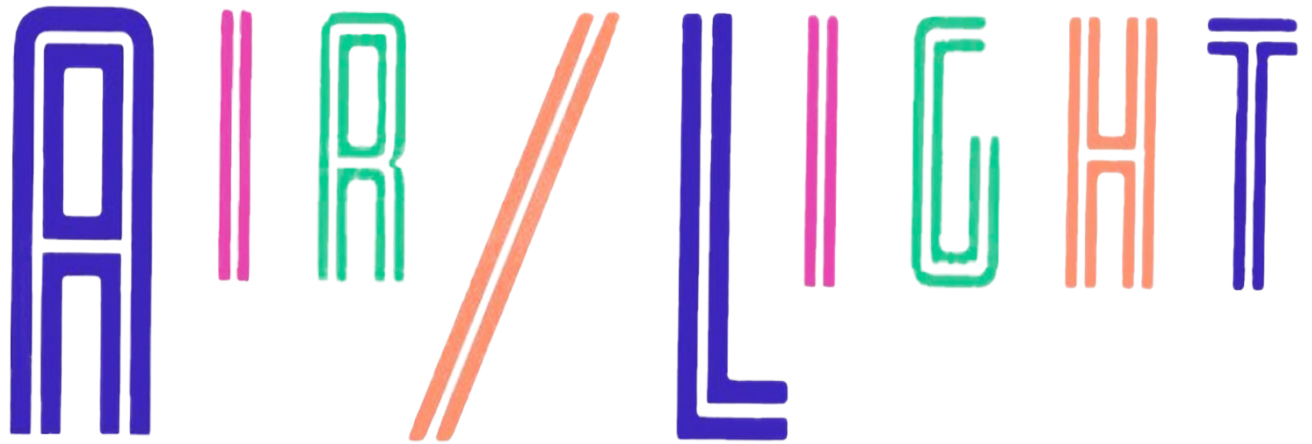


ART LECTURE



ISSUE 6: SUMMER 2022



Summer 2022

Issue 6

Los Angeles, California

AR/LIGHT

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Summer 2022

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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.

Submissions should be made at <https://airlightmagazine.org/about/submissions/>

FROM THE EDITOR

The Summer of My Discontent

David L. Ulin

The other evening, driving west toward Santa Monica on Pico Boulevard, I was struck by a wave of sadness. I was in West Los Angeles, passing a sushi joint where I'd once liked to eat, N95 in my pocket, on my way to an event. Suddenly, all I could think about was loss. Don't get me wrong: I've had it pretty good during the pandemic. I've worked online and stayed healthy for the most part. Even when I contracted COVID, early in the summer, its effects were mild—no fever, not much congestion, just a day or so of headache and a cough and runny nose. This, of course, has to do with the vaccines, which are miraculous, although that no longer feels like a victory to me. Instead, behind the wheel, I couldn't help but think of all the things that have been upended, and not only in regard to the virus. Abortion rights, faith in our elections, a sense of common values and goodwill ... all of this has broken into pieces, and I don't see a way for us to put it together again.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall—this is how I feel almost every day.

I don't want to say that art will save us because I don't believe anything can save us. We are mortal beings and we are here to go. This—the existential conundrum—is part of my sadness, too. And yet, during the days and nights of my COVID convalescence, when I wasn't sleeping what I did was read. Partly, this had to do with being in isolation. Partly, it had to do with time. As I lay, alone, in bed, with books and screens on the side table, I felt immersed in a delicious drifting: the drift of a narrative as it finds its level, the drift of a sentence as it ripples across my eyes. I felt ... enlarged is not the word I want, so perhaps connected? For a moment only—which is all we

have—I was reminded of literature not as an engine of empathy (although it is that also), but rather as a mechanism of radical intimacy, in which writers and readers together drop our guards, and in so doing are revealed.

Some of what I read you'll encounter in this issue: stories and poems and diaries, essays and arguments. That, I remain convinced, is what a magazine can offer, to bring into one place an array of voices and give them room to be in conversation. This is what our public life is lacking, this openness and space. I'm not naïve enough to think writing can lead us back to one another, except in pieces. But maybe, for a moment anyway, pieces are enough?

These are all just random questions, a loose set of notes. It would be a stretch to say my sadness has abated, or has been mitigated to any lasting degree. Still, there are a lot worse ways to spend an afternoon than reading. There are a lot worse ways to spend a week. Not for escape but for assembly—in every sense of the word.

FICTION

The Joneses

Stephen Graham Jones

My dad was paying close attention when Mr. Rutherford four houses down came home with Boris, the gangliest of all Irish wolfhounds. Boris was a rescue dog. His backstory could, for all anybody knew, be Russian mafia, or maybe he had been part of fashion photography for a while. Mr. Rutherford walked Boris each morning at ten on the dot, which was when the widow Blakely could be counted on to be at her fancy mailbox, because she didn't want to miss a single thing. Seeing the specter of Mr. Rutherford in his ratty robe walking this leggy supernatural creature on a foggy morning, of course she startled back, tripped on the raised brick border of her flower bed, and pirouetted desperately out onto her still-wet lawn, her coffee scalding her upper chest. To which Moira Davidson, self-assigned protector of any and all widows, took enough umbrage to that her husband Theodore showed up later that week not with a bigger dog—there is no dog in the world taller than Boris—but with a stocky Rottweiler with a head like a cinderblock and a particularly checkered past. The Davidsons and Mr. Rutherford, observing a sort of unarticulated detente, neither wanting to acknowledge this arms-race-with-dogs, walked opposite sides of the street, executing neat flip turns at the stop signs at either end, and taking the crosswalk to the other side. At first, Dr. K attempted to ward these two killers and their inevitable bombs from his impeccably manicured lawn with a spray bottle of what was supposed to be mountain lion urine. The scent was rank and, we thought, impenetrable. All the same, one dog or another found its way onto his lawn, left a steaming deposit. Taking this in stride, Dr. K shrugged, acquired an

exotic pet license, and came home not with another spray bottle of mountain lion urine, but with the mountain lion itself. Next door to Dr. K were our young newlyweds, the Andersons, who turned out to have enough connections to, later that mountain-lion week, parade a matched pair of hyenas on thick chains up their driveway, and admit them into their home. My dad grumbled about this, possibly because this was no longer an escalation of size or ferocity, but *number*, which, he said, was leading either to chaos or the zoo, neither of which he was interested in being a part of. Our French import to the neighborhood, Claude Carbonneau, evidently felt the same way. What he led from the backseat of his American muscle car—on a dog-catcher's pole, of course—was a scraggly rat terrier, foaming at the mouth with what we could all tell had to be rabies. His little dog wouldn't win in a scrap with any of the other pets, but neither would those pets win, *n'est-ce pas*? This was a new and unexpected tactic—a wildcard no one could have anticipated, but that no one could ignore, either. The Crane twins from down at the corner took this as permission, as license for what, perhaps, they'd been secretly desiring since moving in: a black mamba. It was a standoff every morning, that long, tense fall: Mr. Rutherford with his lanky aristocrat, neither of them deigning to look either left or right, the Davidsons—though, usually, Moira—with their rippling mercenary on a leash, Dr. K patrolling with that tawny, slinky killer, its green eyes flashing menace, the Andersons hand in hand, a smiling, trotting hyena to either side, both of them slavering for Claude Carbonneau's crazy-eyed, wiry-haired little nuclear deterrent, all of them giving the venomous Crane lawn a wide berth since they raised the cutting plane of their electric lawnmower. Which was when my dad finally waded into this fray, not with an animal, but as the animal: ten-ounce defrosted steaks zip-tied to his shins and a semi-automatic pistol in a modular holster at his belt on the right side, concealed carry permit in his shirt pocket, though he was concealing nothing. He was just out for an innocent walk, right? He would have no reason whatsoever to draw his new pistol so long as he wasn't accosted or attacked, right? Which was when my mom came home from the pharmacist with pills to start crushing into his dinners, a few of which I saw her palm into her mouth herself, perhaps to make living in this neighborhood feel less intolerable, or at least not quite so persistently fraught. This standoff up and down the block lasted up until the mamba struck Boris on a foreleg and the terrier infected the hyenas, who in turn dispatched the mountain lion with surprisingly little effort, and

were chasing the Rottweiler up the sidewalk when it seemed a legitimate threat to my father, and all fifteen rounds in his pistol, at which point everybody went back to fertilizing their lawns and repainting their shutters and bringing home newer and shinier cars, until the Andersons accidentally—they claimed—backed their luxury SUV through their garage door, which left such a fetchingly ugly wound that the Murchestons two doors down upped the ante with their completely flooded basement, garnering sympathy all around. Across the street later that week, the whole front of the Lumbrys' home turned up sprayed with the most offensive graffiti. Even after sand-blasting efforts, the profanity and slurs could still be either read or remembered; we could never quite tell. In short order, then, trees began catching Dutch elm disease at a frenetic pace, fences started to weather and sag, driveways showed signs of buckling, and, finally, a kitchen fire in our home (my mom's famous tarts) spread to the roof, then to the houses on either side of us, and pretty soon the whole block was a roiling conflagration, a bonfire where every property was burning at equal levels, meaning the winners could only be the biggest losers—those escaping with the absolute fewest valuables, those the most bereft and emotionally shattered—but perhaps it was the black mamba, slithering away into the gutter, who actually won that particular go-round.

POETRY

“Los Angeles, Summer 2020,” “Thank You”

Sheila McMullin

LOS ANGELES, SUMMER 2020

Night blooming datura fills space between me and the ozone
It's the middle of the night in a heatwave. I can't sleep
This is the only time my cat will sit on my lap
wrap her tail around my thigh and I feel safe

It's also the only time when it's quiet
Neighbors have left their windows open
after running the AC all day
You would expect to see more stars tonight on this new moon,
but it's the city

Still – there, is Orion's belt, Pleiades, Venus, or maybe Mars
Fires are blazing across the valley, rivers, mountains, suburban homes
It's not safe to stay outside for too long

My cat perks one ear,
I swear I hear a train even though they don't pass this close

At the Port of Long Beach, megaships are received and docked daily,
floating cities that bring our shoes and electronics
from the countries in which they were made

The sonar, a metal spike
has been known to destroy
the auditory canals of sea creatures, the whales, dolphins, squids

The ships dock
along the coast which has been manipulated
to receive the weight, dispatch the goods
onto trucks, onto trains
to transport to warehouses where they will be cataloged
and prepared to be delivered to our fingertips

All along these routes are people's homes, communities, schools, play-
grounds
The fires are blazing

I grew up along train tracks
Flattening pennies for my collection
pretending I was lost
Once a refrigerator box was left smashed on the tracks
Kids said there was a person inside it

Each breath, a life of a human being
Each breath, a 75-inch big screen tv
Each breath, a terra cotta pot, a window screen, face masks,
balloons, plastic bags, reusable bags, water bottles, air purifiers,
cell phone cases, dinnerware, pesticides, gas masks,
pocketbooks, glass jars, flashlights, lipsticks and perfumes, Kevlar,
blinds, plastic jewelry, toys, laptops, peanut butter, ion batteries

Each breath is something we need
Something we want
Something to protect us

Each breath is the train passing in the night,
the crossing signals blinking, the train sounding its horn

Each breath is an empty park
An empty park after a party
An empty park with whatever was left behind
Birds with confetti in their mouths

Sometimes a box will fall off the train
It is full of caverns
endless caverns of jewels
and the children all make crowns and are kings and queens

Sometimes the box will be full of the ocean
stuffed inside to protect one corner of the bleached coral reef
The children cry
overwhelmed by what they have lost by no fault of their own

Sometimes the boxes are full of anchors
and no one can pick those up
We create monuments to their everlasting stubbornness
knowing that soon enough the wild mustard will take over

Sometimes the mothers find a box
and know it had been waiting there all along

Sometimes you can hold the box up to your ear
and hear the secrets people say about you

Sometimes the box will give you a way out
and you won't have to justify it to anybody

But mostly, the box will be thrown away
sealed in its original packaging
These are our mountains now

It is not your job to perfect the world, I've been taught,
Nor to hold the magnitude of a timeline of despair all alone

Although, I do pray for the quiet

and a greater capacity to walk the tracks
keep pace with the speed of our consumption, devour the pain

THANK YOU

Here's what happened
I met a man who told me
He hadn't met a magenta aura
Vibrating on this planet for the past 500 years.
Not that long in the scheme of things really
But long enough that I would have never shared
Time and space with the person who last vibrated at this frequency.

No, I said.
I disagree.
I was alive
In a photo with my great great grandmother
Five generations of women
Posing together
The photograph after my great great grandfather tried
To murder his family
My great grandmother just a girl
Chased out onto the front lawn with her brother
The photograph in the newspaper, smudged with fingerprint
That's how I know it happened
Falling out of a scrapbook in a collection of belongings my grandmother left
behind

What I'm trying to say is
I've stood in the turn of the century
That world was coming into misfortune then too
I was at the beach watching the sun
And threw away three pounds of Styrofoam
A broken plastic casing
A red balloon and ribbon tied up in seaweed
Six straws
A Boom! firecracker

An aerosol canister
Several water bottle caps
And even more that I left behind

Was any of this trash yours?
I don't want to take the blame for it.
This is what God told me
Our intent to care means shit right now
Our water is on fire
He said
I have swallowed poison
Ingested beasts to make the land more pleasant for you
I am the shoreline and the horizon
Inheritor of your gold
You bring scorched earth
And rain will only feed this disaster

This is deeper than anger.

Here's one example: Monsanto gave patented GMO seeds to Indian cotton farmers, like a gift, a trial run. And when those seeds displaced local plant diversity and depleted the soil so much so that the GMO-patented seeds became the only crop option, the farmers coerced into buying this intellectual property above market price, paying royalties for use, going into debt, compromising their families, their sustainability, their land, and believing themselves to be out of options, committed suicide.

God didn't tell me any of this.
Journalists and scientists did.
There are PR teams behind this.

What I'm trying to say is
We treat our soil like one use to-go containers
That I value convenience over the lives of others
Over my own ovaries
I want comfort not so far from me and decisions made easy
I do not know where my food comes from

I do not know where my water comes from
But I expect it to be cheap and clean and plentiful

POETRY

“[White Noise],” “Sonnet,” “The Myth of Space Travel”

Mag Gabbert

[WHITE NOISE]

an anagram poem

now the thin twine
sews its nest into sinew
into swine

I witness two newts
hoist noon with shoe ties
into hot eons
with hens who shine

in town the wise hostess
stows white sheets within
snow's wet stone-hewn sheen

oh this wine

it is not sweet
it's tin-ish with soot hints
see how intense

I insist
the sow's honest twin
sent notes to the Sistine
then went west with new tents

so now I sit
on this site with two shins
ten toes with this nose
with teeth I won't show

oh how these
senses swoon how I stew
in tense woe how I wish

to soothe this nonsense
to tow it with nets
so it won't set

SONNET

s t a r s c r o s s
t a r s c r o s s i
a r s c r o s s i n
r s c r o s s i n g
s c r o s s i n g s
c r o s s i n g s t
r o s s i n g s t a
o s s i n g s t a r
s s i n g s t a r s
s i n g s t a r s c
i n g s t a r s c r
n g s t a r s c r o
g s t a r s c r o s
s t a r s c r o s s

THE MYTH OF SPACE TRAVEL

The pelvis of the man I am sleeping with is made of curved metal plates, like a satellite dish.

He has a lustrous new core in his leg—titanium, which fabricates rocketships, smoke screens, glasses, paint so pearlescent it's nearly blue.

Some days he closes his eyes like too-distant planets, describes his pain like this: *white*,
whiteness. At the bed's shallow end, his breaths become quick

icicle fragments, bone chips. No, I do not ask if he has dreams about the accident, whether it's a
relief to wake up

in his skin, pale as opium milk. I don't say what I love about violets: how they give you one
good sniff and then drown out your senses.

We spend our twilights trying to communicate what neither of us feels, the limits of how far this
goes.

Along the ridges of his scars, freckles stretch themselves together into swirls, the way stars do
when they're spinning on the edges of black holes.

FICTION

The Ship on the Horizon

Ben Loory

A man is in his car and halfway to work, when suddenly he slams on the brakes.

Goddammit, he says.

He forgot to get the forms from his wife to give to the insurance company.

The man makes a U-turn and quickly heads back. He parks out front and hurries up the walk.

Honey? he says, opening the door. Honey?

But no one answers back.

★

Honey? says the man, moving into the kitchen.

Honey? he calls out, in the living room.

Honey? he yells, from the bottom of the stairs.

Honey? he says, in the bedroom.

★

The man searches the whole house from bottom to top—he even checks

under the guest bed—but his wife isn't there.

He looks out the window.

Her car is still parked in the driveway.

Huh, says the man.

He goes into the kitchen. His wife's purse is sitting on the counter. The man pops it open and peers inside—there's her phone, her keys, her reading glasses.

Honey? the man says.

He's getting a little scared. He searches the whole house again. He's coming back down from the second floor a third time when his wife emerges from the living room.

Honey! the man says. Where have you been?

I was just in the living room, she says.

No, you weren't, says the man. I was just in there.

I was reading the newspaper, she says.

You were? says the man.

He looks over her shoulder. There, in the living room, he sees her chair. And on it, sure enough, he can see the newspaper.

But how did I miss you? he says.

I don't know, says his wife. I must've dozed off.

You didn't hear me yelling? says the man.

No, says his wife.

She looks at him strangely.

Shouldn't you be at work? she says.

Oh yes, says the man, who'd almost forgotten. I forgot those medical forms.

You didn't take them? his wife says. I printed them out.

He follows her into the study.

She hands him the forms. He stares down at them.

Okay, he says. Thanks. I'll see you later.

What do you want to have for dinner? she says.

Oh, the man says. Whatever.

*

The man drives to work. He's frowning intensely. How could he *not* have seen his wife? Just sitting right there in plain sight in her chair? And how could she not have woken up?

When he gets to the office, he starts filling out the forms. Then, all of a sudden, he stops.

But her reading glasses? he says out loud.

Her reading glasses had been in her purse.

She couldn't have been reading the newspaper without them—she can't see *anything* close up.

But maybe, he thinks, she just fell asleep? Maybe she dozed off as soon as he left the house? And maybe she just felt silly admitting that as soon as he'd left for work, she'd gone to sleep?

But still, the man thinks, that doesn't explain how I could somehow have not seen her sitting there.

And it doesn't explain how she didn't wake up as he ran around calling out for her.

But what's the other explanation? the man thinks. She couldn't have *gone* anywhere. The doors were all locked, and her keys were in her purse.

Unless she'd had others made up.

But now, the man thinks, you're just being paranoid. You just didn't see her, is all. And she must have been sleepy—she was up late last night reading that medical journal.

Well, the man thinks. I'm sure it's all fine. I'm sure everything is just fine.

He goes back to staring at the forms for a while.

He hopes the tests don't find anything.

*

That night, the man and his wife are eating dinner.

How was work today? she says.

Oh, says the man. Pretty good, pretty good.

Did you send in those forms? she says.

Forms? says the man. Oh, the forms, yes, I did.

Will they get the results soon? she says.

I think so, the man says. Hopefully tomorrow.

And how's everything here? he says.

Here? she says. Everything is fine. We got a Christmas card from the Scotts.

The Scotts, says the man. How are they doing?

They went on a cruise, says his wife.

A cruise, says the man. That must be nice.

Mustn't it, though? says his wife. Maybe we could go on a cruise too, someday.

Well, you never know, the man says.

*

When dinner is over, they watch some TV.

I think I'll read a little, his wife says.

Okay, says the man. I'll be up pretty soon.

She's lying there asleep when he comes in.

For a moment, the man stands there, gazing down at her, until finally he's sure she's asleep. Then he turns and goes back downstairs and stands for a while in the living room.

The living room is empty—just some chairs and a couch. There's only one way in and out. His wife couldn't have gotten there from anywhere else.

Unless maybe, the man thinks, somehow...

*

He circles the room, staring at the walls. Staring at the ceiling, the floor. And pretty soon, he sees it—there by the bookshelf, almost perfectly hidden: a secret door.

Ah, says the man.

He looks for a latch. He finds it; the door opens up.

He's expecting a staircase leading down into the dark, but instead, what looks like sunlight comes flooding up.

What the...? says the man, shielding his eyes.

After a while, they adjust.

He walks down the stairs—they're hewn from rough wood. When he gets to the bottom, he looks out.

*

He's standing on a beach—a white, sandy beach. Perfect, turquoise waves are rolling in. Seagulls are crying; the smell of salt's in the air. A great noon-day sun is glaring down.

Sun? thinks the man.

He looks at his watch. It's 11:35 at night. And he's standing in his basement.

What is this? he says.

A couple seals are lolling by the waterline.

How is this happening? the man says aloud.

He turns and looks back up the stairs. There, at the top, he can just see his living room.

From down here, it looks a little sad.

*

He pictures himself up there, sitting on the sofa, wondering about his test results. He pictures his wife, worrying beside him.

Then he turns to the ocean and looks out.

The ocean's so blue. It's incredibly blue. He can see a single ship on the horizon. The ship looks gigantic—so pristine and white.

The man kicks his bedroom slippers off.

He pads in his bare feet down to the water. He laughs as it tickles his toes. The water's so warm—it's like the Caribbean.

The man smiles and slips off his robe.

He dives straight on in, underneath a wave, and comes up laughing for joy. He hasn't felt like this in more than thirty years—since they went to Mexico on their honeymoon.

He remembers their time there, sitting on the beach, drinking margaritas in the sun. He remembers that pyramid—climbing to the top—and the day they went exploring in that cave.

But mostly he remembers swimming in that blue, blue water; how it felt then like nothing was wrong. Like all of those things he always worried about had finally vanished forever and were gone.

And the man feels that way now, floating by the shore. He cranes his head up and peers out.

The ship in the distance has moved away now.

The man looks down at his watch.

*

Shit, he says.

The watch isn't waterproof.

Next time, he says, I'll have to take it off. That is, of course, if I can get it repaired.

And suddenly he thinks of his wife.

He thinks of her upstairs, lying in bed.

I hope, he thinks, she hasn't woken up.

I hope she's not worried about me, he says.

So he swims to the beach and wades out.

*

He washes the sand off under the beach shower and finds a towel by the stairs. He dries himself off and puts on his robe, grabs his bedroom slippers, and heads up.

Back in the living room, he closes the door. Then he turns out the light. He walks up the stairs and climbs into bed.

His wife rolls over and looks up.

*

Honey, she says. Is everything okay?
Oh, yes, he says. Everything's fine.
She notices the morning light coming through the shades.
Have you been up all night? she says.
Well, says the man, looking at the clock. Yes, I guess I have.
The tests, she says. You're worried about the tests.
Oh, he says, blinking. Well, yes. But actually that's not why I've been up all night. I found some kind of beach in the basement.
Oh good, says his wife. You found it, too. I was a little worried I was crazy.
Nope, says the man. You were not crazy. Or at least, if you are, I am, too.
All right! says his wife. Just like old times.
And the two of them smile together and laugh.

*

Come on, says his wife. You should get a little sleep.
It's true, the man says. I should.
He's lowering his head onto the pillow, when suddenly the telephone rings.
Ugh, says the man.
The phone rings again.
You want me to answer it? says his wife.
No, says the man. I should probably do it.
He picks it up.
Hello? he says.

*

He listens a while. Then he nods his head.
Okay, thank you, he says.
He hangs up the phone. He looks at his wife.
The tests came back negative, he says.

*

Oh, says his wife.

She bursts into tears.

Oh, I'm so happy, she says.

Yes, says the man. I have to say I am, too.

I think we should celebrate, she says. I think we should make a pair of margaritas and go down to that beach in the basement, and have a big party and then get on that ship and sail away to the horizon!

Okay! says the man. That sounds like a plan!

So the two of them get out of bed, and they put on their robes and go down to the kitchen and start rooting around in the cabinets.

*

Do we even *have* margarita mix? says the man.

What about these beers? says his wife.

Those have been in there a long time, says the man.

Does beer go bad? his wife says.

I don't know, says the man. I guess we'll find out.

I'll get the towels, says his wife.

They stop by the bathroom and she goes in and grabs some, then the two of them head for the living room.

*

But strangely, when they get there, the secret door won't open.

In fact, the secret door is gone.

They hunt all around the spot where it used to be, poking and prodding at the wall.

But after a while, they finally give up.
Well, that's a drag, the man says.
Hang on, says his wife. I've got an idea.
And she leads him to the front door and outside.

*

How's about here? she turns and says to him, as they stand out on the front porch.
It's perfect, the man says, looking around. I kinda forgot this existed.
They lean against the railing and pop their beers open.
How's about a toast? says his wife.
Okay, says the man. To the medical profession?
What—no! says his wife. To us!
To us! says the man, and the two sip their beers.
Oh, that's pretty good, his wife says.
It is, says the man. It's hard to believe.
Aged to perfection, his wife says.
Hey look, says the man, pointing off into the distance. That cloud looks a little like a dragon.
A dragon? his wife says. You're always so dramatic. More like a chihuahua, I think.
The two of them laugh and take each other's hand. In the distance, the cloud floats slowly on.
And the two of them stand there, gazing from the rail, while below, the wind makes waves across the lawn.

