving my chest, she'll stop shaving her armpits and legs.

—I changed my mind, I say. Poulia, Avgerinos, it's too sweet. I'll change it.

—You won't change a thing.

—And the ending?

—Poulia went off to find her Avgerinos. The end.

—I'm afraid, though. I'm afraid I should really put me on the boat with her. I shouldn't just leave her there at the port. What if she doesn't board? What'll happen if she doesn't get on the boat?

She huddles even closer in my arms, grabs my hand, and squeezes it against her stomach.

—You have to let us leave, she says.

—I can't, I'm afraid. I really, really need to finally hear a story that doesn't end in injustice.

—Any story worth its salt is like a manual for assembling a broken world. That's the justice you're looking for.

She raises her head, our eyes meet in the dark.

—You have to let us leave.

—I don't want to. I'm telling you, I'm afraid.

—But you have to. Let us go, please. Just like that, calmy. Close your eyes and let us leave. You have to. Honey, let us leave.

Day was breaking, but the moon still shone in the sky—a dreadful consolation.

POETRY

“Law of the Letter,” “My Wife Falls Asleep to Friends and It Streams All Night,” Quabbin Reservoir”

Elizabeth Galoozis

LAW OF THE LETTER

Asking questions got me yelled at.
Better, I learned, not to know the secret but to know it existed,
catch the sound of whispers but not their shapes.
Don’t be shitty, Dad said to me when I thought I’d make a joke instead.
Eggshells hid under the carpet. I thought it was funny.
Fourth grade, I went to the state spelling bee,
got tripped up on a word I knew, I can never forget – sachet.
How cocky I must have become,
I said to myself, to rush through such a familiar word. Talk about a
joke. To be ditched by the only dependable
knowledge: the order of letters, so confirmable.
Letters have always soothed me when
my parents couldn’t.
No words that can’t be put into

order. I loved taking names from the
phone book to alphabetize them, finding the rare ones beginning with
Q. Even now, when I need to sleep or steady myself, I
run through the alphabet. Listing cities, poets, flowers,
skeleton elements, sacred places, systems of belief—anything that can be put into order.
The words in their places
unadulterated by silenced or secret meanings.
Visualize their shapes in sensed order, a skill no one
wants anymore. There is spell check; there is sorting column
X, A-Z. There are sentences I can write now:
You don't have to win the spelling bee. You didn't deserve to be yelled at. You don't have to
finish the list.

MY WIFE FALLS ASLEEP TO FRIENDS AND IT STREAMS ALL NIGHT

And I'm left awake
to decide when to mute the timeline:
maybe, the one
where they swap apartments
of radically different shape and quality
in the same building,
or the one
where everyone has a good laugh
about how silly Phoebe is
to follow her mother's advice
when the woman killed herself, lol.

The next morning,
Monica and Chandler may be married
but that night
they will still be arguing
about the wedding.

The next morning,
Rachel's teeth
are blinding in their fabricated uniformity
but that night
they soften
into the mouth of a common person.
All the jokes
that unwound silently over us
as we slept
recursively find their sound
the next evening:
Joey tries wearing women's underwear
but stops because it makes him seem gay.
Chandler enjoys watching red carpets
but hides it
because it makes him seem gay.
Ross curls himself around Joey in a nap
and everyone runs to see for themselves
because it makes them seem gay.
Kathleen Turner shows up as Chandler's drag queen dad
and everyone loses their minds.

Every twenty-five minutes
they are twenty-five again,
splashing around in a fountain
on the Warner Brothers lot,
dancing according to their archetypes
twenty times a night
and forever.

QUABBIN RESERVOIR

The perimeter is paved
for people like us
to drive through
and take pictures.
Wide, deep water
submerging four dissolved towns:
dismantled libraries,
vacated graves,
rooms where couples slept together.

You pull over, suddenly
recognizing your own unmarked attraction.
Lead me into the woods
to show me what was once a house.
Boggy steps slump
to the sunken leaf-layered hollow
that was the cellar.
I won't go so far
as to descend them.

