AIR/LIGHT

Winter/Spring 2023

Issue 7

Los Angeles, California

AIR/LIGHT

Contents

Editor
David L. Ulin

Managing Editor
Aaron Winslow

Editors-at-Large
Aimee Bender
Dana Johnson
Danzy Senna
Karen Tongson

Copy Editor
Chris Daley

Founding Advisory Editors
Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky
David Lynn
David St. John

Advisory Editors
Maggie Nelson
Viet Thanh Nguyen
Claudia Rankine
Danny Snelson
Arthur Sze
Oscar Villalon

Air/Light logo created by Letty Avila and Dennis Lan

©2023 All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author.

www.airlightmagazine.org
editor@airlightmagazine.org

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

My Father's Pen

David L. Ulin

Last month, when I was in New York, my father gave me a pen. That this was a big deal only speaks to the particular, and peculiar, dynamics of my family. For as long as I can remember, my father has been a collector of pens. He keeps them in a cushioned carrying case. When I was young, they were mostly Parkers or Crosses (those elegant silver cylinders I came to love so much). But over the years, he has branched out to other manufacturers. When I arrived to see him and my mother, he had just bought a new pen from a German manufacturer named Diplomat. This is the implement that, during the final morning of my visit, he bestowed on me.

I should say that, when it comes to pens, my tastes are decidedly lowbrow. I prefer the Pilot G-2 07, with its gel ink roller ball. The key for me is disposability. I don't want a pen I have to care for. I don't want a pen that I can't lose. And yet, this pen my father gave me is a stunner: black anodized aluminum with orange piping, like a mechanical bee or an artillery shell. I expressed my admiration the evening I arrived and used it a day or so later when he asked for help filling out a form. I've never enjoyed the heft of a large pen, but this one was so well-designed, so evenly weighted, that holding it felt natural. I offered another compliment, then thought nothing more about it until my father placed the pen in my hand.

The gift, I want to say, was a signifier. Of what? My father's love, perhaps, his presence. Or maybe I just wish that it were. One aspect of my father's aging is that he has begun to have trouble with his language, or more accurately, with his ability to speak. It's not aphasia but shortness of breath, of stamina; it's hard for him to push out the words. At the same time, he con-

tinues to read, a hundred pages a day most days. This is the essence of who he is.

I've been thinking about that as we put together this edition of *Air/Light*. I've been thinking about what we're given, whether a pen or the legacy of reading, which is something else my father bestowed on me. I would never describe him as effusive, but his enthusiasms often overlap with mine. Much of my adolescence was spent sitting in rooms with him, alone together, as we both read in silence to ourselves.

For that, I am grateful, as I am that we still talk books. I am also grateful—do I even need to say it?—for the benediction of the pen. My father does not offer gifts easily; the dynamics of my family once again. But I have used it a number of times since I returned from New York, including to map out the warp and woof of this new issue, which means that (to me, at least) my father has played a role in what you'll read here, the movement of the language, the pattern of the words.

FICTION

God's Big Mouth

Henneh Kyereh Kwaku

God has a big mouth; opens & the earth shakes before he swallows—another day has ended & he hasn't taken my life—he's either letting me fatten to his taste or he has a purpose for me; before I sleep, I invite all the angels back into my life; I ask for God's wings over me, I'm not sure he has any, but I ask anyway—I mean, I don't know them that well—I don't even know their surname or what gender they are; are they even called God?—I know God is full of surprises, still I assume I will die in my sleep, so I put everything right before sleep steals me: arrange the table, lay the bed, sweep the floor of the fallen hair, of the used condoms & every evidence of *sin*; anoint the feet & head & admit transgressions & ask they be forgiven; weep a little, let them be real—God reads hearts.

I am Achilles or I am Anokye, but the prophecy says I will die in my sleep—so I stay awake until I cannot; it is 12:07 am and the family witches meet so I sleep after their meeting, 3:43 am, or 6:52 am on the days they delay; what I fear is not my death, it is my living—the possibility of becoming something I may never become—If it was possible, I'd die—like Ananse & witness what burial & what celebration I'm given; return from wherever the dead go, on the third day or fortieth because I need the rest that death likely offers, & block those that need blocking & love those who need loving, better.

When the prophet asked: *Are you an Archbishop?—why are so many angels following you?*—I giggled because I hired them on my way to the temple like I do every night; I am not sure what they take in return but I will do everything for the prophet not to project my *sins*; when I saw my friend die in a dream, I prayed & fasted for days so he would live—when bullets rained

on my body in a dream, I treated my wounds in the morning & rested.

My faith is in forms that don't require truths or lies, that freedom is what I seek—like playing Bethel Music or Hillsong United through the loudspeaker as I listen to J Hus or Kendrick Lamar or M.anifest or Shatta Wale or SZA or Rihanna or Cina Soul or Buju through the headphones at the same time—like God, my father & I do not agree on everything & though we love ourselves, I love the silence that follows each *I love you*—God has a big mouth & if I should die in my sleep, I wouldn't want any Ghanaian to know where I am going—I want to move like the silence before we travel overseas.

POETRY

“Gal,” “Say What,” Communion”

Adele Elise Williams

GAL

She’s so helpless and the undertone

is spooky-ooky! She’s so natural

and the assumption is heaven high

is gilded and gyrific, is, like chakras.

I mean, placement for purpose. I mean,

outward burst. She’s so blond! And

I mean BLOND. Like, a dirty dove.

How the most familiar thing becomes

the opposite of gentle when dead.

She means well when she asks you

to touch her, when she negotiates

the abyss. She only means to tell

on herself, she's only making history.

SAY WHAT

the most painful thing i know is a mother

a shadow behind the sheet but the sheet is the surface

of a frozen over lake

the moment you first bust your own skin

being called ugly

i can barely stand the sun much less

growing cold

it is not all so dark and down

it is funny too! like

how i give my whole life to the idea

of art but nothing gives back

like how no one matters and everything

silenced gets the last laugh

yea, i'm cracking the fuck up y'all

i'm rolling

down a hill and the hill

is made of holes

COMMUNION

The image is ruined because I learned too much. The image is cohesion.

There is the narrative of loss, and then there is the shame.

Mud on sunstone.

Water withheld.

I cannot be here now because I did not invite me.

I cannot remember because I never went. In high school homecoming

was as foreign as money. Prom only ever a violence. Everything

a vile-ence these days. I'm over the bloodletting.

Don't be so coy.

In high school dicks shook their blame at me like a candy.

Living is always a risk. I know this now, how I yearn for haptic, how I

throw away obscurity. I'm smarter tho. I figured it out. Water is wet

and blood still is. No one cares about coherence; we only want mud-sun.

There is only ever the filthy event.

POETRY

“Angel’s Share,” “Mother of Muses,” “Do I Really Have Nothing At All,” “Secondhand God”

MICHAEL CHANG

ANGEL’S SHARE

U were in my dream once, driving a little clown car

I could tell from ur sandals that u were Jesus

A v good lyricist that we also know as extremely kinky

U were diminished till dead

In my family the heart goes first so I make sure to stock up, 3-for-$5 or some such

Always show up on time, sneak cake under bridges

Thomas Crown Affair as indictment of late-stage capitalism

They have never been fisted by a deerskin glove

or tasked with changing all the pronouns on somebody's Wikipedia

In that underfunded planetarium, rickety & New Jersey

A dumb lightshow of desire

We invented it

Everyone had gone

I had a sensitive head

MOTHER OF MUSES

Look at u, so smug abt ur comfortable crack

Doctor's faxed over ur results: still a fantastic asshole

Something on ur chin, chopsticks in the air, table manners missing like my gas money

No thank u, I need that like I need a lock in a sock: immediately

Ur w/ her now, fitness lady, the one u said had a splash of the coffee

Ur mold growing in somebody else's basement! finally

I know u still swoon over packages naughty & nice,

the milk-shits & boys who read

oh! dasher, dancer, love handles out of reach

There u are, serving lines as petits fours, more stale than the Commonwealth of Nations

Not sure if it's worse to ignore u or listen to ur smart mouth

If the walls have ears they must be bleeding

Show hole

so small & grieving

DO I REALLY HAVE NOTHING AT ALL

some boys chase success on lilypads

other boys lasso w/ strong pelvis

the 3 a.m. call nobody answers

doofy w/ bearing of eunuch

obsequious, emotionally suffused

always plotting

shunned like teen mom

i don’t find angels terrifying

i enjoy them enigmatic & tight

i don’t mean to be aleatory

pls be gussied up to see me

u may look forward to the excavation

survival is overrated

i wanna thrive

SECONDHAND GOD

wut u do on weekends, bluebook ???

everytime i see u

i'm surprised by how good-looking u r

at best misleading

at worst inconclusive

e—'s candied asshole

laid out for me like tatami

we went alone

eyes rolled back

whites showing like a furby's

pointed out the sights

pulled a muscle

nothing but the sky falling

full of abandon

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

Notes on Sleaze

Daniel Torday

Sleaziness is the central condition of our age, the predominant aesthetic of our epoch. The word might initially evoke a certain shag-carpeted, feather-in-the-fedora pimpiness of the 1970s, but that is tempered by the lens of the present. It is the graininess of the Times Square reimagined in David Simon's The Deuce more than it is Times Square itself. Sleaze is the golden-paneled presidential apartment; it is the biceps lifting the assault rifles on NRATV, the nasal Chicago accent of the newly politically powerful custom pillow salesman. But our sleaziness is hardly limited to politics. Sleaziness is also the ersatz Super-8 of A24's Zola, which at once makes us glare in horror at the de facto kidnapping of a young dancer and celebrate the first film "inspired by a Twitter thread." Twitter is itself one long perpetual motion rehearsal of sleaze, more so under the guidance of Elon Musk, purveyor of sleaze from faked self-driving Tesla videos all the way to the outer atmosphere. Sleaziness is every selfie profile Twitter photo. (Mea culpa, I've got one.) Sleaziness is the celebrated return of Juliette Lewis in full-body fishnet on Showtime's Yellowjackets, a self-conscious reboot of William Golding's The Lord of the Flies; it is the excruciating rapping of Kendall Roy on HBO's Succession. In the dictionary, sleaziness is the "immoral," the "unpleasant," the "socially unacceptable." There is nothing more sleazy than the hair-clippings-and-Elmer's-glue beard on Senator Ted Cruz's face—it grabs the rhyme at hand with greasy, and clutches tight. Sleaziness is just innocuous enough to convince, but paper thin enough to cripple a culture. In our lives, it is everywhere. We live in the age of sleaze.

*

While the definitive etymology varies, the word itself almost certainly comes from a mangled pronunciation of "Silesia" in the mid-seventeenth century. Silesia, in eastern Germany, was at the time the source of cheap sheets. It was the MyPillow region a century before the Declaration of Independence. In 1640, the word meant something like "downy, fuzzy" or "flimsy, insubstantial." In The Conduct of Life, published the year before the outbreak of the Civil War, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes: "A day is more magnificent cloth than any muslin, the mechanism that makes it is infinitely cunninger, and you shall not conceal the sleazy, fraudulent, rotten hours." In the OED, synonyms come in at depraved, sordid, disreputable. The word itself seems to be hemmed in by rhymed association with a handful of similar but different words: greasy, skeezy, easy. It half-rhymes with flea, brings to mind the trochee fleabag. In our mouths, it feels oily, slippery, oleaginous, corrupt, fraudulent. But etymologically, all those words move past sleaze itself, which pushes far more on a lack of ethics, the insubstantial nature of a certain variety of human behavior. Ours are undoubtedly fraudulent, rotten times, and their sleaze is worn on our sleeves. Sleaziness is four shirt jackets on America's pock-faced sad excuse of a Che, spewing fascism on a podcast; it is all of reality television; it is (sorry not sorry) Queer Eye and highly produced baking competitions as much as it is The Bachelor.

*

It is no coincidence that the onslaught of sleaziness arrives at moments of deep corruption of our political and social norms. Think about those Nixon days when the Oval Office was facile and conversant with anti-Semitism, racism, de facto autocracy, and Spiro Agnew corruption. Think about the post-Access Hollywood ascendance of Donald Trump. His sleazy bragging about sleazy behavior turned the attraction of every partner in America against the other. This was true at least until the proliferation of COVID-19, which made previously self-imposed sleaziness almost an afterthought. Two years of avoiding physical contact made even the idea of sitting in a room indoors without your face covered appear sleazy. The sleaziness of a bare nose peeking out above a cloth mask. Many Americans learned the sub-

conscious feeling of sleaziness inherent in waiting in line behind a man with his face naked to the virus-spewing breath of the public: fraudulent, contagious, rotten. If having a president who was a self-proclaimed sexual assaulter had not been enough to enshrine ours as the age of sleaziness, the wet markets of Wuhan made the aesthetic widespread.

*

In the earliest days of radio technology, towers sent out signals that reached only local listeners. By the early 1920s, radio towers began to produce signals that could cover an entire region—even cross borders. One of the first to take advantage of the most powerful towers in the country, outside Kansas City, was a quack named Dr. John R. Brinkley. His broadcasts had enough range to reach not only Missouri and Kansas, but also well across the southern border into Mexico.

Brinkley became one of the most notorious early pioneers of the medium. In the years just prior to his broadcasts, capitalizing on a slew of patients he gained by making house calls during the height of the Spanish flu, he'd opened an eighteen-bed clinic in Kansas, where he popularized a practice of replacing men's testicles with goat glands. He claimed that doing so would make men more virile, and he used early radio technology to convince men to undergo his procedure. Brinkley had gotten his MD from a diploma mill; in the mid-1920s, in part because of his attempted move into the larger radio market of Los Angeles, the Justice Department went after him and other fake doctors with fake MDs. He was able to beat the rap in court. He was a charlatan, a mountebank, a pre-Mehmet-Oz—but after winning his case, he was emboldened. Advertisements of the "first goat-boy" appeared in newspapers, celebrating the virility of the men who underwent his procedure. By the 1930s, Brinkley had ventured into local politics, running twice for governor of Kansas, and eventually becoming a Nazi sympathizer.

Charlatanism doesn't necessarily require sleaziness, but the two have a bearing on each other; where sleaziness is unethical for thinness of mode and purpose, charlatanism requires that its thinness parade as girth. It enshrines thickness. Barely a decade after Brinkley's quackery, a young political hack in Weimar Germany also recognized the power of radio to get into the minds and hearts of the populace. "The radio will be for the twentieth

century," Joseph Goebbels declared in a speech on August 18, 1933, "what the press was for the nineteenth century."

Now, not quite a century later, podcasters and internet personalities operate with a similar brand of charlatanism. None went on house calls in the days after COVID or acquired fake MDs. They didn't have to. Alex Jones needs only to appear with his barrel chest, or Joe Rogan to make hay of his success at Taekwondo as a teenager, to appear virile and trustworthy to broad swaths of the (mainly) male public. Our age of sleaze runs thinner, ninety years on, than did that last great era of its proliferation. But the means rhyme. Where Brinkley sold his goat gland grafts, Rogan and Jones sell nutritional supplements. (Brinkley himself started out on his grift by selling "tonics" meant to appeal to men's masculinity in the 1910s.) According to a profile in The New York Times, Rogan "makes market-moving recommendations for dietary supplements, CBD-infused beverages." In the early days of his podcast, The Joe Rogan Experience, he was buoyed by advertisements from a sex toy company selling a product called the "fleshlight." He moved on to shilling for a company called Onnit, whose most recognizable product, "Alpha Brain," claims on its label to "help support memory & focus." Rogan is a majority shareholder. This in addition to his having sold his podcast for a reported hundred million dollars to the streaming service Spotify and its principal Daniel Ek. In the age of sleaze, the entire history of music is owned and meted out for $9.99 a month by a man with the least musical last name possible.

Not unlike those who benefitted from diploma mills before they were foreclosed on, the charlatans of our day exploit weaknesses in Food and Drug Administration regulations to make wild and unsubstantiated claims about the efficacy of their nutritional supplements. Since 1958, there has been a loophole called the "generally recognized as safe," or GRAS, exemption, so the nutritional supplements that enrich Rogan are not regulated in any way. Brinkley came close but did not become the governor of an entire state. Dr. Oz, a mountebank with an actual MD who has also grown wealthy selling GRAS dietary supplements, came dangerously close to becoming the junior senator from the state where the Constitution was drafted and ratified, which is also where I live. One entire Lydia Davis short story, called "PhD," reads: "All these years I thought I had a PhD. But I do not have a PhD." Because this will not be a sixty-thousand word essay on the age of sleaze, I will not here utter words like "George" and "Santos."

*

The last great post-pandemic moment in America codified a not-so-different profusion of sleaziness. The Spanish flu moved from pandemic to endemic virus between 1919 and 1920 and, for a handful of years afterward, left the American public wary, if susceptible, to come-ons like Brinkley's. The first great work of American literature to follow was The Great Gatsby, the gaudy parties and sleazy sidewalk puppy-purchasing and mid-afternoon drunken parties in the Plaza. Published in 1924, Gatbsy first came to F. Scott Fitzgerald's mind in the summer of 1922, when the widespread fear of Spanish flu was still near to mind. Fitzgerald sent an early draft of the novel, then called Trimalchio, to his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins.

"I would know Tom Buchanan if I saw him on the street, and I would avoid him," Perkins wrote to Fitzgerald after reading the draft. He noted the deep sleaziness of all the major characters, from Gatsby to Meyer Wolfsheim to Daisy, whose avowed love for the thinnest veneers of Gatsby's wealth—"it makes me sad because I've never seen such beautiful shirts," Daisy Buchanan cries upon opening his closet for the first time—has a depth she covers over with sleazy jokes and palaver.

Part of Perkins' genius in helping his author turn Trimalchio into the novel it became was in calibrating the level of sleaziness in each character. In early drafts, Perkins felt he couldn't quite "set his eyes" on Jay Gatsby, who needed something more to distinguish him. So Fitzgerald multiplied and multiplied that great iteration of sleaze, Gatsby's "old sport" dialogue tic, until it came to represent something ineffably insubstantial. Because these were the days just after the Spanish flu, those notorious Gatsby parties became an expression of a newfound openness after the social distancing of the previous years, years of a kind in which we find ourselves again. In a party scene that Fitzgerald would later cut, his characters show up "dressed as 'village constables' … Daisy buttoned into a tight Provencal peasant costume." Rather than the opulent scenes of Art Deco glitter depicted in Baz Luhrmann's lurid film adaptation, Fitzgerald had imagined a sleazy themed party in which, amid their conspicuous wealth, Tom, Daisy and Nick came dressed as poor people. When, early in the sequence, we see "a negro dressed as a field hand serving cider," we're reminded of the most nefarious aspects of the Buchanans, aspects that go far beyond sleaziness into out-

right racism and fraud—the way Jewish Meyer Wolfsheim's "nose flashed," and Tom Buchanan reads a book called The Rise of the Coloured Empires. The Great American Novel takes pains to remind us how quickly sleaziness tips over into something more like corruption, more like evil. It's hard to remember or even to imagine now, but the book received near universal pans when it was first published. Sales were horrible. Fitzgerald said he'd never publish so short a book again, feeling its brevity—just under fifty thousand words—contributed to the reception. Edmund Wilson, the most noted critic of the day, called it "little more than a glorified anecdote."

*

In a time of overweening sleaze, it is valuable to note what is not sleaze, or not exactly. Bernie Sanders can be disagreeable, but he is never sleazy. Dianne Feinstein is far too old to be sleazy. Euphoria is lurid, too slick by half, and borders at times on the pornographic, much worse in its third season than in its first. But the beauty of its visual presentation is too overwhelming to be sleazy. Sally Rooney's novels, while erotically charged, are not sleazy. Fleabag should be sleazy given its name, but it is not at all. While Newt Gingrich might be sleazy in other ways, as a politician who most directly deserves blame for setting off the three-decade cycle of warfare in our party politics, he is never merely sleazy but outright corrupt.

*

The foremost aesthetic avatar of entertainment in our age of sleaze is the reboot, the franchise, the Intellectual Property universe. At one time, a mere sequel alone appeared to our culture sleazy, throwing bad money after good. Jaws is a popular masterpiece; Jaws II is borderline unwatchable. Now the sequel is the way of things. Nine of the top thirty grossing films in cinema history are movies from the Marvel Universe (or were until the second of infinite Avatar sequels arrived late last year, billions of dollars grossed by the avatar of Avatar). The eighth Fast & Furious movie, barely distinguishable from the first seven, grossed over $400 million—in China alone. And that doesn't even touch on Ghostbusters: Afterlife, more Sex and the City under a new name, new versions of everything from The Wonder Years to Saved by the Bell to 21 Jumpstreet arriving as the thinnest pos-

sible ways to grab an audience, to make ersatz art.

Not so fast. Or furious. Let's linger for a moment on the most egregious example: the Marvel Universe. No single corporation has done more to milk its Intellectual Property (IP) than have the principals at Marvel. After making its surprisingly successful film version of Spiderman with Toby Maguire and Kirstin Dunst in 2002, executives at Sony Pictures bemoaned the fact that "all we have is the spider." So in 2008, Marvel began its domination of big budget spectacle with the first of three Iron Man films. Marvel was subsequently bought by Disney in 2009, which also purchased the Star Wars franchise in 2012, setting the stage for the omnibus juggernaut Disney Plus. This past year, nine of the ten top grossing movies in the United State were comic book films or franchises.

"American comics have shaped wars and inspired movements," Jeremy Dauber writes in his definitive American Comics: A History. "They've provided ethical edification and provided moral scandal and, bluntly, they've conquered pop culture." They've also opened the door to a culture dominated by thrice-told tales and fantasies. QAnon followers might seek in vain for a reboot of the JFK franchise, awaiting their savior in JFK, Jr. But when they and their madmen brethren began advancing, armed, on the United States Capitol, not even the National Guard was there. Bringing back the deus ex machina as a plot device has had no tangible effect on the advent of a real-life deus ex machina. No small part of the sleaziness of the Marvel Universe comes in the overbearing singularity of how it adapts its source material. Marjorie Garber writes of Shakespeare that "every production is an interpretation: world events and brilliant individual performances alike have shaped and changed these plays." There have been three Spidermans in the past two decades, but the role is hardly updated; in the most recent iteration of the franchise, all three actors appear on screen at once. I would ask you to imagine Denzel Washington, Mel Gibson, and Orson Welles on stage as Macbeth together, but then—no, I wouldn't. Even I wouldn't do that.

Marvel's IP might be overbearing mainly in its ubiquity as property, but it's hard not to perceive a distinct sleaziness built into the intellectual side of the equation as well. Stan Lee, born Stanley Martin Lieber, took the fledgling Marvel into prominence by using its artists and writers—and then putting his name to the product. When the legendary Jack Kirby left for DC after years of frustration over the provenance of his books, he created a

character based on Lee in his Mr. Miracle series. As Stephanie Burt details in The New Yorker, that character was an "ever-smiling sleazy entrepreneur [named] Funky Flashman," a transparent Stan Lee avatar. Lee brought the corporation near financial ruin in the 1980s, but while he no longer owned the IP that's overwhelmed film and television for more than a decade, his grinning face appears in every one of the Marvel movies, a sleazy Alfred Hitchcock reminding us who killed the middle-budget movie.

"Honestly, the closest I can think of them, as well made as they are," Martin Scorsese said of the films, "with actors doing the best they can under the circumstances, is theme parks." A Shakespeare theme park, one guesses, wouldn't have quite as much financial success. But then one visits London and finds, restored, The Globe.

*

While it has nowhere near the cultural reach of the Marvel Universe, the most critically lauded television show of the age of sleaze is the HBO series Succession. We eagerly await season four this spring. Depicting the excesses and deep sadnesses of the Roys, a media empire loosely based on media mogul Rupert Murdoch's family, Succession is a morality play that's essentially a mirror of all the sleaziness of mid-to-post-Trump-era America. On its surface, the life led by the scions of Logan Roy would appear to be the very opposite of sleaze—the family spent the end of season two on a luxury yacht that forced the show's ostensibly satirical hand, nearly tipping over into outright wealth porn. The unethical sleaziness of each of the Roy children increasingly becomes the main subject of the show. In the opening season, we see Romulus Roy unable to perform sexually with his girlfriend in a hotel room; in season two, he's unable to woo the much older Gerri Kellman, his father's lawyer, in a hotel room. On the night before their wedding, Shiv Roy and her fiancé Tom Wambsgans get in an epic fight, over Tom's unwillingness to have a threesome, in a hotel room. Shiv has an affair with her ex-boyfriend, now chief advisor to a powerful senator, in a hotel room. When at the end of season three the family company, Waystar Royco, appears to be on the verge of fully imploding and selling to a new-media tycoon—who appears loosely based on (wait for it) Daniel Ek—we see Logan and his lawyers prepare the paperwork for a merger in a hotel room.

While the present-tense drama around the Roys and their business is

about the Lear-like potential inheritance and control Logan's grown children will receive, almost all of its drama takes place in transit, in travel, on the way to meetings, in limos, taxis, helicopters, in Ubers and on yachts and in wooden boats. Were any of the characters to stay put long enough, to sit in their burnished apartments and self-reflect, all they would see would be their shabby behavior, their back-biting, their overwhelming sleaziness. So they're ever on the move, always away, always running running running from themselves. There is opulence, but it is undergirded by the ephemeral sleaziness of the transience that is all money can purchase.

Much has been made of the Lear-like conceit at the heart of Succession, and one might be tempted to argue that in its own way, it's a kind of Shakespeare reboot—or interpretation, depending how charitable one is feeling—but through three seasons, the comparison is little more than superficial. Sleazy. There is no Cordelia, just Edmunds everywhere. (And okay fine, the way characters in Lear, Edmund above all, misrepresent their identities is positively GeorgeSantosean.) Cousin Greg, Logan's grandnephew and a sleazy hanger-on, is the closest we come to meeting a Fool, watching him stoned and puking out of the eyeholes of an ersatz-Disney mouse theme park costume. It might feel apt to suggest that Kendall, Shiv, and Rome are all Gonerils or Regans, but frankly they're Edmunds at best, all conniving for power. When Logan has his one scene of brief madness in season three, he's hardly pontificating on the heath; instead he's at a conference center, in need of cranberry juice to clear up a UTI. The gods could hardly be bothered to kill these wanton flies for sport—or otherwise. They're too sleazy for the gods to so much as sneeze.

In what might appear to be the sleaziest move of all, Roman snatches defeat from the jaws of victory in the penultimate episode of season three, when he accidentally sexts a pic of his penis to his father. We see the member itself and share in Logan's shock. But this jumps far past sleaziness; there's pathos all over the scenes that follow. Logan immediately asks Rome if he's sick, if he has a problem. The obvious answer is, Yes, indeed he has a problem. His father isn't capable of loving him, or anyone—only money and power and their rapacious capitalistic pursuit. At the end of the next episode, this is made almost pornographically explicit when, as his children make a move to take the company from him (inevitably, they fail), Logan asks Roman what he wants.

"Your love?" Roman says. It's not sleazy anymore; it's pathetic, heart-

breaking, full of meaning and depth.

"The power of King Lear," Garber writes, "and its place in our cultural imaginary depend above all, at least for a modern audience, upon its depiction of a human story of love, suffering, and loss."