POETRY

“Palermo,” “In Praise of Pottery”

M. Cottonwood

PALERMO

Colder than we expected. More ruined.
Ancient things sprinkled here and there.
The plaster dirty, the statues melting.
We take turns withholding from each other,
Passing the impoverishment back and forth.
We reach the ruins at Sòlanto after closing.
The guard agrees to sneak us in for some
Arbitrary number of euros if we promise
To be careful—*There are no lights,*
He says. I don't have enough cash.
We drive back down the hill in sidelight,
Deprived of seeing whatever is up top.
He points out a big, odd cactus. Is it
Two cactuses? Grown amicable, hugging.
We drive to our hotel past ruined splendors.
But I don't care about architecture.
About columns or domes or materials.
I don't care about the statues in the fountain,
Slick Orpheus and his unwilded animals.
I'm detaching myself from the things I love.

The color has drained from the cactuses.
Maybe it is a single cactus. Or a family.
Our last night in Rome I had to block
The door to the dark room with my body.
Too many men too aggressively grabbed
At him while he kissed me, throat to throat,
And another man hammered pleasure
Into him. Feeling that violence in my teeth.
Jealousy. No jealousy. Undulating.
Detached from him, what am I?
My hands on his cock, clinging to it.
Not knowing who sucked me who I sucked.
Explosions of joy in my head and around me.
After hours of our pants around our ankles
His wallet was gone. Stolen, or perhaps just lost.
Our second day in Palermo the weather changes,
It's now too bright to open our eyes,
The sweaters come off, perfumed with sweat.
I buy orange cocktails in plastic cups, we drink
As we walk without destination, looking,
Quiet, not doing justice to the situation.
Soon a landscape free of our interruptions
Will do whatever landscapes undirected do.
No one will be left to interpret the action.
The heat will work on bodies other than ours.
Jealousy. No jealousy. Undulating.
In the chilly taxi that takes us to the airport
All tired innocence now he rests on my shoulder
And somehow finds his wallet in his pocket.

IN PRAISE OF POTTERY

All possible partners and positions
Serve as matter for the infinity,
The pretend infinity, of my craft.
Capable of anything, I do have
A special knack for pairings with boys,
Having studied many of their bodies
With love. Happily my work is limited
To physical beauty; I don't believe
In the soul, struck by desire, transported
To some vision of beauty outside time—
Unlike my good friend who's always lost in
Speculation. Know yourself, he tells me.
Nothing sadder than knowing what you are
Or thinking you know. Sitting at my wheel,
Hands coated in clay, I shape the body
Of a pot, its turning flesh cool and supple,
Before I describe on its wet surface
The many commonplace acts of pleasure
People repeat with little variations.
My pots are popular because I show
The truth of sex. If the thing's off-kilter
I simply smash it down and start over.
I never pay my models very much
But they don't do very much; they don't learn
My craft or worry about the business,
And no one's going to recognize them
From the pots their naked bodies decorate.
I'm conscious of working in a mature
Tradition, but there's always a young crew
Of kids shocked, shocked by the sight of smut,
As if the practices were something new.
I hate them. One time I stayed inside a boy

Long after the need passed, and when he turned
His sweet confused eyes to me I released
A flood of urine that made his gut ache.
I forced him to hold it in. My good friend
Has lots of young admirers but fucks none,
As if the body were a threat to the soul.
He's a fool. The body knows what it needs.
One must strong-arm the soul to obey it.
I live under the steady cheerful light
Of my unrelenting sanity, ply
My skill with the wheel, boys, appearances,
Indifferent to whatever's beyond sense.
There's a perfect lid fastened on the world.

POETRY

The Art of Bullfighting

Jose Hernandez Diaz

This is me letting you go. Float away.
Beyond the misty shoreline. Beyond the fading sunset.

Finally, you have exited the dizzying tunnels in my mind.
No longer will I compare you to an out of reach rose.

The petals have died. In spite of my open palms.
In spite of the relative calm. Finally, we are free.

To flee. To return the masquerade.
Looking for the art in bullfighting.

We are wrist-deep in blood.

FICTION

Only We Are Here

Clary Ahn

The Park baby dies on a Sunday. The entire congregation, fourteen-year-old Katherine included, knows about it an hour later. *Botched surgery*, her mother says. *Too bad*.

The neighborhood fills with dread and paranoia. Parents begin to schedule frantic doctor's appointments for the smallest of concerns—a twinging elbow or nausea from a plate of bad oysters. A passing ache becomes a sign of capital-d Disease, and uppercase-a Accidents a reason to go to the emergency room, armed with alcohol swabs and tears.

At the baby's funeral, everyone huddles together in shared grief. Katherine expresses her sympathies, shoulders hunched down to face the muddy dirt path.

She never knew the Parks well, and she never will. There are always things she will never know. Things she cannot know. She is still young and shapeless, unfamiliar with death. She is not sure what she is doing there. All in all, it is a quiet affair.

*

Soon, the Parks move away. Word in the congregation is that they have gone to the Midwest to start over. To plant potatoes and live off the land.

What is more likely is that Mrs. Park has moved back in with her parents in Idaho, but that is not nearly as exciting.

"I'd never do that," Katherine's friend Penny declares one day, words almost prideful.

"Do what?"

"Bend like that. Return home, even when I'm older. Did you know Mrs. Park is only twenty-three? I thought she was at least in her thirties. When I'm in my twenties, I'll be far away, in New York or London or something. Anywhere but here."

"They're mourning. Not everyone wants to leave home."

Penny pouts. "What do they want, then?"

"Their baby died," Katherine says, not unkindly. "Surgeon's mistake, right? You'd be sad, too. Aren't you sad?"

"I think so." Penny's lips pucker. Slowly she spreads her fingers out across her face to disguise the rising heat in her cheeks, the bodily admission of shame.

*

Generations ago, Katherine's family farmed rice in Korea, and in the weeks that follow, she cycles through her usual tasks with the furious motions of a rice farmer amid famine, surrounded by sustenance but unable to provide. She applies for part-time summer jobs without success and practices scales on the piano until the tips of her fingers cramp.

Her brother says, "Don't come running to me when you get carpal tunnel."

Penny tells her, "You have to learn that one sad song from Naruto."

Then she sends her the sheet music via email, and Katherine busies herself with another two-hour practice session. She shows Penny. They laugh, but the sound is muffled and rehearsed.

Eventually the neighborhood returns to normal. The local news reverts to its regularly scheduled dose of gossip. A middle-aged man rescues a deer from the highway and gets his fifteen minutes of fame. One day, on a whim, Katherine flips a coin to decide on cheeseburgers or pizza.

Between slices of pepperoni, Penny knits her eyebrows and juts out her

lower lip. Her lips are slathered in bright lipstick, and she closes the tube with deft motions.

"I've figured it out," she says. "The older you get, the more sinful you become."

Katherine raises an eyebrow.

"So what I'm saying is we're already doomed. Just look at some adults."

"Not the Park baby—"

A nod. "Of course not."

Penny's eyes glint in the yellowish light of the fast-food joint, reflecting the gaudy red signs near the glass. She looks tired.

"It's just interesting to think about."

Katherine shrugs. "I guess."

"What do you mean, I guess?"

"It's pretty sad," she says. "I don't know why I can't stop thinking about it either."

"Like you can't, or you won't?"

Katherine sticks out her tongue. "Stop trying to psychoanalyze me."

She thinks about death all the time, going back to a childhood spent imagining the flames of damnation. She imagines it over and over, knowing nothing of its truth. Her family was not always Christian. Her ancestors, laboring out in the sun, lived their lives as normal people. Somewhere, it must still exist—that simplicity, romanticized into unreality.

Penny wrinkles her nose, then lets out a loud laugh, flushing in the humidity of the evening. "Everything is bad if you think hard enough."

The cashier sends them a curious look, and they wave him off awkwardly. Katherine gives Penny a light punch on the arm, and Penny feigns pain. The two dissolve into giggles, their breath foggy and disappearing into the cold air.

A minute later, Penny presses her knuckles to her chin and lowers her eyes to the tabletop. She brushes away a few crumbs, letting her palm linger.

"Poor baby," she says. "Poor Parks."

"Yeah," Katherine says, because she doesn't know what else to say.

"I hope we never end up like them." When Katherine stands to clear her plate, Penny pushes the other girl back down with a small, almost embarrassed, chuckle. "No, come on. Let's stay here a little longer. I don't want to go back just yet."

"It's getting late. Did you want to order anything else?"

She shakes her head. "No, I'm okay. It's just nice, that's all. Ambient."

The restaurant's entrance swings and creaks open with new customers, a whining child tugging at his mother's hand, and a family passes by Katherine and Penny's table without a word, an entire universe lived and lost in an instant. Katherine tears her gaze away from them.

*

There is a theory that your soul becomes nothingness upon your demise. That nothing in your world right now will ever truly matter, that everything is fickle, all your pain unraveled in the end. There is no reincarnation, no rebirth. What you do in the life you are given is all you will ever do, and you will be forgiven and forgotten in the end. It is strangely comforting.

The congregation loses contact with the Parks, as if the young couple is purposely placing tangible space between themselves and their past tribulations.

Katherine and Penny turn fifteen. A week later, Penny suggests an outing somewhere far. When Katherine agrees, it is in a desperate attempt to cure her boredom, which is reaching a boiling point. Every morning she comes out to her lawn to melt under the hot sun. She would do anything to quiet the droning in her head. Everything around her seems to move like molasses, slow and languished, as if acutely aware of its own mortality.

Come July, they borrow Katherine's brother's car for a "summer school assignment" and illegally drive up to Niagara Falls, an hour or so from their quiet hometown in upstate New York.

Penny, excited to get out of their neighborhood, practically vibrates in the driver's seat, singing loudly and terribly to the radio. During the second half of the drive, she sleeps in the backseat, spare blanket clutched in her fists. Forced to drive, Katherine's knuckles turn white as she tries to understand the highway and all its signs, but luckily there are not too many other cars on the road.

Niagara Falls is, according to the Internet, a natural marvel. After arriving,

they push through the throngs of tourists to look at the wonder with their own eyes. Drizzles of light water leave droplets dripping down from the ends of their hair.

Penny points her thumb at the crowd. "What do you think you'll do when you grow up?" she shouts at Katherine. "Will you be a stay-at-home mom, or whatever it's called?"

"I don't know. I'll probably work for the government."

"Really? Like a secretary?"

Katherine doesn't elaborate. "It's stable. My mom does it."

"You'll do paperwork all day."

"What do you want me to say? That I want to be a rock star or something?"

"I want to live off the land, like in the Midwest, in the middle of nowhere," Penny declares. "I think I'd be good at it. You know, it's harder than it looks."

"I never said it wasn't. But I thought you wanted to go to New York."

Penny screws her eyes closed. "Yeah, if I can even make it there." She stretches her hand out towards the falls, whispering, "I think I'd be fine either way."

A spray of water pummels both girls in the face. They raise their arms, shouting rancorously, and let the cold drench their hair. Penny lets herself relax, tension slipping away from her shoulders. Next to her, Katherine wipes the water from her eyes and sighs. Her clothes stick to her skin, every crease defined and taunting. But she doesn't shy away from the ledge.

*

Later, they drive home, still dripping water. They know that if they stand in the sun for long enough, the wet will evaporate from their clothes, and all physical proof of their escapade will be lost to that familiar cycle: life and death.

On the highway, Penny cranks up the radio, loud enough for the car to rumble and groan. She's wearing an old sweatshirt now to hide the light dampness of her shirt, limbs shrunken by the clothing folds across her chest.

"Well," she says once they arrive back in town.

It's dark. Their clothes are still moist.

They maneuver to the edge of an empty driveway, and Penny turns off the ignition. With a small grunt, they step out onto the sidewalk, and Penny insists, one hand lingering on Katherine's shoulder, "Since you're still wet, tell your parents you slipped and fell into the pool. I don't want them to get suspicious and call the house."

"I'm not that clumsy," Katherine replies, squirming where she stands.

Gingerly Penny slides her hand down to pat Katherine's arm, and Katherine swats at her without any real malice, although the gesture comes across as rough and abrupt. Penny reaches up to rub the back of her neck, and Katherine glances at the open passenger door.

"You're not my mom."

"Sorry," Penny says. She pulls away, as if suddenly conflicted. "I know."

"Are you going home?"

"It's a bit early, isn't it?"

"You'll worry your parents. They'll call the police if you aren't careful."

That is only half-true, though even several months after the Park baby's death, a residual paranoia runs through the town's adults as they enforce open doors and phone trackers.

Penny shakes the car keys, the movement deliberate, and takes her place in the driver's seat again.

"Don't worry, I'm just going to drive around for a bit. Tell your brother I'll return the car tomorrow morning, full gas and everything. I promise."

"Okay, good night." A pause. "You know, soon you'll be able to actually drive legally."

"God," Penny says, "we're getting so old."

"There's nothing good about that. Just sickness and death. And taxes."

"We could leave town. Run away, I mean," Penny suggests in a low voice.

"Start a farm somewhere. Live off the land."

Katherine jabs at her playfully. "You're delusional."

"I think we could do it. Not like the Parks, but, like, actually do it. You get me?"

"Pack a bag and go?"

"I'm serious. Just choose any morning and go." Penny closes the driver's seat door, turns the keys to start the ignition. The engine roars to life.

That night, Katherine goes to sleep with her hair still slightly wet, and wakes up at dawn with a sneeze and low fever. She thinks: I could die right

now, having done nothing. This could be my last breath. She pulls her legs into a fetal position in an attempt to dull her headache, and closes her eyes until she drifts into a dreamless daze. She has never been anything extraordinary, never been more than a tiny blot in a long line of ancestors.

Eventually, she stumbles downstairs, still bleary with sleep, and her mother forces her to take a bitter spoonful of traditional medicine. She pictures her ancestors laboring in the rice fields. They must've worried about the mundane, sickness and death and work, the same as she does now. They must have faced similar struggles. What do adults say? *People don't really change.*

Later, she swallows two painkillers. Her throat, dry and raw, whines against the push of the pills. Then the storm passes, her body recovers, and she falls back into her usual rhythm.

*

Though no one has heard from the Parks in months, they manage to permeate Katherine's every thought. The couple must still be grieving, learning to be themselves again amidst their loss. Penny says in an offhand manner, "In an alternate universe, I think I could've saved the Park baby," and Katherine shakes her head with a click of her tongue. Then she thinks: *I'm ambidextrous. I'd make a good surgeon.* She squeezes her eyes shut and chastises herself inwardly. Penny notices and says, "Sometimes you have to believe those kinds of impossible things." That, out of necessity, the Parks must've fooled themselves at least once or twice. That they still might be.

"So, things we'll never know," Katherine says, "or understand, at least."

Penny puts on a poker face. "Speak for yourself. I'm not stupid."

The seasons change with the leaves, and soon it is fall and cold. After school, Katherine waits for her mother near the curb, backpack slung over her shoulder. A few feet away, a football player hugs an ice pack to his shin.

Penny calls Katherine that night, right after she has slid into bed. They discuss their classes, as they always do, until the conversation veers and Katherine brings up the local harvest festival, a ragtag collection of pumpkins and blueberry munchkins served warm.

"We should plant something," Penny says, voice thin over the phone.

"Commemorate the season."

"Like, after school in the community garden?"

"We can call an Uber," she replies. "Bring some supplies, okay?"

"You're just trying to kill time," Katherine says. She pulls the sheets to her chin and lets the warm feeling run down her chest.

"I know you really like those purple flowers. What are they called again?"

"Hydrangeas. And they're not purple, they're blue."

A laugh echoes on the other end, but it's subdued. "I'd say that's debatable!"

The next morning, Katherine goes to Home Depot to pick up a potted hydrangea, paying with her mother's credit card and lugging the plant to school under her arm.

Something about the day strikes her as odd. There is no good morning text from Penny, and it is windy. The familiar air of playfulness is gone, sucked out into the void, and the town looks drab, dreary, dead. Suddenly it is not an environment she knows, a place she can mold to her own liking. The usual clatter of footsteps and chatter of voices. All of it, suffocating.

It's chilly. She shivers in the breeze, then replays the past few weeks for possible culprits in her discomfort, but comes up empty. Whatever the cause, it is not within her immediate understanding.

As usual, Penny is early. She sits under a tree with an open notebook. They make small talk, and Katherine is dropping her flowers off in the locker room when Penny suddenly grabs her by the arm and shakes her, murmuring under her breath. At first, Katherine doesn't hear her, the dull slur of her friend's words strangely quiet. That is when she notices the slight puff of Penny's cheeks and her downturned eyes, unnaturally bright in the artificial light.

"What?" Katherine frees her arm and rubs at the angry red spot with her palm. Slowly she flops onto the hard floor, and Penny joins her, knees cradled up to her chest. "I didn't catch what you said. Are you okay?" Then—"Are you drunk?"

"I said," Penny murmurs, "do you want to skip school today?"

Capital-d Ditch. Katherine worries. She always does.

They breathe in and out. Let the air wash over their skin.

"You're being serious?"

"I don't know." That is the truth. "I'm not sure."

"Honor thy father and thy mother." Penny quotes the Bible. Then she's

whispering, her voice too big in the vacant room, instantly overcome with excitement. "Stop thinking about that for one second. I'm asking if you want to ditch. Run away, even."

"Where would we go? New York City, like you said?"

"The Midwest. Somewhere big enough that nobody will ever find us," she says, and Katherine's mouth twists into a frown.

"Like the Parks," she says.

Penny wets her lips. Her face falls. "Something like that."

"Is something wrong?"

"What?"

"What are you even talking about?"

She directs her gaze at the ground. "We talked about this."

"Running away?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"I didn't actually mean it. Not really, at least. You're acting weird."

"What do you mean?"

Katherine presses her hydrangea to her chest. "It was just something we said, right?"

They sit in silence for a minute, the bustling of the school around them dulled and flat. Katherine thinks about covering her ears. Somehow her entire world drowns itself in that noise, and there she is in that restaurant again, distinctly aware of her own breaths, watching the family of strangers pass by her table, carrying with them an entire universe unheard, unsolved, never to be known.

And then, she's at Niagara Falls, surrounded by a towering sheet of water, willingly unmoving, splashed by mist. Damp clothes and flimsy excuses. Penny's voice telling her what to do—insisting that she "slipped and fell into the pool." Katherine again, at the Park baby's funeral, unable to understand like always, a degree of separation between herself and reality. *Sometimes you have to believe those kinds of impossible things.* She thinks about Penny and her family, never mentioned and never there—always avoided.

Penny continues to trace invisible circles into the ground. Dust splatters her fingertips like ash. Eventually, both of them stand, averting their eyes.

"Wait, Penny," Katherine says softly. And again, like a prayer, half-guilt, half-longing, all of it an answerless call for salvation. "Penny, I didn't mean that."

Penny says, "How do you think you would've saved the Park baby?"

A few kids, late for gym class, dash in, unfazed by Katherine and Penny's hushed conversation. Someone copies their second-period math homework off a friend.

"If you could've," Penny says, "what would you have done? Just humor me."

Something hot flares up behind Katherine's eyes, and she feels as if she is dreaming. Even her own words sound foreign and muddled.

"We couldn't have done anything," she says finally, harshly. She presses her lips together and feels the overwhelming urge to cry, born out of nothingness. She lifts her hands to her cold cheeks, fingers splayed as if to hide herself from the world.

The first bell rings. Afterward, an unsteady stillness, with none of the peace and none of the calm.

"We should get going," Penny says, and her voice is distant.

Katherine asks, "Are you still coming to the garden?"

"I'll meet you in front of the school like we always do." Penny smiles, her eyes unfocused. "Maybe we'll ditch some other time."

Katherine nods. Doesn't really mean it. Has never meant it. What she wants to say is, *I'm looking forward to it or can we talk for a second or just Penny, Penny, Penny*, but her throat closes and leaves the words dangling at the end of her tongue. A sudden sheet of sweat has appeared on her forehead, and it leaves her palms trembling and slick. Like in sickness, like in fever. Like in death. If this is dying, it is quieter than she expected. It doesn't hurt in the way she thought it would, more aching than violent and abrupt. It lingers, like the sting of a cut.

They part ways after leaving the locker room, but Katherine stops a few feet outside her classroom and thinks about her flower. She thinks about the garden. She thinks to herself: *None of this will matter in a few years.* They will graduate, move away, and start anew, repeating that lifecycle again and again. A soft noise, wet, its rhythm unsteady and desperate, breaks through her whirling thoughts, and with a jolt she realizes she is crying.

Quickly she wipes the tears. From above, the sun, warm and still young with morning, presses against her skin. She ducks away before the heat can settle.

RESPONSES

Slow Homecoming

Sven Birkerts

There is a bookstore, Grey Matter Books, not far from where we live, and I go there weekly. The place carries a massive stock of used books, and while I never find what I'm ostensibly looking for, I always come away with an armful of other finds, and some of these turn out to be the thing I really *am* looking for. This in itself is a kind of metaphor for the thread I'm hoping to track here, the origin point of which is something I found in a book I bought there the other day.

I was looking for J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*—the right words of recommendation had come from the right person—and Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*, because something of my youth is buried in those pages, and I was looking, as I do every time, for Jean Baudrillard's *America*, which once struck a note I've been wanting to recover since. I had no luck with any, but I did pick up, among a few other things, Peter Handke's *Slow Homecoming*, though I did hesitate, unsure of whether I already owned it. Since we moved last year, my books are in no order and on shelves all over the house.

There is the Handke issue—the issue that created such controversy around his 2019 Nobel Prize. Simply, the writer had given vocal support to the repressive regime of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. The ethical question pauses the hand on its way to the shelf, a question I have wrestled with since Knut Hamsun, literary hero of my youth, was revealed as a Nazi sympathizer. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in "The Crack-Up" about holding "two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time." I fear that what he saw

as a mark of intelligence could also be a worrisome indecisiveness.

What sharpened the dilemma for me was that I had been reading and admiring Handke for a good forty years before learning of this advocacy. His work is finally too deeply rooted for me to repudiate it.

I bought the book, but not without some inner tension. I bought it because Handke is an author who touches my writing self, in whose books I find—and this I can't easily account for—the impulse to start writing. I'm sparked by the way his mind moves, the almost aleatory progress of his sentences, and most of all, his willingness to abide in the cloudy conditions of his narrator's states of inwardness. As I abide in mine.

This time, that feeling of inspiration came right away. I opened the book and, of its three linked narratives, began reading the middle one, "The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire," which is, in part, a meditative reflection on Cezanne's paintings. It opens with the narrator out walking, savoring the special vividness of the colors all around. I read—this is the very first page—"The world of nature and the work of man, one with the help of the other, gave me a moment of ecstasy, known to me in the images of half sleep (but without their menacing quality, their augury of terrible things to come), which has been called the *Nunc stans*, the moment of eternity."

As that recognition hits Handke, so the expression of it hit me. I felt a sudden widening and sharpening of attention, and the impulse right away to stop and to ponder its intimations.

What prompted me was that Latin phrase *Nunc stans*. I had seen it before in various books, but never with a clear sense of what it meant, and now Handke had brought it to me. And at just the right moment. Wherever my recent thoughts had been tending, whatever I had been writing about, this was the sensation I needed. *Nunc stans*. The profundity embedded in that seeming paradox: a sense of eternity caught in the stilled moment ...

I found that I wanted to be writing. I didn't know what; I just wanted to feel myself in that active associative stream that for me is the highest joy. The impulse itself tells me that there is something that is waiting to be expressed. Handke's sentences have not led me to it, but they have mysteriously activated the receptivity without which no writing can happen.

I sometimes think that writing is not so much what the writer does, as what it is that takes place.

Certain sentences step forward as I read on. Like this, on the next page: “‘Dream yourself into things’ was long a writer’s maxim; imagine the objects to be dealt with as though seeing them in a dream, in the conviction that there alone will they acquire their true essence.”

This is not a sentence I can just move through on my way to the next. It’s a string of words that pulls me in, and will not let me go until I feel I have digested its implications. At these moments, I’m not reading in the usual way. I’m doing something else—carrying out a kind of deciphering that seems to be about what it means to comprehend.

Comprehend, from the Latin, grasp together. Here there are two concepts: that a writer ought to see objects as if in a dream, and that only in dreams are true essences disclosed.

I don’t know that I can fully fathom—or even believe—either proposition, but in combination they beguile, suggesting that what matters lies just outside the grasp of reason. Which I find a solacing thought.

*

Though I have been a dutiful reader for most of my life—following the school syllabi, reading as many of the “great” works as I could, reviewing on assignment for decades—my real reading has been something else. I mean the reading that feeds my inward self, that offers me the signs by which I try to make my way—that holds out, however obscurely, a promise of some kind of arrival.

This kind of reading cannot be planned or mapped and it follows no identifiable course. It is rarely, for me, about the impact or instruction of a whole book, and much more often a matter of a luminous sentence or passage. Entirely a matter of serendipity, it happens when the eye comes to rest on the needed thing, when all the tumblers click.

I don’t much read for continuity in the way I did for so long—plots, developing themes, and so on. Now I read for glimmers of connection, those moments that touch the points of my preoccupations. They do happen, though of course, I up the odds when I read writers whose sensibilities I al-

ready feel in tune with.

I already know from reading Handke that he believes in coming upon things—the oblique encounter—and that he sets great store by the significance he finds in the most unlikely things. He is, further, tuned to the idea of transcendence, at least as experienced in the *Nunc stans*—instances where some encounter or found thing opens on a greater apprehension, gives evidence that there is depth behind the surfaces we live upon. I read him when I need to be brought back to this.