Around the next bend,
the observation tower.
At the top,
we press our faces to the glass.
Our arms touching from shoulder to wrist,
we lean on years of carved names.
Islands that were hills
rise below us.
We stay, close, a long time.

It's dark as I drive, alone,
back to my city: pragmatic, alive,

beside a breathing ocean,
its monuments preserved.
The moon is half-visible
and half-obscured.
At home,
high above the street,
I turn the tap.
Water has also traveled
from there to here,
from the watershed we observed
to my outstretched hands.

POETRY

Matin

Marisa P. Clark

Incessant, the two notes of the kitchen
clock. The hum of appliances at rest.
Too early for the street sounds on our block.
The chair creaks a complaint. I take the first

careful sip of coffee. And Niko says, “Sweet
little bird,” from his covered cage. He wants
to greet the dawn. Not me. A workday, so I woke
to the phone’s bleat, to dark and chill and her

still gone. I wanted to stay in the warm,
strange scenes of dreams: on Rue Royale, a green
and purple mask; or, dodging heavy traffic,
a small gray cat I caught and calmed against

my heart—its frantic tick-tock winding down,
this clock that keeps best time without alarm.

FICTION

Picture of Spring

Adalena Kavanaugh

After graduating from library school, Shelley moved to San Francisco and I visited her the following spring. She lived in a group house that was correctional-center-jumpsuit orange. Tibetan prayer flags festooned the windows and fluttered in the breeze. Her move into the group house surprised me because when she was stressed out, she used to wipe our doorknobs with alcohol swabs, but she said she'd come to terms with dirt.

"It's natural," she said. "My immune system has only gotten stronger since I stopped fearing filth." She laughed to show me she was joking but she also told me I needed a probiotic. There was a sign in the Orange House bathroom. It read: *If it's brown, flush it down. If it's yellow, let it mellow*.

Over dinner at a vegetarian diner, she mentioned that she wanted to take me to a party in Oakland. One of her housemates was a dot-com sultan who'd cashed out before the first bubble burst. He was slumming with the rest of them, but her housemates speculated that he was rich—a potential point of contention, their strict anti-capitalist ideals at odds with wealth, but he paid his dues on time and had built the chicken coop. Either way, some of his friends owned a house in the Oakland Hills and were throwing a party.

She leaned forward. "They rented a hot tub."

I was surprised how excited Shelley was about sharing a hot tub with strangers.

I told her that I hadn't brought a bathing suit.

"I wouldn't worry about that. You can wear your bra and panties if you're feeling shy."

If I was feeling shy!

"I know," she said. "I've changed."

I nodded, thinking I should congratulate Shelley on her growth, but I felt I didn't know her anymore.

As we walked back to the house, Shelley spoke rapturously about Tom—the Dot-Com Sultan— and told me I was going to love him. After a beat, she said, "He's Chinese," and her announcement hung between us. She glanced at me, eager for my approval. It was like when a teacher sat an Asian kid next to me in school, all matchy-matchy.

I asked what kind of company Tom had before he cashed out.

"He's very cagey about it. I tried to look him up but couldn't come up with anything."

Then Tom walked in. He didn't work, but Shelley said he'd been away buying supplies for a project. He was back for the party.

I don't know what I expected. Maybe a bearded man-boy cloaked in social anxiety and a hooded sweatshirt. Instead, Tom was clean-shaven, had good posture, and wore a plain button-down shirt. He had a confident hairline, a strong jaw made adorable by a cleft chin, and eyes that trained on your face as if he was imprinting you on his brain for future daydreaming.

I was interested in everything he had to say.

Tom offered me his hand. "Ready to take a dip?"

I said I was undecided.

Shelley squeezed my arm. "I'm so glad you two could finally meet."

Tom had a truck, so Shelley and I squeezed into the cab with him. She sat between us and wore a prim, satisfied look.