It is a tradition in Shakespeare studies that in the historical record, there would have been a clear motive for King Lear to ask each of his three daughters to profess publicly their love to him at court in Act 1, Scene 1. With their husbands present, it would be a kind of power play in which they would be forced to say they loved their father most, planting a poison pill in the first moment of Lear's abdication of his throne. But part of Shakespeare's genius, as it pertains to Lear and to Cordelia, is that his most beloved daughter has not yet chosen between France and Burgundy for marriage, so they are not in the room to hear her answer; her unwillingness to say she loves Lear best arrives because it feels sleazy—thin, full of ulterior motive—to be forced to say. In Succession, characters are driven by hunger for power, by avarice and … well, by avarice. With the exception of Roman's pleading with Logan, and the shame Tom feels about his relationship with Shiv, there's virtually no talk or evidence of love. There's not even a whiff of the capability to love in Logan. He can't evince any emotion at all—other than disappointment and competitiveness, which are not properly called emotions, I don't think,and (in season three) pride at having bedded his far younger assistant. Sleazebag. And yet if The Sopranos was the lasting dramatic work of the Clinton and second Bush presidencies, and Hamilton of the Obama era, there's an argument to be made that Succession may just be the signature effort of the Trump Era. When it's to be found, the depth of the show comes from a feeling that each of the grown Roy children has been emotionally damaged by the pathology of their father, although as in regard to the Trumps themselves, it's unclear whether the source of that damage is anything more than greed, shallowness, and sleaze. Rather than a retelling of King Lear, it might be more accurate to say that Succession is as far from Lear as a story can get.

*

The sleaziest, most consequential, and ubiquitous development of the era of sleaze is the rapid encroachment of surveillance capitalism on all aspects of our lives. On social media, Facebook and Twitter grow billions in market

cap from harvesting every imaginable thought we've ever had about Succession, and when and where we'd be likely to buy Joe Rogan's nutritional supplements. We are always under the scrutiny of Dr. Eckleburg's eyes, now with more range than Brinkley ever could have imagined. As Harvard professor and social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff explains in The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power, corporations large and not quite as large now vie to invade our privacy by every means available. The goal is to steal and then to sell our "behavioral surplus": every bit of information that can be gathered about all of us.

"Surveillance capital," Zuboff writes, "cannot keep from wanting to go as deep and far as it can go," into every aspect of our lives. It is Logan Roy minus the human to fuck it up. In the years since the book's 2018 publication, TikTok has amassed the largest collection of information on human movement in history. While it makes and remakes fortunes through advertising, it also deals with researchers, including those at American universities, to surveil us and predict our behavior, sleazily profiting from even our children's dance moves.

In a horror movie, the only logical next act would be murder, concealing the evidence. But in the age of sleaze, the evidence is everywhere, in plain sight in our pockets, on our desktops. The actions of Cambridge Analytica in scraping personal data of millions of Americans from Facebook during the run-up to the 2016 presidential election are too well-documented to revisit; Zuboff's book highlights the intrusion of corporations into almost every aspect of our daily lives, most insidiously through the "internet of things." We're being watched by our vacuums, our refrigerators, our microwaves; Alexa is Mata Hari times a million. Zuboff reiterates all the ways Google and Facebook in particular have made billions of dollars not merely by selling advertising but also by creating the largest repository in the history of human data. By the end of her book, Zuboff makes a convincing case that we are all essentially living in Skinner boxes of Silicon Valley's devising, snuck into our lives through the computers we all now carry in our pockets. B.F. Skinner, when alive, was a kind of nemesis of hers at Harvard, but Zuboff lands on a clear claim that his predictions about human behavior and the marketplace have come true beyond his wildest imaginings. Our phones are, little by little, sleazily stalking us not just to sell us things, not only to capitalize on sharing our proclivities with corporations—they're changing the very way we behave. It grows harder by the day to rebuff this

only as sleaze.

As I was reading Zuboff's book, I received a phone call from my auto insurance company. Would I like to sign up for the new pocket computer application, their representative asked? I could save a substantial percentage on my monthly fees.

What would this application do?

Oh, not much—it would simply track every aspect of my driving, from when I used a turn signal to how hard I hit the breaks on the highway.

"But don't worry about all that," the representative went on. "It mostly just tracks when you drive—like if you don't drive at night, after midnight, that's like a huge part of what will save you money."

Money, I thought, she didn't say, I could be spending on goat glands, on HBO Max.

"Are you suggesting you want me to download an app to my pocket computer that will surveil me while I'm asleep?" I asked.

"So I guess you don't want to take advantage of the app's savings plan," the representative said.

As Zuboff asks, when considering what might get us out from under this surveillance: "Who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides?" The choice in our time seems to go again and again in the direction of: Whomever has the least sense of shame.

Who is left that isn't sleazy? Politicians? That seems less likely by the news cycle. Billionaires? They are the chief hucksters in this era of hucksterism. To the sleaziest go the spoils. This is one of the central themes of Succession, and before it, of King Lear.

Oh, and The Great Gatsby.

By the end of Lear, Cordelia is dead. Throughout the play, her sisters sleazily squander the kingdom they have inherited from their father due to their own legerdemain.

"The replies of the elder two daughters," Garber writes, "Goneril and Regan, to [Lear's] love test have a rehearsed quality, a smooth deceptive flow." The words "sleaze" or "sleaziness" weren't available to Shakespeare in 1604. Instead we have what Cordelia refers to as "that glib and oily art." Close enough. The damage caused by humans drawn to greed, motivated by power and profit, has always been right in front of us. In the words of Gloucester: "We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our grave."

FICTION

Night Bus

Rory Say

Later they would disagree about which of them first noticed the newborn on the night bus. It seemed too strange at first to comment upon, a swaddled infant after midnight, lying unsupervised across two back seats. It's also true they'd both had a bit to drink.

Even so, nobody else took the matter seriously. Their few fellow passengers gave the bundle no more than a passing glance, as if it might rather have been a misplaced handbag or a forgotten loaf of bread.

Enhancing the absurdity was the fact that a mere three hours earlier, between the first and second bottle of Bordeaux, they had at last begun to discuss (at first in the abstract and then with more intimacy) the prospect of having a child. She said she felt her instincts conflicted. On one hand, the idea of a fetus developing inside her—suspended for nine months in protective fluid, feeding off nutrients her body provided, expelling waste, sleeping, waking, growing larger by the day until it ballooned her gut and kicked the living walls of its prison—repulsed her. And yet there was no denying that some core part of her wanted it badly. If not now then soon, or at some point, eventually.

In anticipation of the next stop, an elderly man in a crinkled gray overcoat and frayed cloth cap (perhaps not sober himself) shambled from his side seat to wait by the rear door. They both watched as he turned to the infant, took hold of an overhead strap, and bent himself low. But they could only guess at what sort of face he pulled, or what whispered message he might have imparted; in the next instant, the bus braked and he was out the door.

As she had explained her reservations back at the bistro, he'd taken her hand over the breadbasket and made an effort to hold eye contact. He told

her he understood, then corrected himself. Of course he didn't understand, he said, and gave an embarrassed laugh. How could he ever hope to? She laughed also, unsure as to why, and then their server reappeared with a fresh bottle and they both fell quiet, pretending to forget. The occasion marked their six-month wedding anniversary.

After two more stops, the driver announced that there would be a break of seven minutes, during which time they found themselves alone with the abandoned child. Yes, by now the word abandoned had settled queasily in their stomachs, mingling with the rich dessert they'd shared and too much wine.

With the engine dead, they could hear the soft gurgling from four seats away. Outside, the driver smoked with his back to a side window, oblivious. He'd left the front door open, filling the bus with damp November air.

A moment later, the newborn began to cry, quietly to begin with, then less so. It lay grasping with its tiny hands the air above its head, its hidden feet kicking the brown blanket, or towel, that snugly covered all but the fruit-sized head.

They rose as one and moved together. The face when they first saw it was a pinched mask of pain, ripe red, mouth a dark wailing hole. She told him they had to do something and, ignoring his hesitation, carefully lifted the brown bundle and sat down on the seat beneath, cradling it to her. The effect was immediate. The face settled as the crying died down to a light bubbling of curiosity; the eyes grew huge and aware.

He asked her what in the world she was doing and she said what did it look like. Giving the same embarrassed laugh as earlier, he told her she was crazy, that she was being insane. He looked behind him, as if for help. It wasn't theirs, he said, meaning it wasn't their problem. It would get sorted on its own. They should just go. Without looking up from the eyes that held her, she told him he could go if he liked.

A woman entered the bus. She made a show of shivering as she tapped her pass and tightened her jacket about her shoulders. She looked nearly the age to be called an old woman, and the bright smile her face wore as she made her way down the aisle seemed incongruous with the time of night. It encompassed the three of them.

Would you look at this precious gift, she said with an accent that might've been Irish. Dreaming of its own little bed, no doubt.

Apparently it was true. The newborn's eyes had at some point shut, and

there was no mistaking that behind them lay some image of warmth, of a place far away from the back of the night bus. Politely, they agreed.

And would it be a boy or a girl?

Actually, ma'am, it turns out that—

A girl. She spoke softly, so as not to wake the sleeping bundle she held like a fragile thing.

The newcomer nodded, beaming. She had two of her own, she said, and took a nearby seat. Both grown now, of course, but you never forget them at this size. She pointed with her mother's eyes at the cradled infant, mouth-breathing in sleep, and asked what they had named their angel.

A few seconds of silence enveloped them.

They hadn't yet, she found herself saying. Every time they thought they'd decided, they ended up changing their minds. It was a difficult thing, naming somebody, giving something at birth they might feel compelled to keep forever.

The husband, still standing in the aisle, made some noise with his throat and was ignored. The bus began to move again, and he had to grab hold of a pole to stay on his feet.

The older woman spoke the names of her children. Pictures were produced. She had questions about ultrasounds and cravings, doctors and labor. For how long? At what time on what date? Weren't the drugs a gift from God?

But it was difficult to pay attention. Their stop was coming up and the wife felt desperate to stay on the night bus. The face in her lap was like a fire you could watch indefinitely. From time to time, its eyes opened to find hers and the world went away until they closed again. How easy it could be, she thought, to leave without putting back what they'd found.

She stood preemptively and let her husband take her by the arm. He brought his mouth to her ear, but she turned away and pretended to cough. Beside them, the woman stood also. Well past somebody's bedtime, she said, squinting as she leaned in close. The bus pulled up and the doors swung inward. They both agreed it was.

As the wife stepped out into the freshly rinsed air, the burden she carried seemed to weigh no more than a plaything. And yet she could feel the tiny limbs in their search for comfort, the head turning toward her for warmth. Maybe it really was a girl. Maybe it did have a name, given by someone unable to give anything else.

The husband kept pace at her side, the flat of his hand pressed hard to her back. She could almost hear the words on the tip of his tongue, but there was nothing to say. It had grown too late, and they were both too tired.

At the entrance to their townhouse, she handed him the bundle so she could take the keys from her shoulder bag, and the way he winced as he held the child out in front of him, like it might detonate in his face, left her feeling unmoored on the doorstep, disoriented by a vague sense of shame that took more than a moment to pass.

CONVERSATIONS

The Voice of a Man Who Doesn't Know How to Write: a Conversation with Stênio Gardel

David Martinez

Stênio Gardel's debut novel, *The Words That Remain*, is poetic and intense. In it, 71-year-old Raimundo has been carrying a letter for decades that he both longs to discard and to read. He can do neither. He can't throw the letter out because it was written by Cícero, the first love from whom he was forcibly separated after they were found together at seventeen and beaten by their respective fathers. He can't read the letter because, growing up in the hinterlands of Brazil where he was unable to attend school, he never learned how, and he won't let anyone else read it to him. Cícero promised to teach him but never got the chance. After the separation, Raimundo is forced to leave home carrying the weight of the letter and his fear and shame over his own homosexuality across the many miles he travels loading and unloading cargo trucks in Brazil. The book begins as Raimundo, needing relief from the weight of the words he can't understand, learns to read.

Gardel was born in Limoeiro do Norte, Céara, in 1980 and now lives in the capital, Fortaleza, where he works at the Regional Electoral Court. He and I spoke about his book, illiteracy, a typewriter close to his heart, and the possibility of a new hope and perspective after an intense election cycle in Brazil. This interview was held in Portuguese and translated to English, and it has been edited and condensed.

How did the idea for the book come about?

As an employee of the Regional Electoral Court, I worked in public service for years, and in this capacity, I talked with and provided service to many voters who did not know how to sign their name.

The need for official documents imposes the need to write. They couldn't write. And I think that as I watched this, to give myself a little perspective, I imagined that they were thinking of some other moment in their lives, you know? As soon as we learned that they didn't know how to write, they had to sign with their thumbprint. And I think there was a density of life there in that little instant, you know? That's why I believe it left an impression on me and stayed with me, and it ended up adding to another fictional image I had of a man who has something important to read and can't. The predicament of this man came about precisely because he did not know the written language. I imagined what he could be keeping and then I had the idea for the letter. As I was stirring these ideas, one thing led to another, and this letter materialized as a result of a broken relationship. The idea of that relationship turned into a homosexual relationship.

But it is still like that, especially in the interior of the state, in a more forgotten Brazil, so to speak. It's still a reality. For many people, signing one's name can seem so trivial, so effortless. Most people are able to study from an early age and learn, but for those of us who have had experience with these people who could not, we realize and feel the importance of this, of having power, of having the power, to put your own signature on a document, which for many people can be something trite. For some people, this has a very deep meaning and weight.

How was your journey as a writer?

I'm from the city of Limoeiro do Norte, in the interior of Ceará, and I lived in the countryside on a farm. I remember already having this desire to write from a very early age, like twelve or thirteen years old. I would pester my mother to get me a typewriter, because in my mind, somehow, if I had a typewriter, I would be a writer. It's still here in a small case that I keep with fondness, because my mother did everything to buy it for me when she couldn't afford it. And it ended up that I didn't even learn to type properly, and life just happened.

There came a time when the schools in Limoeiro did not have the same level of preparation for the entrance exam to enter the university as those here in Fortaleza. So, at age seventeen, I came to Fortaleza to attend my last year of high school and to be able to take the entrance exam. I took the engineering entrance exam and came to live in Fortaleza with my brother. I had to leave my mother, my grandparents, my cousins there. Coming to Fortaleza was very difficult. I did not want to. I had to make a very adult, very rational decision. I didn't want this longing. It was all very scary for me. It was very difficult, but time has shown that it was the right thing.

So, I got into engineering school. The dream of writing was always there, but always held back, always in a drawer, or after I started using the computer, kept on a file. And I continued, without really dedicating myself or without believing it until 2013 when I did my first workshop with Socorro Acioli. And then I think some doors opened. In 2016 I went back to doing the workshop with Socorro. I didn't want to push anything back anymore. I had to show my writing in the workshop, start revealing my work. But the main thing was the decision to really start dedicating myself and working on the novel. I already had some things written, but it started there in earnest.

What are your literary inspirations?

My favorite American author is William Faulkner. I discovered him later on, just a few years ago. I love *Absalom, Absalom!*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury*. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers is one of the most beautiful books I've ever read. I also like John Steinbeck. All of these writers I've discovered in recent years. One of my first literary memories was reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Arthur Conan Doyle. I remember being very affected by the whole atmosphere of mystery and suspense, Sherlock's superhuman intelligence. That moved me a lot. I think it's also at the heart of my desire to write. As far as Brazilian literature, Raduan Nassar is my favorite writer. *Lavoura Arcaica* is my favorite book in Brazilian literature. And then there's Guimarães Rosa, Graciliano Ramos too, who I love, especially *Angústia*, and Clarice Lispector. There is an author from Minas Gerais who is not very well known, but I also love his work: Campos de Carvalho. As far as more contemporary writers, I'm a fan of Marcelino Freire, also from the northeast. He is from Pernambuco, and I love his writing.

What are the similarities and differences between yourself and Raimundo?

I am a privileged person in many ways. And one of my privileges is to say that I have a dream in my hands, which is this book. It's a big dream, an old one. My mom died early last year, and she couldn't see the book. So, in this whole dream, maybe this is the only crack, you know, in this whole trajectory. She never saw it. A lot of me is in the characters, especially in Raimundo. Like Raimundo, I am gay. Unlike him, I never suffered the violence he did. But I had my silences, my very personal confrontations, and at certain times, I found myself in some dark corners. Also different from Raimundo, I was always embraced by my family while he wasn't. My mother is very different from Dona Caetana, Raimundo's mother.

What can you say about the cycle of violence that is so present in Raimundo's trajectory?

Raimundo is both a victim and an aggressor. I wanted to highlight the cycle of violence in the book. This violence begins with Raimundo's grandfather. And then Raimundo's father replicates this violence, of course, with other nuances. So, there are violent reactions, yes, but I think with different compositions, so to speak. And then Raimundo too, coming from that background, not knowing how to deal with it, replicates the violence, with another complexity as well. And it is only through this destruction that he causes in others that he encounters, or at least he begins to wonder about, other possibilities, what would bring him another way of being and acting. What he sees in the character of Suzzanný, for instance, is a desire for what he wants for himself. Not sexual desire, but the desire to have her attitude. And at the same time, it is also fuel for his anger, because he can't be like her in terms of acceptance and freedom of expression.

One of the most striking features of the book is the language and format. How did this develop in Portuguese and how did you maintain authenticity in the English translation?

I wanted to create the voice of this man who doesn't know how to write as

being as similar as possible to his spoken language, the language he knew. So it made perfect sense to me, especially when the text brings out his inner speech. I wanted this text to be closer to speech, instead of having the characteristics of a written language and its rules. There are some grammatical errors because our speech is different from writing. So, it was a choice. The text begins with this approximation of the spoken language.

It's also special in English for me because I've been studying English since I was very young. I remember when English became mandatory at school and then I took private courses, too. So, wow, knowing that my story is told in English made me really, really happy. As for the translation, Bruna [Dantas Lobato] is incredible. She made some beautiful choices. For example, I wrote that Raimundo's future was his father's present, as in present tense. But she opted for the translation of the word present as in gift. I thought that was really cool.

Brazil has just elected a new president. The ex-president made many violent comments against gay and trans people. What do you think will change after these elections?

Brazil has the highest rates related to the murder of trans people. And I would say it's not only the speech, but also the stance and, let's say, government directives, which the highest echelon of the government defended. It's not only against the rights of the LGBTQ population, but also other minorities, ethnicities, and different races. So there really is a change of climate, of renewal. Now, with this election, I think, we can change the trajectory. The result could have been different, and it almost was, and this is an element that cannot be ignored; almost half of the voters subscribed to this type of speech, which is still scary. But I think this change in trajectory will at least buy us time, more time to fight these things and embrace plurality and respect diverse origins, skin colors, sexualities, and different ways of love. So, it's a very different feeling than in 2018. But because I'm usually a little fearful, I'm still afraid. I'm half hopeful, but half worried as well. I really hope we can have a better four years ahead. Because of my position in the Electoral Court, I cannot openly defend one candidate or another. It's our job. But I certainly think that my political position is in the book because of the choices I made to create an elderly, illiterate character from the northwest, to talk about violence against minorities. This has a very significant

political weight, or at least I hope so.

VERSÃO PORTUGUÊS

O romance de estreia de Stênio Gardel, A palavra que resta, é poético e intenso. No livro, Raimundo, de 71 anos, carrega uma carta há décadas que tanto deseja ler quanto descartar. Ele não pode fazer nenhum dos dois. Ele não pode jogar a carta fora porque foi escrita por Cícero, seu primeiro amor e amante de quem se separou depois que eles foram encontrados juntos aos dezessete anos e severamente espancados pelos respectivos pais. Ele não pode ler a carta porque, crescendo no sertão do Brasil onde nunca pôde frequentar a escola, ele não sabe ler e não deixa ninguém ler a carta para ele. Cícero prometeu ensiná-lo, mas não teve oportunidade. Após a separação, Raimundo é forçado a sair de casa carregando o peso da carta e o medo e a vergonha de sua própria homossexualidade ao longo dos muitos quilômetros que percorre carregando e descarregando caminhões de carga por todo o Brasil. O livro começa quando Raimundo, precisando de alívio do peso das palavras que não entende, aprende a ler.

Stênio Gardel nasceu em Limoeiro do Norte, no Ceará, em 1980, e atualmente mora na capital, Fortaleza, onde trabalha no Tribunal Regional Eleitoral. O Stênio e eu conversamos sobre seu livro, analfabetismo, uma máquina de escrever muito querida, e a possibilidade de uma nova esperança e perspectiva após um intenso ciclo eleitoral no Brasil. Esta entrevista é a conversa editada e condensada que foi realizada em português e traduzida para o inglês.

Como surgiu a ideia do livro?

Sendo servidor da Justiça Eleitoral, eu fiz atendimento ao público por anos, e nesse atendimento ao público eu conversei e eu prestei serviço a muitos eleitores que não sabiam assinar o nome.

A necessidade do documento impunha a eles a necessidade da escrita. Eles não sabiam escrever. E eu acho que vendo assim, pondo um pouco em perspectiva, eu acho que naquele instante eles pensavam em algum out-

ro momento da vida, sabe? Então era um breve momento, assim que eles reconheciam que não sabiam escrever, tinham que carimbar o dedo. E eu acho que havia uma densidade de vida ali naquele instante, sabe? E por isso eu acredito que me marcou e ficou comigo e acabou se juntando a uma outra imagem, fictícia, a de um homem que tem algo importante para ler e não consegue. A impossibilidade desse homem se tornou exatamente o fato de ele não conhecer a língua escrita. E aí depois eu fui ver o que ele poderia estar guardando e aí veio a ideia da carta. Uma coisa foi puxando a outra. E a carta veio como resultado de um relacionamento interrompido. E depois desse relacionamento, virou um relacionamento homoafetivo.

Mas é ainda assim, principalmente no interior, num Brasil mais esquecido, digamos assim. É uma realidade ainda. Para muitas pessoas o fato de assinar o nome pode parecer algo assim tão corriqueiro, uma coisa tão sem esforço. Porque a maioria das pessoas consegue estudar desde cedo e aprender, mas para a gente que teve a vivência com essas pessoas que não conseguiam, a gente percebe e sente a importância disso, de ter um poder, de ter o poder, de colocar no documento a própria assinatura, o que para muitas pessoas pode ser algo banal. Para algumas pessoas isso tem um significado e uma força, muito grandes.

Como foi a sua trajetória como escritor?

Eu sou da cidade de Limoeiro do Norte, interior do Ceará, e lá eu morava na zona rural, num sítio. Eu lembro de já ter essa vontade de escrever já desde muito cedo, assim, 12, 13 anos. Eu aperreava minha mãe para me dar uma máquina de escrever, porque na minha cabeça, de algum jeito, se eu tivesse a máquina de escrever, eu ia ser escritor. Está até aqui numa maletinha que eu guardo com todo carinho, porque a minha mãe fez de tudo para me dar essa máquina quando ela não podia. E acabou que eu nem aprendi a datilografar propriamente e a vida foi acontecendo. Chegou um momento em que os estudos lá de Limoeiro, apesar de eu ter estudado em bons colégios, não tinham o mesmo nível de preparação para o vestibular para entrar na universidade como os daqui de Fortaleza. Então, aos 17 anos, eu vim para Fortaleza para fazer o último ano do ensino médio e poder prestar vestibular. Eu fiz vestibular para engenharia e vim morar em Fortaleza com meu irmão. Tive que deixar minha mãe, meus avós, meus primos lá. A minha vinda para Fortaleza foi bem difícil. Eu não queria. Eu tive que tomar

uma decisão muito adulta, muito racional. Eu não queria essa saudade. Era tudo muito assustador para mim. Foi bem difícil, mas o tempo tem mostrado que foi o correto. Então, e aí eu entrei na faculdade de engenharia. O sonho de escrever estava sempre lá, mas sempre guardado, sempre na gaveta, ou já depois que eu já estava usando o computador, guardado no computador. E fui levando assim, sem realmente me dedicar ou sem acreditar até que em 2013 eu fiz minha primeira oficina com a Socorro Acioli. E ali eu acho que já se abriram algumas portas. Em 2016 eu voltei a fazer a oficina com a Socorro. Eu não queria mais deixar as coisas guardadas. Eu tive que mostrar na oficina, começar a me expor. Mas o principal mesmo foi a decisão de realmente começar a me dedicar e a trabalhar em cima do romance. E eu já tinha algumas coisas escritas, mas começou ali para valer.

Quais são as suas inspirações literárias?

O meu autor americano preferido eu já conheci assim mais tarde, já há poucos anos, o William Faulkner. Eu adoro Absalão, Absalão!, Enquanto agonizo, O Intruso, O som e a fúria. O Coração é um caçador solitário de Carson McCullers é um dos livros mais bonitos que já li também. John Steinbeck também. Todos esses eu conheci nos últimos anos. Eu lembro de uma das minhas primeiras lembranças literárias que é O cão dos Baskervilles do Arthur Conan Doyle. Lembro assim de ficar muito impactado com todo o clima de mistério e suspense, a inteligência sobre-humana do Sherlock. Eu acho que está até também no cerne ali da minha vontade de escrever, né? E aí, depois disso, crescendo, conhecendo mais literatura brasileira, Raduan Nassar é meu escritor preferido. Lavoura arcaica é o meu livro de literatura preferido na literatura brasileira. E aí tem Guimarães Rosa, Graciliano Ramos também, que eu adoro, em especial Angústia, e tem a Clarice Lispector. Tem um autor mineiro que não é muito conhecido assim, mas também adoro a literatura dele, que é Campos de Carvalho. Estou pensando em escritores mais contemporâneos. Eu sou fã do Marcelino Freire, um escritor nordestino também. Ele é de Pernambuco e adoro a escrita dele.

Quais são as semelhanças e as diferenças entre o Raimundo e o Stênio?

Eu sou uma pessoa privilegiada em muitos sentidos. E um dos meus privilégios é dizer realmente que eu tenho um sonho nas mãos que é este livro. Sonho muito grande, muito antigo. Porque mamãe faleceu no começo do ano passado e ela não pôde ver o Livro. Então nesse sonho todo, talvez essa seja a única rachadura, sabe, nessa trajetória toda, ela não poder ter visto. Muito de mim está nos personagens, principalmente no Raimundo. Como o Raimundo, eu sou homossexual. Diferente dele, eu nunca sofri as violências que ele sofreu. Mas eu tive os meus silenciamentos, os meus enfrentamentos muito pessoais e as vezes em determinados momentos me encontrei em alguns cantos escuros. Também diferente do Raimundo, eu sempre fui abraçado pela minha família enquanto ele não. A minha mãe é muito diferente da Dona Caetana, a mãe do Raimundo.

O que você pode falar sobre o ciclo de violência que é tão presente na trajetória do Raimundo?

O Raimundo é vítima e agressor. Eu quis colocar o ponto de vista do ciclo de violência no livro. Essa violência começa com o avô do Raimundo. E aí depois o pai do Raimundo replica essa violência, claro, com outras nuances. Então, são reações violentas, sim, mas eu acho que é diferente, com diferente composição, digamos assim. E aí depois o Raimundo também, mais uma vez vindo desse histórico, não sabendo lidar, replica a violência com outra complexidade também. E é só partindo dessa destruição que ele estava provocando nos outros que ele encontra, ou pelo menos ele passa a se perguntar sobre a outra possibilidade do que está por vir, do que traria para ele uma outra forma de ser e de agir, que era um pouco que ele via na personagem de Suzzanný. O que ele via nela era ao mesmo tempo desejo do que ele queria. Não desejo sexual, mas a vontade de ter a postura dela. E era ao mesmo tempo também combustível para a ira dele, porque ele não conseguia ser como ela em termos de aceitação e de liberdade e toda liberdade de expressão.

Uma das características mais marcantes do livro é a linguagem e o formato. Como foi o desenvolvimento desse formato em português e o processo para manter a autenticidade na tradução para o inglês?