*

In certain moods, I will put a chair in place so that I can just look at the spines of the books that fill one wall of my workroom. They are only some of the titles in the much larger sprawl, but they are ones I've picked to keep near me. Not so that I could more easily reach them, but because they are books that touch off some private response when I bring them into focus.

For me, this counts as a kind of reading, reading that proceeds on the power of association and traffics in memory. If the wall is a text, it is one that can never be experienced the same way twice.

These odd contemplations testify to what books leave behind besides the memory of their content, which is to say all the different residues of the time spent with them.

I don't mean earmarked pages and coffee stains—I mean something of the feeling, the state of mind, that was part of that reading. For instance, my eye now lands on the distressed-looking spine of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, the only copy I've owned. The book has been with me in various carrying bags, on the bedside table, on the desk, opened again and again at different times and in different places for various reasons. To track a quote, often, but also to fall in with a way of thinking, a mind's particular cadence. Seeing it there, flanked by Benjamin's *Reflections* and Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, I feel a private sense of confirmation that the other two books don't elicit.

That book recalls me to parts of the past, all having to do in one way or another with my ambition, not just to write, but—no less seriously—to think my way toward some understanding of my place in the order of things.

Looking at that narrow spine and chipped dust jacket, I register nothing particular about Benjamin's thoughts on Proust or Baudelaire or the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction. I make contact, rather, with the younger self, the person who found those essays of such compelling interest. I remember phases of my writing life, my own earnestness. I bring it all back, but not as anything that can be *grasped*—something more like an atmosphere of mind, a way of seeing the world.

Illuminations is just one book, but the eye roams the wall, this way and that. Other books can bring back specific times and encounters. Marguerite Yourcenar's *The Abyss*—I can relive the exact moment I spotted it on the shelf in a used bookshop. Or my worse-for-wear Hogarth edition of *To the Lighthouse*, spotted on a bottom shelf in the Brattle Book Shop, where I once worked. Or the slim-as-a-quarter spine of Tomas Tranströmer's *Baltics*, casually passed to me by my then-teacher Joseph Brodsky on his return from a trip to New York ...

I sometimes sit like this for a long time, and if my wife, Lynn, calls from the other room to ask what I'm doing, I usually answer, not quite accurately, "Nothing, really."

You're Breaking My Heart

Chrys Tobey

My grandma was queer, a lesbian born in 1923 to a Lutheran midwestern minister. She died a year after George W. Bush took office, after the towers fell. She never came out.

*

I am queer, a lesbian, or something, born in 1977 to a young, midwestern mom on welfare and no father. In 2002, I wore orange, my grandma's favorite color, and brushed her hair as morphine quieted the cancer. The years leading up to this, I tried to come out. But I didn't.

*

In 1997, the year Ellen was fired for coming out, a beautiful woman flirted with me in a Hollywood club. I was in a car leaving with my friends and she ran up. *You want to come home with me?* Dear god, I wanted to, but I was scared. My friends laughed. So I shook my head, *no*, and she whispered, *You're breaking my heart.*

*

I always thought Aunt Lorrie was just Aunt Lorrie, my grandma's best friend—Aunt Lorrie who lived next to her in the suburbs and when my grandma moved to Florida, Aunt Lorrie followed, bought a house around the corner. Aunt Lorrie who in the time of *Madmen*—the 1950s and 1960s—had her own children, her own husband.

*

My mom told me they were partners for four decades, told me she would walk in on them when she was a kid. The year I was born, they both divorced their husbands. Before my grandma died, I asked her about it while we ate nachos at Applebee's. She spit out her Manhattan, defiant. Pissed. *How dare you*. I made light of it, but really, how dare I. I don't think one person came out in my working-class high school in the 1990s.

*

All the times I tried to come out. My late teens, after I saved \$3000 and flew to Los Angeles with two suitcases. I scoured newspapers, tried to find coffee shops where I could meet women but instead slipped into another relationship with a man I imagined was a woman. The year before my grandma died, I called a lesbian hookup line and was charged \$100. My late 20s, after my first divorce, I moved to Portland and pledged to be true to myself. But I wasn't.

*

I said *I'm bisexual*, but meant *I'm a lesbian*. I loved stories of older women who eventually came out. I'd listen at their poetry readings. I'd think maybe

they could see me. I fell in love with my mentor, who was thirty years older, but I never told her. I fell in love with three other women. I never told them. I've loved one man. I told him.

*

My friend says, *I think you were just trying to survive*, and maybe she's right. I had enough battles to fight—eating disorder; the man who dragged me downstairs by my hair and hit my face (as my cousin said, *Men just sometimes do this. I've slapped my wife*); waiting tables at several restaurants and barely making the bills; bipolar diagnosis; suicide attempt; wheeled out of the ICU because I didn't have insurance; bipolar misdiagnosis; re-diagnosis as PTSD; stalker; protective orders; court dates; depression; another suicide attempt; 105 pounds; irregular heartbeat.

*

I now find other queer women online—what would my grandma have done? What would I have done in my early 20s, in my teens? I was afraid of being judged, but there are many stories like mine. I sip margaritas with a woman my age, early 40s, who after marriages and kids, came out five years ago and half her family, including her sister, disowned her. I date a woman who grew up not far from me in the Midwest. She came out two years ago. As we eat gluten-free pizza in a park, she tells me her parents find it *morally reprehensible*. An eighteen-year-old student writes about how she was terrified, is still terrified, to come out, and I think, *You too?*

*

You will end up with a man, a friend says. Another advises I have sex with some women and then go back to men. Someone quips, *No way! You're*

straight. Many say, *It's just a phase* or *Of course, you've been so hurt by men.*

*

It is twenty years after my grandma died. I am angry. Or tired. Or both. Angry about the hetero movies. Hetero books. Hetero narratives. Tired of others' assumptions. If one more romantic comedy. If one more person says, *You look like a leading lady.* While I wait for a date at a coffee shop, a man tries to flirt with me. *I love your outfit.* Won't stop talking. *Not everyone can pull that off.* He stares when my date joins me in line, tries to figure her out. On another date, the male bartender gives us a round of drinks. A lovely man asks if I will go on a date with him once we're vaccinated, and I say something I should've been saying for years, *There is one problem— you have a penis.*

*

I can't stop watching queer shows and movies and reading queer books. We have them now. I watch a mainstream movie about two women in love. What would I have done in my teens, early 20s? What would my grandma have done? How would this have changed our trajectories?

*

After my grandma died, I exchanged letters with Aunt Lorrie until she passed away, a year later. In her last letter, she sent me everything she had of my grandma's—rings, necklace, earrings. She told me I have both of their names. She told me she could not bear to go to her funeral. And in her final sentence, she wrote—*We had something special: love.*

*

I wish I could tell that beautiful woman who stood at my car window, *I've been breaking my own heart. I'd tell her, It's taken me a few decades, but I'm figuring it out—how to love myself.*

Calistoga

Edan Lepucki

They'd known each other for thirty years and nothing was going to change: Vivi had always been rich and bossy, and Natalie had always been poor and agreeable. But who would turn down two nights at a hot spring in Napa with an old friend? Vivi's first email read: "I haven't seen you in forever. Let's meet in Calistoga, my treat. I insist!" She included a link, which Natalie clicked.

The website showed a luxury hotel with a centuries-old spa and an enormous swimming pool heated by the earth's molten core to an amniotic bliss, the kind of hotel with grounds: ponds and paths and nooks for reflection. In the photos, the guests were swaddled in identical white waffle-weave bathrobes. Natalie thought the robes looked vaguely cultish—and then shushed the image out of her head. The wineries were only a bike ride away; the hotel even had beach cruisers to ride to tastings.

Natalie hadn't seen Vivi in at least fifteen years. Occasionally, they emailed life reports, and there were also Vivi's Facebook posts: her elopement a decade before, and two years after that, the post about her divorce: "All bad things must come to an end." A few years ago, she'd had a baby named Paloma. Vivi was a "single mother by choice"; she had chosen a sperm donor from a database. In an email to Natalie, Vivi wrote that Paloma's donor dad was a composer who was over six feet tall. Natalie was also a single mother, though her daughter Wendy had been seventeen by the time Paloma was born.

"I'm a single mother against my will," she wanted to write, but didn't.

This time, Natalie emailed back: "I'd love to go to Calistoga with you."

Even if the trip was awkward, even if it was terrible, she'd be in a fancy hotel with a nice bed and good food. And with Vivi. It didn't matter that they barely talked; Natalie missed her. She loved Vivi, had never made another friend as glamorous and honest—and fun. They'd met in the fifth grade at an all-girls private school, Vivi's family on the board, Natalie on scholarship. For years, they knew each other so well it was as if they shared a consciousness. If Vivi wanted to, she could pluck out all that Natalie was too stupid or scared to admit aloud. Vivi would blow it off her open palm like so much dandelion fuzz. *Make a wish, Nat.*

Besides, they would be going the weekend before Natalie got paid; that weekend was always the worst. She was a receptionist at a law firm. It was a fine job, it didn't embarrass her, but because in Glendale, rents were exorbitant, life was always punitive by the end of the pay period: canned beans for dinner, no coffee out, a harmless austerity that depressed her.

After she emailed Vivi, she texted Wendy.

Remember Vivi? My old friend. She's taking me to Calistoga. Cool, right?

Wendy didn't reply. Natalie imagined her daughter, twenty-two, in some noirish Koreatown apartment, the parking so bad she took the bus. Was the boyfriend there? Was the boyfriend getting *spiritually* audited at this very moment? Was he wearing that ersatz navy uniform outside the blue building on Sunset? The boyfriend was a menace. Wendy was a menace too, but in a different way. She'd never been in a cult before. She would be, though, and soon. Wouldn't she?

Vivi probably knew tons of former Scientologists. Vivi would tell her what to do.

*

Vivi paid for Natalie's flight out of Burbank, as well as a black car from the Oakland airport.

"It's farther away than the one in Santa Rosa, but better." Natalie wondered how but didn't ask. "It'll take almost two hours to get here. I promise it'll be a comfortable ride!" Vivi wrote. She couldn't pick up Natalie because she would already be at the hotel.

"I'll send you the room number once I'm fully ensconced," she wrote.

The words fully ensconced repeated in Natalie's mind as the car made its way into wine country with its acres of grapes and horse paddocks, the working poor among the very rich, Natalie and Vivi writ large, perhaps. The driver was quiet; he played some soothing piano music on the car stereo. Natalie, tucked into the leather womb of the backseat, fell asleep.

She woke with a start when the car reached Calistoga, which was exactly as advertised: a cute little Victorian town at the north end of Napa Valley. A few restaurants and boutiques lined the main street, and what appeared to be an old train depot housed a psychic and a chocolatier. A quirky-looking motel advertised mud baths and colonics. HEALING WATERS blinked its neon sign.

It wasn't until they passed the motel that Natalie realized the town was eerily empty. Where were all the rugged locals and the tourists in capri pants? She rolled down the tinted window. The sky was yellowish and miasmic.

At the end of the road, the resort glowed, low and whitewashed, Mission style.

"Hope you don't have to evacuate," the driver told her as he helped retrieve her bag from the trunk. He was stocky and thick-necked as a bulldog, and his black dress shoes shone. With his index finger, he picked something from his tongue and squinted at it.

"Ash," he said, and pointed to the sky.

"Oh." Natalie tried not to look clueless. So that was it. There was a fire nearby—of course there was. It was California in the fall. It was California, period. She didn't even know what the name of the fire was, or where it was. The world was too far gone to pay attention.

She looked at the hotel, white as milk, its entrance flanked with olive trees in teak pots. In the fourth grade, Wendy had done a project on California missions. Natalie had to help her; otherwise Wendy wouldn't have bothered doing it at all.

"Adobe bricks are fire resistant," Natalie said. "The priests figured the natives would have a harder time burning them down."

The driver frowned. "Tell Vivi I'll be back Sunday evening."

"You know Vivi?"

"She's my boss, isn't she?"

"I thought you were a company she called."

"Vivi's the real deal. She doesn't like to drive nowadays. You know."

Natalie didn't know but she wasn't going to admit that.

When he was gone, she got out her phone.

What is the fire here in Napa called?

Wendy hadn't texted her back about Calistoga, but Natalie knew this was the right question.

Tubbs. Santa Rosa's in deep shit.

So that was why Vivi had wanted her to fly into Oakland. It wasn't better than Santa Rosa, it was safer.

Her phone vibrated.

Pull your head out of the sand mom.

So, now Natalie knew: Wendy had seen the other texts about Calistoga, and all the ones after that. Two weeks had passed, and there had been no word from her. Was the boyfriend with her when Natalie's texts came in? Was he asking her to read *Dianetics*? Was she reading it even though she didn't read books? Did the boyfriend know what the fire in Napa was called? The name of a fire was not the name of Wendy's teacher or the name of her best friend, though Natalie had failed to know these when it mattered.

Natalie texted *Thanks* and *I love you*, but she didn't expect a reply. She was a lot of things when it came to Wendy, but she wasn't naïve. She wasn't a fool.

*

As Natalie rolled her little suitcase down the path to Building 5, Room 104, she tried not to think about Wendy, or how Vivi had hired a full-time driver, or the empty town and the ashy sky. Instead, she imagined her old friend waiting for her. Vivi would be sprawled elegantly across her bed in one of those waffle-weave bathrobes. A classic black bathing suit beneath that, and her jewelry; she always wore jewelry. Some cool earrings perhaps, and her dead mother's gold band. Painted nails—red. Her hair would be a golden mane around her face, and she'd squeal when Natalie arrived. She would take Natalie in her arms and give her one of her famous hugs, uninhibited and joyous. Vivi always smelled amazing. She wore expensive perfumes that weren't merely scents, but essences. Hugging Vivi was a sensual experience, a room to step inside. A glimpse of a life that would never be-

long to Natalie.

The last time the two of them had seen each other, Wendy was nearly six. By then, Vivi had taken her inheritance and bought a house up north, in Marin County, but she was back in Los Angeles to visit friends. She wanted to see Wendy, Vivi said. *The girl's growing up! I love her!* But she left after forty-five minutes when Wendy began writhing on the floor in anger because she wanted to watch TV. Natalie was not invited to the group dinner at El Coyote later that week.

Even now, it stung Natalie to think of the friends who had ditched her when she became a mother. At 24, single and scared, with a tiny vulnerable person to keep alive, she felt abandoned. She understood now that it was more mundane than that: her friends had simply lost interest. Or felt alienated. Natalie was *alien* to them. And then, as she fell deeper and deeper into the hole that was raising Wendy, with her tantrums, and her biting, and her inability to be the calm daughter who draws or plays dolls in the corner while the adults do whatever they do, Natalie became unreachable. Eventually, it was as if she had disappeared altogether. Or been erased. Her friends didn't even think of her.

Of course, fifteen, twenty years later, those friends had become parents themselves. They were older moms, with money and careers, children in adorable soft prints. They hired doulas. They bought the same oval-shaped crib in blonde wood and the play couch that had a year-long waiting list. They shared first day of preschool pics and videos of ballet recitals and of their kids learning to read. Recently, they had begun sharing articles about the lack of a support system for mothers in America, about all the invisible labor that went into raising a child.

Even now they didn't think of her.

Natalie's throat hurt as she swallowed. The sky was a cloak. There was building 5. Room 104. She crossed the gravel path.

At the open door stood a skeletal figure with gray, close-cropped hair. An older woman, possibly someone who worked at the hotel. Maybe Vivi had ordered them a bottle of local wine. Or a cheese plate. That would be like her.

The woman turned. "Nat!" She stepped toward Natalie and Natalie felt faint.

"Viv," Natalie said, and her voice came out hoarse. It wasn't the fire, the Tubbs fire, but she hoped Vivi would assume so. It was that her beautiful,

healthy friend had been replaced with this sickly, fragile woman. Vivi's hair was strange: curly wisps at her forehead, the rest flat and matted. Her skin, wan. She wasn't wearing any jewelry.

They hugged. Vivi was so bony. No scent but sour.

Vivi pulled away and smiled. Her teeth were still perfect and white. They were the wrong teeth for a woman who looked like this. Inappropriate, even.

Were the teeth the affront, or the ruined body?

"I should have told you," Vivi said. Her voice was the same—sly, reedy—and this too felt like a betrayal.

"Told me what," Natalie asked, but she already knew.

"I'm dying, Nat."

"Oh," Natalie replied, in that same stupid way she'd said it to the driver.

*

Earlier that morning, when Natalie left for the airport, fog had sheathed the world. Natalie had carefully made her way to her car with one hand in front of her like someone trying to balance on uneven terrain. She marveled at how the world materialized with each step—truck, house, palm tree, bus stop—as if it were all created for her, at that very moment. The flash of bougainvillea, hot pink, crowned out of the mist, and Natalie gasped with delight.

She'd taken it as a good omen: for the trip with Vivi, or maybe for Wendy, for her and Wendy. What is unknown will become known. What seems unfamiliar is, in fact, familiar. Life is a marvel.

She'd been wrong. The universe was trying to send her a different message.

Pull your head out of the sand mom.

*

At the hotel restaurant, Vivi wore what had to be the most chic sweatsuit

known to humankind. It was made of cashmere, pale pink, with buttons instead of a zipper. She was too thin, everyone could see she was sick, but the sweatsuit helped. That was what Vivi said, and she wasn't wrong.

If the terror of the news hadn't worn off, at least Vivi's appearance had. Natalie recognized her friend in this decimated woman: her white teeth and her voice, yes, but also her green eyes, mischievous and probing, by turns. Her laugh like a hiss, like a ball losing air. Her beautiful hands. The way she sat as straight and poised as a ballerina. Vivi.

They were here for lunch, sitting by the big window. Above the bar stretched a mural of foxes playing ukuleles, and the booths lining one wall were covered in supple green leather. The waiters wore chambray shirts, and the speakers played some anodyne salsa music. Natalie's gin cocktail tasted like fresh thyme. Her friend was dying.

"I didn't want to scare you," Vivi said. "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"I wouldn't miss seeing you for anything."

Vivi had cancer. She'd done all the things: the rounds of chemo, some kind of transplant, the macrobiotic diet, the healing sessions with one master or another, even an exorcism.

"People always want to know where in my body the tumors are. Like I'm a landmass and it's a tornado."

"Or a fire," Natalie said.

Nodding, Vivi ran her hands up and down in front of her. "At this point, I'm consumed by flames. I'm like that monk who set himself on fire."

Single mother by choice, Natalie thought.

"So is there a ... timeline?" she asked.

"You mean, when do I die?"

Natalie managed a nod.

"There is, but what of it? Right now, this weekend, I feel okay. It won't last long."

The waiter brought their food, avocado toast for Natalie and scallops for Vivi. Only Vivi would order scallops for lunch. Natalie's own plate was stunning; the avocado, covered with various seeds and leafy tendrils Natalie couldn't name, fanned across a thick wedge of sourdough bread. Not that Natalie wanted to eat anything. Vivi was only picking at her food.

"What about Paloma?" Natalie said. "She's—what, five?" She paused. Steeled herself. "What does she know?"

"She knows Mommy is sick and that I will not be around for much longer."

Natalie thought of Wendy at that age. She was still having issues with potty training. Her kindergarten teacher would put her in this little anteroom between classrooms, so that Wendy could spin in a desk chair. That way, she wouldn't bother the other kids as they valiantly learned to read and count.

"Is she freaking out?" Natalie asked.

"Not really. She draws pictures of me. You know, in a triangle dress, with a smiley face. She makes this same drawing over and over again."

Wendy would not have done that. She probably would have thrown chairs at the news, or stopped eating, or run away. The thought of missing any of Wendy's life took Natalie's breath away. Even the worst of it, the slow-motion car crashes that were Wendy's breakdowns, her petty crimes, the first stint in rehab, the second, the brutal texts—it had all been hell and Natalie was glad for all of it.

She didn't want to cry so she stared hard at her avocado toast. She willed herself to take a bite.

"We have a grief therapist named Dr. Linda. Dr. Linda says Paloma's processing."

"A grief therapist?" Natalie tried to think of something useful to say.

"You know how I used to say, 'Any problem that can't be solved with money isn't a problem?'"

Natalie couldn't help but grunt. "Spoken like a true rich person. If you don't have the money, isn't *that* a problem?"

"Well, sure, okay. But, truly, every real problem in the world can be boiled down to one thing: Loss."

Vivi said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. And maybe it was. Vivi was dying and no money would change that.

"Are you saying even the grief therapist doesn't help?"

"I knew you were the perfect friend to hear this."

"What will you do—about Paloma? Who will care for her?" Vivi's parents were dead, and she had no siblings.

Vivi looked stricken.

"I'm sorry," Natalie said. "We don't have to talk about this."

Vivi shook her head. "I do want to talk about it. Just not right now. Not here."

They both looked around the restaurant, and then out the window. On their walk from the room, ash had dusted their shoulders like snowfall; Natalie's throat was scratchier than ever.

"Should we worry about the fire?" Natalie asked.

"Nothing bad ever happens here," Vivi said.

*

Vivi didn't want to dwell, she said. She wanted to celebrate and to relax, to catch up. She had booked them spa appointments for the afternoon. Mud baths and hot stone massages. Tonight, dinner at the same restaurant.

"We're on a compound," she said.

"I'm never leaving," Natalie replied.

"I'll foot the bill. But only until I die—then it's on you."

It was a little weird, and also not weird at all, that they could pick up right where they left off, but wasn't that the nature of friendships like these? The shorthand, the jokes, the familiarity: it was a frequency they had to listen for. Vivi showed her the dress she planned to wear that night, and they laughed at the squirrels scrabbling up the live oak outside their room. They caught up on gossip about people from middle and high school. When Natalie changed for the spa, Vivi exclaimed at how great Natalie looked topless.

"Your breasts are iconic," she said, relishing the word. "They're i-con-ic!"

Natalie laughed and laughed.

When Vivi went to the bathroom, Natalie got out her phone.

I drank thyme-infused gin.

No reply.

Vivi says my boobs are iconic.

Still nothing.

Vivi's dying. My best friend is dying.

Finally, Wendy wrote back.

you havent seen her in years how can she be your best friend

Natalie could slap her.

Doesn't matter. I love her. How's the boyfriend?

To Natalie's surprise, Wendy answered:

You mean Darren hes doing good.

"Who are you texting?"

Natalie tossed her phone on the bed, as if caught, and told her.

They had talked about Wendy briefly at lunch: how she was working at a coffee shop; how her hair at the nape of her neck was shaved like Vivi's had been in the nineties.

"It's a bitch to grow out," Vivi had said, "but I'm sure she realizes."

"The thing about Wendy is that she definitely doesn't. She never thinks about the future."

Vivi laughed. "I admire that."

Now Natalie wondered how to tell Vivi what had worried her before she had arrived. *No problem that can be solved with money is a problem.* But this was about loss, wasn't it?

"I'm afraid she's becoming a Scientologist," she finally said. "Her boyfriend's pretty serious about it. Wendy said he's an 'operating thetan' and she didn't laugh when she said those words."

"Uh oh."

"I guess it means he's on track to becoming enlightened."

"You know you'll be labeled a suppressive person. She'll cut you out."

"I know, I Googled it." The thought of Wendy joining a cult made Natalie want to get under the bed covers and take a long nap.

In her waffle-weave bathrobe, Vivi looked as small as a child. Her skin was grayish against the white robe. She sat on the bed next to Natalie and put a hand on her back.

"Remember when you cut me and everyone out of your life?"

"What are you talking about? I was never a Scientologist!"

"Of course not. You were a mother. None of us were in *that* cult yet."

"What do you mean? I wanted your help. Your friendship. You all left me."

Vivi looked confused. "Oh honey, no. You never returned anyone's calls. I'd send you these long emails and maybe, weeks later, you'd write back a line or two. And everyone said you never came out. No one ever saw you."

"I had a kid! I wasn't brushing my teeth, let alone writing emails. And I had no money for a sitter."

"Please let's not make this about class." Vivi checked her watch, which probably cost more than Natalie's car—but Natalie would not make it about class.

"Mud baths in twenty. Let's go."

The spa was the estate's original building, from the nineteenth century, and you could tell because it was smaller and darker, less well-appointed than anything else at the hotel. The woman at the front desk kept calling them "sweetheart" and "honey," even though she couldn't be older than Wendy. She offered them ginger lozenges, to counter any discomfort from the smoke of the fire, and Vivi and Natalie sucked on them as they were ushered to the locker room. The lozenge was sharp on Natalie's tongue. Her throat no longer hurt, but she was conscious of it, as if it weren't part of herself, as if she were wearing it. She excused herself to the bathroom to change; she needed to be away from Vivi for a minute.

She couldn't stop thinking about what Vivi said back in the room, about how Natalie cut her friends out of her life. How she'd been in the cult of motherhood. How could two people have totally different versions of reality? Natalie had always thought Vivi got her.

The spa was warm, but not so warm that she should be sweating. Being misunderstood always made Natalie anxious; whenever she and Wendy argued, it felt as if she'd just been clobbered by an ocean wave, only to resurface to a bigger, more dangerous one. There was no convincing anyone—not your dying friend, not your difficult daughter—that your intentions were different than they supposed. Another thing you couldn't solve with money. Or probably not.