We drove across the Bay Bridge and the temperature rose. Shelley lectured me about microclimates and I stared out the window.

We arrived at a large stone house that made me think of a ski chalet, although I've never been skiing. Inside was a large open room with a sunken conversation pit lined with cushions and tasseled pillows.

In front of the conversation pit, a large fireplace had been filled with computer monitors from the 1980s and 1990s retrofitted as fish tanks. They were all lit up and the colorful fish flitted amongst kitschy treasure chests and sunken ships. The people in the conversation pit watched the fish tanks like they were television.

Shelley walked over to a table set with champagne in tiny cans, energy drinks, and beer. She brought me champagne. Tom took a beer. I didn't see any food.

Warm, blippy electronic music came out of dozens of hidden speakers, streaming from a computer in a dim alcove.

The kitchen was off a small corridor. There was a tight knot of people standing over a vegetable platter. Tom put his hand on a young white woman's shoulder and squeezed it. I'd just met Tom, barely spoken to him, but I hated seeing his hand on her shoulder. She leaned her head back. She was blond with a stubby nose and three eyebrow rings in the outer corner of her right brow. She gave Tom an air kiss.

Tom introduced us. Shelley and I gave shy waves.

"Has anyone gone in yet?" Tom looked eagerly at the group.

Kiera, the blonde, reached over, linked arms with Tom, and said, "We've only got it for the day, so we better go enjoy it." These were the nascent days of tech excess.

Tom unlinked arms with her and took my hand. "Alice and I will go in together. She's our guest."

Shelley looked at Tom with disappointment, then grabbed my other hand. "Me too." When I looked at her and tried to shake my head, she said, "Come on, Alice. It'll be fun."

Kiera walked over to Tom and said, "It'll be a tight fit but I guess you don't mind." She flicked her eyes across Shelley, but pointedly ignored me.

Tom crinkled his eyes in appeasement. I suspected he was using us as a buffer.

He swung our arms. "Can't wait."

Kiera ran ahead. Cheap lanterns hung from the trees and cicadas competed with the little splashes as she invited us into the hot tub. She was naked. The soft burbling sound of circulating water had never sounded as menacing to my ears as it did then.

Shelley broke free from Tom and pulled her clothes off. Her pale skin stood stark against the dark night and then she was in the hot tub. Tom pulled his clothes off and levered one tanned leg over the rim.

I didn't want to be naked, not in front of Shelley, Tom, or Kiera, but I didn't want to be a prude. I stripped. First my full support bra with its heavy straps and unsexy beige reinforced cups, and then my plain white underwear. I stepped into the hot tub with as much dignity as I could and settled in between Shelley and Tom.

The steam from the hot tub made Shelley's hair go frizzy and her glasses go foggy.

Kiera had curves but no extra fat that I could see. Shelley had a thin boyish body. And then there was me. Sometimes Shelley said she envied my large breasts but she never said anything about my thick thighs.

Kiera splashed about and kept murmuring how "awesome" she felt, then she lifted her foot out of the tub to show off her green manicured toes.

"Tom," she said, "did I tell you a guy paid me $500 to photograph my toes?"

"That right?" Tom said.

"Yes, and then he offered me another $500 if I'd let him suck on my toes and film it."

Shelley leaned forward. "What did you do?"

Kiera leaned back and kicked her feet a bit so water splashed us. "I made a thousand bucks for something I would have done for free."

"That's so empowering," said Shelley. We used to laugh at people who said things like that.

Tom was quiet. He put his arm around me and that was Kiera's cue to stand up and say she wanted to smoke. I moved away from Tom and his arm fell into the hot tub with a splash. Kiera looked at me and said, "Tom likes it when girls play hard to get." She winked at me but it felt as if she'd pinched me instead.

Shelley stretched her foot and nudged my shin. "You can't do this in New York, can you?"

"I better not get a UTI," I said.