Eu queria colocar a voz desse homem que não sabe escrever muito próx-

ima da oralidade, da forma de falar. A língua que ele conhecia era a língua falada. Então, para mim fazia todo sentido, principalmente quando o texto traz ali o discurso interior dele. E que esse texto fosse aproximado da fala mesmo, ao invés de ser um texto com as características do texto escrito e suas regras, e daí tem alguns deslizes gramaticais porque a nossa fala é diferente da escrita. Então foi escolha. O texto começa com essa aproximação para a língua falada. Também é especial em inglês para mim, porque eu estudo inglês desde muito novo. Eu lembro quando o inglês passou a ser obrigatório na escola e depois fiz cursos particulares também. Então, nossa, saber que o que a minha história é contada em inglês me deixou muito, muito feliz. E com relação a tradução, foi incrível. A Bruna [Dantas Lobato] é incrível. Ela fez algumas escolhas lindas. Por exemplo, quando fala que o futuro do Raimundo era o presente do pai, esse presente aqui era como o tempo presente no original. Mas aí ela optou pela tradução que se refere a gift, presente. Então, eu achei muito legal isso também.

O Brasil acabou de eleger um novo presidente. O ex-presidente fez muitos comentários violentos contra homossexuais e pessoas trans. O que você acha que vai mudar depois dessas eleições?

Olha David, o Brasil é recordista de assassinato a pessoas trans. E eu diria que não só as falas, a postura e, digamos, diretrizes governamentais, é o que o posto máximo do governo, ou o alto escalão do governo defendia. Não somente contra o direito de homossexuais, transsexuais, mas também outras minorias, etnias e raças diferentes. Então há realmente uma mudança de clima, de renovação. Nesse momento, a gente pôde com essa eleição, eu acho, mudar a trajetória. Acho que se o resultado tivesse sido outro, e quase foi, e isso é um elemento que não se pode desconsiderar, quase metade dos eleitores subscreveram a este tipo de discurso, o que ainda é assustador. Mas eu acho que essa mudança de trajetória, pelo menos, vai nos dar tempo. Mais tempo para lutar contra essas coisas e abraçar a pluralidade e respeitar as diversas origens, cores de pele, sexualidades e as diversas formas de amar. Então, é um sentimento muito diferente daquele de 2018. Mas eu, como sou um pouco medroso, eu ainda estou meio assim. Estou metade com esperança, mas metade ainda preocupado, digamos assim. Eu espero que realmente a gente possa ter melhores quatro anos para a frente. Por causa da minha posição na Justiça Eleitoral,

não tenho como ficar defendendo abertamente esse ou aquele candidato. É o nosso trabalho. Mas com certeza eu acho que meu posicionamento político está no livro, como você falou, foi pelas escolhas que eu fiz. Trazer um personagem idoso, analfabeto, nordestino. Falar da violência contra as minorias. Isso tem um peso político muito significativo, ou pelo menos eu espero.

POETRY

"Elegy with Two Trees," "On Eschatology," "Lines for the Winter Solstice," and "Lines for the New Year (1)"

Christopher Merrill

ELEGY WITH TWO TREES

In memory of Larry Levis (1946-1996)

Dengue, and dysentery, and near-death
Experiences in careening cars,
A midtown bar, a besieged capital—
Of my time here below I should remember
More than the accidents of history,
Which I somehow survived. But since close calls
Shape much of what I write, I can believe
That the abyss opening underfoot
At the end of every line is what he glimpsed
That night, waiting for *the last lukewarm ember*
To die out in the fireplace, wondering
If he had hooked God on his gift—a stash
Of methamphetamines, which would go well
With a single malt distilled in an alembic
Once used by Cleopatra the Alchemist,

Who passed along to poets the elixir
Of life—the animating principle
That undergirds lyrics and elegies
Alike, the quickening I feel whenever
I read between the lines of his last poems.

———————

We dared not speak of the *oracular*
Ashes heaped in our memory of the war,
For fear of being exiled or condemned
To servitude and death in some ungodly
Plantation wrested from the first stakeholders—
An angry cohort of religious bigots
Who never learned the language of the tribe
That let them carve out of the wilderness
A more restrictive covenant with God,
Which would inspire them to exterminate
Their hosts without a second thought. Our people,
Sad to say, who failed to see the errors—
Doctrinal, moral, geographical—
Embedded in the sacred text they used
Ruthlessly to subjugate their hosts,
Who had their own cosmology and customs,
And then consign them to a reservation
Far from the world they had inherited.

———————

Regard the poet under a box elder
Or a horse chestnut on a winter night,
In the embrace of failure, avoiding his friends,
Who will accuse him once again of thinking
Only of himself, remembering
The solitude of childhood and the lost
Songs of the Mexicans hired by his father
To prune the orchards and pick grapes from the vines,

Which seemed like cages to the boy, who drove
The tractor discing fields and memorizing
Poems—his stay against the fear he witnessed
In the landowners stirring drinks at dusk.

———————

Her allergies? Almonds and opioids,
To which he might have added marital
Relations, humor, and fidelity,
If any paramedic asked. None did.
The ambulance left for the hospital,
Its siren blaring, and he followed after
In his Rent-a-Wreck, concocting a new story
To tell the doctors and police, who would
Investigate him for the rest of his life—
Which was, in the event, curtailed by crystal
Meth and a shot of Herradura Silver.
Scrawled on the last page of a manuscript
He loathed with the passion of the fiancé
Left at the altar was the pseudonym
Invented for the scribe who failed to note
His place in history: Anonymous.

———————

What he remembered of arranging grapes
For drying on his father's roof was not
The raisins but the drudgery. The golden
Leaves falling in the grove of quaking aspens
Where we had stopped for water and a snack
And the intimations of mortality
His dying girlfriend raised matter-of-factly
While doling out trail mix she made that morning—
These prompted him to say that poetry
Was nothing like a raisin … or everything.
He lit a cigarette, and we resumed

Our hike into the wilderness. What joy
I sometimes felt in Larry's company
Was tempered by my knowledge of the depths
Of the abyss he measured with such glee.
What madness to expect him not to fail
To have my back when I most needed him.
He needed all of us more than we knew.

———————

The poetry workshop broke hourly
In his seedy flat in downtown Salt Lake City
So he could do another line or two
In the bathroom, from which he would emerge
Sniffling, bright-eyed, and brilliant until the rush
Began to fade and he slumped down and down.
Once someone asked a poet to explain
A complicated image. *Oh, you know,*
She replied, *how we lacerate each other*
Ten thousand times a minute? No one said
A word. Finally, Larry roused himself
Enough to say that everybody fails.
That isn't interesting. What's interesting
Is when we pick ourselves up and start again.

———————

He drank his fill of pleasure and despair
Producing in his cups a poem to close
The book on his short life—a dirge best left
Unfinished, so he seemed to think, preferring
To jack off in his bed, though he expected
To lose interest in the act and begin
To wonder about God. He built a fire
In the fireplace and monitored the embers,
Remembering how an ex-convict's story
Enlarged a cold night in a bar: the clerk

Shot in a 7-Eleven, cars crashing,
A walk under the stars. The patrons' silence
Released the storyteller from any claim
Night and his conscience might hold over him.
Not so the poet thinking of his son,
Who was exhausted and estranged from him.
Of their last day together he recalled
A melody, more inconsolable
Than bitter, playing in a record store
In Times Square, punctuated by the clerks
Asking if anybody needed help.
A father and his son, reluctant to speak,
Pretended to browse through the bins of albums,
Certain he would remember this forever—
That is, until he finished typing up
The poem a friend retrieved from her computer
Long after he was planted in the earth.

Notes: The phrase, the last lukewarm ember*, was published in Larry Levis's* The Darkening Trapeze: Last Poems*, edited by David St. John (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016).* Oracular ashes *appears in Sophocles'* Oedipus Tyrannus.

ON ESCHATOLOGY

Kindly ignore the sequencing of approvals,
St. Peter told a cohort of arrivals
Whose final day on earth had coincided
With shortfalls of belief in those who prided
Themselves on never being wrong. *A pity*,
An undertaker thought, leaving the city
At dusk, exhausted and exuberant,
Having upended yet another rant
From a family member of the newly dead:
Go to Hell, is what he always said.

———————

The ferry sailing down the Hudson River
Carried among its penitents a lover
Of drawings by the Old Masters. She believed
Happiness was forbidden; hence she grieved
For what was never in the cards for her:
A picnic in the Palisades, the chirr
Of crickets, and her husband skipping work
That day at Windows on the World—his smirk
Was what she longed for when she took her seat
Aboard the ferry in her winding sheet.

———————

Their suffering assumed a new disguise:
The laurel wreath, almonds instead of eyes,
Bonfires of books and drawings set each night

Of the insurrection, swallows taking flight
Below a wooded ledge reserved for duels
Before the Civil War, more drills in schools,
Militias meeting at the barricades
To sing hosannas to the hotel maids
On strike for better pay and safer work
Conditions, while the guests all go berserk.

LINES FOR THE WINTER SOLSTICE

Lower Rio Grande Valley

This convocation of bald eagles watching
For any movement in the grass below
The leafless mesquite sprayed with an herbicide,
Which the agronomists claim will not harm
The prickly pear and desert Christmas cactus,
Will fly away before the longest night
Falls on the Wild Horse Desert, where shale oil
Production has eclipsed the cattle ranches
In revenue and rendered useless all
The laborers who live across the border,
While years of drought have laid waste to the land.
My mother's dying far away from here.

———

A vintage Piper Cub flies low along
The Rio Grande toward Laredo, marking
The charred remains of a casita burned,
Perhaps, in the drug war, and the slow progress
Of a green pickup toward the greener water,
Where as a child the pilot used to swim.
Now he banks sharply left, his mineral interests
The map he follows to his ranch to count
The cattle grazing dangerously close
To his airstrip, where we must land by sunset.
(He cannot navigate in the dark.) Winter
Wheat grows below in irrigated circles.

———

The ouroboros wants what's his, the guide
Explains to the official delegation
Sent to negotiate a better deal
On trade and tariffs with a client state
Determined to exact their pound of flesh
For military basing privileges
And access to high-value prisoners
Arrested in the Global War on Terror
And then forgotten in their zeal to start
Another war on the periphery
Of their declining sphere of influence.
The snake that eats its tail always survives.

———————

My father died last winter, and my mother,
Who has advanced dementia, kidney cancer,
And what remains undiagnosed—a wild
Anger directed at her children—sleeps
All day and night, barely speaking or eating,
Awaiting our inevitable parting.
Her toenails need clipping, her hearing aids
Are broken, and her rings (engagement, wedding)
Are missing, likely lifted by the crone
Who wanders into other women's rooms
To see what might look good on her. *This sapphire*,
She whispers. *Just what I was looking for*.

———————

At dusk, I fill the wood stove with mesquite
And crumpled pages from *The New York Times*
And light a fire to keep me company
On the first night of winter, remembering
An orphanage in Juba, South Sudan,
Where the Ambassador and her Marines

Knelt on the floor to read books to the girls
Saved from the streets, thanks to the volunteers,
Who wanted to rebuild a country riven
By civil war—which would flare up again
Within the week, closing the Embassy.
I do not know what happened to the girls.

LINES FOR THE NEW YEAR (1)

A snowy egret taking wing from the sand castle
Dissolving in the rising tide, and pelicans
Skimming over the Gulf, and in the warming shallows
Fevers of feeding stingrays undulating near
The boys on kickboards and a photography instructor
Who won't adjust his camera to the fading light.
The stingrays leap out of the water to avoid
A hammerhead patrolling the sandbar—white flashes
Against the gray horizon. A two-masted schooner
Tacks westward, toward the Yucatan. It's time to go.

———

A wooden crab cage tethered to a frond of kelp,
On the wrack line below a condominium
In which a couple is dividing up their books
And photographs—of the Venetian gondolier
Who left their luggage on the pier; of gaunt hyenas
Watching a pride of lions finish off a zebra;
Of a skyscraper tilting toward the setting sun…
Amicable? Unlikely. A windsurfer cuts
Around a buoy, while his partner glides beyond
A fishing boat returning with a haul of tuna.

———

No sign, in dream, of our security detail.
And when we left the University of Baghdad
We had to ask for directions to the Embassy.
Our taxi driver's last fare was a suicide

Bomber who blew himself up in a crowded market.
Nor did we stop at the checkpoint, where the Marines
Were teasing the new German shepherd with a rag
Soaked in the blood of the lamb slaughtered for the Feast
Of the Immaculate Conception. What to do
Until the Champagne, resolutions, *Auld Lang Syne*?

Fiction

Pearl

Tara Ison

We have as yet hardly spoken of the infant; that little creature, whose innocent life had sprung, by the inscrutable degree of Providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion…

"What does that letter mean, mother? – and why dost thou wear it…?" "Silly Pearl," said she, "what questions are these? There are many things in this world that a child must not ask about…"

—The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne**

I've never seen my mother naked, is that weird? I'm not saying I want to—that would be weirder, like I'm some freak and I'm not. I just wonder about her breasts, sometimes, if they're like mine, now that mine have puffed out a little. Hers are probably bigger though, less girlish. Maybe she nursed me when I was a baby, but that's weird to think, her doing that. It's hard to imagine having her in my mouth. It's just this puny little apartment for the two of us, we've always shared a bathroom and bedroom, we've always even shared a bed, and I keep my back to her but she still sleeps pushed up close to me, her breath on my neck, she holds on like I might twist away

**All text excerpts in italics from* The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850*

from her grip and flutter away in the night, which makes no sense when most days it's like she hates me. Sometimes she looks at me like who the hell am I, where did I come from, am I even her kid. It's scary. When I'm eighteen I can move out but that's still four years away, and when I mentioned it that one time she looked so hurt, like I'd already abandoned her, this poor lonely mother of this one child, and how can I even think of doing anything so cruel?

But even to sleep she wears those hideous pink scrubs, and a long-sleeved tee underneath, so at least I don't have to feel all her skin on me, thank god. Her scrubs are the shapeless bubblegum-color kind, she wears them all the time and not just the uniform for her job, she wears them even when they're splashed dark with her patients' blood or vomit or I don't want to know what else. I think she likes wearing them even more that way, like Look at me I'm so helpful to the sick, look how I minister to others, like those stains are a badge of honor or act of penance and it makes her all saint-like when I can't even imagine her nursing me, her own daughter. I bet she used a bottle to feed me soy formula. Anyway, going around always dressed like that she's really just showing off how virtuous and self-sacrificing she is, and that's another thing I hate about her, she's such a fucking martyr, my mother.

And she always locks the bathroom door when she's in there, even when I was little I remember sitting on the floor outside the bathroom door crying because I couldn't get in to her, I needed her, I might have been hungry or scared of something, and what kind of mother does that, leaves her almost-still-a-baby baby locked outside alone for what, modesty, or shame? Doesn't that seem a strange thing for a mom to do, even with all her religious fervor bullshit? I mean, even the Virgin Mary nursed baby Jesus, I saw it in a book in my art history class. Is it so sinful for a mom to let her own daughter see her breasts? Although even the word "breasts" is weird to use about my mother, but I can't say "tits" or "boobs," those are so childish and crude, and I try to always use the correct words for things, that's why I read a lot and already study lists of SAT prep words so I can get into a good college some day and get far away from her and this stupid town. Although she rolls her eyes at that, too, tells me I'm being full of myself and a brat and only booksmart, that I understand nothing about people. The other word I could maybe use is bosom, but that's the kind of prissy old-fashioned word she'd use herself, so no.

But maybe she just didn't or doesn't know how to be a normal mom. She never talks about her own mother, would never answer my Why don't I have grandparents, and maybe they threw her out of the house when she got pregnant with me, maybe they were as freakishly religious as she is and called her a fallen woman or maybe even a whore for sleeping around, or maybe she was just a druggie or delinquent, I think that's the word they used back then, and maybe they had Social Services come take her away like she always says will happen to me if I don't control my fierce temper and stop being so wild, desperate, and defiant all the time. So maybe it is all my fault and I ruined her life, maybe I really am just devilish to wonder who my father was or what happened to him or what my mom would look like naked. Sometimes I realize I'm staring at her chest, all hidden by that baggy pink polyester, and wondering if my poking-out nipples are the same as hers, and does she have that same vein as me on the left one that curves around like calligraphy or embroidery and disappears under the breast-pooch.

Maybe my wondering is just morbid curiosity. A guilty imagination. We're all of us full of hidden sinfulness, she always says.

Maybe she does really hate me.

Maybe I'm a "child of rape," like that lady cop calls herself on the TV show I watch when my mother is out working a double shift, the one about special victims, there was an episode where the cop's mother was all "I could have aborted you, but you were the one good thing to come out of all that, you've been my reason for living," and my mother is like that with me sometimes, not in words, when she's all strict control and judgey, but I can tell when she looks at me with her push-me-pull-you love, it's an anxious love, or hugs me with a kind of fierceness that says I'm the sole treasure in her life, how she'd be all alone in the world without me. And the lady cop is all tortured and guilty, because what if it's a genetic thing, what if she inherited the violence and evil of her rapist-dad, what if she's really her mother's punishment, a constant reminder of that dark thing, and my mom's dark scary thing was my father, and now it's me. Now I'm the one who brings her a world of pain. Now I'm a symbol, like my teacher teaches us about in my English class, where I always get big red As on my papers. So I never ask anymore about my father, I used to beg her to tell me, but the last, final time I did she just turned away with her prissy, lady-like church-face, said I needed to seek a Heavenly Father because I'll never know an earthly one,

she's so obnoxious when she gets in one of those moods, like she's a model of piety, said I really need to get over this father-fixation of mine, and why would I need more parent than her and God anyway, all we need is each other, we will stand all three together at our final judgment. But maybe God aside she's always regretted not aborting me. Maybe she regrets that I had been born at all. Maybe she's just always waiting for me to explode with all my horrible ugliness and malevolence any second now.

Okay, it did happen once, I think it was only once, when I lost it a little. When I was really little she caught me throwing rocks at a bird. But that's just a phase all kids go through, isn't it, when you feel these hostile feelings but you're just a kid so the feelings have to cram up inside you really tight, they're squeezed hot into this puny space of your body and so it does explode sometimes, the temper, it has to explode out onto something or someone, and there was no one there, it's not like there were other kids around, she always gave some excuse why I couldn't have playmates, couldn't go with girls for Dairy Queen milkshakes after school or someone's house for a slumber party, better I stay home with her, better it was just the two of us, meaning better she keep me all to herself, so I never went and after a while other girls stopped asking me anyway, because of my freakishness. But who cares, who needs those stupid other girls and their jeering laughter, I don't, that's what I thought when I saw a bunch of them from homeroom crossing the street like to get actually away from me and go get their stupid ice cream. Okay, I guess it was only a year or so ago and I wasn't that little, but I wished they would all just drop down dead, I wanted to pick up stones to fling at them but they were gone. So there I was pelting this one little gray bird, and my mother came by in her hideous flaunted scrubs, she must have been walking home from the hospice, she started screaming at me all appalled, how can I be like that, where did that come from, she's tried so hard to raise me right and with good discipline and if Social Services ever comes to take me away it will be all my ugly-tempered fault, or maybe she'll just call them on me herself because I have a sick and morbid heart and she doesn't know what to do with me anymore. I get so scared, I really try to ignore my mother's threats, but still, that just seemed extra mean. And the bird was okay, really, it just fluttered away with a broken wing, and I tried to explain with words about my insides getting twisted up small and hot, my puny wrath, and I don't know why I'm like that sometimes, the turmoil, the anguish, and despair, I really do try to be a normal

and okay kid. But she hasn't let me forget I did that, like a ha, there it is, my wild, heathen nature bursting out of me, so maybe it's in my genes like a disease and I'm doomed.

Maybe I really am something ugly and evil. A demon offspring.

Maybe I'm not truly worthy to be loved.

Maybe that's half a truth, and half a self-delusion. I don't know.

Or maybe I'm a product of incest and that's the big mystery, there was another show about that once. Gross. Maybe she had one of those illicit love affairs with her own brother, a creepy guilty passion, but of course it's the woman who succumbs to temptation and must bear the stigma, she's told me that, the girl is always to blame, so she was the one the family blamed and set apart to infamy for her perversity and maybe that's why she never dates and keeps her hair bunned tight and lives like some dried-up nun in a cloister with only me to touch. And it would explain how she looks at me scared sometimes, because I'm inbred, I'm a born outcast, her emblem and product of sin, maybe I'll even turn out deformed one day, her mark of shame, all imprinted in the flesh, and everyone who sees me will know.

Although none of that would be my fault, right? Anything wrong with me would be all her fault, and my father's fault, who or whatever he is, they're the guilty ones, and it's really not fair for me to be the one token of her shame.

What do you do when your own mother thinks you're a freak?

But then grabs at me, hugs and kisses me all hungry like we have some secret bond, some secret intimacy of connection, it's the two of us against the world, but it's a smother love, there's not enough air in our tiny apartment or bed, I'd need the whole wide world to breathe in just to get a single breath that's my own, without her neck-breathing love, her polyester love. Her love is all grip. Her love is all leech. Her love pelts me down, and I will never be able to flutter away.

The person I don't understand is her. I don't have the right words, no matter which ones I choose.

*

It's so weird to see her there, through the window, just eating ice cream like anyone. I can never imagine her out in the world, just her round-trip trudge through town of home-hospice-home, and I wonder if I should go

in and plop down at her table and say Hi, Mom, as if we're a normal mother and daughter, and over sundaes and under Dairy Queen fluorescents I'd tell her about my algebra and American history day and she'd tell me about her dying patients, she'd point out whose bright blood stain was whose on her chest, and we'd walk home together through town, maybe even hand in hand. I'm not positive it's her, though, her back is mostly to me and her hair is rippling dark and rich down her back, and then it hits me I've never seen it loose that way, all unbunned, and that's another weird thing about my mom, and this one scares me.

But I go in, and then I see she's not alone, there is a man in the booth with her, a strange man sucking hard with fat lips on a milkshake straw. So I linger behind the soda machine to maybe catch bits of their talk, and I see him reach out and touch her hand, as if they're intimately connected. And I hate the man. I see more of my mother now, I can see most of her face, and she looks so pretty, and I think princess. There's a glow of strange enjoyment, a wild-flower prettiness about her, and I can see what can only be, okay, the only word is a happiness in my mother. I see her sex, her youth, the whole richness of her beauty as she smiles a radiant and tender smile at this man, a smile I've never seen, it's never been for me, but I guess I'm just her daughter.

Then I hear my mother's voice.

"I don't know how to deal with her," she says. "Advise me what to do."

He touches her hand again, with a triumphant smile and an air of authority, and I hear him murmur "highly disordered mental state."

And she nods again. Then,

"Only a few days longer," she says.

And it's happening, I know, I feel a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable it has the force of doom.

Then I realize she isn't wearing her scrubs, or even one of her long-sleeved crew tees, she's wearing a top I've never seen, it's a snug and skimpy sweater top like a homeroom girl would wear, with a deep deep V, I can see the exposed creamy skin of her neck and throat, the shadow deepening down between her breasts, and it's like she's sitting there stark naked, my mother, and I realize the outward guise of purity was but a lie, that she has been the evil one not me to lie for so many years, and now I think fallen woman, I think whore, and fucking hypocrite, my mother, displaying herself without fear or shame for this man, for the whole Dairy Queen, for the

whole stupid town and the rest of the wide world but me, to see.

*

I feel her get into our bed and I pretend to be asleep, I wait for the clutch of her traitor arms and I wait more until her neck-creeping breath is soft and regular and her grip loosens a bit in her sleep, and I slowly squiggle around in her arms, so I'm facing her. Her asleep face is like a mask, or, rather, like the frozen calmness of a dead woman's features, and I have never seen her so calm, gentle, so at peace.

I put my hands on the slight gap where her scrub top and tee have ridden up, and feel her belly is soft and warm, feel I'm a kitten kneading its mother's belly. I slide my hands up until I feel the soft curving weight of her in my palms, I take her pendant motherhood flesh in my hands, I press gently but firm and I hear her breath change in her sleep, the leap of heart thump beneath my hand, the sound from the back of her throat like a cat purr, and her nipple slips between my fingers and I squeeze and squeeze, it grows larger and harder and longer and I hear my mother's moan. I bend my head, hungry little kitten in its blind mewling search, I put my mouth to it, I kiss it, I lollipop lick, I take her in my mouth and suck hard, feel the swell of her in my mouth as I suck and suck, I want to draw her into me, more of her, so I bite, I use my teeth and her moan turns to a gasp, then a sudden start, and a struggle and cry of pain, I feel her try to push me away, free herself from my grip but I'm not letting go, my grip is harder than hers ever was because this belongs to me, and I bite hard, I bite beyond bruise, feel the sweet cream of her turn to salt in my mouth, I see the bright scarlet stain on her skin, and I will scar her forever, I will brand her so the world will know it is my love crushed so deeply into her heart and when she forever looks down and sees the mark upon her breast she will know that she is mine.

POETRY

“Homo Americanus,” “The Charm and the Dread,” “Betimes”

Rodrigo Toscano

HOMO AMERICANUS

freeform hollerin’ at the Lit conference (in syllabics)

1.

No. We don’t want you to breathe in—then out.

No need to stand up, stretch out, twirl your wrists.

Most assuredly, no incantations

Are being asked of you, not a single word.

Know what, Jack, Jill? *Scrap* the four directions.

Your identities and ours beside yours

On a coat rack at the door, quite comfy

How much *whacking* can your piñata take?

Yes, you stand on stolen land, you may now

Zounds! Methinks my station merits the ploy

Which, under *these* conditions, is public

Though you're planted on private property.

We do acknowledge *that*: the conditions

The one thousand directions not to take

At this after *after* party, we call

Anarcho-Tyranny Über Alles

Or, simply, The Finance Oligarchy.

Please be modest, slithering on the ground

Scooping up treats, subtracting from the whole

Our allotments of failed Liberal Schemes

Coming into view as we splinter up.

2.

Who won the prize? The prize among prizes.

A prize of a prize, you might say, a win

Over one more prize—to win—a prize, won.

Surprise! There's no prize for that. Or for this.

Piñata sticks swung blindly all at once

Is more to the point, bloody point, hobbling

Stumbling onto the arena of Kultur

But what's at a distance tracking it all?

Or, in close: poetics as *detainee*

Marks it a *fugitive*—in mind, and gut.

We were just about to jump outta here

As the smoking debris began to cool

Before the dawn of more Centrist Hokum.

But here we are, herding piss-poor students

Into the bare halls of Career Poet.

There's exactly five things a prize can do:

One: it bestowith wings to wingless works

Two: it stauncheth today's systemic wounds

Three: perchance it payeth the rent—golly

Four: it groweth wings on the fugitive

Five: it clipith the fugitive's new wings

3.

Strategies recalibrating tactics

Kind of work. Kind of what might not—is you.

Games abound this side of the barricades

One of them is Self™, as *designed* by "you"

But here's another piñata at hand

Popped out from nowhere, perplexing, tempting.

Fellow insurrectionists, lend an ear

Identity thinking stalls <hard reset>

And bullhorn this—all night long, publicly:

Old Universalisms pen us in

Where we mean to run with a New Story.

New Stories, reject Catastrophizing

Refuse a forgone Tragicomedy

Stage an Alternative Futurity

Identity thinking stalls <hard reset>

Blindfolded, Homo Americanus

Grab this trusty stick, grip it mightily

Raise it high—and on the downswing—*crack it*.

Now the bards scramble, now the bards bag up

Scraps of self, whose purpose—*they know not what*

Though it's arousing, all this newfound *pep*.

THE CHARM AND THE DREAD

a meditation in the time of COVID

Take a deep breath in.

Take a deep breath out.

In.

Out.

There is no past.

There is no future.

There is only now.

There is only now.

Trees … are hilarious.

Grass … is hilarious.

The charm of roots.

The charm of clouds.

The charm of that faucet that's leaking again.

A Dohblin ahccent (how'd the fock that get in hire?)

Take a deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

Welcome to China.

Floating flowers in air.

The crimson yellow of no past.

The charcoal pink of no future.

Trees don’t select flight seats at the time of purchase.

Grass doesn’t need to know the hotel checkout time.

Oceans.

Oceans.

Oceans.

Oceans.

Breathe in.

Hold your breath.