But Natalie had seen the spa menu and she knew the mud bath was nearly two hundred dollars. What problem was Vivi trying to solve by bringing Natalie here?

The attendants called their names. Both were Latina, nearing sixty, Natalie guessed. Did Natalie make more or less money than a mud bath attendant at a fancy resort? What a shitty thing to wonder, she thought, and yet—did anyone with forty-nine dollars in their checking account ever come to this place? She doubted it.

The attendants led them down a narrow hallway that opened to a large room. In one corner, two guests—a duo on a friend getaway like Vivi and Natalie, perhaps—were being hosed off by their own attendants. They were probably fifteen years younger than Vivi and Natalie, and Natalie watched Vivi take in their lithe and healthy bodies, gritty with the mud that slid down their torsos and legs into the large floor drain. Once all the mud was

washed off, they'd be slippery and new. They'd be perfect. You could tell they weren't mothers. They bore no signs of it, physical or spiritual.

"I wish I were thirty again," Vivi said.

"I don't," Natalie said.

Natalie thought of her life then: she'd found a job at a dental office because she and Wendy needed better benefits. It was awful, bad pay and deathly boring (like her current job). There was something demoralizing about mailing out the appointment reminder postcards to patients who didn't show up. The smell of the fluoride made her sick, and the whir of the drill was like a gnat in her ear. Then Wendy broke a kid's arm at school, for apparently no reason at all, and his mother screamed at Natalie to *control her monster of a child*.

The two younger women were clean now. They turned somber as their attendants wrapped them in white towels and led them to a row of clawfoot tubs at the other side of the room. These were filled with mineral water, pumped in from the hotel's geyser, Natalie heard their attendants explain.

Natalie and Vivi were instructed to remove their bathrobes. Until now, Natalie hadn't seen Vivi without clothes. Her friend dropped her bathrobe and gave Natalie a look that meant: *Don't look away*.

Vivi was as vulnerable as an injured songbird. She was so frail, and so impossible. There was no way she should be able to stand upright. Her breasts had been removed.

"Now you know where the fire began," she said, and let her attendant lead her to her mud bath.

The baths were actually large cement troughs, and the mud was dark and gruel-like. It looked disgusting. Natalie stepped into her own trough carefully, and the swampy substance surrounded her, sucked on her. She sank in and her mind went blank as a television screen being shut off.

"Why did you bring me here?" she whispered. She turned and saw that Vivi's eyes were closed. Mud was smeared across her collarbone.

Vivi opened her eyes. "You knew there was a reason."

"Not at first. At first I thought it was because you missed me."

Vivi closed her eyes again. "You know what will hurt most about dying?"

Natalie didn't hesitate. "Not knowing how Paloma will turn out."

Vivi shook her head and grinned. Her eyes were still closed but Natalie could tell she was picturing something and it was glorious. "I know she'll be amazing. Fierce and beautiful and smart as hell."

"What is it then?"

"It's that I won't get to see it. See her."

Natalie didn't answer because there was nothing to say. Loss was the only unsolvable problem, especially for a mother.

Vivi's eyes were still closed when she said, "My lawyer's name is Kristen Vebber. She'll call you."

"Your lawyer?"

"About Paloma."

Natalie tried to sit up but it was like being held down, smothered; she could barely move. She felt suddenly nervous, as she had in the locker room.

"I want you to take her," Vivi said. Her eyes were open now, and she was watching Natalie closely to gauge her reaction. "Adopt her. Raise her."

"Why me?"

"No one else can do it. Not like you will. She's not even six yet."

"Vivi, we don't even know each other anymore. Who am I?"

"You're a mom with experience. Wendy's grown up."

"And I totally fucked her up. She has problems, Vivi. Real problems."

Vivi removed one of her hands from her tub. It was coated in brown muck. When she waved it at Natalie, bits of mud sprayed between them.

"Stop that!" Natalie said.

"Her problems aren't because of you. You love that girl."

"What if they are, though?"

Vivi's eyes were closed again and when she spoke, it was as if conjuring a spirit.

"Paloma has a significant trust. Whoever takes her will have an ample salary available to them until Paloma graduates college—or until she turns twenty-two, whatever happens first. Kristen Vebber has it all worked out. It took a long time to finalize the details."

"This seems crazy."

"I know. But fuck, I'm not going to be here and I don't want her going to some horrible aunt I barely know. Besides, Paloma loves the photos of you, the stories."

Natalie didn't know what to say. Did she want another child? Could she care for Paloma the way she deserved? What if she messed her up? The mud felt very hot; it oozed into her.

"Natalie," Vivi said, startling Natalie. Her voice was certain now. Vivi was

looking straight at her. Straight into her soul.

"I have enough money to solve this problem," Vivi said. "And yours."

"My problem."

"Does Mr. Operating Thetan have money? My guess is no—not as much as you and Paloma." She laughed, a ball deflating around the room.

Natalie couldn't help but laugh, too.

"And if you lose Wendy," Vivi said. "Paloma will be there."

*

Three hours later, after the mud bath and the mineral soak and the hot stone massages, Natalie was alone in the resort swimming pool. Vivi had returned to the room. She was worn out, she said, and she wanted to call Paloma with the good news. Natalie had agreed.

The water in the pool was warmer than the air, like a giant bathtub, and Natalie let it envelop her. It did feel healing. A handful of other guests floated around her. Vivi was right; nothing bad could happen here.

Natalie let go of the pool noodle on which she'd been bobbing and floated on her back. The sun had gone down but the fire left its fug, and the sky was orange-gray, heavy. It smelled like smoke, much worse than before. Someone nearby was coughing.

She imagined the flames getting closer and closer until they were here, at this hotel. Heat that hollowed trees and cooked animals would throttle the property and melt the buildings to sand and then to glass.

Vivi's image of Natalie was warped, so what. Natalie wasn't sure it mattered. Not anymore. Vivi knew Natalie wouldn't say no. Maybe that was why she'd chosen her in the first place. Natalie could live with that.

She was going to buy a little Spanish-style place in Atwater like she'd always wanted. She would quit her job. She would walk Paloma to and from school. Wendy could come for dinner if she wanted. They'd get take-out.

Vivi would be dead.

Not yet, though. She was still alive tonight, and she wanted to leave early. First thing tomorrow. Not because of the fire, even if the fire was the sane reason to go. The front desk was giving full refunds. But Vivi wanted to get back to Paloma.

Natalie didn't mind. If something bad was going to happen here in Calistoga, which was the closest thing to heaven on Earth, she didn't want to be around to see it. She would go on believing it remained unscathed.

It would be untouchable.

She would go meet the little girl.

DIARY

Clay Diary

Abigail Thomas

SATURDAY

When I say I live in the moment, it's not a brag. Time makes no sense anymore, and the present is all I've got, and it seems a fitting place for an eighty-year-old woman. I think of each moment as a nautical swell, and I surf from one to the next, and never wipe out. Some moments are longer than others, some steeper. I can carry on a reasonable conversation, make a birthday cake, get to the bathroom, feed the dogs. I can make things out of clay. If I keep my wits about me, I can handle whatever shows up in the present, but mention something interesting that happened yesterday and it's a different story. My daughter recently referred to a conversation we had the day before, and I drew a blank. No memory of it at all. I am used to things slipping my mind, but not quite so quickly. This lapse terrified me, and I said as much. She tried to comfort me, talking about how stress affects everything, and how long I've lived, how much to remember already, and she calmed me down. I am beginning to understand that each day is a day unto itself; there's no guarantee how much of Friday will survive the trip into Saturday. Things get left behind. A lot gets lost overnight.

I made puppies today; they look as though they made themselves. They are drying on the windowsill. Cavorting. I also made a creature holding a very small version of itself. I used the terracotta, which is almost gone. I'm not loving the new white clay; it's so slippery, like making something out of a flounder filet.



SUNDAY

So far, so good. Making faces using the gray clay. Two little girls, both calm; one bird, another bird, and what now appears to be an angel with a broken wing. I am suddenly deeply involved in his/her (its?) repair, but I don't believe flight is part of its future. The wing is too badly damaged. Is this how an otherwise sensible old woman discovers an alternate reality? To look down and find in her handful of clay an angel with a broken wing, no features on his poor face, and no way to mend him? An angel who will have to make his way on this earth and learn to hide his wings? We are a dangerous species. Better warn him. The dogs are barking. Someone is at the door.

I am making angels and birds and fish. An imaginary conversation ensues.

Is that an angel?

No, that's the sea turtle.

Is that the bird?

No, that's the angel.
What's that one?
That's the manta ray.
Make another angel.
It doesn't work that way.
I show her the bird.
It has to be an accident, I tell her.
And then you enhance it.



MONDAY

The crows were carrying on so loudly I didn't hear the telephone at first. It was my grandson Joe, and I always pick up when he calls. He is worried because I am so hoarse, but I told him it was nothing and sent love to his big family. He sounded good. Then I went to the screen door and cawed twice and the crows all got quiet. Usually there's only a little pause and then they are back at it. I have a swollen gland in my neck, which hurts, and a frog in

my throat and it must have lent some serious authority to my caw, because they are still quiet. Good lord. Minutes go by. My god, what did I say?

Half an hour and not a peep out of the crows.

New clay arrived! I made a snapping turtle. It isn't very good, but I'm letting it survive. I was making the very simple face of a young boy when the terrible news came on. The eyes are just dents, no lids, no iris, just hollows from pressing my index finger into the clay. I don't know how this will dry, and need to keep a look out as I'm not sure he will know he has eyes. He has a round face and his mouth is open. Turned the radio off.

Sadie went upstairs after breakfast. She preferred an empty bedroom to me not paying her any attention. It made me feel guilty and it hurt my feelings, which is a lousy tasting brew. She just now came back down and is lying next to me on the couch. I made a little creature I just love. I don't know what it is, or what it mostly is, sort of half bird, half little mammal. It's a dinosaur, my daughter Sarah says. I'm thinking of colors to paint her. I checked on my angel. I'm trying to fix the wing so it won't fall off. The slip is drying but it's awfully fragile. Drying always looks like dying.

Had to use the knitting needle to make big holes for eyes on the little boy. Reminded me that "stare" and "starve" come from the same Indo-European root.

TUESDAY

How could I remember a man I barely knew who ate a few mayflies just to see what all the fuss was about, and have zero memory of a cod fisherman my sister remembers and says I knew him, too? You'd think a cod fisherman would loom large in my memory but no such luck. Apparently, all you have to do is eat a few mayflies. I have decided not to get upset at all the obviously large moments that have vanished from my past. I can still count backwards from one hundred by sevens and get my clothes on properly and enjoy my own company. I'm at home with myself.

I admit to a bit of a turn the other night when I realized as my eye went easy over things I love in the room where I sit, that one day this will all be stripped from the walls and dispersed, because I will be dead and the house will belong to somebody else, and their stuff will go up on the walls, and fill these rooms. I did feel a bit odd, as if everything I love was suddenly at an unfamiliar angle, but I got over it. Eighty will do that for you. And over

there is the candied apple red urn Chuck gave me years ago, telling me the saleslady had assured him my ashes would fit nicely. Having decided that's where I'll be, I can gaze across the room at my final dwelling, and from time to time, depending on the news, look forward to it.

Chuck would have loved knowing this. What would he have said about all these faces? They started after he died. That's when Catherine gave me the clay. Did I say that already? Well, I'm saying it now.



WEDNESDAY

Fried up chicken thighs and shallots with some weird mushroom that looked like a page of music. Got to go back to Sunflower and find out what its name is. The word blueberry stays in my head, but that's not it.

Today I made a child with a protruding upper lip, a dog with a ball between its paws, and a mouse. I used the Das clay, a color called Stone. Ordered two more slabs before I saw the way the child is drying. Is it supposed to dry all mottled in different shades of gray? The child's face is like that, as

is the dog, but the mouse is a nice shiny gray. What's up with that?

It's time for bed but I feel as if I'm forgetting something. Then I remind myself tomorrow I won't remember what I forgot. Ha ha.



THURSDAY

This morning a hippo head showed up out of nowhere, all the soft knobby details, but I couldn't make the rest of the beast so I didn't save him and I should have, I could have made a little pedestal for it the way I did the cockatoo. Then what appeared was an angry man, god knows what his problem is, and another animal that could be anything, but is mostly sheep. And a large creature holding what is probably her baby but might be an egg. I made her out of the white clay, so soft and squashy, but it dries before you're done and the edges get wrinkly so you have to work fast. She is sitting, but she has a long back, leaning over what is in her arms.

Then I tried to make a base for the angel but it didn't work out.

I am only really happy when my hands are covered in slurry and something is getting discovered or finished, or in the middle of being made. Maybe happy is the wrong word.

Another mouse. Dinosaur still unpainted. It's like she's sitting around in her underwear.

Tomorrow!

FRIDAY

I'm just walking through a room full of things I've collected, or made, or found, or been given, all things I love to look at, and here it comes—that twinge, a freshly minted reminder that I'm mortal. And not just any old garden-variety mortal—at eighty I'm more mortal than ever. Next I endure an unpleasant moment during which it feels like I'm dead already and in mourning for all my lovely stuff, and then life resumes. Twinges by definition don't stick around, although they recur with unnerving frequency. An hour later, I am staring at what is taking shape in my handful of clay, and again with the twinge. I get it, okay? Mortal. You can stop now. Except there is no "you."

But now I'm curious. What other physical manifestations of the abstract are there? There's panic and depression, and fear and grief, and then my mind goes blank until I remember desire. Of course, good old desire! Polar opposite to death twinges! But close cousins. Speaking of which, parked next to Woodstock Meats, I watched a young man shoving his shirt down into his jeans, which reminded me of an old boyfriend who was always naked in his jeans, which made me acutely aware of the possibly naked body of this young man, which led me to reminisce, I'm sorry to say, about all things penis. I got a little nostalgic. I experienced a bit of a rush. I wondered about the young man. His girlfriend stood nearby, waiting while he sorted himself out. I tried to study her face to determine whether she was a girl who cared what kind of penis she was dealing with, but concluded you never can tell.

Who am I kidding? We all care.

Three more puppies today, and a dead baby elephant. The latter just showed up in my hand. Sad and ghastly. You never know what you'll find. Two turtles.

SATURDAY

I don't know what possessed me but I watched a YouTube video by a real artist about how to make a face out of clay. Lots of measuring. It was a really good face. But there was nothing crazy going on. It was kind of depressing.

Made another turtle.

My daughter Catherine wants the white creature with her baby! And the newest turtle, which I think is actually a frog. Making another right now.

I have been experimenting with just finger dents for nose, for mouth, for eyes, and if it works, she will be just so lovely and so understated. Terracotta. Finally had to use the knitting needle for her eyes, though. Just a hint.

The guys came by to mow the lawn. Outside is every shade of green in the world.

Found an old letter from Chuck. Had to sit still for a long time.



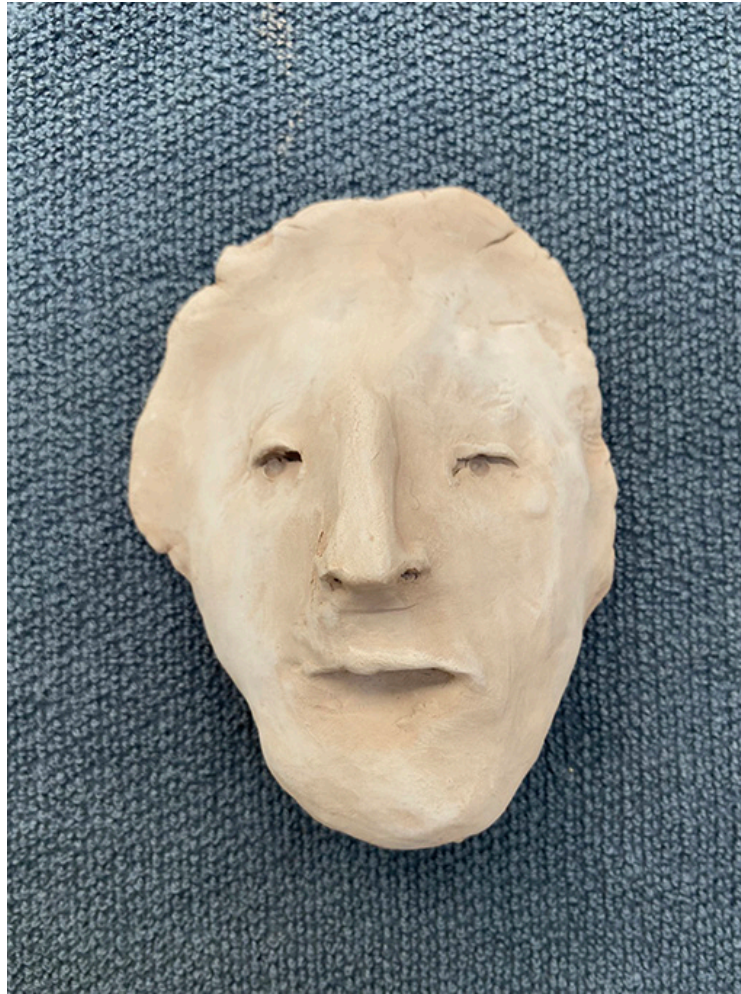
SUNDAY

This morning, first thing I did was to check on the experiment, and oh god, I love her. She reminds me of when you're trying to remember someone you knew years ago, but you can't quite picture the face. That's what she looks like, a sort of dim memory. She is just lovely, but she's just about to disappear. I can't stop staring at her.

Later I made a man's face with the white clay, which is still slippery but I'm getting used to it. He is austere, and smart, and I left the tiny leak of terracotta slip that came off the needle when I made his left eye. It's just a trickle of blood; it suits him not to wipe it away.

A head appeared complete with ears and a sort of George Washington wig thing going on with his hair so I made him into a bust. His head is flung back, nose in the air but joyous and playful, not a serious bone in his body. Of which he doesn't have one, of course.

I gave the shiny silver mouse to Paul for his mother (she likes mice) and made three more as soon as I got home. With every passing mouse, the next gets bigger and more menacing. Almost ferocious! It's so interesting. As if I am in charge of the evolution of the mouse so it can take over the earth and make a better job of it than we have done.



MONDAY

Well, today I went crazy. Two capybaras, four mice, two young girls' faces, one old man, one young man I started yesterday while listening to American Roots. He wound up with a pompadour and his mouth wide open singing. Or, not quite a pompadour, but I don't know what else to call it. Then I made another singer, the blues, I think. I love him. A bear's head, a grizzly, judging by its snout. Might paint it. And two rats. Making a rat makes me love rats. It was a feverish day of making and making and making. I turned the heat on even though it's almost spring because it was chilly but really so I could put everything on the radiator to dry faster. I used to just lean over to see how they were doing but then I brought a chair. Sometimes Sadie comes to lie down on the rug next to me while I watch them dry. It isn't boring. They are separating from me. I am watching over them, really.

Tomorrow we're supposed to get sun.

I counted: fourteen new pieces in one day.

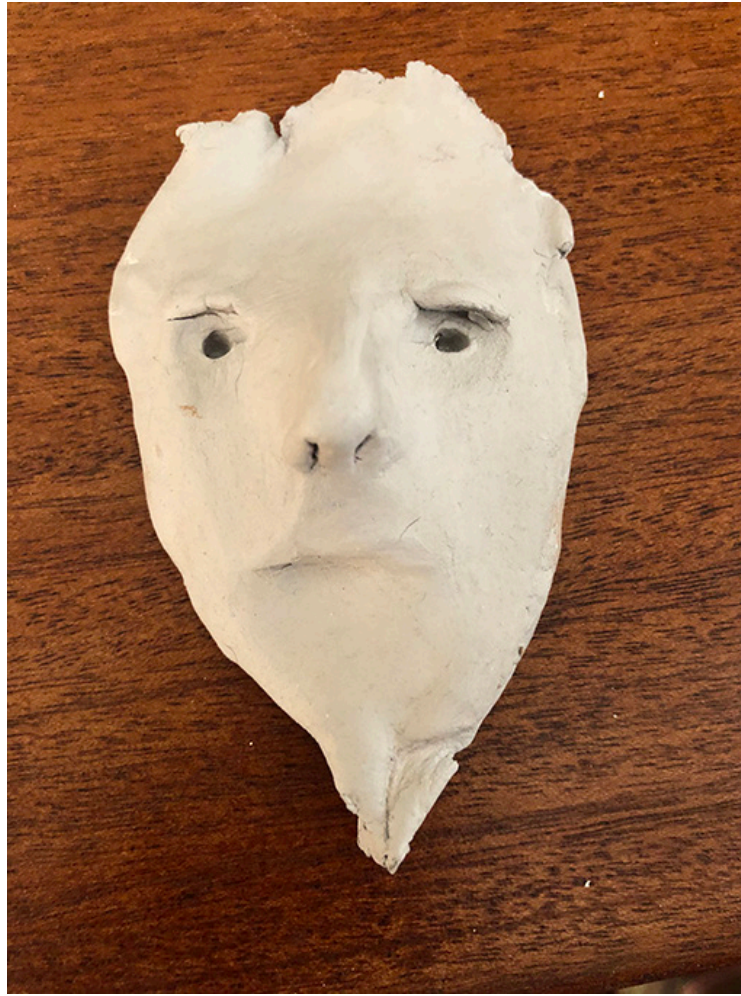
TUESDAY

A rainy gray day today, but everything is green. The war I'm in is between a nap and another mouse. I'm so tired, and my neck hurts again. The hardest part with mice are the tails. I can't make a long skinny tail. Or really any tails at all. So they aren't exactly mice, but there's mouse in there somewhere. Or maybe just blame the farmer's wife. Also made another little white dinosaur although I didn't mean to, two frogs, a tiny face, and an animal that might be an anteater. And as for tails, what about moles? Impossibly short. Talk about an afterthought.

My sister Judy used to collect pigs and it was her birthday last month so I made her a pig. It was hard to keep the snout from collapsing but once I got the hang of it, I made pig after pig after pig. Big ones, little ones, god it was fun. Even now, I find myself looking for the snout in a nice big handful of wet clay.

Every day I listen for crows, but not a one since I cawed at them on Monday. That's five days with no crows. Last night in bed, my heart went crazy again, like a racquetball court in my chest. I wondered what would happen to all these faces if I died. When I die, there's no if. Here's a wish: When I die, and when my family have taken everything they want, there will be things left over. I want them to invite my students and my friends to the house and let them take whatever they might want. I need to put that in my will or a letter or something. There is so much stuff I love. I want it to find a home.

On a whim, I painted my dinosaur purple. It suits her.



WEDNESDAY

Dogs woke at five; I let them out and lay down on the sofa to go back to sleep. Dogs came in. Sadie sat on the back of my chair and growled out the window. I was curious to see what had provoked an actual growl, but not curious enough to get up. I've been so terribly tired.

Catherine has the virus. She sounds miserable, poor thing. I had to tell my old school friend who was planning to come and stay for a few days, and she wisely is changing her plans. Which was partly a relief because I kept worrying that she might want to eat three meals a day and talk and I don't do those things plus one look in my icebox and she'd have been out the door. I don't think we have seen each other for forty years.

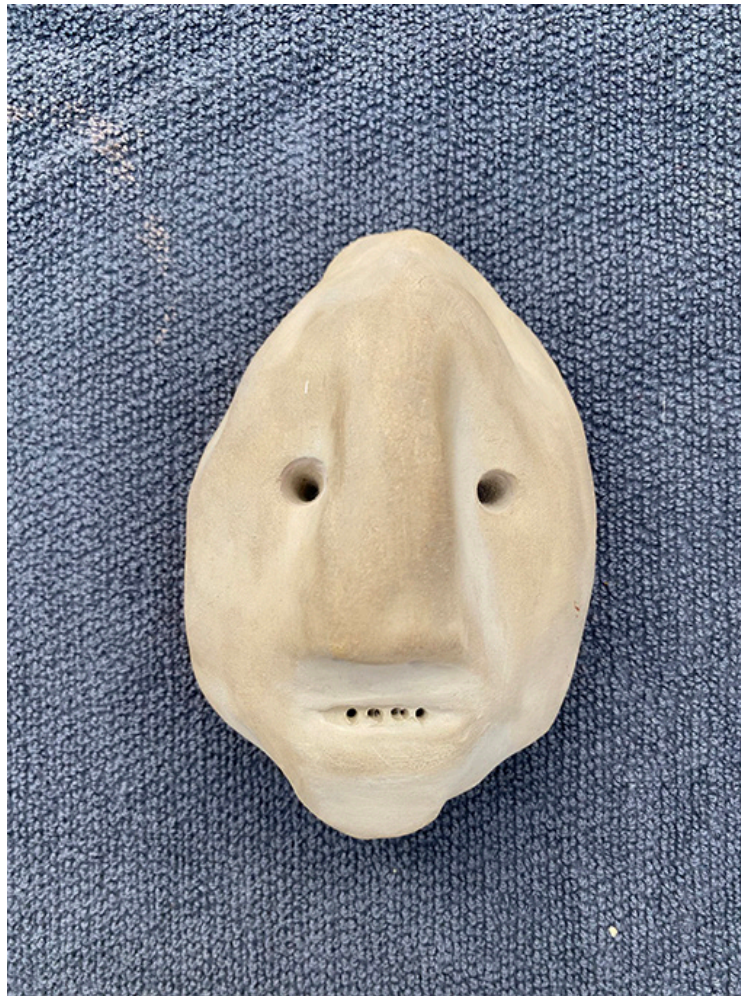
Maybe fifty.