Shelley sat tracking my every movement, looking to see what Tom did with his hands.

Tom turned to me and said, "I guess this isn't as glamorous as it looks on TV."

"When I think of hot tubs, I always think of these cheesy ads for the Mount Airy Lodge," I said.

"I remember those!" said Tom. "If only we were sitting in a hot tub shaped like a martini glass."

Shelley pouted. "No fair." She had grown up in Maine, far from the Poconos and the tri-state area.

Tom stood up. I looked at his groin and saw that the hairs were wiry but nearly straight like mine.

"Want to go to In-N-Out?"

I looked away from his cock, but not before I noticed the way it twitched, halfway erect.

*

The next day Shelley left early. She'd been quiet after we returned from In-N-Out but when I asked if she was upset, she said she was just tired. Tom had asked me lots of questions about my life in New York, but I always tried to pull Shelley into the conversation.

I flipped through my travel guide and felt exhausted thinking about all the touristy things I should do while I was in town. I looked at a map and saw that at the end of Golden Gate Park was a beach. In between jobs, I worked part-time organizing and cataloging a rich man's private library. I thought I'd take a bus to the beach and read there before heading back to pick up a rare book Mr. Haggerty had on reserve at a store downtown. When he found out I was heading out west he'd become excited and said he'd pay me fifty dollars to act as courier.

When I grew tired of walking, I sat on a bench. I had a book, but I wasn't really reading it. Then a man sat down next to me. It was Tom.

He gave a shy wave.

"Did you follow me?" I meant it as a joke, but it came out like an accusation.

"I like to come out here once in a while." He bumped my shoulder playfully. "Look at that." He pointed out into the sea at dramatic rock formations.

I looked where he pointed.

"Have you been inside the camera obscura?"

I shook my head no, and he took my hand and tugged it before dropping it again.

"Come on. Let's go."

We walked up a hill, and there it was, the camera obscura inside a small building made to resemble a cheap 35mm camera.

We stepped inside and were surrounded by a silvery image of the sea and swooping birds. The dark rocks looked cruel.

It was mid-morning; no one else was there. Tom held my hand again.

"Did you have big plans for today?"

I told him I had to go to pick up Mr. Haggerty's book. He asked if I wanted a ride back into the city.

The bookstore only traded in rare books and prints. When I told a man

behind the counter that I was picking up something for Mr. Haggerty he nodded and went to the back. When he returned, he placed the book in front of me. Tom was standing next to me and I could feel his eyes as he watched me examine the book for flaws. The man had given me white cotton gloves and I carefully examined the spine and binding before I turned the pages. It was an art book of color reproductions of Japanese erotic wooden block prints—ukiyo-e shunga. By today's erotica standards, the prints were somewhat comical with exaggerated phalluses and bodies twisted into sexual positions, participants nearly fully clothed except for their inflamed genitals.

After I determined that there was no damage, I signaled for the clerk to prepare the book for travel.

There was an awkward silence while we waited. To fill the void, I explained to Tom about Mr. Haggerty.

"Are you some kind of expert?"

"It's just a job," I said. I'd already decided I didn't want to work in archives.

"Is he a pervert?" Tom asked.

"I mean, does he collect erotica? Yes. Does that make him a pervert? I don't know."

"But what do you *think*?" he said.

I didn't know what to say. I spent very little time with Mr. Haggerty. I wasn't getting call-backs for interviews. I'd spent every spare cent on this trip.

"I think I like a paycheck," I said.

"He's white, isn't he," Tom said.

I sighed.

"Typical," he said, mouth pursed like he'd tasted something rancid.

I ignored him and waited for the book and then tucked it under my arm and exited the shop, not waiting for Tom to follow.

Back in his truck, I nestled the heavy book in my lap. Tom said, "Could I show you something I've been working on?"

"Depends on what it is." I imagined something techy and addicting; some product that would net new riches.

"Let's keep that a secret until we get back to the house."

I've always liked secrets. I nodded happily.