Don’t let it out.

Hold your breath.

Sing “New York, New York” in your chest.

Knees clacking together.

Release your breath.

Welcome to Bourbon Street.

There is only now.

Ah-dohn-deh eh-stah lah cantina deh Tequila?

Oceans.

Oceans.

Oceans.

The charm of a medivac helicopter.

The dread of a failed meditation.

The charm of another ambulance.

The dread of a failed meditation.

The charm of a virus on your fingertip.

The dread of a failed meditation.

The charm of a curved graph line.

The dread of a failed meditation.

Take a deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

Two petals.

An emerald white of no past.

A lavender orange of no future.

There is only now.

Blue, with a hint of silver.

Oceans.

Oceans.

The last puddle on your street.

The power of a cat finding it.

The last flower of a hibiscus plant.

The power of a worm chomping it down.

That damn rooster again.

The rooster again.

The rooster.

Rooster.

Rue.

Stir.

Welcome to Antarctica.

Ah-dohn-deh eh-stah – breathe in.

Icebergs.

Icebergs.

Icebergs.

Nobody.

Nobody.

Nobody told you to stop breathing.

Nobody told you to start breathing.

Nobody told you—stop goofing.

Nobody told you to stop regarding that leaky faucet.

Droplets—one by one—is music.

Birds—one by one—is music.

The clouds are hamming it up.

Your heart is hamming it up.

Your lungs are hamming it up.

Your belly is hamming it up.

Your tongue is hamming it up.

Your toes are hilarious.

Your toes have always been hilarious.

Night sky, stars.

Night sky, stars.

Night sky, stars.

BETIMES

a rhapsody for activists

Betimes, you *stall*, and by stalling, *rocket*

Betimes, you're a dead-bored worker

Betimes, a devoted worker without deep purpose

Betimes, you're a thrill-seeking slacker

Betimes, a genius co-worker—without peers

You *chose* this, you chose dialectical wreck sensational

You pounce towards direct intents unknown

You've sloughed off crooked dick nationalism

You've blown up indolence (on some occasions, eloquence)

Who can Velcro on a plasticized red wig when you want it?

Who can supply you a bronze lion future beast of victory?

Betimes, you're a *pre*-pounce poet, posing as *pouncer*

Betimes, you're a *post-pounce* as twitchy twitch

Not whatever! *Never* whatever! But *this*:

You're a *Spectral* Socialist—savage

You're a *Spectral* Socialist—civilizer

You're a *Spectral* Socialist—dirt clod on diamond

Who can futurize "The People" without the trademark?

Who enacts fire canister hierarchical reform?

Betimes, you carouse, and by carousing, arouse

Betimes, you're a "hella" (as y'all say) cat with hiss *and* claws

Betimes, you're a devotee to love slamming you to the ground

Did you really *choose* this gem? Art thou chosen?

Are you ascending now towards free-floating domes in the sky?

Have you handily sloughed off sultry stance nationalism?

Betimes, nationalisms offer *services*—left *or* right

Betimes, *intra*-nationalisms show a way out—for a fee

Who can hyper-spatialize "The People" without coordinates?

Who enacts super symmetrical justice reform?

You're a *Spectral* Socialist—bit actor

You're a *Spectral* Socialist—stunt double

You're a *Spectral* Socialist—diamond fleck on demon dung

Betimes, you *rocket*, and by rocketing, *stall*

Betimes, you *stall*, and by stalling, *rocket*

MULTIMEDIA

7-10-22

Anne Germanacos

Time is passing as we speak, as your eyes wander this line.

Or not. Are we all in a foreverness, tongues poised to taste the occasional spectacular minute infraction of the lie?

For years, I kept a journal. From the age of eleven or twelve. I turned sixty-four several days ago. I don't keep a journal in the way I once did, as if my life depended on it. I've pierced that lie.

But what to do with the fallout, because it's all, or most of it, is still there, here, in the world by which we are touched.

At the same time, I realize that journals kept with an abundance of freedom may be more important than the stories, the novel,

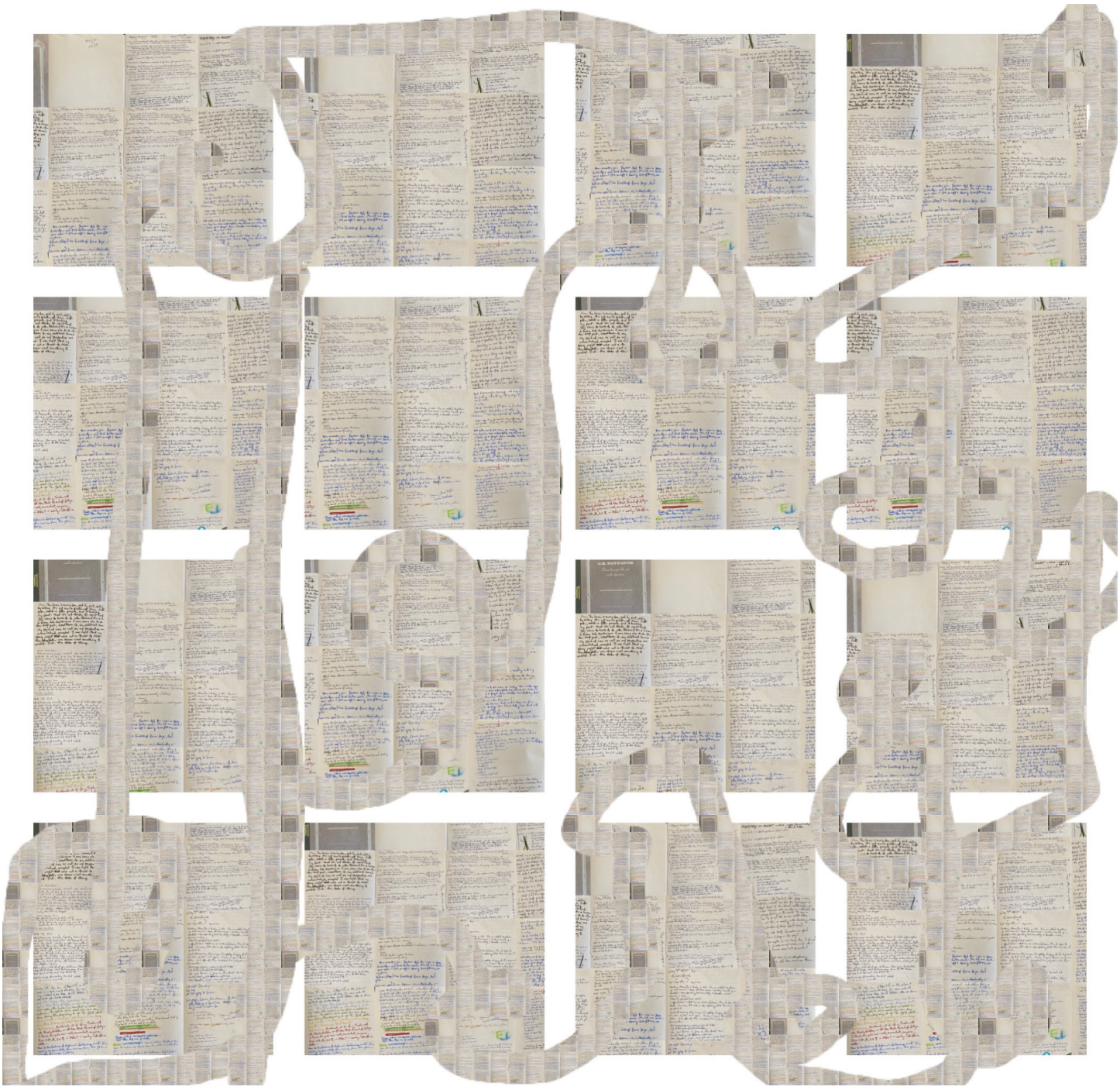
the poems, the essays. The intention was only this: to walk along beside the life, making a braid.

I've chosen to turn words into something else, something new, a visual palimpsest, the layers yielding to time through the process of erasure.

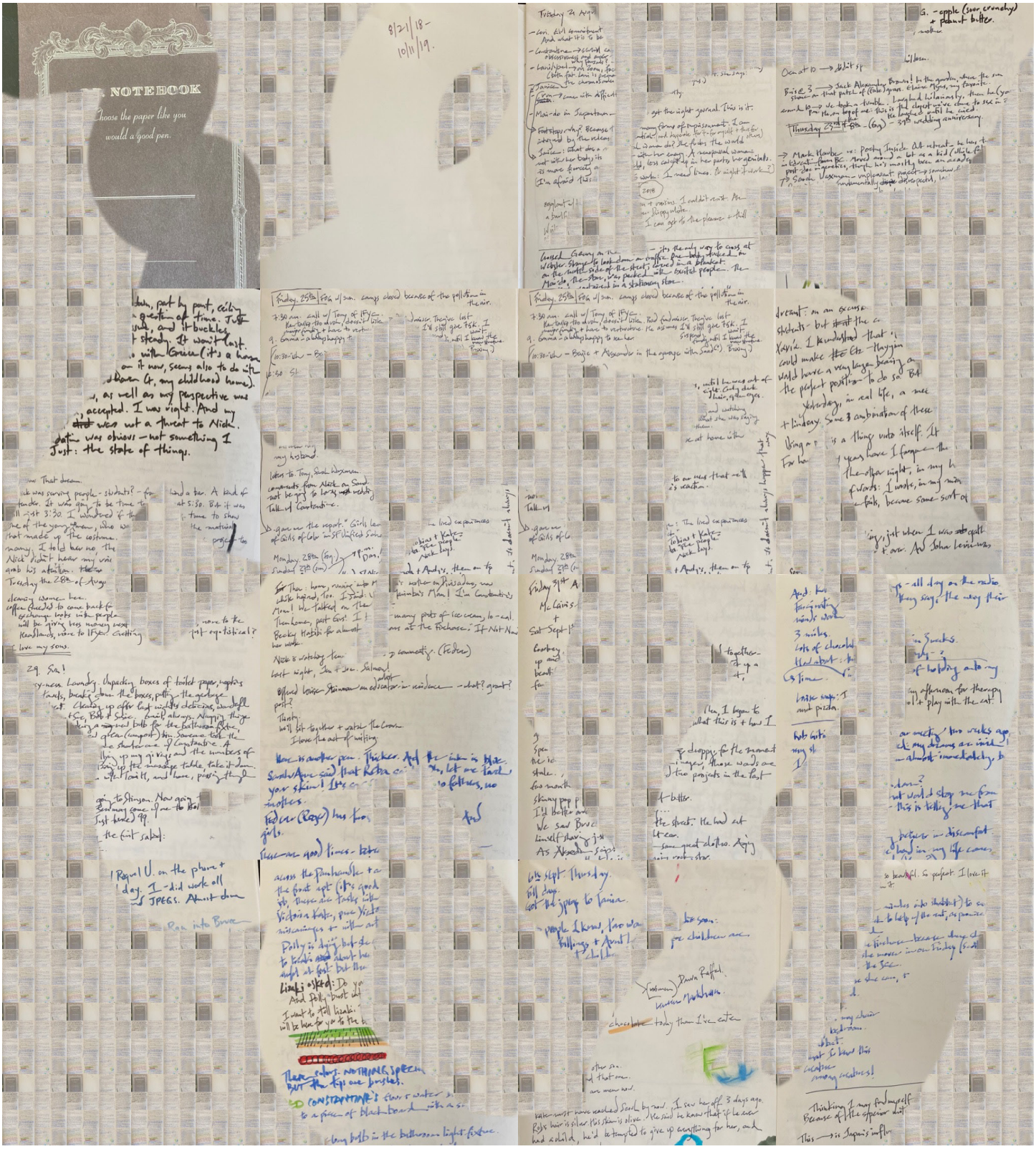
What, after all, may be revealed?

In the process, I've had no control over the way hidden layers are revealed. I don't know which words will show, which will remain hidden in the rock face of the image.

I hope to be surprised, and hope not to be embarrassed. But this is a pri-



vate project, offered to a public. Embarrassment comes with the territory. So be it. I hope not to expose anyone else's nakedness.

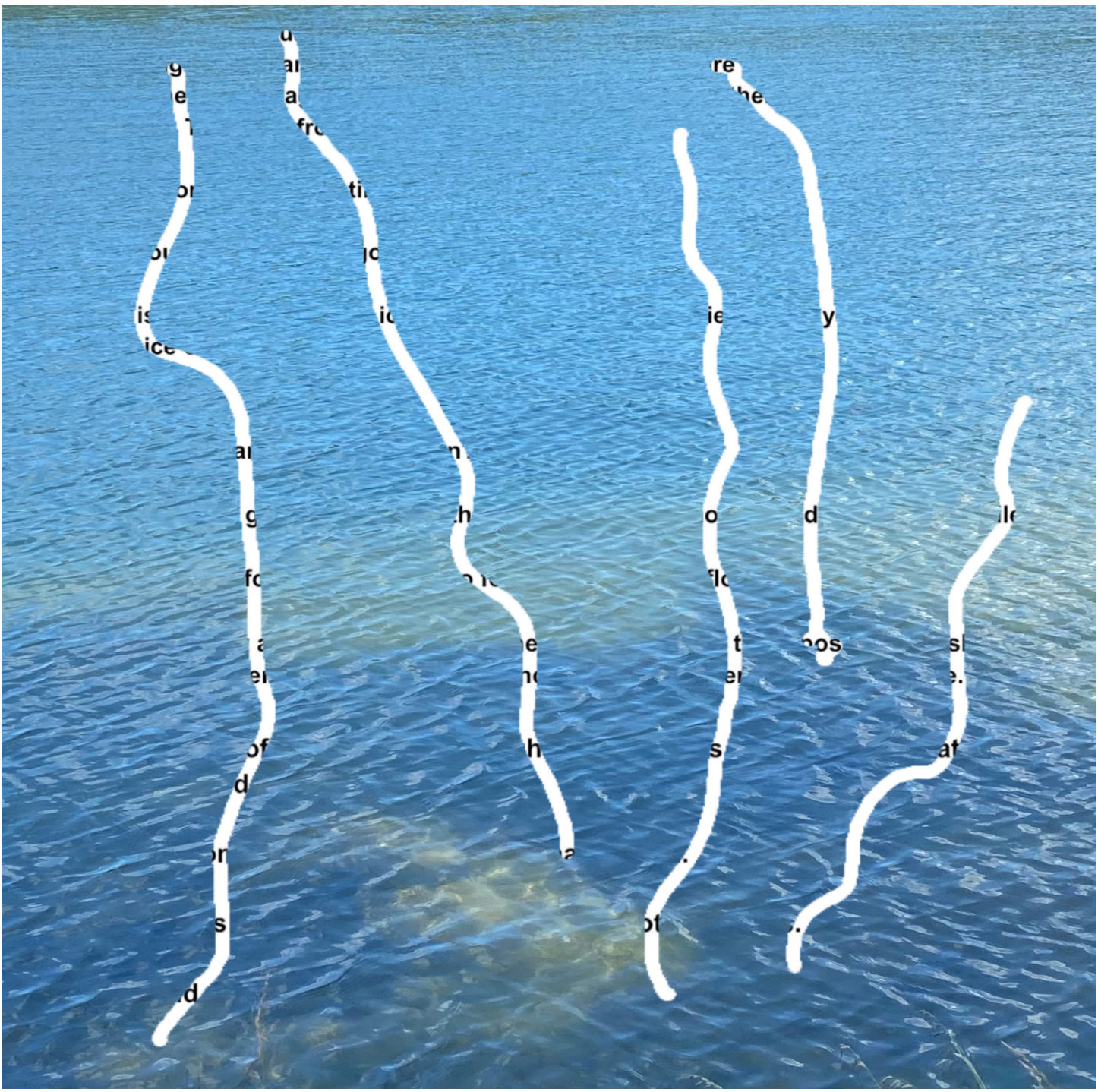


7 21 22

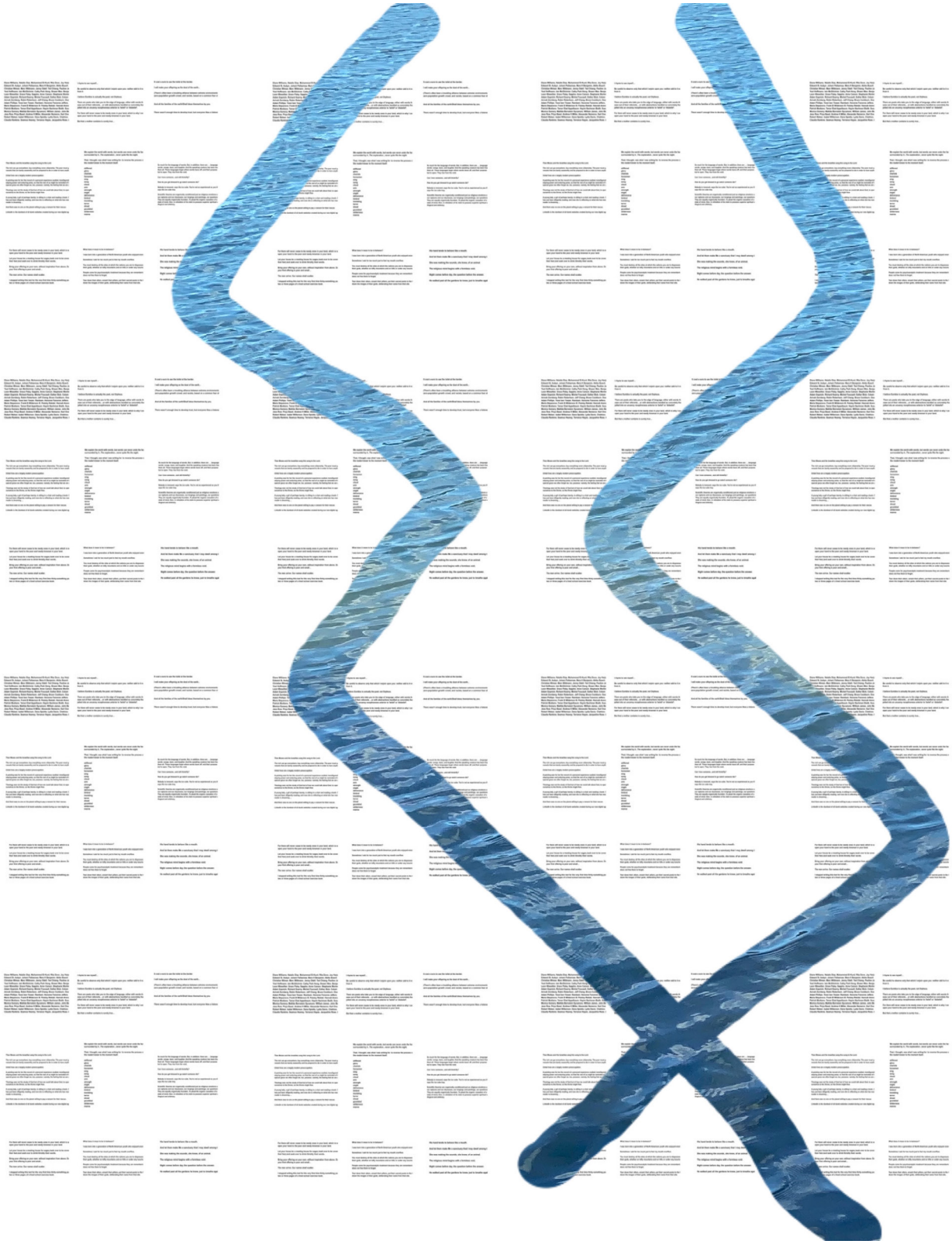
A moment I had not expected to live, a time in history so desperate for

the right words that none feel adequate.

And so I throw them out to sea, bury them in the earth, beneath sand, cover them with bark, fly them skyward with the hope that in letting them go, leaving words to go back where they came from, they may emerge with the power to touch us differently, to make meaning in entirely new ways.




ciel



POETRY

“sometimes, the light,” “No Elegy for the Magic,” “Now That I Know What I Had, I know,” “Sestina for Suzanne Lummis, Empress of Noir,” “On Creating a New Form (Maybe)”

Lynne Thompson

SOMETIMES, THE LIGHT
(Joni Mitchell’s Ode)

Blue, here is a shell for you
and sometimes, there will be sorrow,
but I have no regrets, Coyote.

We’re captive on this carousel of time,
oh, but sometimes the light.
Blue, here is a shell for you and

varnished weeds in window jars.
Why did you pick me and
do you have any regrets, Coyote?

Buy your dreams a dollar down.
Heed the trumpets' call all night.
Blue, here is a shell for you because

the more I'm with you, pretty baby,
I'm like a black crow, flying;
dark and ragged and no regrets.

Until love sucks me back that way,
dreams…dreams and false alarms
but Blue, I've got a shell for you.
What points regrets, Coyote?

NO ELEGY FOR THE MAGIC

I have never been IRS-audited
nor have I ever driven to Nome.
I have never spent a winter in sleet
and I have failed to swill any oceans,
to swan-dive from the middle of a dream.
Have you forgotten, dear reader, that
I told you about the v.vulgaris that stung
me on its way to a dying desert saguaro?

I have never died that way
because I am a little pirouette. You can't
ignore me because you can't ignore this:
we are never in peril of not being in peril,
however, I'm always a dialect preserved-
in-salted-water. I love this one magic life.

NOW THAT I KNOW WHAT I HAD, I KNOW

I got what I wanted:
a delicate brume over the city,
the crown of a bright moon.

(All this happened a long time ago,
earth rising up against each transgression.)

I had hold of a good thing
and I don't believe I knew what evil meant
between man & what shines—

(he don't know what he doin' yet,
his mornings are still comin')—
the unresolved pros and cons.

All this happened yesterday—
the peel, as of live layers of skin and age.

When I want I can remember everything:
the lake wide and long, almost
out of the reaches of the impermeable moon.

SESTINA FOR SUZANNE LUMMIS, EMPRESS OF NOIR

There is a backlot for my discontent,
the Pittsburgh of my imagination,
because it's terrible being a myth!
(Could it be my plan needs fine-tuning?)
In L.A., it gets like this at night:
everyone drunk at the party …

Everyone is drunk at this party!—
at this backlot of our discontent.
In L.A., it gets like this at night,
in this Pittsburgh of our imaginations.
Perhaps our plans need fine-tuning
because it's terrible being a myth.

Although it's never terrible being a myth
especially if everyone's drunk at the party.
None of our plans need fine-tuning
in this backlot of our discontent,
in this Pittsburgh of our imaginations.
It's just that in L.A., it gets like this at night.

It gets like this at night in the City of Angels
where everyone's story is nothing but myth,
a kind of Pittsburgh of the imagination
where everyone's drunk at the party,
splayed on a backlot of discontent,
their plans suspicious of anyone's fine-tuning.

But. Be suspicious of everyone's fine-tuning.
Remember that in L.A., it gets like this at night:
see us huddled on a backlot of discontent
where everyone's story is nothing but myth

with everyone drinking Jack Daniels at the soireé,
headed for the steel city of their imaginations.

I wonder though about the cities of imagination; I
gotta suspect everyone saying you could use fine-tuning;
come with us—everyone's got a good drink at this party.
Because I remember: L.A. gets like this at night and
anyway, everyone's story is nothing but noir & myth,
backlit on the backlot of interminable discontent.

For those who are discontent & skeptical of fine-
tuning: grab a good drink, remake all your myths as
you strut in L.A. because it gets like this every night.

ON CREATING A NEW FORM (MAYBE)

If you haven't read every poem written, it's hard to know whether you've invented a new form. But since I've never seen a poem written as a centostina (the combination of a cento and a sestina), I'm going to take pride of creation until someone proves me wrong.

What prompted me to develop this hybrid form (of which "Centostina for Suzanne Lummis, Empress of Noir" is an example) is this: Sestinas have long been the bane of my writing life. Unlike other forms, which are so pleasurable in their unfolding, in their romance or exoticism—the villanelle, the pantoum, the sonnet—the sestina has long held me in a grip of terror. I obsess endlessly about those six end-line words that have to be repeated throughout the poem instead of thinking about the poem as a whole.

Then a light went off. Why not combine a form I love with a form I loathe? Thus, the birth of the centostina!

The cento—from the Latin word for "patchwork"—is a collage composed of the lines of another poet (or group of poets) that creates an entirely new and unique poem. Homer and Virgil were early practitioners and contemporary examples can be found in the work of Nicole Sealy, Linda Bierds, John Ashbery, and Marwa Halal.

As for this centostina specifically, a group of Los Angeles poets were invited to write poems in celebration of Suzanne's generosity in teaching and sharing her work. I reread Suzanne's collection Open 24 Hours for inspiration and was struck by the "noir-ness"—a trait for which Suzanne is known—of so many of the lines. I wished they were my own. Then I realized I could make them my own if I reorganized them into a cento and, upon discovering that a mere cento wouldn't suffice, it occurred to me that the centostina would be a good way to magnify the city's noir personality as imagined in Suzanne's poems.

The lines for inclusion were chosen fairly randomly; that is, I didn't take any time to think about them in the context of the poems where they first appeared. Originally, there were about twenty-five lines that I narrowed to six, before beginning to mix and match and recombine until they created an idea of their own. The rest of the poem followed the strictures of the

sestina form: six unrhymed stanzas of six lines each, followed by an envoi of three lines that gathers and deploys the six preceding end-words. The same six end-words reappear in each of the five successive stanzas but in a set pattern of changing order.

The result: an homage that I hope Suzanne and you, dear reader, enjoy.

PORTFOLIO

Give Me Shelter

Wendy Murray

I took a sublet on Marion Avenue for a month, not just because it was super charming and cozy, but because the signs pointed to a good thing. Marion is my mom's name, and Angelino Heights has intrigued me since my first Halloween there in 2019. When drawing en plein air there last year, I met some lovely folks and Saturday nights are exciting for this rev-head. It's also super close to the number 4 bus line—the Santa Monica bus—that stops at random times at Sunset/Marion and then belts straight up Sunset. You might not have noticed my stop as the Metro 4 stop sign is dominated by the large, colorful Highway Gothic sign, urging you to avoid public transport and get on the 101.