I made a funny sort of baby chicken face, another man with a sense of humor, a different man who is pissed. Like the one the other day. Why are they pissed? Are they Republicans? They look kind of dumb. It got gray and rainy and the dogs and I took a long nap. My watch said five-thirty when I

woke up and at first, I didn't know whether it was the next morning or today's night because the light is the same in spring.

Forgot tomorrow is garbage day. I had to ask Sarah for help because it was too heavy for me to budge. She obliged graciously. Thank god I remembered before it got dark.

My friend lives in Alaska and makes her own dog food. She has also written books and been a high school principal but nothing compares to those first two details.



THURSDAY

It felt like Saturday all day. I made so many frogs; I'm calling them frogs, but they could be something else I don't know about. In the late afternoon, it rained hard. It's bedtime now and I can't wait for morning to see if they are dry enough to paint, as well as that funny boy I made with the pointy nose. And the alligator, which when I looked at him just now, I realized the

head was in the wrong place; the head was where the tail had been, so I made a few adjustments, now it's a pretty perfect alligator. Oh god! It was a day full. This new gray clay, I could swear it was a muscle.

I remembered that the last time we saw each other, my high school friend and I, we were eating somewhere in the village—West 4th Street?—at a table outdoors and the waiter was inattentive to say the least and finally, after we had waited an hour for the check, we just up and left. I believe the term is we tennis-shoed on out of there. We started slow and nonchalant, but the farther away we got, the faster we ran. What a funny instinct. We were very proud of ourselves.

Ate the chicken soup for breakfast. Eating watermelon for supper.

Had my blood work done, almost didn't go but did. Finally!

FRIDAY

Man, that was fast. Dr. Sheran called and left a message to call him about the blood work. Turns out I have kidney disease. Who knew? He gave me the name of a kidney doctor he wants me to see. When I called, it turns out she's booked until September, three months from now, so I made an appointment with another doctor for August. Then I was worried that I'd fall into the needs-a-transplant list and called Dr. Sheran; he said two months was okay. It has taken a while to absorb the news. There were a few hours when it scared me, but I got over it. At eighty I ought to have something going wrong. My GRF is 35, which means I'm halfway to severe, as far as I can tell. No idea what kidney disease entails but I'm not googling it. That way lies disaster.

Made a sort of bird's head with a very long beak. It looks like a pair of scissors.

Wasn't going to tell the kids but told Catherine who was very glad I wasn't hiding anything from her. Didn't tell Jen or Sarah or Ralph yet. It needs to come up in conversation, although hard to see how. Nobody needs to worry. I'm not worrying.

Sam called, nice to talk to him. Wondered about his mother's car, but it's gone to Joe. Made a couple of those objects with my thumbs. Drying nicely.

I finally figured out how to make people's ears. You just do it. Pinch. But it's tricky. For some reason, the left ear works fine but the right ear doesn't look anything like its mate or even an ear, so it takes a while. It's worth the

trouble because who knew ears had such personality? Seven new faces that are just an excuse to make ears. Some of them look so surprised! "Look! Ears!" they seem to say.

Cancer workshop was great today. SATURDAY

I've been digging around in a folder of writing so old it's typed. Found a poem that is shorter than its title, or almost. Hardly a poem, but it was too perfect, what Lenore said, I had to write it down. Forty years ago? She was my sister-in-law, ex. Such a smart funny woman.

Lenore Says the Poet Is Acting Like a Shoe Salesman

Shoes, poems—oh, honey,

We're all selling something.

Jerry Stern. I was crazy about him for years. "I'm in it for the pleasure," I told him once, which was a lie. He grinned. "I'm in it for the pain," he said. Spoken like a poet. Then one day Chuck's friend Ron showed up as a ring-er for the Viking Penguin softball team. We all went out drinking after the game; Ron and I kept eyeing each other. My god, he was sexy. I wish there was a better word, but I can't think of one. Finally I leaned over and said, "Wanna fuck?" and we went to Central Park and did. That lasted a couple of years. Man, what a sweet mistake.

Waiting for a cool new shape to dry. Sort of half frog, half shield. Found another poem about my mother playing jacks. Everything I touch gets covered in clay. The poems, the doorknob, the coffee cups. Painted another pig face bright pink. Biggest thing I've made so far. Five inches by six inches. Very cheerful.

SUNDAY

Today I am cooking like a crazy person, corn chowder, chicken soup, both delicious, or at least the chowder will be after I reduce it in the oven. Now we're out of half and half and heavy cream, so I will have to make a run. It is a beautiful day. Made two new dinosaurs, babies, I think. They aren't very good but I'm fond of them.

At eighty you don't expect to learn something new, at least not every day. However I am learning something new every day. Granted, it's the same thing, but I learn it over and over with the same startled awareness. I look out at the lush green expanse behind my house, gazing with pleasure at everything growing, especially my locust tree, loving the spread of its branch-

es, and at the same moment, or a moment later, I remember this is not really my green yard, and not really my tree. Mine to appreciate, to care for while I live, but I don't really own anything. What is mine to keep? Secrets, maybe. Nothing else. Mortality is hitting home in interesting ways, but it doesn't diminish the pleasure I take in the way my locust fills the sky—my locust, old habits die hard.

Had two dry dinosaurs. Painted one green, the other pink. Also made an unfriendly woman. Because why not? We don't always feel so friendly. But leaving Sunflower, I heard a voice call, "Hey, good-looking," and I turned around. "You knew to turn around," said a somewhat disheveled guy, not necessarily in possession of all his marbles, but it was a sweet moment.

"Once upon a time," I said, smiling, and got in the car.



MONDAY

Loving my amphibians, or whatever they are. Made one tiny creature after another today, mouse, anteater, turtles, must have made a dozen. Cather-

ine came over, angered and hurt by Liz, and I made her a creature to bite Liz in half. She took it home with her.

Bought a bottle of vanilla, chugged the equivalent of two shots, had to lie down. Vanilla is alcohol. My first taste in seven years. I am not drinking because of my problems, I am drinking because I am an alcoholic. Such an ugly word. Why can't we be unicorns or begonias or something? What's odd is that I don't feel guilty. Possibly because I'm not lying to myself. And not even a shadow of guilt. What's wrong with me? Have I finally grown up? I think I'm just living my life.

Painted two more puppies, one of them kind of a mustard, the other a bright brown. The paint comes in tubes and squirts on in thick curls. I use my fingers because everything is small and it feels so creamy. Thank god it washes off. I put the puppies back with the others on the windowsill underneath this big object that had something to do with radar on a plane in World War II. It's on a pedestal; the shape is lovely, blimp-like, but slender.

Late now. This time every night, I put everything down and think about Chuck. It almost feels as if he's here.

TUESDAY

After Chuck's memorial service, I remember the weirdest physical sensation. It took me a little while to figure it out. I'm alive, is what it turned out to be. I'm alive.

Walking in Zigzag

Diane Mehta

The horse struggled to its feet behind a blood-red pickup truck. We had just descended a wooded slope and emerged onto the transverse, which cuts the park in half, when we saw three rangers and one concerned couple gathered around the truck. It was twilight in December, still warm from a peak daylight temperature of 60 degrees.

We stopped and waited, because when you are in a city, it feels unusual to see something go wrong with a horse. The seconds ran on as the outcome was determined. A red sports car sped up and braked to a halt. A woman in riding boots jumped out, in that way that people racing to the site of an accident move because they do not know what to expect, so every second seems to count more. She moved with emergency energy, but within a few meters of the horse, she slowed her approach. The expert, the friend, the trainer. She stroked the horse's head and the space between its eyes. It nuzzled her and licked her thighs. Her jeans were the color of cornflowers.

The horse dropped its head down in a way that reminded me of the immortal horses mourning for Achilles' great love Patroclus after he died on the battlefield in Homer's *Iliad*. A man named Walker was running around the horse as if he had lost something or was checking all the angles to find some proof of violence: a smear of blood, swelling, a shard of concrete in the soil, a knife. He was looking for something material to explain this suffering, which was a mystery. The worst violence is often where you see it least.

Walker had a grizzled brown Victorian beard that thinned at the ends, like a waterfall. I found out later that he was not a veterinarian, as I'd thought,

but the owner of Kensington Stables, located several blocks south of Prospect Park. The stable provides lessons and pony and trail rides. It is the last horse stable operating in Brooklyn, a working artifact of the nineteenth century, reminiscent of a small town with its carriage houses and cobblestone streets. An urban stable is a little like a circus that has stayed too long, but the kids love it and the horses don't know anything different.

Walker told my partner and me, the three park rangers, and the other concerned couple at the scene that it's not unusual for a horse to fall. It is very unusual for a horse to have trouble getting up. He gave her medication to help her to her feet, and that was the end of the information. She stood rigid beside the truck, looking as dazed as we felt.

It was an ordinary Saturday in December. People were returning home from walks and the sun was setting as usual between heaven and earth. There was no emotion that could not be mollified or tamped down. Branches scribbled their winter names into gray skies. Confused blooms sought to rouse themselves. It was a corrective and a prophecy. The natural world is a living ecosystem that cycles through varieties of life and death, and as long as we allow this ecosystem to survive, we sustain our own breath. Out of our commitment to the collective emerges the recognition, as Wallace Stevens said, that divinity must live within herself.

I expect more bad news in the world, but I did not expect to amble down a hill, in woods that were a safe haven from the dread that had infected everything, and witness a horse in duress. The horse embodied our relentless suffering, which promised to continue without any purpose or outcome. The tragedy was that, even in a state of suffering, the horse had to walk on trembling legs back to the stable, burdened with carrying others around the bridle path without any expectation for a nobler life.

I was so used to being on alert that the horse's condition immediately deepened the caved-in feeling that had refused to lift all year. Hours-long exploratory walks in the park were a salve. The park was reliably pastoral and often unrefined: woods crossing muddy trails, hillsides strewn with rotting tree trunks full of bugs, and bullfrogs or snapping turtles splashing in the lake. Prospect Park has roughly thirty thousand trees. In winter, naked branches strike a chorus line pose, arms up as if asking us to clap. They show off their bodies. They throw chameleon shadows, morphing their long, dendritic arms in the morning into hieroglyphs at noon. My favorite branch, by a pond, twists down and up again into a loop that makes no sense. Light

floods down like an annunciation.

Everyone who came to the park walked in zigzags. You could almost fast walk all the hauntings out of your system. You came for the scenery and proof of other people with whom you had nothing in common besides sunlight, moonshine, and weather, and then avoided those people and stole the mood of quiet rapture from the half-pruned, lightning-struck, ax-felled trees in the miniature forests between the paths. Rain dampened your heart in a way that made the day unbearably interior, but you took your umbrella and got in a salvation walk anyway.

The park became Edenic, a return to innocence—before history started churning, before “that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste / Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,” as prophesied by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. We took pictures of oak and maple, ducked into woodlands to explore the intricacies. An infrastructure of leisure was under way in every direction. Lean-tos and teepees constructed from felled branches appeared at an ever-quickenning pace. Some shelters were a little ramshackle and others so well-designed, with branches trimmed to roughly the same mass and length, that they seemed to have been built by an architect. I thought of these structures as giant armadillos, with sheltering armor to protect bodies against the elements that no longer feel safe. People exercised outside anyway. Teenagers made bike ramps from packed mud and sawed-off tree branches in the woods by a chain-link fence. When a fence gets placed around your world, it is up to you to create a world inside that is larger than the fence and larger than you. The fence itself was never really true.

Wind during this time felt different. It was something to run from or flutter into. If you put your arms out, it would lift you above the trees and whip you across the field in old-fashioned terror. You arrived in the realm of the supernatural, which was better than here.

One day, when I was walking with a friend, a storm churned up, with high wind. We were ambling across the nethermead on the north end of the park, and he started running. He yelled back that he was afraid of wind. I ran after him, in this time when we were all afraid of everything. We parted ways and ran home in the rain. During a second walk, also in high wind but without the promise of a storm, we paused on a ridge. I wondered if he would bolt. This time, he smiled at me and put his arms out like a hang glider lifting off into the same pale-green nethermead. I put my arms out, too. The wind would lift us. We were facing east. A man walking north in the

nethermead, fifty meters away, stopped and turned to watch. Suddenly he threw his arms out. The three of us stood there like crosses for a while. We glided in place. These were not our tombstones. We laughed with heightened ebullience, then we put our arms down. He waved goodbye and continued across the field. Being in the park reminds you that you are always half wild and not nearly as wild as the world would allow you to be.

*

On December 18, I emailed Walker to ask about the horse, identifying myself as a passerby who had arrived just after the horse fell. I checked my email obsessively for a reply but none arrived for three days. During that time, I searched the Internet for the history of the stables and information about the horses that live there. I found a few videos of the bridle path that winds 3.5 miles through the park. It looked unfamiliar, like tallgrass prairie where bison graze, or far-flung wetlands in Staten Island. I wanted to believe that this magic frontier existed, unseen. But suspicion and irritation kicked in.

What struck me were videos and photographs of people riding on a street nearby. I wondered if the person who had posted the photos thought it was cute to show horses at a busy intersection in a city full of cars. There is nothing normal about a horse clomping down a city street that hasn't had horses for a century, and there is nothing right about putting blinders on a horse to shutter from its peripheral view the surrounding world. It seems like another way of telling a horse to suffer. Blinders are a way of making the horse human.

Over the next few days, I thought about going to the stable. I could just show up and inquire about riding lessons. This approach seemed sneaky, but I couldn't understand why it was taking Walker so long. There are times when you walk a line between your business and another person's life and you wonder if you have made a mistake and pushed too far, if you offered too much help or if you wanted so much to be charitable because you in fact were the one who needed the charitable feelings most. It is just people being indifferent in the world, either to you or to your tacitly enraged demand to be kind.

I continued my walks, like everyone else. December 20 was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. A waxing crescent moon appeared that night. I was beginning to look up with habit, on my daily walks, to track the moon's varying degrees of illumination in daylight. You think the moon is right there within sight all the time, without thinking about the adjustments you are making in its presence, and then you're surprised when it seems to walk off and do its own thing. It's as if it has deserted you for a while—but it was you, locked in your thoughts, who deserted the moon.

That night, it was 38 percent illuminated and 397,041.163 kilometers away from everyone who died on Earth. The newspapers did not record the number of dead that day, instead covering the solstice as if the moon was gone, the night itself was gone, and the moon would come back tomorrow after this shortest and darkest day of the darkest year of the century.

The solstice is a mythological turning point. It measures the shadows of the trees and our axis of rotation, which is tilted 23.4 degrees relative to our orbit around the sun. Sunrise, sunset. Life is short, but days are long if you find in the abbreviated hours some common project that is bigger than you, even as minor as sourdough bread. For me, as for many, meandering through the park was the common project—and a baptism daily by dew, rain, sunshine, wind, any of it enough to sustain hope for another day or less.

I had falsely assumed, and even now I continue to falsely assume, that suffering is temporary. I want to believe that suffering is an inflamed point of reference on a timeline around which all other time moves. The threat of illness is in the air, like a post-apocalyptic horror movie. The world is burning, flooding, inhaling itself alive.

*

On December 21, three days after my email, Walker finally responded: Tinkerbell was fine, and they didn't know why she had so much trouble getting up, but he and the veterinarian were keeping an eye on her.

I'd have replied differently. I'd have given the stranger, who took the time to write, a list of details about the horse's condition. I'd have assured her that the horse was being observed and recorded. It is a mark of respect to

keep track of the numbers that define, in blood tests and scans, health. I keep track of the endocrine gland and the calcium in my bones so I do not one day collapse. Research institutions collect data by county, country, and the world. If I were Walker, I'd probably do some Google searches, see what I looked like, type in my name along with "horse." I'd be relieved to discover I was just a concerned citizen. I'd tell me everything was going to be all right and supply the proof from the veterinarian that Tinkerbelle was thriving. Or I'd say without delay that she was not okay and admit that getting older was taking a toll, and horses get ill and ramshackle and eventually retire from the parties and bridle paths where she might fall again and next time, they would have mercy and shoot her in the head to end her suffering.

The brief note unsettled me. Over the ensuing days, I grew angrier. Why hadn't he given me more information? The world is full of information, so I expected the abysmal and terrifying details. America's catastrophe year kept getting compounded: 52,000 wildfires that burned nearly nine million acres, a hurricane season so busy forecasters used up the alphabet and moved onto Greek letter names. Mass protests against racial injustice and police brutality. We survived by walking around the park, avoiding and searching for the company of people with whom we share this ongoing trauma.

*

It is January 12, and I'm again at work on this essay, thinking about Walker's email. Approximately 4,400 people died last night, an ordinary mid-winter Tuesday in America. My oldest friend told me she was dying of pancreatic and liver cancer. Wilhelm Kempf is playing the second movement of Beethoven's Sonata 3 in C Major, with that appoggiatura uplifting on the beat as if gently reminding me that my 88-year-old friend's life is ending with beautiful clarity, for she is in love with her good luck to have had three sons and a boyfriend and his family who loved her and me.

I rummage through old photographs looking for her. I find one she gave me long ago. She is standing with wild horses in a field, under azure skies. A low mountain slopes up in varieties of green behind her. She is wearing a pink tank top tucked into a white flared cotton skirt with a pink braided

leather belt snaking through the belt loops. Her smile looks youthful and intoxicated. Her hair is pencil-straight brown. She is young and firm-shouldered. The horses' manes are long and their sandy coats look like velour. I take a picture of this picture and send it to her.

Today I went for a walk in the park again. I haven't seen any of the horses from the stable since the incident. I convince myself not to email Walker a second time, because that is the point at which he will become suspicious. But I want to ask him a million questions. I want to ask my friend a million questions, too. I am trying to find some answers to keep me on my feet. I know this is an attempt to regulate my world, as Nietzsche said of the way philosophers build ideas. Of truth, Nietzsche said: "It is a rendezvous, it seems, of questions and question marks."

The truth is that America is a peculiar kind of rendezvous. The close-up images of our reality are full of buckshot. We are re-examining the ways in which our condition, *our conditions*, can be watered, re-envisioned, tolerated, or fed. Yet we are not so simple that we cannot complicate our carnage. It is similar to watching a child learn to walk: They learn that to fall is human, and that you must get up relentlessly, readjusting your weight to a world misleadingly out of balance.

"Comforter, where, where is your comforting?" asked Gerard Manley Hopkins, at one of the lowest points in his broadly unhappy life. Like the horse—and like Hopkins—weak in the legs is often how I feel. What we all want is to be cared for, to live in a society in which your social contract is my social contract, which demands some measure of decency. You bear witness to the pain of others and try not to be complicit. Yet how many of us truly care about the pain of others? Society is livable even under the worst circumstances. We can't fix much, but we can close our eyes and make a space for the facts inside us.

So I have decided that it's part of my social contract to preserve things, even when they do not belong to me. For the record: Tinkerbelle is a sturdy-looking, chestnut-copper older horse with a white face and underbelly, and what appear to be white-haired fluffs of meringue on her ankles. Tinkerbelle has frayed, leathery hair on her feet, as if she belonged in Iceland on green volcanic prairies between glaciers arrested now and then by thermal vents.

I wonder how old Tinkerbelle is, and whether she was exhausted the day she fell. Or maybe, like my friend, she had cancer and only weeks to live. I

know my friend is too tired to hold her phone now, and that her sons hold it up for her in the rare moments she has energy to talk. They share the many notes and photographs she receives from friends and family. One friend, said one of her sons, sends a picture of a flower every day. Today I sent two pictures from my daily walk. In one, an antique-style gas lamp brightens a pebbled path to the nethermead at twilight. The other portrays a small, spooky pond in which a craggy, dead tree trunk is dramatically reflected, as if tricking us to jump in. Even in an abyss, a reflection is a memory. I went to a stained glass store and took a picture of two flowers blooming on a sheet of glass and sent her that, too.

I wonder about the photograph of my friend with the horses. I have always imagined that it was taken in her native Edinburgh, where horses still roam the countryside between castles and ruins. I emailed this question to her middle son. He wrote back to say the photo was taken in Princetown, New York, near the home his mother lived in when I met her. Until that day, she had been afraid of horses, but this changed after she hugged one. She and her then-boyfriend slept in the field with the horses that night. I also slept in a field, with her youngest son, when I was nineteen. We were on a hill in the Upper Hudson in sleeping bags. It was midwinter and we had no tent. It snowed on my eyelids. I asked him then if we would freeze, but he said the sleeping bag would protect me.

*

In the white space of the email between Walker and me—all that empty space between his response and my concern—was all the absence I felt during this hemorrhaging year.

My friend will be ashes by the time I finish this essay. She told me that after she accepted the cancer, she felt an incredible flood of happiness at how lucky she was, for her life had been full of love.

That evening, after we saw the horse fall on the road, we continued east into the park, the way Adam and Eve entered the mortal world from Eden. We had been banished into the wilderness. My weeping seemed rounded and cared for by trees looming over us like nurses in the dark. It is part of the design that we enter and exit in darkness, between sparks of civili-

zation—soft lights around the fields that beckon us to follow a path to the interior, trails trampled underfoot by wayfinders through steep cliffs slippery enough to tumble down with scrapes and bruises and the humiliation we all seek to avoid in the places we have not controlled enough. The sky bloomed, as if for me only, with gray light and tree-fronds. A handful of trees still had leaves that seemed to be out of sync. They were shaking their fists: Damn you for allowing millions of leaves to die while we have tried to hang onto our beautiful colors, damn you for making us clutch these thin branches for what's left of our crumpled lives.

The path ahead of us was pitch black. I could barely see where my feet were going, but I believe in questions and question marks, and I believe that what I don't see will help me discover what by accident I stumble across. I heard the rustle of dead leaves that smelled like jaggery and felt the ground soften under my feet.

The horse was making its way back to Kensington Stables. She suffered, drugged up, as she limped. I hoped she would rest there and that Walker would take pains to figure out whether she was exhausted or sick or cancerous or old—and then do something about it. There would be resolution of the kind we seek for ourselves, and life would be made whole again for this creature, who seemed to be on her last legs, and who didn't deserve to be maimed by any more of our suffering. Or, if she turned out to be ill, and if the world were just, Walker would ship her upstate to live out her days on a country farm that closely resembled the one where my friend fell in love with the velour horses. My friend died peacefully at 4:00 pm Colorado time and reentered the freeze-frame moment caught in that photograph I hold so dear—soft brown hair caught in a breeze, arms around the horses eager for her company.

POETRY

“Hyperbolic Geometry,” “Lavender Eucalyptus Boyfriend,” “Jean Seberg,” “Marion Cotillard”

Eileen G'Sell

HYPERBOLIC GEOMETRY

You smell like Tom Ford in a vat of peaches, catcalls floating through the Lower East Side when the Lower East Side was lonely Lorca marveling at anemones and angles (angels) gridding the cocaine-raspberry island where the moon rises over mothers of mud and shoes push hope on the F train. You said, “I cannot believe your eyes.” I said I’d miss the hideous strip mall and the sting of car leather and twelve-hour days at the laundromat mourning the slow death of credulity, a spill of strangers patiently waiting for sillage tight and dense and, anyway, I always wanted to smell like pussy, just not necessarily my own

LAVENDER EUCALYPTUS BOYFRIEND

Lavender Eucalyptus Boyfriend has a Russian hat in the corner of his room and a drawer lined with new blank tapes. On bright desert days, he is cast-iron solid, dares to eat a Tucson peach. His vascular lift skyward helps me spot a dove, a quail, a scratch of green. In a dust storm he tells of javelinas, of having more than he felt he ought and never feeling he deserved what he had. He has an ontological enthusiasm for rare birds and knows all the places where each bird is rare.

JEAN SEBERG

I've gone fugitive too,

when it meant jumping
forward, my ambition in life

to become immortal,
then suddenly and quietly die.

I don't remember a storm
in the story but thunder

in the cut. A Breton
boat-necked possibility,

pregnant on the street.
There were other scenes,

from other films, but few
who cared to listen,

all mafia and mascarpone
spread thin against the Seine.

MARION COTILLARD

On all sides, all city long
the devil trees escort me.

Niel says, "I am often."
And sometimes I agree.

The escalator, sparkling
path to somewhere joy is rational,

will start too high to hear
the dead, the summer birds and breeze.

Faith is just fear of being
alone, flowers notwithstanding.

I won't cry over crinoline,
but I want my money back.

FICTION

After David

Catherine Texier

Logging on to the site is like stepping into a candy store. Or walking into a party and waiting for someone to talk to you, some swaggering dude with a joint in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other.

All you have to do is leave your chat window open and the hot pink band will light up, and they'll rush in. One of the many amazing surprises of dating online in your sixties is to discover all the twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings who flock to you as the latest taboo to transgress.

Ethanb, 20 – You're really attractive. It's my fantasy to be with an older woman.

BMW1976, 37 – I love French women.

Desire4Mature, 42 – The dynamic is unmatched when it's the right older woman and a younger man.

Eljefe86, 27 – I know I am a bit young but I think you should give me a chance...