He turned on the radio and we listened instead of talking.

At the house Tom opened the door to his bedroom and invited me inside.

His room was spare— a large comfortable-looking bed with a white down comforter on top and a wooden wardrobe instead of a closet. There was a small table pushed up against the wall with two windows, but other than that, there wasn't anything else in the room except for a small bookcase.

He pulled a wooden chair out from the table and motioned for me to sit down. Once I was positioned, I saw that behind the door, in the far corner, stood a dressmaker's dummy and a basket of ribbons and other findings. I had expected computer towers and electronic doodads but the only computer was a laptop on the table with crappy speakers attached.

He moved to the wardrobe and pulled back its doors. He took out a few items on metal hangers and laid them on his bed. They were corsets. One was a shimmery blue in a quilted silk, topped with blue lacy cups; the other was similar but in a gradually deepening pink with black lacy cups. They were beautiful objects but the hooks in the front made them seem punishing, as well.

Tom gestured toward the corsets. "I made them."

"Why?"

He looked at them lovingly, but with a hint of confusion. "I'm good with my hands."

He walked to the bed quietly, as if afraid to disturb his creations, and gently lifted the pink one. Then he walked over so quickly I didn't have much time to react. He held the corset in front of me, as if measuring its potential fit against my body. I stiffened.

His voice came out hesitant and husky. "Would you try it on for me?"

I tried to move the chair back but it bumped against the table.

"I don't think so."

"Why not? I've already seen you naked." He tried to smile, but when he saw the look on my face he said, "I'm sorry. That sounds awful. Would it help if I told you I think you're beautiful?"

What woman doesn't want to be told she's beautiful?

I gave him a skeptical look. "Why don't you ask one of your friends? Why not ask Kiera?"

"She'd get the wrong idea. Plus, she's already too vampy. Tattoos up and down her body. You already know what you're going to get. You're a blank canvas. I like that."

"Oh, come on. Do you really expect me to fall for that?"'

He lowered his eyes in mock contrition. "Maybe."

"How do you know her?"

He kept shaking his head slightly, as if he couldn't explain to himself. "I used to go to this bar, Crimson & Clover. We'd see each other around."

"And?"

"And we were sort of involved."

"And now you're not?" I said.

"No. But we have mutual friends, so I still see her around."

"She still likes you," I said in a teasing voice.

"I can't help it if someone wants something I can't give them."

"Why do men think women want things men can't give?" I asked. "When the truth is they just don't want to give anything at all?"

I remembered how he'd held my hand and then let go, like he was testing me.

He looked at me head-on for the first time. "Anyway, that was a long time ago. I'm actually celibate. Trying not to let things get complicated."

"Making corsets is a terrible way to take your mind off sex."

"True," he said.

"This is very San Francisco," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"San Francisco seems to live by this ethos of ethical abstention. It's not about what you do, but about what you don't do." I wrinkled my nose.

"You're not wrong," he said.

"Is this the kind of hobby dot-com millionaires take up when they retire? Why not devote yourself to good works?"

"Everyone thinks I'm some kind of computer guy because of my friends. I guess I let them believe that. I had a carpentry business back in Jersey—I built all the furniture in this room. I saved enough to take some time off."

I fingered the bottom of the corset.

He looked down at me. "Come on. Try it on. I promise, this isn't sexual. Not the way you think it is."

"That's not exactly a compliment."

He took my hand and held it against his crotch. I let him hold my hand there and I felt his erection.

"This seems very sexual to me," I said, ready for the obvious to happen.

I stood up and faced him. Then I took the hanger and walked to his bed. Once I was down to my underwear I turned and saw him watching me. He had an unreadable expression on his face.

I took off my bra and pulled the corset down over my torso. I adjusted my breasts—the cups were stretchy—and pointed to my back. "How do I do this up by myself?"

"You don't. You need a partner."