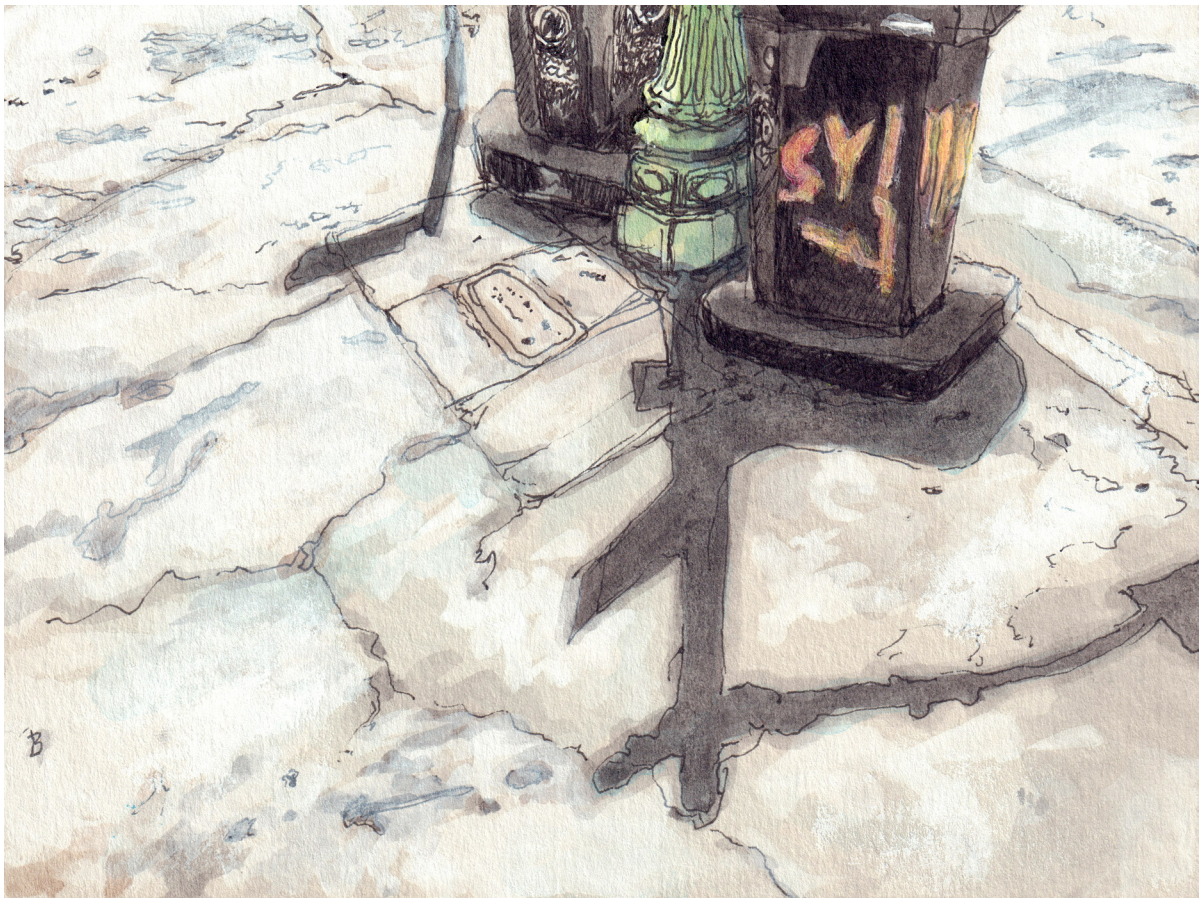
There's no permanent shelter at my bus stop. I try to catch the bus to work early, to ensure I make it on time, and avoid the relentless summer sun. The buildings on the inbound side have been knocked down for a massive new development, although the digger sits idle every morning. The only shade is cast by the two trash cans, a bench, a pole, and the streetlamp.

In the early mornings, if someone isn't sleeping on the bus stop bench, I can sit in the shade. But by mid-morning, it's a perilous situation to avoid the sun—I wedge myself between the pole and the curb—facing the oncoming traffic on Sunset. In the late afternoon, I stand awkwardly to fit within the sliver of thin shadow cast by the streetlight, or I huddle way too close to a rancid black trash can.

When the trash cans are open, they become ominous, wide-mouthed monsters—I've seen folks lean into them and fear they will be lost forever.

Even with a mask on, that bin smells terrible, but I figure that's better than skin cancer. After growing up under the hole in the ozone layer in New Zealand, and having had skin lesions removed, the last thing my body needs is more sun.

Mondays are the worst. The taco stand has blown up and is bustling with queues five nights a week. Dodger weekends are so busy that by Monday morning, the sidewalk is oily enough to make me slip, and it smells like a



***Wendy Murray, 3:13PM Saturday 6 August 2022**, acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*

grease trap getting emptied. The remnants of the food and garbage make the stop feel like a festival ground—the day after the festival. It's a shame "It Never Rains in Southern California": to clean the streets, water the plants,

Wendy Murray, 3:01PM Wednesday 3 August 2022, *acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*

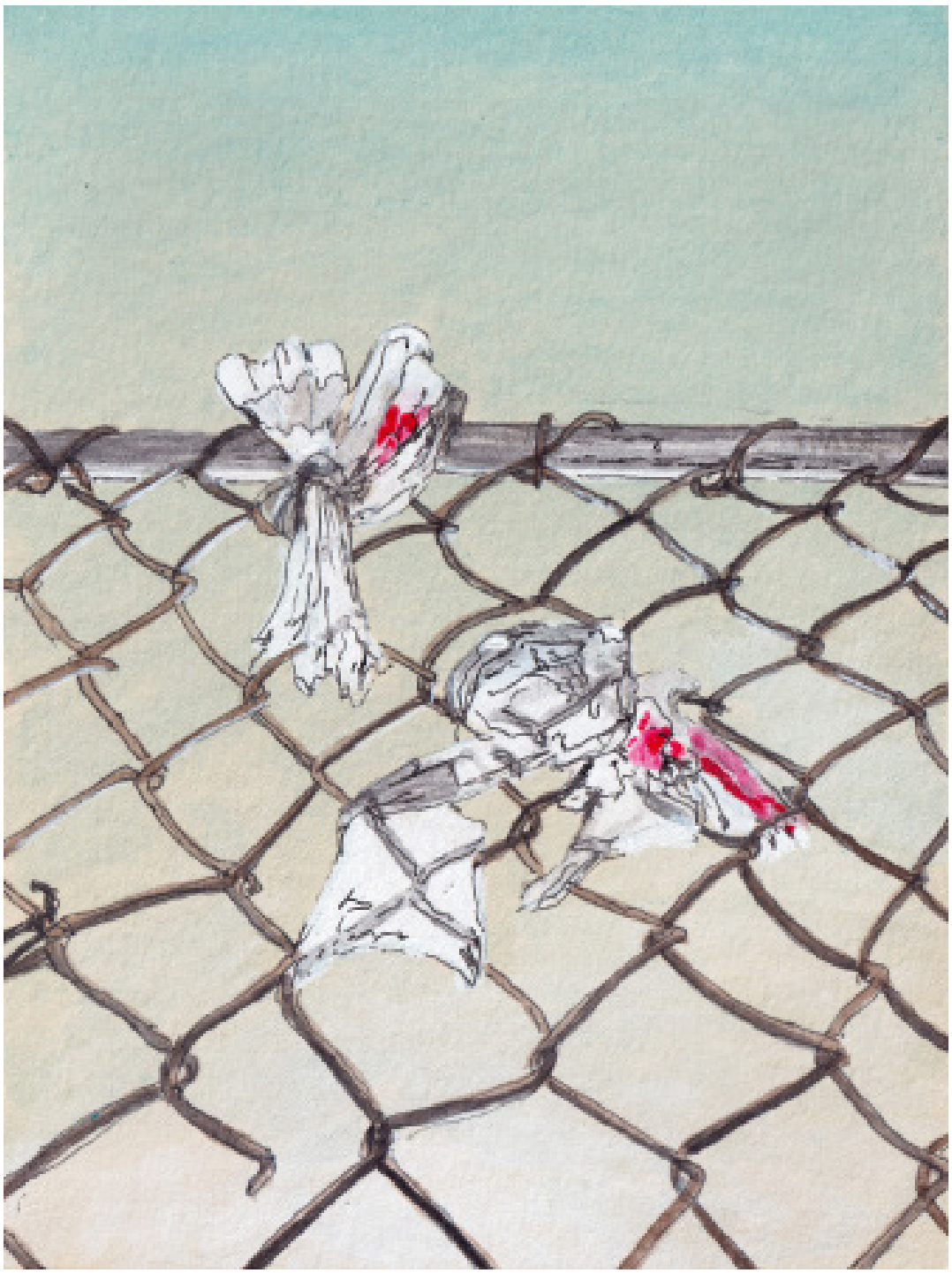
Wendy Murray, 3:45PM Friday 12 August 2022*, acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*

Wendy Murray, 1:05PM Thursday 11 August 2022*, acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*

***Wendy Murray, 12:56PM Thursday 28 July 2022**, acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*

Wendy Murray, 11:22AM Sunday 24 July 2022*, acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*

***Wendy Murray, 1:32PM Monday 1 August 2022**, acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*



***Wendy Murray, 2:30PM Saturday 30 July 2022**, acrylic on museum board, 16 x 12cm*

DIARY

On Being and On Being the Right Size

Rob Bowman

Part 1

I just didn't feel very good.

It wasn't turning forty that upset me; birthdays aren't big deals to me. I don't need presents or anyone to say anything. It's another day. I don't remember being born, and besides, I had little part in it, although it was difficult and painful for my mom; it feels like a day when I should call and apologize to her every year, say thank you, apologize again. Instead, I celebrate all the other things. I surprise people with gifts when I think of them or see something they would like. It has resulted in awkward moments and a peculiar selfishness—what should one do when given a gift with no warning? It puts them out, the recipients, but I never think of that until it is too late and I have already made it uncomfortable.

Birthdays feel at best like a social obligation and, at worst, a sad competition. I remember turning older than John Keats ever did and feeling like a failure. I remember turning older than all those dead twenty-seven-year-old rockers and feeling like a failure. I'm now older than John Lennon will ever be. I'm also older than my cousin who died at six, who didn't get a chance to live at all. We sat in her hospital room and talked to her, comatose and bloated, pumped full of steroids and chemo and painkillers, body exhausted from surgeries that put holes in her but not much else that I could ascertain.

So I'm not one for birthdays.

And forty didn't scare or worry me. I figured most of those years were

kind of a waste anyhow, working to become someone interesting. Or, if not a waste, then time spent hiding in a chrysalis, working to become beautiful and grow wings, but I had stayed there too long, emerged withered and with muted colors. At forty, I figured I was as beautiful, in one sense or another, as I would ever be. Either way, I wasn't likely to get much more interesting, only to grow more sleepy and dull.

The issue was that everything itched.

My wife and I had just come back from a date, relieved the babysitter, and settled in to watch a small piece of a movie, to which we expected to fall asleep. But I couldn't settle in because of the itching. I had been having a hard time getting comfortable. I was taking hair loss pills and every stray strand on my pillow made me readjust my body until I was considering sleeping upright, strapped to a board against the wall. I had also accidentally yanked a chunk of nail from my right big toe. The resulting infection had me on antibiotics and off that foot as much as I could.

My health has generally been good with blips of catastrophe. My first year teaching I had a seizure in front of students. I was thirty-one or thirty-two, old enough to know how to take care of myself and young enough to think I didn't need to do so yet. I was working all the time, writing lesson plans, grading, trying to stay a day ahead but sometimes only managing a few minutes. I adored my students and they at least tolerated me. Then, one afternoon, my stress levels were so high, my brain broke.

Here's how it happened: I was lecturing when I noticed the class looking at me with more puzzlement than usual. After a moment, I heard myself, what I had just said. It sounded weird but I couldn't figure out how. When I spoke again, I understood. All the words were right but they were in the wrong order. The sensation was disconcerting, as if I had begun this essay: "Very just good didn't I feel." I spoke a second sentence and the words were in the right order except for the first letters of the words: "Bust ot none jor firthdays." I forced a laugh and tried to wave away my students' concern, but then my right side stopped working and I realized I had dropped my paper and pen.

My vision swam. I fell down.

The students in the front row were football players. They were in their jerseys so it must have been a Friday. They leapt from their seats and picked me up, put me in my chair. They wanted to call 911, but I said not to. I concentrated and spoke slowly. *I'm fine. Just work on your pages. I'm fine. I'm*

fine. They worked; class ended. I sat in that chair and waited to feel better. That young, early thirties, I still felt mostly invincible if a bit stiff in the morning when I woke up. But just then I slumped in the chair, breathing and hoping, no longer certain of anything.

The human body is complex. Hoping to restore it through willpower is the kind of nonsense many people believe. For me, it had more to do with desperation than with hope.

Plainly, I don't much care for my body. It's a ridiculous and ludicrous machine.

*

Not long ago, I read the essay "On Being the Right Size" by J.B.S. Haldane. It led me to a collection of his work and a biography by Samanth Subramanian, *A Dominant Character*. Haldane is as equated with brilliance in England as Einstein is in the United States. But I hadn't heard of him until I ran into that essay, which I read only because someone else had cited it. In the essay, as I recall, Haldane discusses the sizes of various animals, including elephants, and what would happen if they were dropped from the top of a skyscraper.

Or not. On checking again, I discover that Haldane considers, rather, dropping the animal down a mine shaft. I have never stood on the precipice of a mine shaft, but I have been at the top of a couple of skyscrapers. I suppose the skyscraper would be easier to find but it would be harder to get the animals up there, elevators not being suitable for elephants. The mine shaft would be easier to clean up. Just close the mine, leave the carcasses, a mass grave with direct access, a place upon which to drop flares and point telescopes downward. The pavement, alternatively, would be a mess.

Haldane writes that one "can drop a mouse down a thousand-yard mine shaft; and, on arriving at the bottom, it gets a slight shock and walks away. A rat is killed, a man is broken, a horse splashes." *Holy shit*. A horse *splashes*. It's the most violent thing I have ever read and I have read some terrible things.

Is the difference between a mouse and a rat so great?

Is the man simply broken? Broken things can be mended. A man is obliterated, presumably. The important parts at least. The body may be recognizable, I suppose, way down there, but who is going down to look? Drop

him onto the street and someone will amble over to see who it is, horrified but curious.

*

I found my way to the hospital after my seizure, or whatever it was. I am tempted to call it my *episode* but that feels too Tennessee Williams to me. In the ER, I called my fiancée, who met me there, and also called my parents, who drove over. Every single person—family, nurses, doctors—upon their arrival asked why I had driven myself, why I hadn't taken an ambulance.

Or at least a taxi.

It hadn't occurred to me. My brain was broken. They ran tests and told us that either my brain or my heart were faulty and that soon, they would have to crack open my skull or my rib cage. They just had to take some tests to figure out which and then, I suppose, grab the appropriate saw.

Every test was inconclusive. Something had happened but no one could say what. They decided not to slice me open. Instead, I had a CAT scan, an EKG. I had good insurance, so every test was ordered. Wires were stabbed into my scalp in places designated with a marker. I was asked about a variety of topics while a screen lit up with different colors to create a fuzzy map of my brain. This is called an EEG. Something I just read tells me that a series of metallic discs are placed on the patient's head. I remember being stabbed. So much of the hospital is hazy but this definitely happened to me.

In an essay called "When I Am Dead," Haldane writes that if he dies "as most people die, I shall gradually lose my intellectual faculties, my senses will fail, and I shall become unconscious." It is a perfect description of those moments before the football players picked me up and carried me, not in some kind of victorious end-game ecstasy, to set me in a chair, looks of concern all around.

The EEG was inconclusive. Everything was inconclusive.

"Does that mean everything is okay?"

"It means we can't tell."

"So I'm not okay?"

"We don't know."

It may have been some freak occurrence, a bolt from the blue, a random lightning storm in my brain. I'm reminded of a woman in British Columbia,

Ruth Hamilton, who was sound asleep when others saw a bright light streak across the sky. Hamilton woke to a crashing sound and the feel of something, many small somethings, against her face. A meteorite had crashed into her home, straight through the roof, the attic, her bedroom ceiling, and landed on her pillow. It lay there, stopped by the softest thing in the room.

Hamilton woke in a panic, thinking someone had shot a gun. She called the police. Together, they figured out what happened. The space rock was next to her head. Another few inches and she'd have been obliterated. Asked how the experience changed her, Hamilton said: "The only other thing I can think of saying is life is precious and it could be gone at any moment even when you think you are safe and secure in your bed. … I hope I never ever take it for granted again."

The interviewer asked if she had any interest now in stargazing or astrology or anything like that.

She didn't. She had her answers and no further questions. All I had were questions. My fiancée kept wanting me to make more appointments, to seek the answers, but there didn't seem to be any. I stopped asking questions even though I still had them.

*

I didn't have a headache. I was just fuzzy. As is my wont, I looked up some patron saints. Saint Teresa of Avila is for headaches. Saint Peregrine Laziosi is for those who suffer from AIDS, heart disease, cancer, all the bad diseases, a catch-all saint for the worst things. I imagine Saint Peregrine to be very busy … if, that is, prayers are heard.

But of course, they aren't, are they?

I think about my cousin. My cousin's daughter, really. The six-year-old. I refer to her in conversation as my niece but that isn't true. She died of leukemia, and my cousin, a devout woman, prayed so hard her hands bruised. I tried to pray but it felt silly. We were close, the six-year-old and I. We went to the movies, ate junk food. When she died, parts of me withered and died as well. She would be twenty-five now. At the end, the very end, Make-A-Wish arranged for an early screening of *Finding Nemo* in the hospital, set up a projector and everything. It was all very secretive.

My cousin narrated the movie to her daughter, explaining what was on the

screen because the girl's face was so swollen with steroids that her eyes had been squeezed shut. She was on forced oxygen and the mask was strapped onto her face, not some tube under her nose. It looked like something for an astronaut. The girl's hair had been that thin and soft hair of young children. It was a kind of honey blonde. But then, after that hair fell out, what replaced it was dark and coarse, and not just on her scalp. She grew thick eyebrows and a beard. A six year old girl with a black beard.

Was it the next day? Two days later? I couldn't be in the room, sat in the hall.

They turned off her machinery and she died.

*

Zooids aren't just a single animal. Or more accurately, they are one animal but function as a system of animals, coming together to create a larger and more sophisticated creature, creature as society. They are sometimes called colonial animals. It's unclear to me how to distinguish zooids from animals that aren't zooids. What about ants? They live in colonies and create a unified whole in service of their queen. What about wolves in packs? Or people in, well, nearly everything we do?

Is the collective the zooid?

What does individual mean in this capacity?

There's an essay in which Lewis Thomas describes an art installation that is basically a bunch of ants. First he explains how insects, like any creature, are different in isolation than together. "When social animals are gathered together in groups, they become qualitatively different from what they were when alone or in pairs," he writes. I like the "in pairs" part. That I can still be who I am when I'm with another person, depending, I suppose, on who that person is. Maybe you. Maybe together we could still be who we are.

But Thomas is just warming up.

"Single locusts are quiet, meditative, sessile things," he continues, "but when locusts are added to other locusts, they become excited, change color, undergo spectacular endocrine revisions, and intensify their activity until, when there are enough of them packed shoulder to shoulder, they vibrate and hum with the energy of a jet airliner and take off." Hold on, locusts are *meditative*? On what does a locust meditate?

I didn't know the word "sessile." It describes an organism that is locked

down in one place. Picture a barnacle. It doesn't move. Though, of course, if it is affixed to the hull of a boat, it may travel the oceans many times over, something I'd love to do. When searching "sessile," the first result is "sessile polyp." These are masses that can build up in the walls of hollow organs. You don't want one. It doesn't lead to good things. Just more tests. Wires, x-rays, scans.

*

"Does that mean everything is okay?"
"It means we can't tell."
"So I'm not okay?"
"We don't know."

*

The largest ant colony in the world is so big it's hard to comprehend. It's in Europe. In a way, it *is* Europe. It stretches some 3,700 miles from the Spanish coast across the south of France, into northern Italy. If a person were to take an ant from the Spanish end and drop it next to an ant from the Italian end, they could communicate. They would recognize each other as belonging to the same colony. Some researchers believe this colony may be even larger, spreading across oceans to Australia, Japan, and Hawaii. I couldn't find an explanation of how that might happen. I can't make it work in my head.

It's an Argentine ant, the species. They were introduced into Europe only eighty years ago but have been wildly successful. There is an ant colony in Hokkaido, Japan that *looks* like 45,000 separate nests, but it turns out all of them are connected by tunnels. Meanwhile, I still don't know how to make and keep friends as an adult.

I've tried. I really have.

*

I think about the cells in my body and the little tunnels and rivulets that connect them, how all these things compose the logic of *me*. I can't wrap my head around it. I'm sure most of us have had this thought and outgrown it, but I haven't managed yet. What if one of those little ant nests were to be snuffed out? What if a bad kid poured gasoline in it and lit it up, like the kids in my neighborhood used to beg their dads to do? They would pour the gas slowly down the hole and tell the children "stand back, stand back," before dropping the match. Sometimes it didn't light but sometimes it went with a *whump* and every so often, it would burn like a ghostly dirt candle, a little flame dancing for minutes as ants crawled out and burned to death. We used to laugh and clap and run around like monsters. If someone burned one of the nests and got it down to 44,999, would the whole ecosystem collapse and fall apart?

Part 2

I was forty and I didn't feel very good. And then I started dying.
Not existentially, but quickly, shockingly, actually.

*

When reading Haldane, you have to look past certain things. His ideas require us to take them with a certain amount of salt. A grain. Two. A hillock. Haldane's views on race are appalling, as is his defense of the Soviet Union. How could he not have known, a man of his brilliance?

A hillock is smaller than a hill but has nearly double the number of letters. It's a word equally charming and ungainly. I love it. Haldane would certainly have used it, known that a hillock is not only a small hill but a bit away from other hills, a topographical outcast, a runt.

*

Haldane has as many troubles understanding what makes up his body as I do with mine. While I see myself in a ludicrous, living Play-Doh sort of way, Haldane regarded his brain as more than the atoms that smashed and swirled in his skull.

"It seems immensely unlikely to me that mind is a mere by-product of matter," he writes in "When I Am Dead." What he's saying is that there *must* be something else, right? Some kind of something? Soul?

"I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms," he goes on. "… I am compelled to believe the mind is not wholly conditioned by matter." The hope is that, after death, his mind will merge with an infinite mind. But he knows this is really more a comforting thought than a substantial idea, writing, "The belief in my own eternity seems to me indeed to be a piece of unwarranted self-glorification, and the desire for it a gross concession to selfishness."

Well, shit. If Haldane's self-glorification is unwarranted, who am I to seek anything at all?

*

Everything itched.

I wondered if the dog had brought in something and rubbed it on the couch or if one of my sons had done something, some prank. Is itching powder still a thing? I remember ads in the back of comic books alongside x-ray glasses that theoretically would let you see through clothing of the 1950s. But my boys don't read comics; they get their superheroes from the movies, and besides, they wouldn't have the cash to send or a stamp to send it with. My wife and I tried to settle on the couch but I couldn't stop clawing at myself.

"What are you doing?"

"It itches."

"What does?"

We wiped off the couch and I jumped in the shower, but it didn't make a difference. My wife fell asleep and I went to bed, but sleep wouldn't come. I masturbated, hoping that would help. It didn't. There is some strange and humiliating truth that even when everything hurts and the biological alarms are going off, the reproductive system is happy to step up to the task.

I was lying in bed and swallowing hard. What was going on?

This swallowing wasn't an emotional gulping; it was the only way to keep thin threads of saliva from the back of my throat. I wondered if my throat

was closing. A few years earlier, a chef with whom I'd worked had an allergic reaction and his throat closed. He gasped and thrashed in front of his boyfriend as the boyfriend begged him to not die.

He died.

I packed a shoulder bag with a phone charger, some gum, and something to read, made sure my insurance card was in my wallet, grabbed lip balm (I can't fall asleep without a fresh layer). I kissed my wife on the forehead.

"I'm going to the ER."

"Do you need me to take you?"

"No. I'm sure I'm fine."

But I wasn't sure I was fine. If I had been, why would I have gone? I didn't want to worry her and I didn't want to wake the kids.

Besides, I had a small pattern of making middle-of-the-night trips to the ER. This was probably my third in the eight years we had been together. She barely stirred. I drove to the hospital, thinking either my throat was closing and I should drive quickly or that I was overreacting and would be sent home. I should have called a taxi or a car service or an ambulance. *Why didn't you?* someone asked me later in the emergency room.

It didn't occur to me.

I parked in a distant lot because ER parking had a time limit. I worried that the staff would turn me away. I had developed a twitch on top of my incessant scratching. Twitch is inadequate as either verb or noun; these were more like tiny convulsions, seismic things that moved in a human version of geologic time, not one right after another, but with gaps that could make them seem unrelated although I knew they weren't, that they were part of a string of spasms or possibly a single extended seizure taking breaks, deep breaths, and pauses.

In my head, I rehearsed a story to justify my situation. I'm a teacher. I'm not on drugs. Everything itches and now I'm starting to shake but the shaking is more like a surprise contortion and I can feel my joints stretch. My stomach hurts. I'm worried I may void my bowels (does "void my bowels" make me sound like I deserve attention?). Can you hear me? I'm wondering because my throat might be closing and maybe the words are just in my head. I swear I'm not making this up, though there's nothing you can see, no blood or anything like that. I swear I'm telling the truth. Please believe me.

My wife thinks I'm either exaggerating or at death's door, and there is rarely an in-between. When I had kidney stones the first time, I called my mom

and she insisted it was nothing. I told my roommate, who rushed out and bought every stomach-related medication at the convenience store. It cost a small fortune at that time. I tried to choke down a chewable Pepto Bismol but threw up as I writhed on the floor. My roommate drove me to the hospital and I tried not to cry. But I did because I thought my insides had ruptured and why not cry at a time like that? My mom still feels guilty over that.

I didn't have insurance then. They sent me home with a screen that looked like the nets used to capture goldfish from the pet store tank. I was told to urinate through the screen to catch the stone and take it back in so they could analyze it, but I knew I couldn't afford that. Even so, I used the screen anyway, eager to see what the stone looked like. It came out with, honestly, thorns, long spikes as if it were a biological Sputnik, carrying signals from inner space. I would have liked to know its history, but I was left to imagine the reasons—possibly having to do with drinking too much coffee and booze and not enough water—from a list online. I've cleaned up my act but have also had more stones in the years since. I fire them straight into the toilet, groaning and sweating and dribbling blood, sitting, hunched or sometimes gripping the handrail if I'm in public. Then I go about my day. I could tell someone, but what would it matter?

Would the nurse believe me? That was what mattered. The waiting area had a few families; they looked at me as I came in. People in ER waiting rooms look to see if the new arrivals are worse off than they are—an "at least I don't have to deal with that" feeling while also hoping it is nothing serious, not out of good will so much as hoping it won't push them further down the waitlist. We have been here so long and the baby is crying and I don't know how to afford this and my god this room is crowded and every time the doors open and they call a name I wish it was mine or my child's or my husband's or my wife's, they are all I have and I want them healthy and my pain is real, please treat me, treat mine, don't let anyone else delay what we need. I walked in and everyone looked at me and I didn't know if it was because I was the only white guy or because I had changed out of my pajamas into slacks and a button up because I want the doctors and nurses to know that, I don't know, I respect their place of work.

Hello and how do you do?

I'm unfailingly polite at the hospital. When I went in for the kidney stones, the guy next to me had been stabbed. Or was it shot? Either way, every

doctor or nurse who addressed him was called "motherfucker." Between bouts of vomiting, I asked my doctors and nurses how their days were, and I was treated brilliantly. Until they heard I didn't have insurance. Then there were a lot of embarrassed looks.

I wanted to be polite to the admissions nurse. The waiting families didn't look away. Without glancing up, the nurse told me to sign in and that they would see me when they got to me. It was a busy night, full house.

Then she raised her eyes and her mouth fell open.

"Go back there right now." She looked at the security guard and he hit the button and I walked back. The nurse met me around on the other side of the security door and walked me to an empty chair, said there weren't any beds but she would tell someone right away, right away, sit down, right away. I was glad to sit. When not convulsing, I was shivering. I asked if there was a bathroom I could use. I was still worried I would void my bowels and told her so. She pointed to a door nearby.

I figured I must look pretty bad, but what had the nurse seen that caused her to blanche and send me straight back?

*

Aspen tree groves aren't groves, not really. Groves are groups of trees but a grove of aspen is a group of tree, singular. In Colorado, people drive to the mountains to watch aspen leaves go from green to gold, and if you don't pick the right weekend, you miss the most dramatic changes. The colors ripple across the mountains and the valleys in waves, causing a static undulation.

When I was a boy, a man drove around the neighborhood in a pickup truck stuffed with aspen seedlings, each about five feet tall and spindly. He knocked on doors and offered to plant them in your yard, wherever you wanted, get them all set, tree and labor included in the price. My dad said, *sure, let's line that back fence*, and he had five put in. *Why not more?* I asked, and he told me they'd grow and fill in the space, that it wouldn't be five trees. It would be more.

How?

Because, he went on, aspen aren't like other trees. They spread under-

ground and then their roots shoot out of the ground and start a new tree except it isn't a new tree, it's a part of the existing tree, spreading like a paper-skinned disease. I'd look for the tendrils and, sure enough, there they'd be, coming up along the fence but also in the grass, by the porch. I'd run the lawnmower over them and feel the mower shudder.