*

The first time we met was in Tompkins Square Park, around noon, before he went to his day job at a nearby recording studio. He had contacted me a couple of weeks earlier – *Hi, I am Jonah, you seem quite lovely*. I liked that word *lovely*. Almost old school, anachronistic even. So much more respectful than the raunchy pick-up lines tossed around the site like so much hastily knotted bait in the dating river. A touch of old-fashioned gallantry that contrasted with his pictures — sexy as hell, with a scruffy beard, dark curly hair, beat-up Converse, and an electric guitar on his knees.

Still, when I saw how young he was — 37 — I hesitated. I was 62. A full generation. He gently insisted. I gave him my phone number and he called. His voice was smooth, just a little nasal, relaxed. Social ease. Not pushy. When you meet someone online, you make your decision to go ahead or not on tiny clues. He worked two blocks from my place. Why not get together for coffee? It was mid-September, a few days after my birthday. (Another birthday to ignore, forget, tread lightly over — because what else is there to do with the years that pass?) The weather was warm with a trace of cool, elm trees still glorious, their green just a bit dusty after the hot summer. I waited for him by the dog run and watched a pair of pitbulls frolic.

I had an envelope under my arm, with the bank statements proving I could cover Louise's rent in Brooklyn in case she came up short. I had to have everything photocopied so Louise could sign the lease. I was nervous about whether I had enough money in my relatively small investment account to qualify as guarantor. New York landlords require solid cash in the bank. I was still getting royalties from the book I had written about the end of my marriage with David, but they were dwindling, so I was mainly living off my paychecks as a freelance commercial translator and my teaching. Louise and Juliet were at home, Juliet visiting from Jacksonville with Vivian, her baby, who was exactly one year old.

I didn't tell the girls what I was doing. I just said I was going to the copy place. I wasn't dressed for a "date." Skinny jeans, t-shirt, denim jacket, booties, casual. My usual look. He was a jazz guitarist. No point dressing up. He strolled up to me in his sneakers and bomber jacket, looking straight out of Brooklyn. Laid back. Good-looking in a kind of nerdy way. Jewish, I realized later, when I looked him up online. (He had told me the name of his quartet.) Dark hair curling down his neck and tumbling forward, dark stubble of a beard, sensual mouth, soulful look in his hazel eyes, strong — but not too strong — nose, tallish, but slight. Elegant. Sexy smile. Where had I seen that

smile before? These warm, smoldering eyes?

Shall we have coffee? he asked.

As we walked side by side across the park, falling into step with each other, he felt familiar, as though we had been lovers in a previous life. I forgot the envelope under my arm, the financial responsibilities. There was a quality of silence that I found relaxing, a mute complicity, as if his presence released in me a long-forgotten insouciance. He was immensely appealing.

We headed to the little coffee shop along the park. He asked if I had told my daughters I had a date. I said I hadn't. Then he asked if they were his age. I said, no, younger. And we laughed with relief. At least, that was that. And then his smile, head a little to the side, almost shy — as he offered to pay, because I was taking out my own wallet, not sure. Was this even a date?

I told him I had to photocopy some paperwork and he offered to go with me to the copy place. (*I'll be a little late for work, but that's okay.*) Later I thought he had arranged our date close to the time he had to start work so that if it turned out we had no chemistry, he would have a good excuse to cut things short. We walked, coffees in hand, and I spilled some on my feet and he squatted to clean up the stain with a napkin and said he liked my boots. I handed him my cup while I went in.

It was while I waited for the paperwork to be copied that I thought of David and our move to the neighborhood more than twenty-five years before — when everyone lived in the Lower East Side instead of Brooklyn. Finishing the first short stories, sending them out, applying for grants, writing all day long, giving readings and going to readings every night, scrambling for money, the excitement of belonging to a group of young, edgy, emerging writers. I could sense — or guess — that he was holding out for the same dreams. Did he see that in me, too? Or did he only see an older French woman, with whom he wanted to experience the thrill of the forbidden?

I was surprised that he was dating online. He was in a band. He must have had girls fawning all over him.

He laughed.

Actually, the kind of music I play, it's all guys. It's not like pop music. I don't get to meet girls that much. And people are so guarded in New York. If you talk to a girl in the street, they think you're a creep.

Why did you contact me? I am so much older than you.

I thought you were cute.

I hope it's not because you're into older women. I wouldn't want to be a fetish.

His face didn't give anything away. He would be a good poker player, I thought.

He had dated a German woman for three years, he said, going back and forth between Berlin and New York when she finally moved back for good a few months ago.

I asked him the name of his band. He was playing that night, but way out in Bushwick. (I'm not going to ask you to go that far.) Then he pointed to a metal door covered with graffiti in a still grimy block that gentrification had yet to reach.

I work here. It's a recording studio.

I double-kissed him, French style, and on the way home I sipped my cappuccino with the kind of lightness and excitement one has after the promise of a new love — or a promising encounter — such an unexpected surprise, tendrils of desire rising in a limpid sky, not a cumulus in sight, thinking no further than the moment, no further than that immediate mutual attraction, that ease we both felt, then joyfully tossing the cup in the trash can at the corner before walking up to my apartment.

He sent me a message two days later. I was in a taxi headed to JFK with Juliet and Vivian. Juliet lived in Jacksonville with her husband who was a jet pilot in the Navy, and I was going to spend a few days with them, while Scott was deployed in the Gulf.

I am on my way to Florida, I texted back. I glanced at the baby who was wailing while Juliet precipitously unbuttoned her top and pulled out a breast dripping with milk. The driver, who looked Afghan or Uzbek, stole a quick, possibly disapproving, look in his rearview mirror but said nothing.

I only mentioned that I was traveling with my daughter. I didn't mention the baby. Her existence was off-limits, of course. Unmentionable. Unthinkable.

Let's get together when you come back, he replied.

*

It wasn't my first experience with virtual encounters. One day, a couple of

lonely years after my breakup with David, *Irishactor* sent me a direct message on Facebook. On the thumbnail photo, a sexy guy in his thirties, with pale blue eyes, cropped hair, and a light beard. He looked thoughtful. His page was filled with dreamy photos of a farmhouse by the ocean and shots of a white mare peacefully grazing in the fields, the rocky Irish coast in the background, and a stone fireplace in front of which a Persian cat slept, its paws folded under its bosom, next to an open laptop.

We started to message every evening — which, for him, five hours ahead on the West Coast of Ireland — often meant 3 or 4 a.m. I imagined him in the rugged farmhouse, within hearing distance of the tide, waves crashing menacingly on stormy nights. I imagined flying to Dublin and showing up soaked from the diluvian rains while he greeted me, bathtub full of steamy water, fragrant Irish stew (he had given me the recipe) on the stove. The affair lasted two months. I was stunned to feel how powerful the letdown was afterwards, as if we'd literally spent all our nights together. I knew that imagination was the most vivid organ of desire, but here was the proof of its power.

After *Irishactor*, signing up on the dating app was an easy step, like shifting from smoking weed to shooting hard drugs. I had no expectation, really, just a bit of excitement: choosing the photos, writing the profile, and the trepidation of exposing myself publicly, as though I was about to stand half dressed in a skimpy outfit on a street corner, waiting for the first clients to show up.

*

A month later, *Hey11211*, 37, Brooklyn, jazz guitarist — Jonah — appeared in the flesh between the elm trees of Tompkins Square Park, having magically slipped off the small window of the dating app, like the genie floating out of Aladdin's lamp.

Almost instantly, it felt like love.

I couldn't say why, exactly. Of course, all the red flags shot up simultaneously, wide age difference, casual online contact, musician, laid back attitude, non-date coffee date creating a perfect storm of arousing danger, making my heart beat. At the same time, this uncanny feeling of complicity,

as though we had already slept together, and we could just seamlessly slip into bed without missing a beat or embark on a trip tonight — last-minute tickets to the Maldives, for instance.

I couldn't remember when I had the dream, whether it was after the first or second time he came to see me. But I'm pretty sure it wasn't in Jacksonville at Juliet's, although when I was there I did wake up several nights in a row in a sweat, wondering whether I should pursue or not because he was so much younger than I was. Still, when had I ever put the brakes on anything in my life, especially where men were concerned? All the men I had been with since David were younger, so what's an extra few years?

Thinking back, I must have had the dream after the first time we had sex, or maybe after he'd asked me about anal sex, online. The word anal blinking dangerously on the little window, coiffed by a band of hot pink. In the dream, I was being pursued by two black wolves, up the stairs of a house I shared with my mother. The wolves had cornered me against the wall. I woke up, drenched in sweat.

He texted me again the afternoon I flew back from Jacksonville. I was doing some errands in the neighborhood when my phone buzzed. I thought it was Louise, fumbled to pull the phone out of my bag, and when I saw his name, my breathing accelerated.

Hey, Eve. So when are you going to invite me to your place?

Me: Why don't we have a drink tomorrow and talk about it?

He: I think you've already made up your mind.

I thought of that line from a song that had been a hit that summer: *I know you want it, I know you want it*. My heart jumped. He was right. We had both made up our minds within a few seconds of seeing each other.

He continued: Considering our age difference, it would play out like an affair rather than a romance.

I was walking through the park, phone in hand, close to where we had first met, coming back from depositing a check at the bank. (Later he would show me how to deposit checks directly on my phone.) It was a bright day, but the light seemed to darken, as though a cloud was passing in front of the sun. I sat on a bench. So that was his opening gambit. All risk and benefits calculated beforehand. I just want to fuck you. Let's not waste our time on niceties like dates and candlelight. That's the deal, take it or leave it. No

room for negotiation. I swallowed hard.

Fine, I thought. He only wants sex? I can handle that.

I played it coy to hide my agitation: What about seduction?

He: Yes, seduction, of course. Always seduction.

My legs felt weak when I got up and started to walk back home, as if he had already backed me into a corner and taken control. I didn't know whether I was disappointed or aroused — the two sensations blending together in an explosive mix.

After the breakup with David, I couldn't wait to shed the role of wife, like a snake sloughing its skin. The truth was I was shell-shocked. I couldn't imagine embarking on a new relationship. With whom? How do you start again to mesh your life so intimately with someone after a 22-year marriage? My body was running way ahead of my emotions. The sudden freedom was intoxicating. All I wanted was lovers. Hot sex. Right away there were a few, in quick succession, fleeting, passing by.

Then there was Vadik, who was living in Europe and traveled all the time for his job at the UN. The long distance didn't scare me. On the contrary, it allowed me to be a mom for Louise without confusing her by bringing a man into our home. In fact, when he asked me later to live with him in Geneva, I panicked. I couldn't see myself moving with Louise, to that apartment complex in the outskirts of Geneva, which resembled the Soviet-era apartment buildings in Moscow where he had grown up. I couldn't see myself anymore as a wife.

And now, just as Louise was about to leave home, I felt a new burst of sexual energy. It was unexpected, that in my sixties I should feel more self-confident than I had at fifty, when David had left, or even at thirty, when he and I had met. I knew I looked younger than my age — like my mother did, slender, toned body and a halo of blond hair, lucky genes, I guess — and also that I had in me that fire she had. That fire I hated, that I was jealous of, when I was a girl, when she lit up a room with her energy, her seduction, sucking up all the attention to herself. My own fire had been smoldering all these years in the safety of the couple.

In *La Maman et la Putain* (*The Mother and the Whore*), the Jean Eu-

stache movie, Alexandre (played by Jean-Pierre Léaud) has a live-in girlfriend, Marie, but starts an affair with a hot Polish nurse, which threatens his relationship.

I had grown up with that story, the constant swing between pure wife and naughty lover, the oldest story of romance told by men in the Western world — and perhaps in the whole history of humanity. In my grandparents' home, where I grew up, my grandmother played the role of wife and mother, while my mother, defiant, pregnant by accident, was the bad girl with the platinum blond hair and the stiletto heels, cigarette dangling between her fingers, whose mysterious life played out offstage. I navigated between them, the straight-A, straight-laced, good girl, secretly yearning to let my wild side loose as soon as I could.

*

He texted me the following Monday, mid-morning. I was getting out of the shower, thinking about him.

When will you invite me over?

An hour later, he was running up the stairs, guitar case slung over his shoulder. It was noon. The sun was pouring in. I made him espresso in my stovetop Italian moka pot. Dark, lanky, he watched me with a look of expectation and ironic detachment, perhaps not sure what I was expecting of him. I watched him watching me. While the coffee was brewing, he strolled to the baby grand piano and opened the lid.

Better not, I said. It needs to be tuned. The wood got cracked when it was shipped from France. It was my grandparents' piano, from the 30s. I played on it for ten years.

Afterwards, I regretted not having heard him play.

He leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping his coffee, smiling at me with that dazzling smile, all dark skin and dark beard, like a Middle Eastern movie star, waiting for me to make the first move. Maybe he was intimidated. David, too, would lean against walls, against door jambs, against bedposts, and look at me with a half-smile, offering himself. Do with me what

you wish. Take me. I am yours. I had never wanted a man so much since David. It was that open invitation that was devastating.

I came to him. He put the cup down.

Shall we rip each other's clothes off? he asked ironically, or rhetorically.

I pressed my body against his. I could feel how big he was through the canvas of his cargo shorts.

I'm hard.

I know.

I took his hand and we went to my bedroom. There was a bookcase outside the door, with all my novels, in English and in translation, stacked on the shelves. He picked up the memoir I had written about the end of my marriage with David, twelve years earlier. It had a big, glamorous photo of me on the cover, black and white.

It's me, I said, although it was obvious. He studied the photo for a moment and read the blurbs, then put the book back, his face blank. For a second, I wondered if he was comparing my book cover photo — the one my agent had qualified as "glamour-puss" — to me now, but I let that fleeting thought go. In my bedroom, he looked around, taking it all in, the mirrors, the antique dresser, the windows. With an air of calm detachment.

The light was too bright for a first time.

In full daylight, the first kiss. Without the help of darkness, soft lighting, conversation to soften the edges. Like a shot of vodka, neat. His lips, deliciously pulpy. He was skinny, with a slightly hairy chest, narrow shoulders, a soft stomach, not a gym body — but that body felt like fire between my arms.

I collapsed on the bed under him, and he helped me out of my jeans. I was wearing black socks. He put his hand on mine as I was about to peel them off.

No. Keep them.

There was no foreplay, just him inside of me, filling me up so much I wasn't sure I could take him all, afraid he would chafe the tender skin inside. And then, as he moved ever so slightly, as his eyes searched mine, something gave way in me, and I dissolved around him.

You're so wet, he whispered, and his face went soft, his breath came faster.

We were not ripping each other's clothes off. There was a slow deliberateness to his moves. A shyness, even, as though he was waiting for a signal

from me to let loose. There was something elusive about him, withholding, as if he had been detached from his body — mind floating above us, watching ironically. And the chemistry was so intense I could barely abandon myself, my body was trembling, holding back from fear of being consumed.

One time, many years ago, I had smoked sinsemilla with David during a trip to the Keys in Florida, and as we drove on one of the bridges headed to Key West, I had hallucinated a higher power, a God watching me from the sky. This felt like a high, too, but a high that was more emotional than purely sexual. I came in long, almost silent sighs, just before him. I leaned against his chest and touched him gently where his penis was resting on top of his thighs.

I am not a good rebound guy, he apologized. Not like when I was twenty-five.

You aren't so young anymore, I teased. Thirty-seven is practically middle-aged.

I had forgotten my own age, by then. I was just the right age. Or no age at all. Age was but a number.

I ran my fingers through the hair that curled on his chest.

Hmmm. So soft.

I put lotion on it, he joked. L'Occitane.

L'Occitane? That's a French brand. How come you know about it?

Men who live in New York can't help being metrosexual, he said.

It was funny to be so attracted to a guy who labeled himself *metrosexual*. Also a jazz guitarist. When I was a teenager, my crushes had been musicians: Liszt, Chopin, Schubert, Beethoven. I played their music on the piano, the same one that was now in my living room, and I listened to their albums on my little orange turntable. But they were all dead.

Afterwards, I watched him cross the landing, guitar case on his back, in shorts and flip-flops. (It was a warm day.). In a flash, I remembered David in his flannel shirts and ripped jeans — the very incarnation of the eternal American sexy boy. And then that other flash: David, just back from the red-eye, walking up these same stairs with the bag he had taken to Los Angeles to meet his lover. All night I had prepared myself to ask him to leave. All night I had repeated the words: It's over. You need to leave. You need to leave now. NOW.

Furious to have been caught red-handed, he had mashed his hat back on his head, the fedora he had taken to wearing lately, and bolted for the door, didn't even put the bag down. He only turned back on the landing for a final goodbye with these cryptic words — you and I are still us. The us of the past, presumably. Because the present us was dissolving at that very moment.

Jonah waved at me from the stairs with a smile that was a bit lopsided, tender, with a dash of smirk, a dollop of irony, erasing the last image of David.

To be continued, he said.

CONVERSATIONS

Taming Dragons: a Conversation with Nicole Rudick

Sam Stephenson

Nicole Rudick's *What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined: An (Auto)biography of Niki de Saint Phalle* (Siglio Press) is a hybrid: both a biography and autobiography of the artist, told in images and words.

The Museum of Modern Art once described Saint Phalle's output—which ranges from sculpture gardens to prints to theater sets to jewelry—as “overtly feminist, performative, collaborative, and monumental.” Rather than explain Saint Phalle, Rudick chose instead to work with a trove of rare and previously unpublished writing, letters, paintings, drawings, sketches, and other works on paper from the artist's archive in Santee, California, and sequenced these materials without analysis or interpretations. The result is an intimate account of Saint Phalle's life and creative concerns and an unconventional, utterly unique mode of life writing.

I first met Rudick in 2011 when she was managing editor of *The Paris Review*. We worked together on several dozen online pieces, including the *Review*'s first excursion into mixed media, a thirteen-part series called *Big, Bent Ears*. The collaboration influenced my book *Gene Smith's Sink*, which is informed by our ongoing, open-ended conversations about the mysteries of life writing.

Rudick and I spoke via Zoom about her two decades of interest in Saint Phalle, why a traditional structure didn't fit the subject, and the historical lack of

women's voices in the fields of biography and autobiography.

— Sam Stephenson

When did you first come across Niki de Saint Phalle's work?

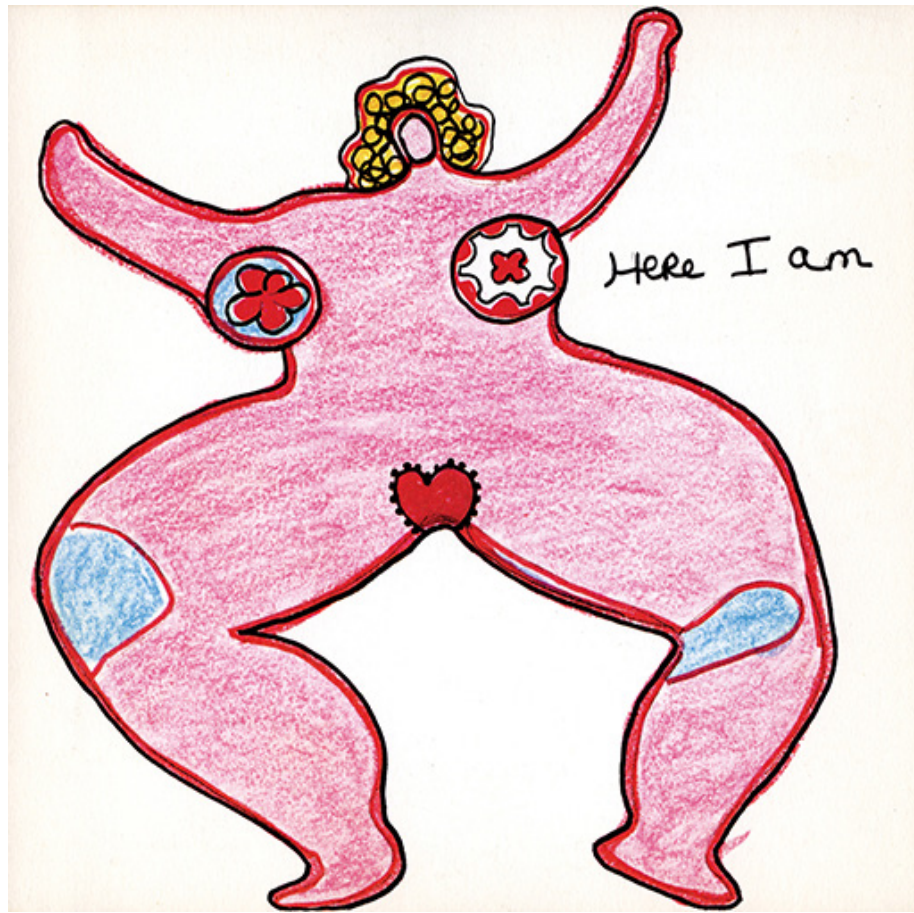
It must have been sometime when I was in high school or college. I was reading about somebody else when her name came up. She was French and I loved French things, and I must have seen a Nana, or something related to the Nanas, which are all about women and brightly colored—so she brought together all of the things I was interested in. Her work has been on my mind ever since then.

Did you know the whole time that one day you would write about her?

I didn't know. It took me a long time to understand that I could think about art in this way. I grew up in Denton, Texas, and my mother worked in Fort Worth, near the Kimbell Art Museum, the Amon Carter, and the Science and History Museum. Whenever my sister and I would go to work with her, she'd take us across the street to the museums, especially the Kimbell, which is one of the best small art museums in the country. Louis Kahn designed the building. It's a series of concrete barrel vaults with diffused natural light coming through skylights and huge concrete slab doors. Lots of travertine and white oak. It feels like a tomb—in the best way possible!

Seeing art there was most definitely formative. I remember seeing the Barnes collection, a show of Jain art, the Terracotta Army, work by Noguchi, Georges de la Tour, Old Masters. I was obsessed with Impressionism and post-Impressionism for a long time. But when I went to college, it never occurred to me that art was something I could study. I took my first art history class when I was a junior, and it was a revelation.

I moved to New York after college and got my master's in art history at Columbia. I worked at *Artforum* and *Bookforum* for about eight years and never came across Saint Phalle's work. It wasn't until I was at *The Paris Review* that I saw her work in a back issue. In 1969, the Review published one of her "Dear Diana" drawings, thanks to their Paris editor at the time, Maxine Groffsky. It combines image and text, which is a form I've written a lot about, and being reminded that she worked in this way got me thinking



Excerpt from "My Love" by Niki de Saint Phalle, originally published by Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1971 and included in "What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined: An (Auto)biography of Niki de Saint Phalle" by Nicole Rudick, Siglio, 2022. Image courtesy Niki Charitable Art Foundation.

about her art from a biographical point of view.

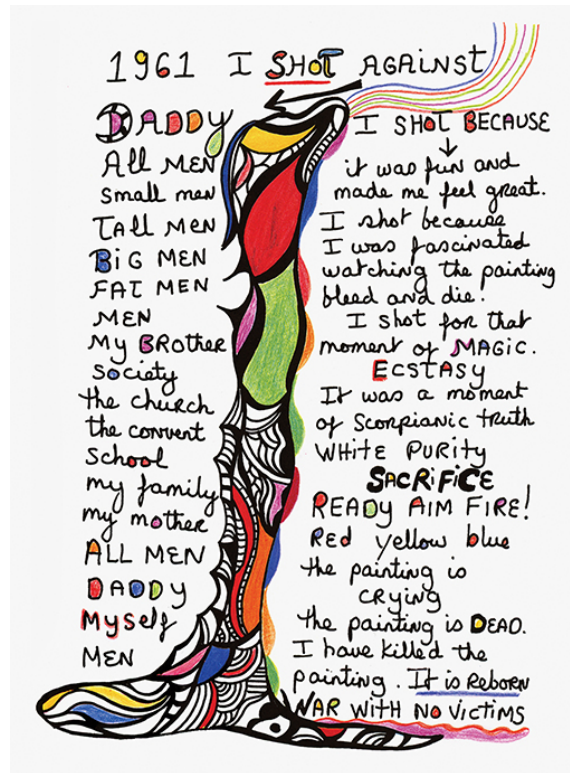
I'm interested in your focus on primary documents.

Archival materials, interviews, artist writings—that's where I always start. That's where I am most comfortable. In college—I went to Trinity University, in San Antonio—the emphasis in art history was on primary documents, not theory, and on analyzing the form of a work of art. Those approaches have really stuck with me. Columbia introduced me to theory, and I used those ideas for support, but theory is never primary for me.

When did the idea for this book arise?

It began to take shape around 2015 or 2016. I had enough of a sense of her works on paper that I knew they were deeply and intimately autobiographical, and I thought there were enough of them to tell

her story. When I went to Saint Phalle's archive, outside San Diego, I found many other things—unpublished writing, serial drawings that addressed her inner life, rarely seen autobiographical works on paper. It was more than I'd hoped for. And that's also when I realized I didn't need or want to include anyone else's commentary. Her voice in these works was so present, so strong.



Untitled drawing, 1961 by Niki de Saint Phalle, published in "What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined: An (Auto)biography of Niki de Saint Phalle" by Nicole Rudick, Siglio, 2022. Image courtesy Niki Charitable Art Foundation.

How had you imagined including commentary?