I turned again and waited for him to pull the laces tight. I gasped a bit as he did. He was gentle, though, and was careful not to tug or pinch. When he finished, I turned around. I realized he must have had a big girl in mind, bigger than Kiera, bigger than Shelley, when he made the corset, because it fit like it was made just for me.

He pulled and adjusted the front and then stepped back as if to admire his handicraft. I felt shy and looked over his shoulder out the window into the backyard. There was an elaborate wooden chicken coop and a couple of chickens pecking in a fenced-in area. I squared my shoulders and imagined myself as a male peacock, unfolding my tail feathers in haughty grandeur. I looked into his face and walked up to him, my hands on my hips.

He just stared at me, making me nervous.

"So? What do you think?"

He licked his lips and took a step back. "Can I take some pictures?"

I shook my head. "No. No, no, no, no. Are you crazy?"

"I want to remember this."

"That's what your memory is for," I said.

"Please?"

I read desire on his face. It was like a war he was losing with himself.

"Fine," I said.

He walked to his wardrobe and pulled out a camera. He posed me in front of the white wall. I stood still, the flash of the camera making me hyper-aware of my body. I was glad it wasn't a digital camera. I didn't want to see myself.

After photographing me he walked over to the wardrobe and pulled the other door open. There was a full-length mirror. He pulled me to the door and stood behind me and made me look. He held me close to his body and took a photo of us looking into the mirror, his face obscured by the camera. The flash was blinding when it bounced back at us.

The corset was beautiful. They're made to cinch us in, and I felt turned on just wearing the thing. I surprised myself.

I turned around to look at him. He wrapped his arms around me. He was much taller than I am. When I moved my arms to hold his torso, he flinched

at first but then relaxed. For a long time we held each other without moving. We were seemingly fused. I could feel everything in my breasts, between my thighs, in the way my back prickled in anticipation. I waited for him to move on, to kiss me. I anticipated it with so much longing I could almost feel a shadow weight against my lips, but instead of kissing me he leaned his head into the side of my neck and placed his nose against the back of my left ear. I've always been sensitive there and this made me grip him tighter. He took a big breath. He made these animalistic snuffling sounds as he sniffed me, like a truffle pig. Then he released me and moved away.

"Thank you," he said, face flushed.

I was also flushed, and confused. I moved toward him, but he took a step back.

"This is enough," he said.

I didn't believe him, so I walked up to him but he backed away and shook his head.

"You have to undo me," I said, frustrated at being trapped in his disappointing fantasy. I pointed at my back.

"I'll loosen you. I want you to keep it. I don't need it anymore."

I turned around and like a film in reverse he undid the ribbon and I realized how shallow my breaths had been. I was lightheaded.

He walked over to the window and stared out at the chickens.

I put my shirt on over the corset—he'd loosened it, but it was still snug enough to wear. I put my jeans on and bundled my bra in my hands.

I walked over to Tom and touched his arm.

"You better go," he said. He hugged his torso, all rigid, and refused to look at me.

I waited, but when he continued to look out the window, I walked out the door.

As I closed his door Shelley came down the hall and saw my bra.

She didn't say anything but pursed her lips and shook her head. As she was about to close her door I said, "It's not what you think," but it didn't matter. She thought we had fucked, and I would never be able to convince her otherwise.

I left the house and walked around Haight-Ashbury as if everything was normal. As if I felt normal.

When I returned, I saw Shelley had been crying, which seemed like an

overreaction. I asked her what was wrong, even though I already knew.

"It's nothing," she said.

"Look. Nothing happened."

"Oh, bullshit."

She stood up and said, "I have to get out of here. I'm going to stay with my friend Karen. Leave the key with Dan before you leave."

I reached for her arm and said that she was being silly, and she shook me off and said I didn't have any boundaries. That I didn't know how to read people's signals. I lost my patience and said she was acting like a middle schooler whose crush doesn't like them back. She looked at me with hate so I took it back, and I said we shouldn't be fighting over Tom, but she shook me off again.