That's what's in the mountains.

One particular expanse of aspen has a name, Pando, which is Latin for "I spread." It covers well over one hundred acres of Colorado. Michael C. Grant, a professor of ecology at the University of Colorado, named Pando with his colleagues and calculated its weight as in excess of thirteen million pounds. This far eclipses any other contender for heaviest living thing, although it also feels like a cheat. The largest sequoias may weigh less than half of that, but they are single trees. Still, Pando is an entity unto itself—or *him*self, since he is biologically a male and has done this without a partner of any kind.

These trees are also known as "quaking aspen" because of how delicately the leaves move at even the gentlest breeze. Early French Canadian trappers and settlers believed the leaves trembled in fear because it was from aspen that the cross was made upon which Jesus was crucified. There are stories that the wood from that particular aspen was so stricken with grief and remorse after the death of Christ that it passed that on to all the other trees. Of course, that makes more sense if they are all, basically, the same tree, curiously immortal and regenerative.

When people go to see the leaves change, they aren't seeing one tree after another shift. They are watching the entire tree complex shut down for winter, watching the spread from one limb to the next. When we go to watch the aspen change, we actually are witnessing a single tree collapse in waves.

Grant called Pando "The Trembling Giant."

*

I tried to move my bowels but my guts were only setting off alarms. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw what the nurse had seen. Like the

aspen, my foliage had changed and I was shutting down. My skin was a uniform, perfectly even red, from the edge of my scalp where my hair recedes to below the neckline of my shirt. I pulled down my pants and my legs matched. My arms were so red that my many tattoos appeared to have washed away. My eyes were as red as if they had been painted, only a small black dot at the center of each. I looked like I had been dunked in blood.

It was then that I became scared.

I grabbed one of those circular green vomit receptacles, filled it with a thin bile, threw it away, filled another. Sat back down. I didn't want to ask for anything I could reach myself, still so polite. A nurse asked if I needed anything quickly. A cup of water, perhaps? I asked for a blanket as I was freezing suddenly, trembling so hard myself the convulsions had become hard to see. My teeth rattled in my jaw, as though loosened from the bone. He got me the blanket, which had been warmed. I wrapped it around myself and was grateful. I trembled slightly less. Then I fell out of the chair and landed on the floor, which was cold against my cheek.

I couldn't tell whether or not I liked the way it felt.

Falling out of the chair wasn't a falling out of consciousness. I was aware and awake. Closing my eyes, I felt, would be a form of surrender. I was hesitant even to blink. I saw the lacquered cement floor close to my face and I felt myself go limp against it. I wondered what had last been spilled there, when it had been cleaned and scrubbed. Was I the first person ever to lie down here? It seemed possible. The nurse who had brought the blanket stood me up and put me on a bed, wheeled me into a newly empty bay, took my vitals, and began to shout. Every person in the hospital, it seemed, ran toward me, each of them shouting in turn.

I smiled at everyone.

"Thank you for seeing me," I said. "I really appreciate it."

Then I went into convulsions so powerful, so jagged, I thought my bones would break.

*

Lots of things can cause uncontrollable itching and the collapsing of one's organs. The scabies mite is one. It burrows into the skin and feeds on every

bit of you it can find. Then, it defecates into your bloodstream, your vascular system little more than plumbing; the microscopic excrement causes the itching. And the sores, the crusting of your skin. Humans tend to pass on mites through skin-to-skin contact, mostly sex. There is also a roundworm parasite called *onchocerca volvulus*. It invades your body through the bite of a particular black fly then remains unnoticed inside you until it doesn't. The tiny corpse causes intense itching and triggers an immune system reaction so intense it causes blindness. The parasite seems to exist primarily in Africa and a chunk of South America.

It stays there? I wonder about that.

*

How did those ants make it to Europe?

Part 3

When all those doctors and nurses came running in, I felt important. Never before nor since have so many people been so keenly interested in my well-being, not at family reunions or birthday parties. Not anywhere.

"What's wrong? What happened? Did you take something?"

"I'm on antibiotics for a busted toe." I was embarrassed for the next thing. "And I'm on hair loss pills. I'm losing my hair."

"Anything else? You can tell us. What else?"

"Nothing."

"We need to take your blood. We need to test what is going on with you. You can tell us. We are going to find out anyway. You can tell us what is going on. Save us the time. Come on."

But there was nothing to admit to.

*

Maybe it's sepsis, I heard a doctor saying. Get that blood test right away to find out. I asked what sepsis was. It's an infection in your bloodstream.

Like you've been poisoned. I thought about that, a kind of self-poisoning.

*

Onchocerca volvulus sounds like a spell one would cast to poison a person's bloodstream, mumbled under the breath while rubbing a talisman, a lock of hair, a piece of paper with blood smeared across it, staring at a photo with some parts of it scratched out.

When scientists measure how poisonous a snake is, this is the scale they use: how many mice could be killed with the venom from a single bite. There is one snake called the Terciopelo, which means velvet in Spanish, but it is also called a Fer-de-Lance, spearhead in French. It is the largest of the pit vipers. A single bite from the Terciopelo can kill over one hundred and sixty-three thousand mice. This sounds like the worst thing in the world but it's hardly anything compared to the really toxic bites. The Coastal Taipan lives in Australia and has been described as alert and nervous and jumpy. It is quick to strike. One bite from the Taipan can kill nearly *five million* mice. More mice than there are people in Los Angeles. How many mice would be killed by whatever was in me? How many mice am I worth?

*

I couldn't stop shivering. They were piling on the heated blankets. It should have been a tender image. They would place blankets on me and fold the edges under my limbs, covering my feet, like being tucked in by a parent, maybe with a bedtime story. Instead, I felt like a dinosaur sinking in a tar pit, a silt that would become sedimentary rock, with me as a fossil.

Then something blared and everyone took off. I asked the nurse to please stay. I didn't want to be alone. Please don't leave me.

I wish I remembered his name. I can see his face, ruddy complexion, red-brown hair cut short and combed over to the left. He seemed sorry to walk away. What was his goddamn name?

*

My sons sometimes ask to read science books before bed. Rather, they ask me to read science books to them. They flip through the illustrations until they find something they want to learn, with a photo or a drawing or a computer rendering. The books are arranged in blurbs and fragments; each two page spread is about a singular idea but is fractured into little bubbles of print, each in a different font and size. It is supposed to look exciting and jazzy.

"What does this one say?"

It's about lizards, maybe. Whatever.

We intermittently flip through *Bill Nye's Great Big World of Science*. It's pretty good, keeps their attention for ten minutes when other books don't last for five. At one point, Nye writes, "As big and complex as our world and the cosmos seem to be, scientists are always looking for patterns and basic ideas to simplify things."

No shit, Bill. My sons found that page boring and flipped to something better, maybe with volcanoes.

*

I couldn't stop shaking. Then someone took my temperature. They put the thermometer in my mouth, and my teeth were chattering so violently I worried I would snap it in two, crack my teeth. What did they say? One-oh-seven? I was boiling. The nurse gasped and yanked away the blankets, shouted the temperature to others who rushed off to grab ice packs for my skin, ice chips to cram into my mouth.

"No! No!" I protested. "I *need* them. You don't understand."

"Your brain is cooking. You are going to suffer brain damage. You aren't cold. You just think you are."

"Please don't take them." I started weeping. Like a child, begging. The nurse with red-brown hair said he would let me keep a sheet but just so I could squeeze it in my grip. My little space filled up again with staff.

Wait, I was wearing a hospital gown by then. When had that happened? I think it was before the blankets. When I was shown to a bed, I was handed a gown and they snapped the curtain closed around me, pseudo-privacy as I put on a sheet that allowed access to every orifice. I heard the beads in the curtain track clack clack clack. They told me to change and I spasmed out of my clothes, herked and jerked into the gown although I couldn't hold my hands still long enough to tie it up. I was so cold but was relieved at the idea of progress, eager to take whatever steps led me to healing.

But I'd still had the blankets then. Now they were taking them away.

A nurse lifted me into a sitting position and another pulled my gown away, folding it at my waist to preserve some illusion of dignity. They began to slap monitoring stickers onto my chest, my sides, then sunk IVs into the crook of my left elbow, the top of my right hand, pumped saline to get the lines open. The heart monitor began its thin song but the beat was wrong. My heart had gone into some kind of irregular pattern. They put an oxygen meter on my finger and looked despairingly at the numbers. My lungs were filling up. My systems were shutting down.

I wished I'd asked my wife to drive me, because then she'd be in the waiting room instead of home, asleep. It was a selfish wish. I wanted her not to have to watch this, knew it was something she would never unsee. But I also needed her face. I needed her to tell me she loved me. I wanted that to be the last thing I heard.

*

In "On Being the Right Size," Haldane explains that insects don't have respiratory systems as we think of them. There is no need. They are so small that they don't require a complex system to transmit oxygen; instead, their bodies have "tiny blind tubes called tracheae which open to the surface at many different points." These tubes act like little air ducts. Oxygen can diffuse through their flesh when needed. But there is a limit to how deep it can go, about a quarter of an inch, "so the portions of an insect's body more than a quarter of an inch from the air would always be short of oxygen. In consequence, hardly any insects are much more than half an inch thick." I guess I can believe that. Except for that last part. Hardly any insects

are much more? But some of them fucking are. How do they breathe? You can't wave away breathing. Without oxygen, everything dwindles. Haldane says lots of annoying things like this.

The deeper you go in his collections, the worse the essays become. Are they arranged like this in the hope that we won't read too deeply? Are they chronological and he got worse as he went? None of the essays bear dates. John Maynard Smith is credited as editor. What decisions did he make? What essays did he leave out?

*

If you have a garden, eventually, if the soil is healthy and you water enough, you will get mushrooms. They might be edible or they might give you a stomach ache or they might kill you. Since I don't know which ones are which, I pluck them out and wash my hands. Can't be too careful. I pluck them all out and toss them in the compost bin or in the trash or, shamefully, over the fence into the neighbor's yard. After doing that, try this: dig up the dirt and see what's there. It is the mycelium, the body of the thing you have removed. The mushroom is just an appendage, a sex organ sprouting from the ground. The mycelium is the real deal, a system that spreads and creeps, rising up occasionally to spread its spores. There is a mycelium system in Malheur National Forest in Oregon that the National Forest Service claims is the largest living thing by area, covering three and a half square miles. The mycelium looks uncannily like a circulatory system or the tiny little branches and sacs—alveoli—in a person's lungs, spread out flat. There are cultish groups of mushroom fanatics who feel these similarities signify a connection between us, humanity and fungi. I don't see it. It's a common pattern in every living thing. So what?

And what's bigger? Malheur or the Trembling Giant? Who's right?

In French, malheur means "misfortune."

*

The staff was scrambling.

The blood tests had come back, maybe. They had a new idea, a new theory. They began to pump the strongest antibiotics they had.

"Are you allergic to anything?"

"No."

There weren't enough tubes to put in all the things they wanted to put in. The crook of my other elbow got an IV. So did my other hand. Still not enough.

"Mr. Bowman. We are going to put a port in your chest."

"What?"

A nurse objected. Should we get him to an operating theater first? Should we put him under? Should we do this now?

"Yes. We are doing it now. It will be fine." The doctor was comforting in part because he wasn't comforting at all. He was a serious man who didn't fuck around. He was in his fifties, maybe. With a deep voice and a knowing sort of stare. He didn't care about bedside manner. I was grateful and terrified.

"He can't watch this," someone else said.

The doctor got a marker and put a mark on my chest, not far below my right collarbone. He lay a sheet of sterile operating paper over my chest, pulled it away, cut a square out and placed it back on my chest, the cut-out over the mark he'd made. Then he spoke to me directly.

"Mr. Bowman, this will not be comfortable. We are going to put a sheet over your face so you can't see it. I need you to lie very still. Can you do that?"

It turned out I could stop shivering and convulsing if I had no choice. They put a sterile paper sheet over my face.

"I'm going to give you a local anesthetic with a needle. It will burn." Someone asked if the doctor wanted to give me a topical for the needle but he said no. The needle went deeper than I would have thought possible; it felt like it went all the way through me.

Then the burning came.

"You're going to feel a lot of pressure. Don't move."

So I didn't. I heard something wet. Squeezed my eyes shut. I could feel him rooting in my chest, fingertips presumably but maybe some instrument. Whatever it was, rubber-covered flesh or surgical steel, felt enormous, giants spelunking through tiny caverns in my body. It was invasive. There was

an uncomfortable intimacy in it, a new kind of sensation and vulnerability. He was touching parts of me no one had ever touched. I didn't know his name.

*

There is a stretch of desert near my home where we walk our dog and the dry bushes have jackrabbits living in them. Rabbits don't frolic, don't loll, don't play. They bound in terror, frantic as the dog leaps and runs, smashing random zigs and zags, creating spasmodic new trails.

*

Haldane has an essay called "How to Write a Popular Scientific Article." I'm sure he means popular as in for lay people but I can't help reading it through the lens of being popular at parties, which makes the title hilarious and aspirational and maybe delusional. The piece is written in direct address, a lot of "you," and it feels a bit accusatory, though that could be me feeling delicate. In the essay, Haldane advises that knowing one's intended audience is more important than anything else, "even more … than the choice of subject." He advises that the author of such an article "must know a great deal more about your subject than you put on paper." To lack this kind of expertise is to "give the impression that the author has looked his subject up, and tried to give a condensed summary of it … [this] will not hold the attention of a reader of popular articles, who does not contemplate severe intellectual exertion."

Which makes me worry I am doomed.

Haldane tries to sound encouraging and fails spectacularly. "This does not mean that you must write for an audience of fools," he insists. "It means that you must constantly be returning from the unfamiliar facts of science to the familiar facts of everyday experience." As he goes on, he explains how analogies work without ever using the word "analogy." His first example is to compare a scientific phenomenon to the way a bomb explodes.

You know, everyday experience stuff.

But I'm not going to put only a fraction of what I know here. I'll tell it all and there will be gaps anyway. I will hold nothing back but still won't know everything that happened. I can't. There are huge foggy places in my mem-

ory.

Part 4

They pulled away the sheet.

I've looked up how chest ports are supposed to be inserted. There are two incisions, one to guide what happens in the other, but this doctor made only one and then felt it out or intuited it somehow, running a tube through an artery and into my heart. I lay there and thought about my family while willing my body not to move. Then they pulled away the sheet. A tube was sticking out of me, set into a plastic patch, taped down. I looked at the doctor and the nurses on either side of him. They were splashed with blood.

Mine.

*

The port meant more solutions could be poured into me, solutions as in liquids and as in hopefully eliminating problems. I could hear them talk about the different things they wanted to try, incantations of pharmaceutical ingenuity, names that merge Greek and Latin with corporate synergy, needles as wands, clear plastic pouches and syringes standing in for doeskin and divining rods.

*

In "On Magic in Medicine," Lewis Thomas reminds us that in the early days of medicine, "hostile spirits needing exorcism were the principal pathogens, and the shaman's duty was simply the development of improved incantation." The manufacture of medications involves a long tradition of trying shit and seeing what works and what doesn't. The successes come in shocking bursts. Felix Hoffmann, a chemist at Bayer, invented or found or synthesized or summoned or alchemized both heroin and aspirin. What's more, the two discoveries took place around ten days apart.

Bayer loves to tell the story of the aspirin but is less keen to discuss the heroin.

Haldane's essay "Pain-Killers" comes toward the back of the collection. Again, this is an indicator of bad things. Haldane is a fan of heroin, writing

that it "is remarkably useful in dealing with the intractable tickle of a severe cough." He acknowledges that some people enjoy the psychological effects but claims he isn't one of them, even as he also admits to having "taken a large dose of heroin four times a day for ten days or so without getting any 'kick' out of it or losing an hour's sleep when I stopped taking it." He is convinced that the drug's addictive properties are more troubling for Westerners and that no Communist would ever be addicted, as their systems are just too powerful.

*

Haldane writes that until recently, "there were very few ways of killing bacteria in a body unless they were concentrated in a small wound or abscess or in some special region such as the urinary tract." He discusses the new drugs that had been created. Mostly, he celebrates them, although he is leery of how dangerous they are, particularly something called Prontosil. It's a name I find hilarious, perfect corporate nonsense. I can imagine the ads. *When you need help pronto, you need Prontosil*. Haldane writes that it "has cured a number of cases of septicaemia ('blood-poisoning' and puerperal fever) in the most dramatic way … but it is a dangerous drug, and has killed a number of people." This is a man who boasts about heroin, wary of oral antibiotics and particularly of those taken by way of injection.

"For the dose needed to kill a man is only a few times greater," he writes, "than that needed to disinfect him." To *disinfect* him.

They decided to dump everything they could into the port that led directly to my heart. But there were problems with that, too.

My heartbeat remained inconsistent. It would rise and fall, flutter and pound. Rhythmic issues. The heart muscle wasn't getting adequate oxygen. One nurse would listen to my chest with a stethoscope and then ask another to do so, then doctors, a conga line of step forward, bow down, pause, next one up. Bum-bum-bum-bum-BUMP.

It was decided to put me on an adrenaline drip, the strongest shit they had. If you look up intravenous adrenaline use, pretty much every doctor warns against it. The consensus is that it will create more cardiac problems, that it will do more damage than good. Every patient who has died as a result of adrenaline was given it intravenously, on a drip. The nurse injected a thick syringe of it into the bag of my saline line, adjusted the flow, and

walked off to see another patient, assuring me he would be right back.

*

It's tempting to think of medications as little soldiers swooping though our innards, protecting whatever our various parts are in this strained metaphor. Villagers or prized buildings or something. But most treatments are more brutish than that. They take out anything in their path. Recently, scientists were able to get photographic evidence of orcas killing a blue whale. A group of researchers filmed a pod of killer whales relentlessly attacking the largest creature ever to live, tearing it to pieces. Much was made of the attackers swimming into the blue whale's mouth to eat its tongue as it tried to fight them off. There are accompanying photos of the scientists in the carnage's aftermath. They are *delighted*, grinning, ecstatic. One gives a thumbs up to the camera. *We did it*, they seem to be saying. Of course, what really happened is that the researchers got lucky and the blue whale didn't.

*

Telling someone else about your pain is like trying to explain your dreams. They can't understand; they weren't in your head. It all becomes relative to something else. When I had those kidney stones, I told the doctors my pain was at a seven or eight out of ten. I had never felt anything worse but certainly imagined that it *could* be worse. It can always be worse, which is encouraging in the moment and horrifying at any other time.

I now know what a ten is on the pain scale.

Regular pain—cuts and burns, muscle pulls and broken bones, break ups and humiliations—are terrible but real pain is something else. It's an existential kind of horror and, evidently, it is pretty rare. Thomas writes about death in an essay called "The Long Habit." He recalls that David Livingston experienced near death, caught by a lion, ribs crushed in its jaws. He was saved by a friend who fired what turned out to be a miraculous shot. Livingston later described what he felt in those moments: "the extraordinary sense of peace, calm, and total painlessness associated with being killed." It led him to conclude that all creatures contain in their neurochemistry some kind of emotional armor, an analgesic of the soul. Thomas, who has seen much death, writes that only once has he witnessed a person die in agony,

and it was due to rabies. Thomas suggests that rabies must switch off whatever mechanism protects us from the agony of the end.

A similar switch must have been thrown in me.

Imagine your skull has been cast in iron, like an old bell. And, like an old bell, the pour had its problems. There are hiccups and bubbles, cracks. The seams are visible and the sound is wrong when struck: instead of a clear bright tone, you hear a skittering screech with some impossible low grumble, a dischord. There had been a mistake, a fuse lit, and my heart *detonated*. Not once, but a string of detonations, one after another, more quickly than can be understood, thrumming like a hummingbird's but concussive, enormous, elephantine.

In "Joyas Valadoras," Brian Doyle discusses the hearts of hummingbirds and whales. A hummingbird's heart is the size of a pencil eraser, and it beats ten times a second. A whale's heart is enormous, so big "a child could walk around in it, head high, bending only to step through the valves." He doesn't mention the heart rate, but it can be as slow as two beats a minute.

People often say they feel their heart hurt, but it's a trick our minds play on us. *I have felt my heart against my ribs*. An animal panicked and trapped, smashing against splintering bars. The contractions had such fury I could feel the cast bell of my skull clang, every heartbeat a hammer. My skull strained and pulled along the seams where it had fused long ago and I worried it would rupture, spill my brains to the floor. My lungs ballooned, my guts seized, my muscles screamed with a desperate power. I could have torn the world in half.

I knew that I was dying. This was it.

"Something's wrong! Help me!"

According to the bromide, there are no atheists in foxholes. The idea is that in the moments of real desperation, we turn to whatever well of faith is there, drink from it, plead for it to save us, for God to smile down and grant mercy.

For me, it was the opposite. I knew I was alone and that anything that came next wouldn't be as good as what I had. I knew that only the doctors and nurses could help me. And I knew I was ashamed, that for all I had, I wanted more, things both selfless and greedy.

The team came running in. They couldn't understand it. Then, someone glimpsed the IV bag and saw it draining. They could literally observe the flow. It was not a gentle trickle. Someone had made a mistake, opened it up

in full, and my body was slurping down the adrenaline, an hour's worth or more in maybe a minute.

A nurse adjusted the flow wheel and closed the line. I kept crumpling into a ball and then flattening myself, rolling up, spreading out. I was screaming but no sound was coming out, veins as thick as pencils, nightcrawlers.

I'm pretty sure I never closed my eyes, even when the sheet was over my head. I barely blinked. If I did, I felt certain, they would never open again.

There were apologetic looks but no one wanted to take responsibility. I don't blame them. I don't know that I would have either.

Then someone asked what all of us were thinking:

"How is he still alive?"

*

Toward the end of *The Lives of a Cell*, Thomas has an essay that is uncharacteristic and makes the rest of the book feel less reliable. It's like one of those pieces by Haldane that make you wonder how much to believe of what he writes. To his credit, Thomas is just recounting something he has read but even that feels irresponsible, like a literary form of gossip. The essay is called "The Iks," and in it, he describes a book by an anthropologist who spent two years living with the Ik tribe in Uganda. The Ik are, as described, beyond loathsome. Thomas calls them "an irreversibly disagreeable collection of unattached, brutish creatures, totally selfish and loveless." He attributes the behavior to the Ik having lost their homeland.

The anthropologist's book, apparently, suggests that all humans are like the Ik at heart, but Thomas, bizarrely, doesn't mention the title or the name of the author. I had to look it up: *The Mountain People* by Colin Turnbull. It was adapted into a play by Denis Cannon and Colin Higgins and staged by the occasional genius and constant provocateur Peter Brook. *The New York Times* ran a review by Mel Gussow in October 1976, not quite two years before I was born. Gussow writes that the plotless action includes a "young girl, on the brink of starvation … buried alive by her parents in a grave of twigs. Having nothing to eat, a boy calmly swallows stones. Another steals food out of his sister's mouth. A mother offers food to her son, holding it over a fire so that the child, reaching for it, is scorched. The mother howls with delight." It sounds ghastly. Thomas recounts the same events and notes that the Ik "share nothing. They never sing." He says they

"breed without love or even casual regard." See that word, breed? See how Thomas, the great humanist-scientist, uses the most demeaning, animalistic term?

"I cannot accept it," Thomas writes, but he is not referring to the Ik's behavior. Rather, he is referring to the Ik themselves. "I do not believe," he goes on, "that the Iks are representative of isolated, revealed man, unobscured by social habits." They don't represent us, in other words. They are both anomalies and animals. Yet where is his critique of Turnbull? The selfishness described here makes no sense. In 2011, Cevin Soling released a documentary, *Ikland*, that challenged Turnbull's book and its conclusions. The Ik are shown as friendly, singing, inviting, even as they fight off heartache and despair.

But everyone believed Turnbull. They didn't question what he said for a moment. Some answers and assertions are so comforting that we will believe them regardless of the facts. So much the better if they justify our worst thoughts and prejudices, if they allow us to feel smug, if they are difficult to check or counter.

So much the better.

*

Some things are just inexplicable.

*

With the adrenaline drip off, my pulse slowed, and my breathing returned to bad as opposed to catastrophic. The seams in my skull began to knit. Blips and bubbles floated through my consciousness. There were concerns about brain damage so I was asked a few questions but they were easy. It didn't seem like much of a test. My body stabilized and I seemed to come back to the shores of the living, waves licking at my feet instead of drowning me.

*

Being the only patient in the ICU wasn't bad.

I wasn't on dietary restrictions, had no broken bones, wasn't bleeding or

being careful not to rip out stitches. I was waiting for my heart to fall into its old rhythms, for my lungs to drain, for some strength to return. I was so weak I could barely support the handheld urinal to piss. But mostly, I—all of us—were waiting for answers. Until we knew what was going on or what had happened, and if it would happen again, every day was full of tests, which involved getting wheeled here and there, attendants moving my tubes as they positioned me. Every two hours they took blood samples, stabbing me anew for each one. I got to the point where I could sleep through it. Just another needle.

I say that, but everyone was worried. I shrugged in response to any medical talk.

My parents flew in, frantic, booking tickets when it still seemed like I might not make it. They sat by my bed in shifts. My wife came, of course, arranging for someone to look after our sons while she was there. Children weren't allowed and, in any case, it wouldn't do for them to see me like this. Four days into my stay, I stabilized enough for them to see me. They were terrified. I tried to smile but it was hard. I smelled terrible.

And so on.

A couple of ER nurses, including the one with the reddish-brown hair, came to see me. It was the end of my first day in the ICU. Or maybe it was the middle of the night? The ICU had no windows. No clocks within my view. They had been talking about me all day, how strange it was, the night before.

"We couldn't believe you never lost consciousness," one said.

"I didn't want to."

"What made you come in?"

I told them I wasn't sure. My mind was still full of gray, like it is now but more so.

"If you had waited even ten minutes, your family would have found you dead."

It's hard to know quite how to react to that. I nodded. I was grateful my oldest son didn't find my body, try to shake me awake. It would have been him, without a doubt. The nurses promised to come again but I didn't see them. I may have been sleeping. It may have been during one of the tests. They would bring the x-ray machine to me but roll me out for scans. Everything was always inconclusive.

"Does that mean everything is okay?"

"It means we can't tell."
"So I'm not okay?"
"We don't know."

*

A cloud of blackbirds flew into the ground a couple of days ago in Mexico. They were yellow-headed blackbirds and a security camera captured footage of the flock, like an inverted wave, a dark ocean falling from the sky into the street, onto sidewalks, smashing against rooftops. Hundreds of them. Most got up and flew away but not every one. They were, perhaps, fleeing in unison from a predator and miscalculated. It could be that pollution addled them. Dr. Richard Broughton from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology said he was 99% certain a predator was behind it. But who knows? A couple of hundred starlings crashed into a road in Wales in 2019. Everyone agreed on the predator from above theory in that instance as well, but there's no way to know. In September 2021, some three hundred birds smashed into One World Trade Center in Manhattan. It was thought that the lights in the building had confused them during migration. *The Daily Mail* attributed a "volunteer" with having picked up and collected the dead birds to count them. There is an accompanying photo, birds organized in rows by size and species, sparrows, some blackbirds, hard to tell. They look like they are in some kind of sleepy regiment. Maybe the cause was reflections on the windows. But windows aren't new in New York.

Who did that person volunteer to? Would one have needed permission to do such a thing? Here's the thing I most want to know: What did they do with those small carcasses after the photo? What is more absurd: a series of bird funerals or some custodian sweeping them up, placing them in garbage bags? Alley cats feasting?