I had thought that I would supplement her material by interviewing friends and family of hers, to fill in the gaps or offer insights. But in the archive, I read through a binder full of just these sorts of interviews that were done after Niki's death and realized that, as would be true with anybody, if you ask someone about a person, and then ask someone else about the same person, you get two different stories, two different people. I mean, you know this from working on your biography of Gene Smith. Who knows the truth of a subject? Is there ever a *truth* of a person? I realized that each of these

people who had been close to Niki saw something different in her. I didn't want that in the book. Her voice was so strong in the artwork and writings she left behind and that was enough. I wanted to tell the story from her point of view.

The word you use in your introduction to describe interviews with people who knew Saint Phalle is "claim." They were all making claims about her. They were claiming her, not letting her be.

They were claiming some sort of truth about her. My intent isn't to denigrate or disparage those people or to imply anything malicious. It can't be helped. We behave differently around different people, and that produces different versions of ourselves. It's like "phone voice"—when you get on the phone, you talk differently from how you do off the phone, and it depends on who you are talking to as well. Two people may understand you in very different ways.

As we age, we change too. I'm not the same person I was twenty years ago. That person is still in me, but if you had interviewed me twenty years ago as opposed to interviewing me today, I would be quite different. That's an idea worth pursuing, but it's not exactly how I wanted to approach this book.

You let Saint Phalle's words and drawings tell the story and it makes them explode off the page. As I read, I thought: In a normal book, the author would jump in at this point and connect some dots and add commentary, but if you had done that, it would have diluted the power of Saint Phalle's art. It takes a gifted and brilliant person like Saint Phalle to leave behind documents with that kind of power, but then the decision to take yourself out of the presentation indicates such a lack of ego on your part. Did you and Lisa [Pearson, publisher of Siglio] discuss this approach from the outset?

I knew Lisa was the only editor who would let me do it this way. It's characteristic of her entire endeavor. It's hybrid, neither one thing or the other—that's the realm where Siglio functions. She immediately grasped what I had in mind and wanted to publish it, without hesitation. She never doubted my approach. Her confidence helped keep me going because I have to admit

there were times when I didn't know if the book was going to hold together.

Ruth Scurr's unusual biography of the seventeenth-century writer John Aubrey is the closest model, and I kept her book on my desk during the entire project. Whenever I had doubts, I would pick it up and read a few pages and feel I could keep going. It was a talisman for me. It was hard not to insert my opinions into the book, to analyze Niki's work, because I do have opinions about it, but I knew this book wasn't the place for those opinions.

The book opens with an insightful letter that Saint Phalle wrote to her mother. It's stunning on one hand and electrifying on the other because, as a reader, you realize you are dealing with something unusual.

I believe that's who she was. She wouldn't have made the art she did if she weren't someone who was capable of thinking intently about her own feelings. The monumental sculptures and sculpture parks took an incredible amount of will and desire to create, and yet throughout her career, she was invested in collaboration and inclusion. She was not egotistical but also did not negate herself. That's a fascinating balance.

Her work really is her life. I can't think of another artist where that is so clear and moving, and if you insert a critical or historical voice, it does something to reduce it.

I think it's true. I think that's one reason why I never quite heard her voice in any of the catalogs. Maybe it's an unfair comparison. Exhibition catalogs involve criticism and analysis, and that type of work is important and necessary. As are more conventional biographies. I'm not saying my book is the way all biographies should be—the form should be dependent on the subject. I don't know many artists whose work could support this kind of narrative. Saint Phalle is unique—she put so much of her life story in her work, which makes this possible. The books I laid out in my introduction, including yours, showed me that many forms are possible in biography and autobiography, and those forms do what the writer and the subject need them to do. You set out to write a traditional biography of Smith and then realized it didn't seem quite accurate, no matter how many facts you compiled.

When I think of her many traumas, I wonder what anybody could add

to her own account. Even comparatively minor moments, like when she's a kid in a boat with her siblings and parents, and things get wild and it starts to feel like the boat might sink.

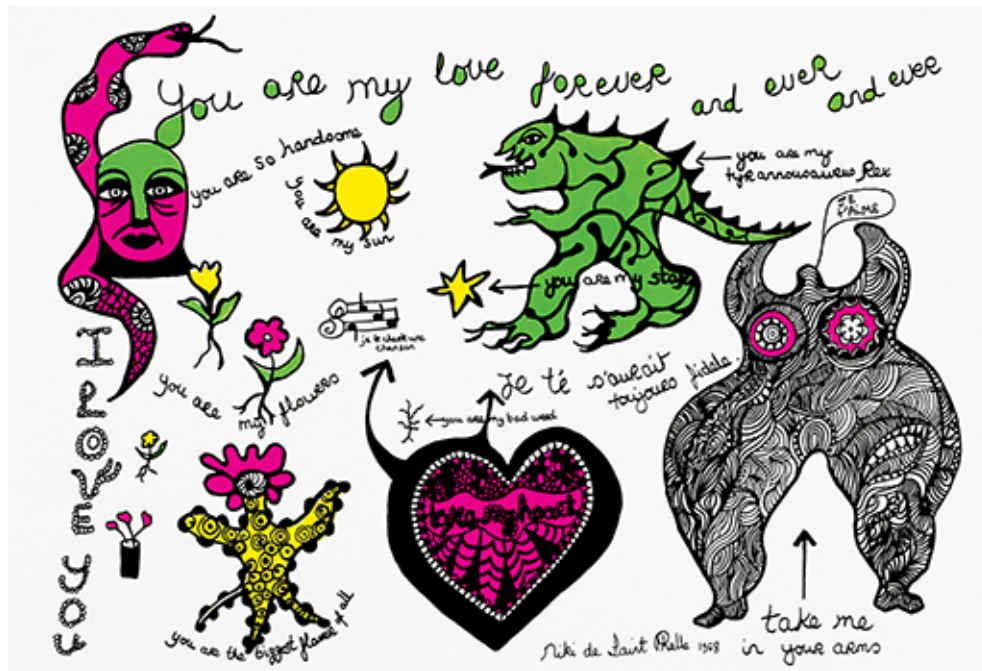
She wrote about that boat scare in her memoir that was published in 1999. Most of the text was written later in her life, retrospectively. We remember certain things, and not others, for a reason, and she thought the boat incident was important enough to include in her memoir. Maybe it didn't quite happen in the way she remembers, but that doesn't always matter. This is an idea I got from Nathalie Sarraute's memoir *Childhood*. She wrote it in two different voices, but both are hers. One voice recalls scenes from her childhood, and the other voice occasionally calls the first one out. At one point, the first voice describes the memory of a picture from a children's book, and the second voice says, "Wait a minute, are you sure you're remembering that correctly? Shouldn't you check?" And the first voice responds, "No, what's the point? What is certain is that that picture is still associated with this book and that the feeling it gave me has remained intact." The sensation that stuck with her, in other words, is what she had to draw on.

One example that comes to mind is when Saint Phalle writes about being expelled from Brearley. A standard biography would do a lot of work to figure out what actually happened. But you've already learned that she was reprimanded by a grade-school principal for writing pornographic stories, so you know that it's probably something along those lines.

She painted all the fig leaves on the statues red, and that's why she got kicked out. It's a funny story, but it's mentioned in conjunction with her so frequently that I didn't think it needed to be in my book. I think it's even in her Wikipedia entry.

In my biography of Smith, there's very little about his *Life* magazine work and that's what he's most known for. Every time I started writing those sections, I'd feel waves of desultory feelings wash over me. I just didn't think it was very interesting. The book probably would have sold better if I'd left them in.

It's odd to think about the necessity of including things that lots of people already know. I suppose not everyone knows about the Brearley incident, but it felt enough like a rehash, and I wanted this story of her to surprise the reader, as much as possible.



"You Are My Love Forever and Ever," 1968 by Niki de Saint Phalle from "What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined: An (Auto)biography of Niki de Saint Phalle" by Nicole Rudick, Siglio, 2022. Image courtesy Niki Charitable Art Foundation.

After her shooting paintings, she writes, "From provocation I moved into a more interior, feminine world." Do you think she stayed in that world for the rest of her career?

That statement is a little misleading or simplistic. It's certainly true that she moved into a more feminine world, but the works she made after the Tirs, or shooting paintings, and before the Nanas are quite complex and make an interesting transition between the violence of the Tirs and the buoyant Nanas. She made sculptures and sculptural reliefs of various women—witches, mothers, brides, whores, as she put it. The surfaces of the

works are rough and embedded with toys and little objects. They're kind of frightening. They remind me of the reliefs she was doing before the shooting paintings, where she embedded knives, axes, saws, and other sharp objects into the surface of the work. After the Tirs, there's still a sense of violence, and also a kind of witchiness. I feel like calling them interior and feminine doesn't fully get at what she was doing. She also didn't start making Nanas and continue just with those for the rest of her life. She ranged around quite a bit, and, importantly, her interior perspective changed over time. If you read the book from beginning to end, she's not in the same place later in the book that she was early on or in the middle.

The lack of explanation is so powerful. There are so many questions I have, like, did she keep in touch with her kids? But then I'm also left thinking, who cares? If I want to know if she kept in touch with her kids, I can go find out myself.

Those just weren't questions I was focused on. The book captures her inner explorations and the spirit of her work. There are questions that readers will come away with. Is that a failing?

There are big, traditional biographies that I love, that are brilliant. But as I say in the foreword—and this comes from working with you for so long—how do you know where the boundaries of a life are? How do you know where to stop? Or when something doesn't apply? You can cover so much and it's never going to be complete. There may be information that comes along too late for inclusion. And there is also the fact that at some point you're guessing what's going on in a person's mind. You'll never really know.

I listened to a conversation between Imani Perry and Ruth Franklin while I was working on this book—they had both recently written biographies. One of them used the phrase “the tyranny of the archive.” You are beholden to what you find there and to what you don't find there. You don't know what you are going to find and you don't know what you are looking for and you don't know what isn't there. When you attempt a biography, you live in fear of something being discovered later that you missed. Ruth Franklin learned during her writing of Shirley Jackson's biography about a significant cache of letters that was found in somebody's barn. She was able to use them for her book, but what if they hadn't been found? What else is out there that the biographer doesn't know about?

Even the biggest archive is just a fraction of what that person actually did in their lives, how they spent their waking hours. I'm interested in this idea that there's more power in leaving things out. In music it's often said that it's not the notes you play, it's the notes you don't play. That line is attributed to Miles Davis or Thelonious Monk most of the time. There's something relevant about that in what you've achieved in this book. The notes you play resound movingly because of what you've left out.

I think often about Albert Murray's conception of the hero, and how it relates to jazz, and how in the breaks is where the hero can come in and be heroic, be creative. That's their moment. Those gaps, or moments of dis-juncture, are moments of opportunity for all kinds of things to happen. The things I left out, as you say, that wonderful analogy with jazz, gives the reader an opportunity to make linkages of their own. The Barthes quote I use in the book—a cooperative between the reader and the author and the subject—speaks to that. Every time I read the book, I notice something new, a different set of associations. Why would I want to try to explain that when I can instead let the reader make the discoveries and leave the book open to new thoughts and different connections? That's the spirit in Niki's work, too.

Here's another passage from Saint Phalle: "Through painting I could explore the magical and the mystical, which kept the chaos from possessing me. Painting put my soul-stirring chaos at ease and provided an organic structure to my life, which I was ultimately in control of. It was a way of taming those dragons that have appeared throughout my life's work, and it let me feel that I was in charge of my life's destiny. Without it I'd rather not think about what might have happened to me." I think a lot of artists become artists for that reason—a way of taming the dragons, processing those feelings and creating something they are in control of.

The reader can see Niki learning from herself, in a sense, and coming to terms with difficult matters and figuring out how to deal with them. The motif of the dragon is important. It's menacing in much of her work, but in her book on AIDS, she made a drawing of a dragon with a chain around its

neck, like a leash. She uses a very similar drawing in her tarot book, to represent the Strength card, and it says, "Only love conquers all." In the AIDS book, which is a deeply empathetic work, she writes of the disease, "We have to learn to live with it." There are many things we can't dispel in our lives, and we must learn to live with them. It feels very intuitive to me, very right, very true. Her art is enthusiastic, but never wildly optimistic or Pollyannaish. A strong thread throughout the book is the connection between sorrow and joy. They travel together and are linked always. We carry them both in our lives, all the time. That seemed to be a significant realization for her.

Did you ever have any thoughts about whether she would like or dislike certain choices you made?

No. I mean, you can only ever really guess at that sort of thing, right? I suppose I didn't start down that path because then I might second-guess all kinds of decisions. There's no evidence that she planned to make a book like this. At the same time, she did leave what I chose to take as stepping stones. Because her work is so autobiographical, I never felt that I was reading too much into it, that I was putting more meaning into it than she intended. That's why I keep pointing out the fact that you can't do this kind of book with every artist. It's dangerous to assume that art is automatically autobiographical. Fiction writers complain about this regularly—the assumption by readers or critics that the characters are modeled on the writer herself. It must be chafing to create a piece of art and then have people read your life into it. But Niki's work was explicitly autobiographical, so it felt both safe and right for me to treat it this way.

When I was working on *Gene Smith's Sink*, I asked my research assistant to go through ten years of the *New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and the *London Review of Books*, and chart the coverage of biographies. Who were the subjects, who were the authors, and who were the reviewers? The results skewed heavily male in all three categories, around 80-85%. There are many reasons for that. One is that women's lives weren't and aren't documented as often as men's.

There's a great book by Nell Dunn called *Talking to Women* that was orig-

inally published in 1965 and was reissued a few years ago by Silver Press in the U.K. Dunn published conversations she had with women friends of different backgrounds. Ali Smith wrote a great introduction to the reissue in which she discusses “the radical necessity of giving and having voice.” That line stuck with me while I was putting my book together, and I thought about the fact that it’s a relatively new idea as it relates to women and historically marginalized groups—both the “having voice” and the “giving” part, amplifying that voice, giving that voice space and time to be heard. Those two elements—the having and giving voice—animate my book.

For all the work Niki made about women and women’s experiences, I don’t think she necessarily sought to gender her art. Certainly, recognition that her father was able to leave home and have what appeared to be a second life outside of the home, that men had this power and she wanted it—she didn’t want to become a man. She wanted to be a woman with this power. She wanted to be a woman with that kind of freedom and freedom of experience. Working publicly, and being in some sense a public figure, allowed her to lay claim to her own story. The life was hers and it couldn’t be denied her.

I see that in the history of autobiography, where recording the story of your life and writing it down is certainly a way to lay claim to it, in addition to women writing themselves into history and insisting that their parts matter. Within the circumscribed realm to which women were restricted for so long, they were doing things and thinking things and imagining things and pushing out against those boundaries. But even today you can go to Target and see the kinds of clothes they sell for young boys and girls and it’s totally gendered. The boys’ shirts are all about adventure and being wild, and girls’ are about being kind and really about self-effacement. Kindness is not over-rated, but the way we expect girls to be versus boys isn’t much different from a hundred years ago, only now it’s a capitalist mandate. Niki refused to deny herself and refused to deny a desire for a life outside the home.

English as a Second Languish

John Olivares Espinoza

During my grandfather's sleep,
a brujo whispers into his ear:
 "To fasten English to the tongue,
 rinse your mouth with black coffee
 poured inside a gold chalice."
Rattle of clay pots
fishes Grandfather from the dream pond,
not the faultline's jostle, nor aftershock.
Emboldened, he rushes to the white
man's market—hungered,
 barefooted—for a cut of beef.
 Twigs, pebbles, and glass
 tack to his soles like a sandal.
He arrives to the meat counter.
A carnicero flays strips of shoulder
from a block of lamb. The butcher's apron
smeared with vermilion petals.
 Here, only the tripas
 whisper the pig farmer's Spanish.
The scent of dried, salted shrimp
quivers the lining of his stomach.
He struggles to muster his immigrant's
lexicon of malapropisms: "Execute me, sir..."

His voice received as crackles of static...
On this day in 1958,
Grandfather operates a tractor
in the arid desolation of farmland.
The oxen of wheels kick up dust
participles into the atmosphere.
Also: the sun slow roasts his arms.
Brown. The color of tender flesh
kissed by gnats. Dusk.
A cliff swallow tows
a bow of lilacs across the horizon.
Hunger—like English,
like Mexico—is a honeycomb
the bees have abandoned.
In an anthology of unsettling dreams,
the sun is worn on Grandfather's brazos
like sleeves. Out there, dusk will carol
for him in Spanish:
Song of the sparrow,
song of the cliff swallow.

Macro dosed

Roberto Lovato

My psychedelic journey began on a late summer day in 1974, when I was eleven. I hadn't actually taken any drugs yet, but the psychedelic spirit of music and revolt inside and outside our crowded Mission District apartment would take me on a long, strange trip that has yet to end.

My family lived within earshot of the music, gunshots, and mayhem of the Army Street projects: three blocks of white graffitied towers housing almost 500 Black and Brown people.

The world around us burned with the revolutionary fervor I saw in our neighbors, some of whom were Black Panthers, Brown Berets, hippies, and Vietnam war protesters. Meanwhile, the fervor of my brother Ramón, Jr. (aka Mem) and myself was dampened by the wet rags of the Saturday cleaning ritual ordained by Ramón Alfredo Lovato, Sr. (aka Pop).

Pop was a complicated person. On some days, he was a handsome mustachioed Orpheus, a lyrical, sometimes loving, and always charismatic man who rose from the depths of Depression era El Salvador and brought our apartment to life with laughter and the songs blaring on the living room stereo.

On other days, there was no music.

As if to protest the cleaning ritual, Mem waited until Pop left for his favorite hangout, Hunts Donuts, to lead us in a counter-ritual he had created: to lie on the ragged red living room carpet and put our three foot Panasonic speakers on either side of our heads as we blasted Abraxas, the legendary album by Mission local Carlos Santana, who had gone to high school with

our eldest brother, Omar.

While Mem lay on the rug, I waited my turn on our beat-up red sofa, losing myself in the mystery of an album named for a Gnostic god that embodied both dark and light, good and evil.

I was besotted by the image at the center of the kaleidoscopic album cover—a naked, Black woman who represented the Virgin Mary, speaking with a winged, red, and also naked angel, pointing skyward as she floated on a conga in a psychedelic recasting of the Biblical annunciation of Christ.

After Mem left the living room, I lay between the speakers and started a furious flurry of air guitar and conga solos. Between sets, I stared at one of the spiders nesting in a corner of the living room ceiling. I used to knock the spiders down with a broom and squish them, until I read that these black and brown creatures had a marvelous power: the ability to use their internal chemistry to create the webs with which they navigated the abyss above and beneath them.

I was on the magic red carpet, high on music, soloing, pondering spiders, abysses, and forbidden gods when a powerful force entered the living room.

“What the diablos are you doing?” Pop yelled with the voice that meant he was super-pissed. “Why aren’t you cleaning the house?”

The shock of his presence screeched hard against my musical groove.

“We already cleaned it, Pop,” I said, jumping to attention. “We were just listening to some Santana.”

“I could give a shit about Santana. It doesn’t look clean. You need to get off your ass—or else.”

Pop’s “or else” could mean anything, including the least desirable option: whipping or beating me or leaving me to await his wrath.

Besides his anger and violence, the most abysmal thing about growing up with him was his underground business: buying and selling contraband and running guns between Hunts Donuts and our volcanically gorgeous homeland, El Salvador. I always had the sense that Pop’s homeland bore a deep secret that explained much more than his volcanic anger.

I grabbed a rag and started air cleaning, acting like I was wiping spots Mem and I had already cleaned, until Pop left the house again.

Santana became my gateway drug to the rebellious power of psychedelia. My rage against Pop inside our apartment would grow in proportion to the revolt outside, as when neighborhood people protested after two local congueros who lived around the corner were arrested for playing music in a

park in violation of a “bongo ordinance” put forward by Supervisor Dianne Feinstein.

Inside and outside our apartment, the Man’s war on the beautiful had begun. Soon, other protests—with signs against “evictions” and “gentrification”—meant the war would extend to the material plane of our apartments, of our bodies in the Mission.

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From age twelve onward, the rebellious spirit led me to find respite at the Mission Library, where I devoured Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*, Carlos Castañeda’s *The Teachings of Don Juan*, and Erich Von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods?*.

I was especially taken with the work of Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist-philosopher who had first turned Allen Ginsberg onto LSD as part of a research project at Stanford in the late 1950s, when the drug was still legal. Bateson’s ideas about what he called “the pattern that connects”—that more than reason, “recognition and empathy” connect humans to other humans and to nature—gripped the soul of the fragmented teen I’d become.

Despite these ethereal wonders, I still came home to an angry father. I became increasingly disconnected after he did things like pulling a gun because I stopped him from hitting me. My revolt eventually exploded onto the streets where I found fellowship—and my first psychedelic experience.

In the summer of 1981, at 17, I dropped some mescaline, my earliest hallucinogen. That same year, I encountered the person who, in many ways, would help me revolutionize my consciousness about psychedelics, Grace Swanson.

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On meeting Grace, a Sicilian grandmother whose daughter Judith had married my brother Ramón, my first thought was, “Who the fuck is this weird older lady with the frizzy hair and electric eyes?”

I was visiting Ramón and Judith's Victorian apartment on Sacramento Street and brought my tattered copy of *Mind and Nature*, Bateson's book about the pattern that connects.

"Oh," she said with a big grandmotherly smile. "You're reading Gregory's book."

"You know his work?" I asked. I had never shared these ideas with anyone.

"Yes. We were just with Gregory and Lois in Big Sur," she said.

I felt a mix of cool and scared, my distrust of white people putting up a big angry border against the pattern that could connect us. Despite my reservations, Grace and I talked about Bateson and other things for hours that evening.

"Fuck," I thought. "This lady knows thinkers I admire. Maybe I should lighten up on her." On top of that, Grace was family, a fact that allowed me to trust her as I'd never trusted a white person. I wanted to know her.

Over big bamboo bong hits with her gentle hippie bear of a husband, "Bongo Bob," Grace told me about the divorce—and the pursuit of consciousness—that had brought her West, after a friend gave her John Lilly's *The Center of the Cyclone*. Neuroscientist Lilly was the author of many psychedelic books, and he had invented the sensory deprivation isolation tanks featured in films like *Altered States*. I had entered the psychedelic realm of the white men through the books I read, after entering the physical realm through my Brown community. I felt intensely the tension between the teepee ceremonies of the underground and the (often) well-meaning white men who studied and westernized that ancient knowledge in very above-ground, public ways. Grace would help me bridge the gap between these worlds.

"This man, John Lilly, was going through some of the same experiences I went through," Grace told me. "Only he was doing drugs. I was meditating six to eight hours a day, reaching altered states of consciousness. I decided that I had to meet him and found out he was in residence at Esalen."

The stories were cool, but what most drew me to Grace was her combination of motherly love and wisdom. Her many oft-repeated phrases—"welcome everything in experience," or "set your intention," or "things happen below levels of awareness"—became mantras, especially when experimenting with the medicines.

"I love and adore you, Tito," Grace would say in every conversation, and her wisdom helped me surrender some of the anger I felt for white people—

and for Pop.

After attending community college, I went to UC Berkeley, graduating in 1987. I started working with refugees in San Francisco. Wanting to understand both the crisis and the familial roots that brought my family to San Francisco, I visited Chalatenango, the war-torn region of El Salvador, in 1990.

When I returned, I sought out Grace to help me make one of the most consequential decisions of my life: whether to join El Salvador's Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN): guerrillas fighting against the fascist military dictatorship the U.S. was backing.

Grace invited me to visit her in Big Sur and Esalen. We hung out briefly with some fascinating psychonauts at Esalen's cliffside baths, but my mind wasn't very cosmically oriented. Instead, I was focused on the material plane of the catastrophic war in El Salvador.

Back at her cabin, she gave me some mushrooms. They took effect as I lay on her couch. My body started shrinking and growing like I was Alice after biting the cake that said "Eat Me." Grace guided me on my decision. I went back and forth, tripping on the majesty of Big Sur, the emerald waters of the Pacific, and other parts of the coastal scenery while talking about how angry and scared I was.

Until that moment, Grace had remained neutral about my decision. But as we kept talking, she said she didn't think I should go because she feared for my life.

"It's easy for you to say that because you're white," I snapped. "Your people aren't the ones being slaughtered."

"I understand you're angry, but this may not be the best thing for you. And remember," she added with that grandmotherly gaze, "you are my people, Tito."

The family thing hit me, and we argued back and forth before I made up my mind to go.

The shrooms, the stunning Big Sur setting, and our conversation had the effect of intensifying my respect for the authority of my experience, my deepest feelings. Grace was the soft board against which my revolutionary resolve hardened.

But I had no idea what my decision would mean.

In late 1990, I returned to El Salvador to help overthrow the U.S.-backed fascist military dictatorship as part of the FMLN. I adopted a *doble cara* approach, literally “double face,” continuing to work with a non-governmental organization by day while working to sabotage and prepare attacks on military and other installations.

Among the many experiences that would later require the medical use of psychedelics was a 1990 visit to San José Las Flores, one of the first towns in the region to be repopulated after the massive uprooting of the 1980s.

I arrived to what looked like a celebration of a patron saint. A makeshift plaza had been created in front of a school building in the center of town. Defining the borders of the *placita* were trees, buildings, and poles—all covered with *papel picado*, green, yellow, blue, and red decorative paper creating the special ambiente where clowns, music, theater skits, and other activities would entertain the kids, lots of kids.