The next day I knocked on Tom's door. There was no answer, so I looked up and down the hall before I tried the knob. The room was empty. I walked inside and opened the wardrobe and fingered his shirts and jeans. I saw his camera at the bottom and picked it up. There wasn't any film in it. He had either already taken the film to be developed or he had been role-playing. I hadn't brought a camera, but the light was unusually clear for San Francisco, so I took the camera and bought film at a drugstore down the block.

Shelley came back that night and we hugged and agreed that it had been silly to fight over a man. From a distance our friendship looked intact but up close you saw the cracks.

After two days I knew Tom wasn't coming back until I was gone.

I couldn't ask Shelley about it. This was a topic we so strenuously avoided it almost hurt, physically.

I wandered down Valencia Street for an afternoon. I visited all the touristy places in my guidebook and documented everything with Tom's camera.

I stood in a bathroom in a café. The wall was surprisingly white and graffiti free. I took a felt-tipped pen from my bag and wrote in big letters: "Where's Tom?"

I stood next to my graffiti and took some self-portraits, hoping at least one came out halfway decent.

After I returned to New York I asked for doubles at the photo place. The story my photos told was so ordinary. I couldn't believe how deranged I'd felt walking the streets.

I mailed my best self-portrait to Shelley's house and included my phone number. I wrote TOM in big letters on top of the address and hoped for the

best.

A week later I woke up to my telephone ringing on my nightstand.

"Hello?"

Then I heard his voice.

"Alice."

"Tom."

He breathed heavily.

"Tom?"

"What would you have done if I had kissed you?"

He sounded drunk.

"I should have kissed you, Alice."

I loved the sound of my name in his mouth. He whispered what he'd do to me if all those lonely, inconvenient miles didn't separate us, and I heard the strain, and then the sigh after his release. I was flattered by his desire and felt superior to his cowardice. I didn't touch myself until we hung up, so he couldn't hear what he did to me.

*

Years later, Shelley had three sons, posted wellness videos, and said she wasn't against vaccines for other people, but it was her body, her choice. I only followed her to hate-watch what a silly, dangerous bitch she had become.

Tom was a ghost. He had ceased to matter.

But after I was married and almost slapped my teenage son when he was rude to me, and forced myself not to run out of the apartment screaming when my husband forgot something at the store, and marveled at my therapist when she insisted that forgetfulness was a form of passive aggression, like I was supposed to do something as impossible as change a man and his bad habits, that was when I wished I'd asked for the photos Tom had taken. Not to destroy them, but because I was lovelier than I had understood, and to remember a time when I was careless, but my life wasn't so predictable, and there was still room for surprise, even if it was fucked up, and not something you could tell anyone else about.

POETRY

“I’ve Come to Pee in Your Lake,” “Fly”

Angelica Whitehorne

I’VE COME TO PEE IN YOUR LAKE

I’ve come to pee in your lake and lay
claim to that which wasn’t given to me,
like the men of history who sprayed their
golden liquid and built up their dynasties.
I’ve come to jump off your deck, plummet
into the straight-talking water with my rolled
body ready to conquer. I’ve come to make a deal.
I’ve come to make ripples. I’ve come to open my
eyes and feast on your horizon of sky, a luxury so
large, you can’t pull the heavy curtain over. I’ve come
and now, I can’t wait for this whole place to smell of me.

FLY

That'll be the last fly I ever kill, that'll be
the last blood I ever call forward, that'll be
the last time I play God, that'll be the last
mourning I'll be accomplice to, the last whim
of rage I'll lean into, *that's the last swat I got*,
I proclaim on the street, that's the last buzzing
I'll meet with brute force, this is the last body
I'll be indebted to: blue, green streaked face,
furry and so small I couldn't see your eyes
when I swung, if I just saw your eyes—

Even you, shit eater, are so goddamn beautiful,
why is everything so goddamn beautiful?
It ruins / lives.

Contributors

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