*

Sparrows aren't native to New York; maybe that's the problem. They were introduced in 1850 to address a tree worm problem which, I suppose, must have worked. The tree worms were like caterpillars. There were so many that they would drop out of the trees onto Sunday strollers. This was unacceptable. Meanwhile, the sparrows flourished. So much so that people

started to trap and poison and shoot them, about twenty years after bringing them in.

*

Eventually, I was dismissed from the ICU and put in general care for one night. My oxygen levels had climbed; my children had mostly stopped worrying.

*

In "The Long Habit," Thomas suggests most of us prefer to believe that death is, somehow, avoidable if only we keep eliminating causes. That we will exist in perpetuity if we can just continue diagnosing and treating things. People choose to believe this, he notes, "despite the evidences of the absolute inevitability of death that surrounds their professional lives. Everything dies, all around, trees, plankton, lichens, mice, whales, flies, mitochondria. In the simplest creatures it is sometimes difficult to see it as death. … Flies do not develop a ward round of diseases that carry them off, one by one. They simply age, and die, like flies."

*

My parents and my wife and I were eager to leave the hospital, but I felt something was missing, some kind of ceremony or ritual. We don't have enough in the way of rituals. That, I think, is the root of many of our problems, although I don't have any way to diagnose it. Maybe marking the shift from one state of being to the next would help.

A nurse came in and took out the IVs, pulling off the tabs and stickers, ripping out chest hairs while making small talk. The pain wasn't terrible, nothing like what I'd experienced, but I found myself yelping anyway. She told us to wait for final orders and left herself.

The port was still in my chest. When another nurse came with my release papers, I asked about it.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "No problem."

Then, without pausing to wash her hands or put on gloves, she went to work. I didn't lay down, just sat still while she peeled away the adhesive and

pulled out the port. The line came with it, wriggling and twisting like a tree worm, longer and thicker than I would have guessed.

What had it been? Five days? The dismissal papers had no instructions because, still, no one knew what had gone wrong.

Part 5

I'm not as smart as I used to be.

It sounds like a weird boast, like talking about what a great athlete someone was before their knee blew out in high school. And maybe there is some of that. But here is how I know: There are blanks in my memory. Gray things, static and fuzz. Even when I concentrate, the connections don't come as they once did. It's like when you reach for something on a high shelf and your fingertips can gently manipulate it until it spins and rotates toward you and you can grab or tilt it until it tumbles into your hand. Now I reach up but my fingers don't make contact or just barely brush against it. Enough to let me know it's there but not to hold it. To tantalize and pain me.

Thomas uses insects to consider the process of thought in "On Societies as Organisms." He writes that an individual ant has no mind, that it is but a single spark of thought, a "ganglion on legs. Four ants together, or ten, encircling a dead moth on a path, begin to look more like an idea." They move the dead moth toward the hill but only after "the dense mass of thousands of ants … blackening the ground" fully become a mind, "thinking, planning, calculating. It is an intelligence, a kind of live computer, with crawling bits for its wits."

How many ants compose my mind? I worry I'm the dead moth. Or maybe my mind has become like the termites Thomas also describes. "Two or three termites in a chamber," he explains, "will begin to pick up pellets and move them from place to place, but nothing comes of it; nothing is built. As more join in, they seem to reach a critical mass, a quorum, and the thinking begins." I wonder about the theory here. I think what happens may have less to do with the number of termites than the number of pellets. As Thomas elaborates: "They place pellets atop pellets, then throw up columns and beautiful, curving, symmetrical arches, and the crystalline architecture of vaulted chambers is created." The symmetry comes if we let it, or if the termites let it, in other words.

*

That dropped horse that Haldane supposes? In the same essay, he writes that an "insect … is not afraid of gravity; it can fall without danger." This has to do with ratios of weight to surface area. An animal ten times larger by height than another doesn't weigh ten times more, but a thousand. It's the weight that really piles up. So the insect doesn't fear gravity and neither does the mouse. But the insect, if it were capable of such emotions, would be terrified of water and, specifically, of surface tension. The dewy water that covers someone leaving a bath, Haldane says, is about one-fiftieth of an inch in depth and weighs a pound. But a wet fly must "lift many times its own weight and, as everyone knows, a fly once wetted by water or any other liquid is in a very serious position indeed." As everyone knows. I didn't know it. I feel like these are different things. What this means is that, for the insect, even leaning over for a drink is "as great a danger as a man leaning out over a precipice in search of food. If it once falls into the grip of the surface tension of the water—that is to say, gets wet—it is likely to remain so until it drowns."

What had I leaned over into? Was it something I drank, or was it over the precipice?

*

If you need to cure something, you must first understand what it is.

Ultimately, maybe, nothing was really wrong with me. The leading theory was that I developed a spontaneous allergy to the antibiotic I was taking, Bactrim. My body decided to treat it as a foreign invader, and put out a notice to close up shop, to be done with the experiment of me. I keep restarting this sentence, swapping out "body" and "person." A body can develop a spontaneous allergy. It will accept a medication, do just fine, and then, without any particular cause or warning, decide to tolerate it no more. There are tests one can take to find out for certain but the doctors didn't feel it was important.

"Make sure you say you are allergic."

"Anything else?"

"Maybe sulfa. It's sulfa-based."

"So I'm allergic to sulfa? Is that what that means?"

"We don't know. But you should avoid it."

Thomas writes about something akin to this in "Germs." It isn't the disease, the invading bacteria or whatever biological interloper, that kills us, generally. They want to establish a new home, not to bust up the joint. Rather, "it is our response to their presence that makes the disease. Our arsenal for fighting off bacteria are so powerful, and involve so many different defense mechanisms, that we are in more danger from them than from the invaders."

I don't feel I need to reach too far, to stretch very much to see the metaphors here: how we treat each other, nations, and on and on. "We live," Thomas writes, "in the midst of explosive devices; we are mined."

I can't help but think of everything that sentence means and could mean, swapping the form and purpose of mined; adjective, verb, possessive declaration. We are full of small, vicious explosives, after all. And so, we dig, we shovel and chisel to find those things inside us, pull them out and up to be measured and weighed. Still, at any moment we may be forced to that precipice, to fall down through the empty shafts, where mice are dazed and horses splash.

POETRY

"After the Funeral," "Cold Water," "Forbidden Peak," "The Farmhouse"

E.J. Koh

After the Funeral

what we commit to forgetting
we also commit to memory

I chew with soft teeth still living shrimp
in bright Chinatown while diners karaoke

after your husband found you
under a tree—*she was this high only this tall*

you left a note to make him feel better
a sheet of pale joy

I recall your altar of paper drawings
thoughtful he says *beyond her thirty-one years*

what about the time we talked on the bus
and you asked how I could go on living—

I said it's not a matter of cause or damage
but practice

and what can hurt us need not—
how curious you said *how strange*

we looked harmless
unaware we were what we refused to let go

then like lovely spinning tops
you and I swiveled off in our own directions

Cold Water

In the ocean three bobbing lights
after an hour I see the third is a seagull

Like the sound of washing clothes in water
a flock molts and flies naked and illuminated

even that is the work of the sun—
it holds me in the same light

Only people go looking for themselves
with the low expectations of an argument

I go looking for each and every one of my lies
plumbing decay deep into an idea

it marches out of my mouth in a single file:
I am everything but I long for everything

Forbidden Peak

At the door they warned me how you looked

Protocol was a breathing tube
every question I asked aged you ten years

The ice broke
175 feet

It was forbidden to touch you
since you could see but not feel anything

Each time I entered they reminded me
what not to say

My twin brother
All fear must be the fear of death, a new poverty

We prayed in silence and I was sorry for
my joke about the climber

But you laughed and it exposed you
because you should've died

I heard it again—
the air puffing, the wingbeats of your lungs

inside your alpine white room

The Farmhouse

I start with the body since I am outside
and must try with all my might to go back in

Now I see the possibility there is a me on the porch
dragging to the door but without myself

If I can't tell the difference I recall the terrifying logic
why in a house on fire a dog will stay

The house is brown. Two windows in the front resemble
deep eye holes—

I tell my body to go inside so I can know for certain
when the wind pulled its teeth

I now see how I folded up like a door loose on its hinges
fixed on home like a dog in the flames

FICTION

Mandy at the End of the World

Jose Padua

Mandy came up from the basement one Sunday afternoon like a character from some Barry Manilow song, which is what she was. None of us were prepared. None of us thought this was possible. None of us thought that time, even with the way it creates and destroys so many things through its passage, would bring to fruition this example of early 1970s songcraft (more on that later) as reinterpreted for an American pop audience. None of us were drunk or impaired (or enhanced, as people like to say). None of us were caught in the throes of any number of madnesses for which hallucinations and delusions are symptomatic. None were named Scott or Richard. None of us liked Barry Manilow.

I was raised since infancy—from the delivery doctor's smack on my ass to my first puff of illegal smoke—in this small Virginia town a hundred years from the nearest big city. I'd go to DC sometimes with friends for punk shows, maybe a stop at a strip joint where the bad girls ended up working when they left town. We were the coolest kids at County High, but we always came home. Leaving our small town never occurred to us. When my father died, followed a few years later by my mother, I was left in our family house, a big blue Queen Victoria style with a new kitchen built by old cousin Roger before he had his stroke and forgot how to do those things. Big Brother Jimbo had moved out two years earlier when he and Janice got married. Their kids—my two nieces and one nephew—already think I'm the greatest uncle in the world. Just wait until I make them privy to the best

source of smoke, though of course I'm too old to smoke the way I used to.

After a while, I didn't want to be alone in the house. I wanted to see more people right by me than Barbara next door who was usually doing one thing or another to her garden or else just sitting on her porch with a book. So I asked my friends Billiam and Duck if what the hell, why not come live in my house. It's all paid for and we're friends, all single, and all into the same good music. Billiam was divorced, and Duck didn't believe in the commitment that marriage required but nonetheless was a people person. So they moved in and we hung out and worked sometimes and we listened to music, and if there was something really good in DC, we went.

Things had been going well with us in the house for about five years. I worked a little bit here and there, and Billiam had his decent job taking care of the grounds at the public library (after having worked at the chicken plant). Duck did what he always did—played a little guitar during the day in the living room before heading off for his night shift at the rubber plant.

Then Mandy came.

She was a little shorter than I'd expected, even if Billiam and Duck said she was just as tall as they'd thought she should be. For me, though, there was something about a woman coming out of a song that made me think she'd be tall, the sort of girl I'd look up to physically and intellectually. But even though she was small, Mandy was smart. She came out of the basement like Venus coming out of Botticelli's scallop shell, rising out of that stink (yeah, you know that shell had to stink) like a tall glass of switchel. She was a sight to see, like the surf and turf special at Joe's Steakhouse before they went out of business. But even then, we never forgot that her origin was a Barry Manilow song.

The first few days were strange. Billiam refused to say anything and just eyed her suspiciously between drags of his cigarette. Duck brought her a glass of water; she sat on the living room sofa and started to drink. I asked if she'd like anything to eat. She stared at me for what seemed like an uncomfortably long time, but maybe it wasn't that long and I just wasn't used to having strange women stare at me. Finally, she said she'd like a ham and cheese sandwich. Luckily, we had everything we needed in the refrigerator. I got out the Oscar Mayer sliced ham, store brand Swiss. I even toasted the Arnold white bread. I didn't have any mustard or mayo, so as a final touch, I added a smear of blueberry jelly on the bread. I set it on a paper plate, cut it in half, and put it on the end table next to the sofa. I didn't want to be

rude, so every now and then I peeked over to check out the lovely way she chewed her food, because the way a person chews their food is important to me and says a lot about the person doing the chewing and, sometimes, how they feel about me, which I must say was on my mind right from the start.

As expected, she was a little different from the way she was originally written. Not many folks are aware but she was first created by two dudes from England, Scott English and Richard Kerr. Well, actually only one was from England, and it wasn't the guy whose last name was English, if you can believe that. Scott English was from Brooklyn, though he did die in England. I think he might have become an expatriate—the sort of thing that had no interest for me. As for Richard Kerr, I don't know anything about him except that he was English. I think that's enough.

What else can I say by way of introduction? I have no idea where Mandy had learned all the things she knew but she spoke of them so easily once she started speaking to me. It was like she was an actress who had mastered her dialogue, disappeared into her role. Whoever she was, *whatever* she was, she was all new to me, and like no woman I'd imagined before.

Her second day with us, tiny dark fish flopped around in a puddle at her feet. This was not part of the song. I asked her if she was all right, but all she said was something to the effect that she was a woman, hear her roar, which of course was a totally different song and I had no idea how that had anything to do with the fish on the floor. I guess that's where she was like so many other songs, in that sometimes, you weren't completely sure what she was about, which I liked. It's rough when they're trying to ram some malodorous bromide into your skull in an attempt to make you follow all the good examples. I was never one to play along.

The first time I took her out of the house, we looked at each other, as if to acknowledge that yes, the world is strange and one must watch one's step, and not just because there were sometimes fish. I saw Barbara on her porch next door, talking with Mack, who might have been her boyfriend or something at that point. I nodded and said "hello" or "good morning" as a way of making the moment pass more quickly.

Although those fish were strange, I must say that even stranger to me was that phenomenon they call small talk, which always seemed a shit substitute for true communication. I think that's why, in my younger days, I was kicked out of bars and other similar establishments with such frequency: so

often I'd simply refuse to speak. Sometimes I'd point to the bottle of liquor I wanted to drink from, which would prompt the bartender to mumble with concern and a worried brow, "I guess you can't talk," to which I'd respond, "Oh, I can talk, but I don't want to talk to you."

Soon I discovered this was not what people wanted to hear. I guess that's why I was friends with Billiam and Duck—they didn't always feel that implacable urge to speak. I'd lived alone in my family house those years, high and lonesome but mostly silent. Lonely isn't something you tend to feel too deeply when you're silent—not me, anyway. But when Billiam and Duck moved in, it started to feel like I was part of something again, a family of beautiful silences. Others might have seen the silences as awkward or odd, but I liked them—we all liked them. And then Mandy joined us.

Whenever I walked with Mandy toward Main Street, her left hand was always close enough for me to grab in case she got frightened and needed comfort. I'd be wary the entire time, worried that the fish might start flopping on the ground by her feet, meaning I'd need to explain a few things to people I didn't feel like explaining things to. But the street where we lived was mostly quiet except for the couple right across from Barbara with their shouting arguments that always seemed to end up in the front yard for some reason, and the house a couple of doors down that would get raided by federal agents or local cops. Main Street was kind of quiet, too, this being a small town where *main* doesn't necessarily translate into a lot of motion. Just a few teenage moms pushing strollers and smoking cigarettes, or Jake Bourbon in his motorized wheelchair acting like he was in a hairy rush to get somewhere when everyone in town knew he had nothing to do. Still, there was a part of me that wanted more people to see me walk down the street with a woman from a song—even though that was something that maybe people didn't need to know. Pride with all its sweet glory and delight, after all, seems to always be in grave combat with discretion.

One time I did take Mandy into the coffee shop on Main. We'd been sitting at a table by the window drinking coffee when she said she was hungry and wanted a ham and cheese sandwich, which they had on the menu. I went up to the counter and asked Alicia, who'd been working there for years, if she could make a ham and cheese sandwich but hold the mustard aioli and instead slap on some blueberry jam. After Alicia brought it over to our table, Mandy took a few bites. She was quiet at first, then said, "I like your sandwiches better," which made me feel briefly as if I were hav-

ing some kind of hypertrophic spasm in my heart. I smiled at her and said, "Thank you, Mandy!" I tried to act as if everything were the same. But the world Mandy and I shared had just gotten smaller and a little more humid. We went home and watched the local news for a while—well, it wasn't exactly local but it covered the Shenandoah Valley and came from a station based in Harrisonburg. I hadn't been there in years, even though it was only an hour away and once I had gone to college there for several semesters. Somehow it was a place I didn't think I'd be welcome, so I avoided it like Van Halen shunning brown M&Ms in the dressing room, even though I hated M&Ms no matter what the color.

A few nights later Mandy and I made love for the first time. She was good at it, even though, as a character in a rather inexplicit song, she didn't have much experience with that sort of thing. As our breathing got faster, she started praising the Lord or whoever it was she worshiped. At first it sounded like she was saying either "god" or "gut," which made me think maybe she had some German in her. Then she started using words I didn't know, which made me think of other forms of god, though she still used the given name sometimes as an interjection or imprecation just like the rest of us.

I understood that it was hard being an old pop tune in a small town, because it's hard to be anything but small in a small town. Yet Mandy—despite her sentimental outlook and what I suspected was an extra love hole most people don't have—was anything but small. That created some problems as far as my friendship with Billiam and Duck went. Gone were the nights when the three of us went down to drink at the Lucky Star bar on Main Street. Now it was just Billiam and Duck, because Mandy wasn't a drinker and didn't like to be around people who drank to beautiful excess the way I used to with my friends. I'd spend my days and nights at home with Mandy, and when Billiam and Duck came in from the bar, they'd be all, "Hey, Dewey's saying what the fuck is wrong with you, never coming down, not even to watch the games?"

But as I've said all along, there's nothing the fuck wrong with me. The days move like radio waves through the earth's atmosphere and beyond to points unknown. We don't know if they'll ever contact anything resembling the intelligent life that was their source, and the words we know and speak and sometimes sing travel on in the most profound ways. Whether it's a simple *hello*, the theory of the structure of the universe, or a sentimental love song, the message carries itself aloft. Once we start something, we have

little control as to where it goes, believe me. Mandy, you're a fine girl, like Brandy in that song that came before you, which is the reason your name was changed to Mandy for Virginia, California, America. And you're a woman, too, like Sossity in that song from the last decent album Jethro Tull ever made. (What the fuck happened to them?) But, as I had planned to say from as far as a billion light years away, you're Mandy, even though it's terribly hard talking to you this way.

So I'm going to go back to talking *about* you, and how we went on. Living in what became just our house. That was when Mandy got pregnant, and Billiam and Duck figured they may as well make room for my expanding family. They got an apartment together over on Criser Road. It was a little harder to walk to the Lucky Star, but by that time they didn't drink quite as much as they once did. We were all, apparently, getting older and progressing with our lives. I got a job at the community college. I didn't have a degree, but that didn't seem to matter to them. They recognized that I'd done a lot of learning on my own and could easily manage multiple administrative tasks. Mandy stayed home, tending to the chickens we had out back. It was against regulations to raise chickens within the town limits, but no one bothered us about it. We had fresh eggs most of the year.

Every now and then Billiam and Duck would stop by to say hello and see how we were doing, but we were mostly alone. Mandy's belly was getting bigger each day. She ate my ham and cheese sandwiches while I ate the eggs, hard-boiled like a dark and lonely place, and together we watched the news. Out in the world there was murder and theft, war and the threat of war, bombs and bombers, suicide and all varieties of despondence and desperation. We watched it all from our living room with the shades down as our baby grew inside Mandy's dark pink belly and my heart beat harder in anticipation of the birth, the first smack on the ass, followed by the first breath of country air. Mandy practiced her breathing, taking a long slow gulp and then releasing it like a big girl trying to blow out all the candles on her birthday cake.

The pregnancy went on and on, and after a while Mandy began literally to glow, her cheeks a lovely shade of pink. I quit my job to stay home with her and help because she couldn't get around on her own anymore. We wondered if perhaps she was having twins. We didn't know for sure because we never went to a doctor. Who knew what they might say or tell us to do? All we knew was that we loved the baby and we loved each other. We weren't

about to take any chances with the sweetness in our lives.

And then one day, I did go out. It was two in the afternoon and the boy we paid to get our groceries had been sick. A lot of people had been getting sick in town, and he was one. I still had some eggs, but there was no ham, no cheese, no bread, and no blueberry jelly. I walked to Main Street, telling Mandy I'd be right back. Mandy mumbled something I couldn't quite understand—as she was prone to do under stress.

When I got to the coffee shop, Alicia was at the counter. I ordered the ham and cheese sandwich for Mandy and waited. Alicia asked me about Mack.

"Is he for real?" she wondered.

"What?" I said, kind of startled.

"Well, he says he's buying the coffee shop. He's been having all these meetings with people he says he's going to hire."

"He does have this fancy sports car he drives around. But I thought he was living with Barb because he was broke and needed a favor."

"He says that when he buys the place, he'll make me manager, with a nice raise, which means I can quit my shift at Lucky Star and spend more time with my son."

As we talked, I remembered one time late in the evening. The blinds at Barbara's were still open and a dim light was on in the living room. Through the window I could see her and Mack, dancing slowly. I couldn't hear any music, but they must have been listening to something. You can't move like that without the inspiration of actual music. I mean, I've studied the way people move when there's music as opposed to faking it. People don't move like the rest of the world doesn't exist unless there's music. You can't imagine the demise of all your enemies, much less the end of the world, without there being real rhythm and melody in the air. I watched skinny Mack and big Barbara dance for a few minutes. I could have had my face pressed right against their window and they would not have noticed me. That's how far gone they were in the haze of their own firmament, dancing with their eyes closed and thus blind even to the slightest possibility of transgression and horror.

"I don't know," I told Alicia. "I can't say for sure if I'd believe him. I just hope he's for real."

I said goodbye to Alicia and headed out the door.

After I'd turned off of Main Street with Mandy's sandwich, I started to

hear sirens. I just kept walking for a while, like someone hearing music or a man dancing with his sweetheart. I wasn't sure how long I'd keep going this way before turning again to find some suitable direction, but I kept going, crossing the street to the fancier part of town. I walked past lawn after lawn, those plots of land that used to comfort me although at the moment they seemed like nothing more than dismal fields of practicality.

I must have been getting tired, lost in the dimming light of afternoon. Then, I looked to the ground and saw a puddle of fish like those that would sometimes appear at Mandy's feet. I looked up but she was nowhere to be seen. So I kept going, feeling that even if the future became hard and dreary in ways I couldn't yet imagine, I would think of Mandy. I would remember the things she did—and the scent and taste of ham, cheese, and blueberries on her tongue—until darkness dissolved any memory of her face, and silence swallowed the final notes of that dreadful song.

POETRY

Driven Nail Cure

Emma Aylor

If you've seen a prayer spoken, you know something
of what I mean. The purpose of the prayer list,
read by the priest aloud, prior to a silence, is to hold

names' wetted wafers in the mouth. A person
creaks like small gravel—you told me that.
You told me trees make speech sounds, growing.

You're not one person, but it's clear you're far away
from the plot I've made. Hard ground. Every cold
recalls first cold, as in my Virginia's first winter, a wind

half-silvered, sharp as a mirror we're given back through
but through which we can't see. Same as now. If you've seen
a handmade nail, you can't help but draw

the modern ones backward, the way the art of dark caves portends
our paintings—an abiding absorption in effigies, marks, and asking
that something happen, and in the way we want.

Sometimes in Appalachia a German custom kept:
sink a nail in a tree at the height of a child, to cure it. This presumes

the child has time to grow past what's driven.

Presumes incantation and walking eastward. Certain conditions
must be met, that other events may follow. The list
will keep growing in the quiet, as little the names

you might mean to add. The mirror might show a fix and distance
you didn't intend. Land slips. Its red color. You take the child
from the home before day. Before the charm, neither may speak a word.

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

That LA Bug

Louise Steinman

I never wanted to be born in Los Angeles. My childhood, I suspected, was misplaced. My mother and father were both New Yorkers. Thanks to a trove of correspondence that I discovered after my parents passed away within months of each other, I can pinpoint the exact date—August 1, 1941—that determined my destiny as a native Angeleno. On that morning, my young father stepped off the passenger train at L.A.'s Union Station. In the letter to my mother he wrote later that day: "Now I shall commence to tell you of my Gulliver's Travels thru this fairyland of California."

It was Norman Steinman's first-ever westward crossing of the North American continent, where he'd arrived as a six-year-old in 1921 with his mother and sister, refugees from Ukraine during a period of profound upheaval. The entire country was a battlefield. For three years, per historian Timothy Snyder, five different armies had converged in Ukraine: Reds, Whites, Ukrainian nationalists, anarchists, and Poles. Bands of Cossacks rampaged through the countryside. All of it, of course, was bad for the Jews.

My father forgot his native Russian, but claimed he sometimes dreamed in his native tongue. He often referred to himself as a "Melancholy Slav."

A visit to his parents, Rebecca (Becky) and Herschel (Harry) Steinman, who'd moved west just six months earlier, was the impetus for my father's 1941 trip to California. My grandparents, then in their mid-forties—having made one epic migration from Ukraine embroiled in revolution and civil war—decided twenty years later to undertake a second, albeit less arduous migration, from New York to Los Angeles.

It was an adventurous geographic and cultural leap. A few of my grandfather's cousins from Zhytomyr, in Ukraine, had already relocated to the west coast. Harry was entrepreneurial. Opportunity beckoned.

Within months, my grandparents invested the savings from their dry goods store on East 103rd Street in East Harlem. They bought an eight-unit

apartment building in Los Angeles at 152 North Sycamore Avenue—Streamline Moderne with curved cornices and circular portholes, a style taking cues from the Bauhaus, stripping away the unnecessary. They lived in one flat, rented out the rest.

The building was north of the stretch of Wilshire Boulevard, that great spine of the growing city, known as Miracle Mile. It was located a few blocks from the La Brea Tar Pits, that repository of dire wolf and mastodon bones that have been seeping tar for thirty-eight thousand years. Just last week, I brought home blobs of that tar on the soles of my sandals.

My father's 1941 letters to his wife chronicle the first real separation for the newly married couple. Within hours of their tender goodbyes at Penn Station, my father caught the blues: "I'm terribly lonely. I miss you so … the thought that I am traveling farther away."

At the time of his trip, my father was nearly twenty-five; my mother, twenty-two. They'd known each other seven years, ever since he, a math major at NYU, first spied fifteen year-old Annie Weiskopf at a Socialist meeting in the Bronx. Perhaps he'd snapped the photo of her at the workers' street rally the next day, standing in the crowd. She has the soft round face of a girl and the blooming body of a woman.

Growing up impoverished in a Lower East Side tenement, the daughter of Polish-Jewish immigrants, she knew the cat-calls of construction workers and the prying hands of a great-uncle. She was smart, playful, the star of her high school play. She had moxie. He was besotted.

They waited to marry until my mother was two months out of her teens,

celebrated with a honeymoon in the Catskills. I've seen one snap of the two of them in baggy snowsuits, lying prone outdoors, four arms outstretched, grinning snow angels. In another, they sit on the ledge of a stone fireplace. My father sports his NYU letterman's sweater (varsity basketball, though he was only 5'4"). His black hair waves upwards in ridges like the pianist Van Cliburn's. They stare into each other's eyes with soulful intensity.

From New York to Chicago, my father rode "The Pacemaker," a moniker of some irony, since his heart would have benefitted from such a device later in life. He would suffer his first heart attack at fifty and refuse any surgical intervention. If he had to climb stairs, or if the temperature dropped below 70, he popped nitroglycerin pills kept in a vial in his pocket to ease the pain of angina. He would not be able to throw a basketball or to play tennis with

his fourth, and youngest, child.

Walter Winchell's broadcasts boomed through the observation car as the Hudson Valley rolled by out the window. "I hate his voice but have no choice to turn him off." Winchell, who invented celebrity gossip, had not yet become the arch-conservative who'd support Joe McCarthy, but my father was already wary of him:

> Winchell's slogan 3 dots and a dash. (he'll be back in a flash). However, Jergens is being advertised. I hope it sells while I'm gone. Every now and then I have a queer smile on my face thinking of you, naturally.

Winchell's pitch for Jergens might help motivate sales of soap in my parents' small dry goods store. In my father's absence, my mother—better known for dramatic flair than business acumen—was left to manage the Buckingham Variety Store in West Hempstead, Long Island. She fretted about ornery sales reps, how to price hosiery. She chatted with housewives who needed thread, scouring pads, shoelaces, underpants, safety pins.