Las Flores had a few hundred kids, more than most towns. I started speaking with some of them, and the adults—colleagues and community workers—and heard the story of the boy whose parents were *desaparecidos*; the story of the curly haired girl who would not look at you because her adobe had been bombed out with her family inside; the story of the boy whose mother was raped before being buried in a mass grave.

Some of these kids had parents who, as young people, fled after entire towns of up to 600 people were wiped out by the Salvadoran military.

I left El Salvador understanding better what Roque Dalton, the country’s greatest poet, meant when he called Salvadorans “the saddest most saddest of the world.” I returned to California to heal my San Francisco version of this Salvadoran sadness.

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Years later, I decided to retain a therapist. As fate would have it, I ended up at an Edwardian apartment building just a few blocks from where I grew up. Inside the building, in a home office decorated with blacklight posters, pictures of Ram Dass, and other psychedelia, I met my therapist, Charles Leonard. Charles, it turned out, was also the Jewish son of a witness to the Holocaust.

"What do you think about microdosing LSD?" he asked.

"What's that?"

"It involves taking small amounts of the substance on a regular basis. I have access and think you should consider treatment."

I thought about my previous experiences with the *medicinas* and responded with a big "Fuck, yeah."

I started the program, taking ten micrograms every three days. I also macrodosed under Charles's supervision. Throughout, we worked on my main goal: to write a book about the lines linking El Salvador and California, the lines of my family.

Taking the LSD in small doses brought about a state of consciousness in which I could feel—and get familiar with—the deep, unvoiced, untouchable, and, until recently, unavoidable terror at the root of the relentless sadness devouring me.

Macro dosing in a redwood forest near Mount Tamalpais under Charles's supervision helped me come back in contact with myself. The 200 micrograms (a "heroic dose") led me to engage in lengthy conversation with my Mom and Pop. In my hallucination, Mom, Pop, and I agreed to keep the inner conversation between us open.

Things felt pretty good, as I floated on water like a slow-motion boatman bug in the murmuring creeks and crevices, until we ran into a Filipino man while hiking. My trip was suddenly shattered by the sight of his clothes: camouflage, the same camouflage of the Salvadoran military that had slaughtered children and their parents, the same camouflage of the military men who tried to kill me.

I tightened my body to attack him, but Charles noticed my tension and talked to me.

"Look at him, Roberto," Charles said. "He's smiling, he's friendly. He's a nice man who doesn't belong to the military. It's how he dresses, part of his style."

Charles kept reassuring me. His words had the effect of turning the man into who he was, rather than the murderous monster my mind had made of him. When I came down, I thought about how injured I must be to have such reactions. It was a breakthrough moment enabled by the medicine.

Further treatments felt like they brought the silent, untouchable things that haunted me closer, close enough for me to let them go.

Pop is sitting in his beat-up recliner, rocking in the corner of his Outer Mission home. He watches the news and says he's happy "ese cerote de Trump" is no longer president.

During a commercial, he looks at me and says in Salvadoran Spanish, "There's something different about you, son. I don't know how to describe it, but you seem, how do I say it, mas suave, gentler, less angry."

I'm silent for a minute, weighing what I want to say. His muy Catolico Salvadoran ideas about drugs date back to the sixteenth century and the first drug war, the Inquisition. As recently as a few years ago, Pop pulled out a machete and swung it at me, screaming, "You drogadicto son of a bitch! Stop trying to steal my money!"

The dementia-fueled rage that led to the machete incident is one reason I began to research treatments for Pop. To my surprise, I found psychedelics, including some that the state of California is considering removing from criminal classification: LSD, mushrooms, and other treatments documented in numerous studies to modify connectivity between the brain regions of those suffering from dementia.

The idea of taking Pop to a psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy clinic around Mission High School excites me. The proximity of the clinics to Hunts Donuts will make them a familiar and safe place for him.

Then I remember psychologist friends telling me that, despite growing interest in the medical benefits of these substances and initial moves to decriminalize them in California, only ten percent of those getting psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy identify as people of color. The above-ground psychedelics community has a race problem of hemispheric proportions.

Last year's announcement by the half a billion dollar psychedelic pharmaceutical giant, Compass Pathways, that it was patenting a variant of the psilocybin mushrooms considered sacred in some Indigenous rituals makes talk of a "psychedelic renaissance" sound ominous in a historical way. I wonder what Indigenous Wirikuta friends who've survived many threats—narcos, agribusiness, mining, and psychedelic tourism—think. One therapist with whom I spoke in a small clinic lamented the "superimposition of the corporate consciousness into the idealism of the psychedelic renaissance."

I look out Pop's window toward Mission Street. From the roof, I can see a building with a Catholic-looking cross on it, a big, green symbol of cannabis legalization for Black, Latino, and working class users and sellers in the Golden State. Pop and the cannabis businesses both remind me how patterns of intergenerational trauma don't tend to connect with those of intergenerational wealth.

Almost forty years after I first dropped mescaline while cruising in a low-rider on Mission Street, I remain resolute in the belief that we must decolonize psychedelics.

Fuck it, I think, as I look at Pop. *He turns 100 next year and we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.*

"So, Pop," I start in, "you say you feel like I'm mas suave?"

"Yes. You act differently now."

"To be honest, Pop, it's LSD."

"LSD?"

"Yes. Acid, the psychedelic drug Santana and all those rock stars took back in the day, when we lived on Folsom Street."

"You mean like the drugs that killed Pete, El Hippie, our old neighbor?"

"Not exactly, Pop. Pete overdosed on barbiturates and other stuff. LSD and other psychedelics aren't dangerous like that."

"De veras?"

"Really."

He pauses, looks at me.

"So, Pop. The psychedelic medicinas are powerful and can help slow your memory loss. What do you think about visiting some doctors to see if the medicina can help you?"

"Esta loco? I'm not going to take that shit, even if you pay me."

I wait to see if he's going to make a sudden, more vitriolic turn.

He pauses again, adopting the philosophical posture he uses when he wants to say something he deems important. Then, he intones, with pontifical authority: "But whatever you're doing, son, keep doing it. It's really helping you."

I'm disappointed, but relieved to have avoided his ancient wrath.

"Yes, Pop," I say. "It does."

How Can I Make Them Hear Me?

Cooper Gillespie

In her essay, “Beginning to See the Light,” the essayist, journalist, activist, feminist, and pop music critic Ellen Willis writes: “For those of us who crave music by women who will break out of traditional molds, write and sing honestly about their (and our) experience, and create art so powerful that men and the society in general will have to come to terms with it whether they want to or not, the seventies have offered scant comfort.”

Willis wants to like female folk music but finds it too sentimental, insular, and full of rhetoric. She wonders, “... why did I like so little of the women’s-culture music I heard?”

She describes going to hear the feminist folk-rock band, Deadly Nightshade. The group sings a version of “Honky Tonk Women” rewritten without the sexist lyrics. Afterward, an audience member sends the band an outraged note, which the singer nervously reads onstage.

“They did not have the confidence or the arrogance,” Willis argues, “to say or feel, ‘If you don’t like it, tough shit.’ It was not that I thought performers should be indifferent to the response of their audience. I just thought that the question they ought to ask was not, ‘How can I make them like me?’ but ‘How can I make them hear me?’”

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to be a male-driven industry. Historically, both rock memoirs and rock journalism have been male-dominated. While societal expectations have evolved a great deal since the birth of rock 'n' roll, women are still judged through the lens of the male perspective, seen as women first and musicians, journalists, or fans second. Now, however, there are more female musicians and fans publishing memoirs and more female rock journalists writing criticism than ever before. Their presence, both as players and commentators, illuminates the incongruous nature of a tradition that simultaneously frees and subjugates women. So, the question is: How can female writers, musicians, and fans gain more equitable footing in rock music and rock literature?

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“In an overwhelmingly male atmosphere, female performers have served mainly as catalysts for male cultural-revolutionary fantasies of tough chicks, beautiful bitches, and super-yin old ladies.”

Ellen Willis, “But Now I’m Gonna Move”

I. TOUGH CHICKS

Women in rock know the experience of being expected to adhere to societal gender norms. We make a choice to eschew these norms or to exaggerate what is expected of our gender. Either approach makes for its own sort of statement. A clear-cut example is shared by Patti Smith in the memoir, *Just Kids*, when she relates an incident that occurs when she is eleven. Smith is playing army outside with her brother. They crawl on their bellies, pretending to be soldiers in the summer heat. When she arrives home, Smith’s mother scolds her and says, “Patricia ... put a shirt on!” Smith doesn’t want to because it is a blistering day. None of the other kids are wearing shirts, she points out. To which her mother replies, “Hot or not, it’s time you started wearing a shirt. You’re about to become a young lady.” Smith protests, announcing that she is “never going to become anything but myself.” In the end, she capitulates, but still she writes, “I cannot exaggerate the betrayal I felt at that moment. I ruefully watched my mother performing her

female tasks, noting her well-endowed female body. It all seemed against my nature. The heavy scent of perfume and the red slashes of lipstick, so strong in the fifties, revolted me. ... She was the messenger and also the message."

Not having many female role models in print or in life for what she terms her "female destiny," Smith takes comfort in the character Jo from *Little Women*. Jo is a tomboy and a writer who composes irreverent work and gets it published. Reading about this strong female character gives Smith the "courage of a new goal ... that one day I would write a book."

Eventually, she moves to New York, where one evening Robert Mapplethorpe drags her to a party at the Factory. The manager of the Factory, Fred Hughes, comments on her hair.

"Ohhhh," he says, "your hair is very Joan Baez. Are you a folksinger?" Smith doesn't know why this bothers her because she likes Joan Baez. But every woman reading this right now probably has an idea of why she is upset—a man she barely knows feels he has the right to comment on her appearance and judge it negatively to her face.

When Smith gets home, she realizes her "Joan Baez hair" is a cut she's worn since she was a teenager, so she lays her rock magazines on the floor, cuts out all the photos of Keith Richards, and studies them. Then, she grabs some scissors and chops her hair like his—a transformation she describes as a "liberating experience." She writes:

Though I was still the same person, my social status suddenly elevated. My Keith Richards haircut was a real discourse magnet. ... Someone at Max's asked me if I was androgynous. I asked what that meant. "You know, like Mick Jagger," they said. I figured that must be cool. I thought the word meant both beautiful and ugly at the same time. Whatever it meant, with just a haircut, I miraculously turned androgynous overnight.

Where Smith finds liberation in her androgyny, Willis sees misogyny. In "Beginning to See the Light," she writes of the singer,

I'm also uncomfortable with her androgynous, one-of-the-guys image; its rebelliousness is seductive, but it plays into a kind of misogyny—endemic to bohemian circles and, no doubt, to the punk rock scene—that consents to distinguish a woman who acts like one of the guys (and is also sexy and conspicuously "liberated") from the general run of stupid girls.

I have to disagree with Willis. If we take Smith's earlier statement on its face, she is searching for ways to embody herself. She does not want to identify with gender norms because they don't feel authentic to her. It is other people who

label Smith based on gender expectations. She is working within the confines of the male-dominated music industry, so to forgo female stereotypes and adopt an androgynous persona gives her power.

Smith's new kind of femininity is a revelation, through which some women see a path to the freedom to be themselves. In *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys*, Viv Albertine recalls seeing Smith's photo in the popular music rag, *NME*: "I have never seen a girl who looks like this. She is my soul made visible, all the things I hide deep inside myself that can't come out. She looks natural, confident, sexy and an individual. I don't want to dress like her or copy her style; she gives me the confidence to express myself in my own way."

Albertine can't believe how unrestrained and free Smith sounds on her debut album *Horses*. Her songs are like nothing Albertine has heard before. "Up until now," she observes, "girls have been so controlled and restrained. ... Her record translates into sound parts of myself that I could not access, could not verbalise, could not visualise, until this moment." As she listens, Albertine realizes that "girls' sexuality can be on their own terms, for their own pleasure or creative work, not just for exploitation or to get a man." She is in awe of Smith for breathing heavily and making sexual noises in her music. This gives Albertine an idea. She writes, "If I can take a quarter or even an eighth of what she has and not give a shit about making a fool of myself, maybe I still can do something with my life."

Albertine eventually learns guitar and joins the all-female punk band The Slits. It's empowering for her to play music with a group of women. "I want boys to come and see us play and think I want to be part of that," she acknowledges. "*Not They're pretty or I want to fuck them but I want to be in that gang, in that band. I want boys to want to be us ...*"

At the same time, being in an all-female band is dangerous. The group is spat at, laughed at, and attacked. Singer Ari Up is even stabbed in the butt on the way to see a movie. But the women of The Slits don't back down. They have something to say and no amount of violence or hate is going to stop them. This energy is captured on the cover of their LP, *Cut*, where they pose topless in loincloths, covered in mud. The Slits made this image purposefully, Albertine informs us: "We know we have to have a warrior stance, not try to be all seductive." Journalist Carola Dibbell describes the *Cut* cover in her essay, "The Slits Go Native," suggesting that "the image stakes out the female body as female territory better than anything this side of Judy Chicago's 'The Dinner Party': solid, varied, flawed, defiant, and irreverent." This owning of their bodies, flaws and all, is part of The Slits' punk attitude; after all, they are the first all-women punk band.

While The Slits discover a way to express themselves, Willis finds punk problematic. In "Beginning to See the Light," she describes listening to "Bodies" by the Sex Pistols. She is repelled by the fact that it so anti-woman, a song that despises women's bodies because "they have babies and abortions and are a fucking bloody mess." Yet, she continues,

The extremity of its disgust forced me to admit that I was no stranger to such feelings—though unlike Johnny Rotten I recognized that the disgust, not the body, was the enemy. And there lay the paradox: music that boldly and aggressively laid out what the singer wanted, loved, hated—as good as rock-and-roll did—challenged me to do the same, and so, even when the content was antiwoman, antisexual, in a sense antihuman, the form encouraged my struggle for liberation.

II. BEAUTIFUL BITCHES

The New York punk scene had a different energy than the UK's. In her memoir, *Face It*, Debbie Harry writes that what unified New York was "pointing out the inconsistencies in a hypocritical society and the foibles of human nature and what a joke it all was. A kind of Dadaist up-yours." Harry wanted to be a musician, but there were no women doing what she wanted to do. Smith was around, but, like Willis, she rejected the the androgynous approach. As she reflects:

Rock, like I said, was a very masculine business in the mid-seventies. Patti dressed more masculine. Though deep down I guess we came from a similar place, my approach was different. In many ways, you might say that what I did was more challenging. To be an artistic, assertive woman in girl drag, not boy drag, was then an act of transgression. I was playing up the idea of being a very feminine woman while fronting a male rock band in a highly macho game. I was saying things that female singers really didn't say back then. I wasn't submissive or begging him to come back, I was kicking his ass, kicking him out, kicking my own ass too. My Blondie character was an inflatable doll but with a dark, provocative, aggressive side. I was playing it up yet I was very serious.

Harry uses her glamorous image and melodic pop-punk to deliver songs full of social and gender commentary. Even so, her glamour comes at a price. She allows her record label to sell her as a product, becoming more object than artist, a two-dimensional representation of an idealized version of a woman. She admits

to “selling an illusion of myself.” By marketing her beauty as a focal point for her band Blondie, the music sometimes gets shortchanged. She describes how reviews of their band often focus more on how she looks than on how the music sounds.

Jessica Hopper explores a similar objectification and erasure of women in rock in her essay, “Emo: Where the Girls Aren’t.” Hopper is incensed at the representation of women in her music scene. She explains,

Girls in emo songs today do not have names. We are not identified beyond our absence, our shape drawn by the pain we’ve caused. Our lives, our day-to-day does not exist, we do not get colored in. ... We’re vessels redeemed in the light of boy-love. On a pedestal, on our backs. Muses at best. Cum rags or invisible at worst. ... Emo’s yearning doesn’t connect it with women—it omits them.

As Hopper is writing, word of her discontent gets around the emo scene. She is approached by a guy who asks, “What do you mean ‘emo is sexist’? Emo songs are no different than all of rock history, than Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin.” Hopper signals her awareness. The guy persists, “How are songs about breaking up sexist, though? Everyone breaks up. If you have a problem with emo, you have a problem with all of rock history!”

“I do,” Hopper replies.

As a female rock critic, she has had to wrestle with listening to music that unfairly represents her gender. She writes,

As a woman, as a music critic, as someone who lives and dies for music, there is a rift within, a struggle of how much deference you can afford, and how much you are willing to ignore what happens in these songs simply because you like the music. ... Can you forgo judgement woe to women because the first eight bars of “Communication Breakdown” is a total fucking godhead. ... [W]ho, other than a petty, too serious bitch dismisses Zeppelin? ... Who do you excuse and why? ... Can you ignore the marginalization of women’s lives on the records that line your record shelves in the hopes that feigned ignorance will bridge the gulf ...

Hopper isn’t so worried about her generation. They’ve had feminist musical heroes such as Bikini Kill and other Kill Rock Stars bands, who encouraged her “not [to] allow my budding feminist ways to be bludgeoned by the weight of mainstream, patriarchal culture.” She credits that music for making her a journalist. Her concern is for teenage girls who lack the knowledge of any other underground music—who attend emo shows where only boys play. She wonders if

those teen girls “see themselves as participants, or only as consumers or—if we reference the songs directly—the consumed.”

Even though she was a teen who felt her ideas were important, she admits, it never crossed her mind to play music until she saw other women doing it “to show me that there was more than one place, one role, for women to occupy, and that our participation was important and vital—it was YOU MATTER writ large.”

Hopper maintains it is up to “radicalized” women to encourage others to participate in the music community as artists and people with something to say because “Us girls deserve more than one song. We deserve more than a pledge of solidarity. We deserve better songs than any boy will ever write about us.”

III. SUPER-YIN OLD LADIES (GROUPIES)

The 1960s bred a new kind of fan: the groupie. This term is often applied to women in a derogatory way to imply that having sex with male musicians is the ultimate goal or that they have no other way of being a part of the rock scene. But perhaps this is exactly how they want to be a part of the rock scene.

In her memoir, *I’m With the Band*, Pamela Des Barres challenges the stereotype. She admits she is “desperate to be famous,” but that’s not the motivation behind her becoming a groupie. Rather, she proclaims: “I dig musicians, I feel they have the most to offer me mentally and emotionally because they think basically along the same lines that I do; extremely creative people. Music is life.” Des Barres loves the music, is attracted to the creative energy of the scene and becomes inspired to demonstrate her appreciation physically. “I still considered myself a true feminist in the early days of women’s rights because I was doing exactly what I wanted to do,” she insists. “I loved music and the men who made it. ... I wanted to be close with the men who made me feel so damned good, and nothing was going to stop me. I wanted to treat a rock star ... nice.”

It isn’t all sex. Des Barres makes custom shirts, counsels the musicians, and sometimes cooks for them. She quotes a paperback titled *Groupies and Other Girls*, which cites the GTOs, her groupie gal gang and band, discussing their relationships with rock stars: “We don’t just sleep with them, we go beyond the physical level with all of them and they respect us for that. Musicians are really very intelligent people and that’s the way we treat them; not like studs. That de-humanizes both us and them.”

Indeed, Des Barres and the GTOs are performers in their own right who are championed and supported by their male counterparts, most notably Frank Zappa, but also Chris Hillman, Gram Parsons, and Nick St. Nicholas. All of them show up to the Shrine Auditorium for the GTOs' first show.

Willis is not a fan of the groupie phenomenon. She is bothered, she notes in her essay "The Feminist," that "[f]reedom for women is defined solely as sexual freedom, which in practice means availability on men's terms." And she is offended by a statement about groupies that appears in *Rolling Stone*, to which she responds:

It seems that rock bands prefer San Francisco groupies to New York groupies: the latter being cold-hearted Easterners, are only out for conquests; Bay Area chicks really dig musicians as people, not just bodies, and stay afterward to do their housework. This sort of disingenuous moralism offends me much more than the old brutal directness. At least the Stones never posed as apostles of a revolutionary lifestyle.

The point is hard to argue with. And yet, in "'We Support the Music!': Reconsidering the Groupie," Amanda Petrusich offers a contrasting view, suggesting that being a woman in rock 'n' roll during the 1960s and 1970s was not easy. At the same time, she acknowledges, there were other avenues available to women who loved rock. She highlights women artists such as Janis Joplin and Grace Slick and women rock critics such as Willis and Lillian Roxon. Petrusich wonders if perhaps groupies choose to be groupies because sex is "their preferred option" for getting close to rock stars. She writes:

People find all sorts of ways to manage the magnificent, sometimes paralyzing feelings a true communion with art incites: as long as there have been humans making beautiful things, there have been other humans who wish to subsume or harness that energy via sexual congress. Sex is a method (and an effective one) for achieving a kind of transcendental closeness to another person and, by inevitable extension, to the work that they make.

Through the perspective of Petrusich and Des Barres, in other words, groupies may be liberated women who offer themselves sexually to artists in order to, as Petrusich puts it, "see what happens when a person comes at beauty with beauty."

“For me feminism meant confronting men and male power and demanding that women be free to be themselves everywhere, not just in a voluntary ghetto.”

Ellen Willis, “Beginning to See the Light”

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Many women paved and continue to pave the way for female voices in music and rock literature. Unfortunately, our society is still male-centric which means women are still qualified as “female musicians” or “female fans” or “female rock writers” instead of just musicians or fans or rock writers. While society attempts to put us in gender-defined boxes, women can choose to live with honesty and authenticity, which, in turn, inspires other women to do the same. By sharing their stories and writing about their experiences as musicians, fans, and journalists, women create a new, more equitable narrative for their place in rock, transforming it from a boys’ club to a shared art form that includes multiple gender perspectives.

POETRY

“(N)evermore,” “We Learn the Names of Things,” “Brief As We Are”

Gregory Mahrer

(N)EVERMORE

Rusty hinges are an ocean’s way of thinking

with its hands. It doesn’t imagine a flat earth

but neither does it understand umbrellas.

I think in broken locks, in eulogies for the underneath,

old Polaroids, magnetic norths.

This month I plan to advocate for sleep’s autobiography,

if only I can liberate it from the poetic line.

I agree to carry sleep’s ashes,

should it come to that, through the badlands,
astride a dark horse of my own making.

It's 1968 all over again, only summer has never arrived or is perennial.

In the iron precincts, seasonal disorders appear regular as rain.
No more troubadours immigrating from the south, just this intermittent
beat,

the sleepwalker tracing a line of nevermores
through streets named Ocean and Del Mar.
I'm sure I've been here before, the dream announces.

On second thought, what's the image of twice—
the exact weight in cloth of once and always.

WE LEARN THE NAMES OF THINGS

as they pass, note the countries

where the garroting of songbirds

is still practiced or the captive

voice first begins to unspool—

the softening gate of the eye

closing over a sequence of empty wings.

Of what is devotion made if not delay—

door leaned into an empty field,

sudden rain at rest, a sodden yes.

The sullen waters will overrun the night's low branches

but a thin scaffolding remains.

We have made of this place an alphabet without sound,

an October improvised out of wire and thread.

This is how we learn to count—

first the bird on the branch

then the branchless tree.

Finally backwards sky to chance to leaf.

BRIEF AS WE ARE

We still hope to know what of us

is mineral and what flight,

what perches inside us with folded wing—

the wild raven, or the ravine carried in its chest.

Who wouldn't want to sleep lyrically

even as sleep slips from us, seeking a kinder host.

Fox by the stream drinks without excess.

We are nothing if not multisyllabic, a yonder

and a diagrammed sentence.

A cave that leads to morning.

Foxes folded at the x, summering

under the grammatical sun.

Contributors

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Stephen Graham Jones is the New York Times bestselling author of nearly thirty novels and collections, and there's some novellas and comic books in there as well. Most recent are *My Heart is a Chainsaw* and *The Babysitter Lives*. Up next are *Earthdivers* and *Don't Fear the Reaper*. Stephen lives and teaches in Boulder, Colorado.

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Gregory Maher has work published or forthcoming in *The New England Review*, *The Indiana Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Volt*, *Colorado Review*, and elsewhere. His latest collection, *A Provisional Map of the Lost Continent*, won the POL prize from Fordham University Press was published in the Spring of 2016. It was also a finalist for the 2016 Northern California Book Award. He lives and works in rural Northern California and Baja California Sur, Mexico.

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Catherine Texier was born and raised in France and writes both in French and in English. She lives in New York. She is the author of five novels, *Chloé l'Atlantique* (written in French and published in Paris), *Love Me Tender*, *Panic Blood*, *Victorine*, and *Russian Lessons*. Her memoir *Breakup* was an international bestseller. *Victorine* won Elle Magazine's 2004 Readers' Best Novel of the Year Prize. *Love Me Tender* was a Village Voice bestseller. Her work has been translated into 10 languages.

Chrys Tobey is a poet and writer whose work has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *New Ohio Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Rattle*, and *The Cincinnati Review*. Her first book of poetry, *A Woman is a Woman is a Woman is a Woman*, was published in 2017 from Steel Toe Books. Chrys lives in Portland, Oregon.

Abigail Thomas has written two story collections, one tiny novel, and three memoirs among which are *Safekeeping*, *A Three Dog Life*, *What Comes Next*, and *How To Like It*. Her next book will be published this fall, *Still Life At Eighty: The Next Interesting Thing*. She has four children, twelve grandchildren, one great grandchild, and two dogs. She loves to make things out of clay.