Another black and white: my mother poses behind a bin of socks, next to an advertisement for a line of dress patterns, featuring three fashionable slouching women with pencil skirts and slim hips, plus an array of threads. Her scrawny arms are visible under the puffed sleeves of a cotton gingham adorned with eleven front buttons. Her wavy blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She beams mischievously from the midst of her wares. My siblings and I are the beneficiaries of that grin, her optimism.

That first night on "The Pacemaker," my father walked the narrow corridors, imagining himself a character in a film noir. He read the magazine *Look*, then *Reader's Digest*. He stared out the window into the dark. The rocking motion of the train did not allow for smooth writing, but he wrote anyway.

He described the magnificent sunrise and the train ride itself, recalled how he kept raving to his seatmate about his "Lil Annie." He regretted spending a quarter for a pillow and not using it. "A few soldiers and a few nice girls" made the all-nighter lively. He watched a pinochle game until the sun came up, smokestacks came into view, and "a wealth of industry unfolded itself" on the outskirts of Gary, Indiana. Onwards to the Windy City where, since the train was air-cooled, the sticky heat was a shock. He overnighted in a single room at Chicago's Lawson YMCA at 30 West Chicago Avenue on the Near North Side. Tossed and turned all night, sweaty in his bed.

In the morning, he refreshed himself with a shave. None of the home teams were playing; he couldn't watch a ballgame. In the stifling humidity of downtown Chicago, he boarded "The Scout," bound for L.A. As the train rolled across Oklahoma, he climbed up to the observation car, joining a group of eighteen boys who'd all just signed up with the Marines. He bored his new companions by talking constantly about his wife.

He wrote her next from Winslow, Arizona, long before the Eagles made the tiny town semi-famous. The brief stop merited only one word: "desolate." The train passed within eighteen miles of Meteor Crater, created some 50,000 years earlier by a massive explosion caused by an iron asteroid, but Norman Steinman did not get off the train to see it. He had only California on his mind.

At 10 p.m., the train stopped somewhere in the Mojave. Even late at night, it was still hot. Seven hours later, he lifted the window shade:

> I saw the desert with all the cacti and sand … then just around the corner at San Bernardino the desert disappeared and the beautiful country of California began. While having breakfast, I passed hundreds of thousands of acres of vineyards and orange trees. Finally at 8:30 a.m. I arrived in L.A.

On August 1, 1941, he disembarked sleepy-eyed and sore into the Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal (now Union Station), a Spanish revival masterpiece, then three years old. The pleasurable dry heat of a Southern California summer morning tingled his skin. The scent of orange blossoms tickled his nostrils. "It was a fitting introduction of Southern California to the stranger," wrote one historian about the effect of that heady fragrance on those just arrived from a sleepless night chugging west across the barren desert, "and a pleasant last memory of its beauty to the ones going away."

My father descended to the long tiled tunnel leading from the tracks toward the vaulted, wood-beamed Arrivals Hall, across from the stylish Fred Harvey Restaurant where Fred Harvey Girls served waffles and hot coffee to sleepy customers in red Naugahyde booths.

There were his parents, Harry and Becky Steinman, first in line, his mother overcome with tears. They embraced and, after a slight delay retrieving his trunk, departed for the car. Norman took the front seat in the gray Buick Sedanette, next to his father, as both his parents insisted. Harry drove slowly, proceeding west on Sunset Boulevard, old Highway 66. South on Highland, right on Beverly. Another right onto North Sycamore.

For lunch, my grandmother prepared sardines on toast with sliced toma-

toes, 7-Up in tall glasses, schnapps for Grandpa Harry. My grandmother could not take her eyes off her son, who was her only surviving child.

She'd left her other child, her daughter, in a cemetery in Queens. Ruth had died at fourteen from a tiny hole in her heart, just two years after they arrived from Ukraine. Today this tear would have been easily repaired. My grandparents were inconsolable. A cousin told me how, at the burial, my grandfather threw himself on the grave.

My father had been the only son, then the only child. With the exception of the three and a half years he spent overseas in the Army, he would live near his parents for the rest of his life. In one of his letters from the Pacific, he explicitly reminded his wife of his intention: should one of his parents die, the survivor would live with them, with their children, in their home. She agreed, no debate recorded.

He was dazed by the warmth, by the brilliant scarlet of bougainvillea that flourished in the most humdrum apartment driveways. The miraculous curative qualities attributed to the Southern California climate had long been touted by boosters. Not only was it a healthful land, there were no tornados, no cyclones, no ice or sleet. No snow. No hail. No mud. Enough water. Whether my grandparents or my father were aware of the 7.0 earthquake that had struck the Imperial Valley on May 19, 1940, I do not know.

> August 1, 1941 Friday noon … "Now I shall commence to tell you of my Gulliver's Travels thru this fairyland of California. This place is like a dream. It seems like vacationland when dad drove me to his house. I was the most thrilled boy.
>
> It will be difficult for me to describe this apartment house. It is brand new, only about 3 months old. You know how those new apartments are on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx—all windows. Well, this is like that only one-story high and sixteen apts. They are all unfurnished except for four, one-room bachelor apts. The rents range from 4 dollars bottom to 75 dollars for a five-room apartment. Each apartment here is worth about twice as much if it were in our town. They are gorgeous.
>
> Please understand I am not bitten by any L.A. bug, that I love you and will be home on time as I promised but I must keep raving.
>
> The folks really live in Hollywood. That is North Los Angeles. The sun is hot but very comfortable. There is no humidity causing you to perspire. I still love

you.

> Mr. Schimmel of the Blue Heaven Hosiery Co. who had dinner with the folks last year stopped off to say goodbye and to see me. Well he took pictures of the house, moving pictures. When we look him up in B'lyn, he'll run them for us. He certainly is having a grand vacation. He and his wife have been everywhere. You see how I miss my wife. Mrs. Schimmel says she'll call you when she gets back.

Waking up on Sycamore the next morning, he planned to drive "aimlessly through the streets of L.A," a phrase to savor from the perspective of the gridlocked city I navigate in 2023.

> Driving thru the streets is so enjoyable that if I do nothing else it will be worth it. The folks do look a little tired. It is because of their real estate venture. It took a lot of courage. I hope it will work out for them because they have a piece of property that is beautiful and the latest in style, architecture, period design and so on. I truly was impressed. I'll take some pictures and show you.

My grandfather, dapper in a three-piece suit, steered the Buick past the guest bungalows of the swank Beverly Hills Hotel. They drove east on Wilshire, past the Art Deco Bullocks Wilshire department store, the top of its tower sheathed in copper tarnished green. They drove east and they drove west.

They wound up the narrow Hollywood streets abutting the Hollywood Bowl, where they parked the Buick. Through the back gates, sounds of an orchestra tuning: the Philharmonic in rehearsal. To my father's delight, the great conductor Bruno Walter held the baton. To add to his amazement: "they played our waltz from Mayerling, I nearly cried because you weren't here. Please write Love Norman"

Their "waltz" was part of the score for the 1935 film Mayerling, directed by the leftist émigré Anatole Litvak, who was—like my father—a Jew from Ukraine. Bruno Walter (born a Jew in Berlin, Bruno Walter Schlesinger) escaped Nazi Germany in 1933, becoming part of a burgeoning community of European émigré artists in Los Angeles. This group included Thomas and Katia Mann, Heinrich and Nelly Mann, Leon and Marta Feuchwanger, Alma Mahler and Frans Werfel, Berthold Brecht, Salka Viertel. Mayerling tells the tragic tale of Prince Rudolf, Emperor Franz Joseph's only son and heir. Rudolf's suicide-murder pact with his young mistress shifted succession to his more conservative cousin, Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination in Sarajevo

by a Serb nationalist was a flashpoint for the start of World War I.

Shadows of a previous war, foreshadowing of the next.

The next morning, my father went swimming in the blue Pacific off the expansive beach in Santa Monica. What he didn't know or couldn't see that day was how swimming and sunbathing for Black beachgoers was restricted to a two-block area of oceanfront, known derogatorily as "The Inkwell."

He could not stop raving about the California weather, the state's great commodity, its big lure in the decades before climate change.

> It isn't just talking about any old weather, just for the sake of conversation—because that is the most important thing about this country— the climate. Since I have been here I have not perspired once. Even when the sun is at its hottest you just don't feel clammy. It is pleasant warmth. And in the evenings it starts at sundown and gets so deliciously cool. I keep thinking how we could use such cool nights back home.

From the majestic Art Deco Griffith Park Observatory, he took in the larger view:

> You get a gorgeous view of L.A. You see the whole city is surrounded by mountains. So that the view of both the mountains and valley is beautiful. The Observatory is very high up. Out here you feel as though you are in a thousand resorts at the same time. Darling I haven't gotten any L.A. bug—I still love you and long for you.

It's still possible to connect with my father's ecstasy about the physical beauty of Los Angeles. When afternoon light shimmers off stucco storefronts on Temple Street during my drive home from downtown; when I catch a glimpse of winter snow aglow on the steep façade of the San Gabriels from a trail high in Griffith Park—it can and does take my breath away.

> August 7. Darling. As president of the Buckingham Variety Store, Inc. I wish to acknowledge receipt of your recent card in remembrance of the first anniversary of our store. I wish to state that it made me very happy indeed.
>
> Darling. I'm glad you had such a good time this Sunday. I'm glad your day was full. When I come back, I will be full and complete. I know how you miss me because I feel that way out here. I feel that just half of me is here. How is the other half right now?
>
> Don't worry about the hosiery problem. Just keep selling. When I get back we'll raise prices. Meanwhile I'm glad that you have discontinued the hosiery

club. That's using your head. Keep up the good work and I'll give you a raise and promote you to assistant manager and buyer. love, Norman

My father and his parents drove up the coast to Santa Barbara for the Fiesta Days where there were people who "sang for a few coppers." They attended the Moon Festival in downtown L.A. (raising funds for Chinese relief) in what was left of Chinatown, much of which had been plowed under to provide land for Union Station, displacing hundreds. He found nothing to buy in Tijuana for his sweet wife, who was still fretting about the price of shoelaces. "Jack up the price from 89 cents to $1.09," my father advised.

August 8, Thursday morning. Darling I've just rec'd your desperate letter of Tues. Darling, your rise in prices of the low end of stockings is good. Our business does not depend on hosiery more than 5 or 6% so please don't be alarmed. Don't let business upset you. Take it in your stride. You can do it. Please don't let Buddy run you. Tell him that if you don't want him to use the register that it is my instructions. Please be firm in anything that you do. You can mail in your order to Blue Heaven if you want to.

Darling I'm sure you are doing all right and please don't worry. Darling I haven't gotten that L.A. bug—I still love you and long for you I love you very much.

August 9, Friday morning Dearest, I wish I were back at the store and solving all the problems that are confronting you. However you and I will just have to be patient another week. I'm very angry with Buddy but I'm glad that you fired him.

I'll try to describe the fiesta. Almost all the people come in costumes. Caballeros, senoritas, toreadors, cowboys, all in gay colors. Very many came up on horseback. Two on a horse. The Lady in the Saddle and the man behind her. Even the horses are beautiful. The streets are roped off and everyone walks in the gutter. There are numerous dances in the different streets. There are quite a lot of troubadours playing in the streets for a few coppers. Then at the courthouse, which is a beautiful Spanish architecture—there is a tremendous courtyard where there is entertainment. Everything is done in Old Spanish style—In fact the fiesta is to typify "Old Spanish Days."

In the afternoon when we arrived we visited the Santa Barbara Mission and

were shown through by a Franciscan monk who explained all the historical events and folklore of the Indians.

Of course, the friendly Franciscan did not explain the terrible toll the California padres had exacted on indigenous Californians: forced labor, transmission of pathogens for which they had no immunity. Nor would my father's children learn this history in Los Angeles schools, as we built scale models of those Franciscan missions out of popsicle sticks and paper mache.

But the most enjoyable feature of the trip was the ride. You see we took the coastal highway. This is the same highway that went to Mexico but in the opposite way. On one side was the ocean and it is beautiful and on the other side are gorgeous mountains. And coming home at night the moon shone on the ocean. Just picture that.

*

On December 7, 1941, four months after my father returned to New York from his summer trip to Los Angeles, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Two years later, in August 1943, newly drafted Private Norman Steinman arrived at Camp Fannin in Tyler, Texas, to report for infantry training. In January 1944, he shipped out from San Francisco on a troop ship crossing the Pacific to join the Twenty-Fifth "Tropic Lightning" Infantry Division; in his letters, he wrote in the upper right hand corner: "Somewhere At Sea."

His whereabouts remained censored after he landed. He and my mother agreed on certain codes to clue her into his whereabouts, including the phrase: "I'm where the monkeys have no tails." I now know that, after combat training in New Caledonia and Guadalcanal, my father landed at Lingayen Gulf, northern Luzon, part of MacArthur's return to the Philippines. The phrase "I'm nowhere near the gift for Hal Rubin," referred to his proximity to the front lines, to combat. Within months however, he would indeed "get the gift." The Twenty-Fifth slogged it out in the Battle of Balete Pass, enduring one hundred and sixty-five consecutive days of brutal combat against General Yamashita's troops in the rugged Caraballo Mountains.

I've seen sights and lived through things that have left an indelible impression on my mind.

In the almost five hundred letters he wrote to my mother during their three and a half years apart ("... in the middle of the night in Stygian dark-

ness where you couldn't see your hand in front of your eyes, I had to creep out of my hole in a downpour and sit behind a machine gun whose field of fire was a trail—and all I could do was sit and listen—and my body was shaking with cold…"), my father repeatedly reminded her that, if he made it through, he wanted to join his parents in California. He wanted to start a new life there with my mother, with their daughter Ruth (born while my father was away in combat) and the four other children he hoped they would have.

He wanted them to raise their family in Los Angeles.

He was critical of those among his circle of friends in New York who'd stayed behind and prospered during the war: those who hadn't served while he ate cold chow in a foxhole, those who'd gone about their business while he'd watched his comrades die. My father needed, he wanted—a new outlook, a new address, a new profession.

New York was not New World enough. He would not look back. Start over start over start over. Go west go west go west.

*

In the fall of 1981, I was living in limbo in New York in a succession of sublets, working as a receptionist in a Soho art space called The Kitchen, shielding curators from irate artists trying to retrieve their misplaced video submissions. I was trying to figure out my own future as a performance artist, to figure out what to do next as my first marriage fatally fractured.

By December, my temporary digs were a fifth-floor East Village walk-up sublet from a Magnum photographer who kept only packets of Tri-X film in his fridge. His studio apartment featured a box spring, no mattress.

My mother took vicarious pleasure in my unhemmed life, flying out from L.A. to visit, buying me warm wool socks, showing me her old haunts, sleeping beside me on the box spring, stocking the refrigerator. She loved and missed her native city; she was thrilled that her daughter was navigating its mysteries. My father, by contrast, found my eastward move bewildering. "What are you doing living on the Lower East Side? We worked so hard to leave New York."

Forty years earlier, on his last summer night in Los Angeles, my father and his parents sat rapt under the stars at the Hollywood Bowl listening to Brahms' Double Concerto, performed by the twentieth century's greatest

violinist, another exiled Eastern European Jew. His enthusiasm was undimmed:

August 10, 1941

Darling, This place is like the dream in the Wizard of Oz. Last night I heard Jascha Heifetz. It was thrilling. The Hollywood Bowl is so much more beautiful than Lewisohn Stadium. It was so cold everyone brings their coats and blankets. Mr. Heifetz was superb.

Please understand also and very important that I want to be back at the store not only to be in business again but because I want to be near you and buzzing you right now. Gosh Darling I miss you so.

He was coming home, he promised. "I want to be near you." In this, his last letter from Los Angeles, he did, however, confess to one slight complication:

Darling, I have been terribly upset. I lost my return ticket. I wanted to wait and write to you after I had made my reservation. But when I started looking for the tickets, they were nowhere to be found. We spent the whole day Monday turning the house upside down. So today I'm buying a one way ticket. If no one uses my lost ticket at the end of 3 months the railway auditors will send me a refund. I'm trying to forget that extra $61.29. I'm trying not to let this incident spoil my vacation but it certainly has dampened my spirits. I'll cheer up and forget it.

Darling, I can hardly wait to be with you. Please don't cry. It won't be long now. Please try to look as pretty as when I left you, only a little more cheerful. I'm arriving at Penn Station on "The Pacemaker." That's the same train as when I left. Where can I take you on Sunday? Of course I'll want to get home very early. Darling please take care of yourself until I get back. Please. Norman.

As promised, my father did return to New York from that trip to Oz. Years of war and separation were to follow: Luzon; Hiroshima; the Occupation.

To my mind, that mislaid return ticket for "The Pacemaker" was the telltale sign of his future, my mother's, my siblings, my own. With all its contradictions, its hidden history, its charms and its illusions, Los Angeles had already captured my father's heart.

All photo credits courtesy of the Steinman Family.

FICTION

Big Plans

Shayne Langford

The courts were forcing Cal to live with his mother, sending him to her house in Reno, where the mountains stopped and the high desert stretched out empty like a life where any sense of hope was missing. I hadn't seen my own mother in years, since she left me with my father and took off, but I knew what Cal was feeling, and on his last day in town, we drove deep into Feather River Canyon, below the hydros and the town of Belden to the bottom, where the high peaks feathered into oak-dappled foothills and the river leveled out in long, deep draws broken up only by boulders that had cracked off the canyon walls and formed pockets in the water where trout held.

Cal parked on the side of the highway and we hopped out, taking our gear from the truck bed and sliding down the steep scree field to the gravel bar below, holding our Shiners and fly rods in the air as the loose rock carried us downward, to keep the beer from spilling and to keep the rod tips from breaking off. Our rods were already rigged, and when we reached the bottom of the hill, we stepped into the river immediately, fishing a deep run across from a tall granite cliff. On Cal's second cast, he hooked into a huge fish that rolled up out of the water so we could see the size, both of us yelling loud as the trout shook its body in the air, smacking hard back into the cold water and diving deep, clinging to the bottom and bending Cal's rod

low so I thought that the tip would snap.

Cal was fishing indicators, as always, letting his nymphs ride deep in the foamline, weighed down with lead split-shot, and I was down below him, fishing emergers to small trout eating baetis mayflies. But when I saw the size of his trout, I reeled up, set my rod on the gravel bar behind me, and took up the guide net I'd tucked into the back of my waist pack, wading out in Cal's direction—the current pushing against my legs, the felt bottoms of my boots sliding smooth over the moss that coated the river rocks—and when I made it out, I stood beside him as he fought the fish he'd hooked. The fish was hardly moving at all now, hugging the river bottom tight the way a son hugs his mother, knowing she will one day leave him, only running whenever Cal smacked the butt of the rod with his palm, sending pain down to the fish through vibrations in the graphite.

But even when the fish ran, the rod tip didn't bounce like it does when a fish head-shakes. The shaft of the rod strained and the graphite made a clicking noise like it does when your flies snag bottom. And though I knew Cal wouldn't want to hear the truth, I said, "I think you made him wear it, Cal. I bet you stuck him in the gut or somethin'." Cal said nothing to me and focused only on bringing the fish in, pulling hard to make the trout run and tire itself out, reeling in the slack.

Down the canyon I could hear a kind of rumbling around the bend, which I knew to be a train cruising down the tracks carved into the mountainside across the stream from us. Cal heard the noise too and looked up, then focused once more on fighting the fish. The trout was finally starting to tire out, giving up and drifting down past me as it struggled to fight the current. Cal pointed his rod tip upstream, guiding the trout above him so it couldn't take more line and break him off in whatever rocks were hidden underwater, and so he wouldn't have to put so much tension on the tippet as he pulled the fish to the surface, where I would be able to scoop it up in the net. The trout rolled over on the side as Cal pulled it toward me and I took a step forward, but the fish took off again, diving deep and making Cal's reel scream before it tired out once more. Then it rolled over on the side again and I plunged my net into the water, scooping the trout in the plastic webbing.

Looking down at the fish, I felt a tightness in my chest and I was breathing hard from the adrenaline. When I looked at Cal, he was grinning as wide as I'd ever seen him grin. I pulled the fish out of the water and I could feel the

weight of him now, could see the fat on his belly as he looked up into my face with his dark eyes, could see the tippet wrapped below the kype-jaw. The fish was a rainbow, long and thick and still colored up for the spawn, dark scales on the back feathered into a deep red band along the side and onto the stomach, which was slightly discolored in places, scarred from all the other times the fish had been caught and put back. Cal let a Whoop! out in the air, putting his arms above his head and pumping his fist hard. I took one hand from the net and pumped my fist along with him, but the fish was so heavy, the net dropped into the water and the fish tried to swim out—making my stomach drop. I scooped him again and used both hands to carry the net to Cal.

The train reached us as I made it up to where Cal stood. The engine was a Union Pacific—the yellow and black paint chipping, the headlight glowing up front even during the middle of the day—and I looked up in time to see the engineer staring down at us from the window of the locomotive. I saw Cal see him, and without speaking or pulling the fly out of the fish, Cal grabbed the trout by the knuckle of the tail—his hands still shaking from the adrenaline—and slipped his other hand under the belly so the fat spilled over his fingers, picking the trout up and holding him in the air above his head until the leader snapped and hung loose from the fish. The man driving the train pumped his fist at us and blew the horn loud, and Cal kept the fish in the air even after the man was long gone. The trout was moving its eyes back and forth—the knob of the kype-jaw opening and shutting, the flaps of the gills trying to suck air as it suffocated—and Cal was breathing in unison with the fish, sucking deep in his lungs as though he was also searching for breathable air.

Cal brought the trout back into the net, and I could see that I was wrong then—he hadn't foul-hooked the fish in the back but had stuck him in the eye with a black hot-head mini-leech made of strips of rabbit fur so the trout was blind in that eye now.

"Now that's a fuckin' fish," Cal said and took the fly between his fingers and ripped it from the trout's eye. The trout squirmed in the bottom of the net feeling that pain, smacking the tail hard against the metal and snapping a few loops where the net was connected to the frame. Cal wore the beat-up State of Jefferson hat his father had given him the first time he took him fishing as a boy, and he stuck the black fly in the top of the hat, right above the yellow logo. Scales from the fish clung to the barb, and when he pushed

the fly into the hat, the scales were released, floating in the air the way feathers float when a quail is shot with a pump gun.

I looked into the basket, where the trout lay nearly dead now, and I dropped the net quickly, reached in, and picked the fish up around the gut—slime coating my fingers, rolls of fat folding over my hands—and walked over to the river, where I could revive the fish in the current and watch him swim away. But Cal grabbed me hard by the shoulder and I turned to face him. He stared me square in the face—eyebrows falling low, the deep scar his father left on his brow moving over the bone—and using both hands, he grabbed the fish from between my fingers, tossed it onto the gravel of the bank.

"I'm keepin' this one," Cal said, smiling. "I got big plans for him. *Big* plans."

A kind of sickness rose in my stomach as I heard those words. I hardly ever kept fish, only when my parents ran out of money and I needed something to eat, and even then only trout that were small, fourteen inches or less. Looking at the fish, I could see it was over two feet and close to seven pounds—nearly the size of my chest—which meant it was an old fish. Ten years, maybe, only seven years younger than we were then. Though seven years can be a long time to live, especially when you are hurting, and I could see from the scars that the fish had felt pain.

"I think we should put him back," I said to Cal. "I never seen a fish that big."

"He ain't your fish," Cal said in a nasty voice. "I caught him, and I'm gonna keep him. I told you I got big plans for him."

"You gonna mount him or somethin'?"

"Nah." Cal took his hat off, looked at the ground, and smoothed his hair out. The freight cars were still passing us, rusted and covered in graffiti, and maybe a mile in the distance, just around a bend in the river, I could hear the Union Pacific engine's horn blow loud in the thick air over the rattles the old freight cars made.

"I'm gonna leave him in Ma's bed once I move into her and Jesse's place, tuck him under the sheets or somethin'. I want Jesse to find him since he said he thinks fishin's a sin. He's a damn city boy. He'll get freaked out. I bet he'll fuckin' puke."

The grin on Cal's face was mean, and I could see the anger he felt toward his mother and Jesse, an anger I wished I had inside my body. To me it

seemed easier for a man to feel anger instead of the sadness I carried with me, thinking of my own mother—easier just to hit someone or leave a rotting fish in another man's bed sheets. But I'd never seen a rainbow as beautiful as this one—all scarred up and old, but still glowing with the spawning colors—and I wished we could revive the fish in the current so he could pass his genes on, help the next generation to grow strong and resilient in all the ways me and Cal's fathers had failed to teach us.

"You know my ma's a damn liberal now," Cal said. "Jesse too. Last time I went to visit they were watching CNN in the living room. You believe that? What a fuckin' disgrace."

"No," I said. "I can't believe it." And really that was a hard thing for me to believe, though I wasn't entirely sure what a liberal was. I didn't think about that kind of thing very often, and I knew Cal didn't either. Both of us had other things to worry about—in my case, whether or not my mother would show back up and where I would get money for food so I didn't starve like when I was younger. All I knew was what my father had told me: Liberals were people who didn't know what it meant to put in a hard day's work, people who talked about their feelings instead of manning up, stuffing down the pain, and supporting their families. People who hated the military and the police, who went off to college and relied on their parents for money instead of earning it themselves. I wasn't sure how a person could end up thinking that way, growing up in Quincy, where no one had health insurance and people worked part-time, minimum wage, but refused to take welfare checks, surviving off the mule deer meat that filled their freezers. A place where people fished all day to push the hurt from their hearts and act like men.

"Well, she is." Cal shook his head like that was a despicable thing. "I think it's why she left my dad. Or at least that's what he told me. He said CNN brainwashed her and now she thinks she's better than us, and that's what liberal means."

I met eyes with Cal, and I could see tears flooding his. But he made a little noise in his throat and looked away, and when he met my gaze, the anger was back in him.

"I hate Reno. That place is a shithole. All the fuckin' casinos and prostitutes. That whole city's trash, if you ask me. Not this place." He gestured with his arm at the river, cutting deep blue through the granite bottom of the canyon, water reflecting the digger pines that clung to the mountain-

sides, jutting out of the rock in search of light. "How the fuck am I supposed to fish if I ain't livin' in Quincy?"

"You can fish the Truckee," I said. "Or Pyramid Lake. I saw pictures of the cutthroats there and—"

"That ain't the point," Cal said. "I *know* these rivers. I could catch a fish whenever I want. Plus I get to fish with you—" He paused, and for a moment I thought he would say he would miss me when he was gone. That was not something you should say to another man, unless you wanted to be called a faggot, and I hoped Cal wouldn't say a thing like that to me just then. "I don't wanna start over, is all," Cal said. "I love this town. I feel at home here."

"Me too," I said.

I tried to imagine then how it would feel to move in with my mother, wherever she ended up in the world. I still wrote her letters every day, once I got home from fishing, but she'd stopped writing back a long time ago, and I didn't have a number to call, only her address. And I can admit that I missed her. I can admit that some nights I laid out in the front lawn, crying and petting the feral cats and praying to God that she would come home. Believe me. All I wanted was for her to come home.

The engine on the back of the line of freight cars passed, and a moment later, the end of the train disappeared around the bend in the river, heading in the direction of Chico. When I met eyes with Cal, I now had to look away, knowing there was water there from thinking about my mother. I stared down at the place where the fish lay on the gravel bar. The trout's good eye was facing up, and I could see it moving in the fish's head, taking us in as the life started to drain from him. The fish was hardly alive now. The gills were still working, but I doubted they could suck in any air. No matter what, we couldn't save him at this point, could no longer revive him, and I was sad for that. I walked over to the dying fish, knelt beside the head. I rubbed my hand over the scales, which had been dried by the cold air, and used my finger to poke the fat on the fish's gut, pressing down hard so I thought I could almost feel the insides. The sun was high, and the darker scales on the back glowed the color of gold, the red along the side deepening to the color of blood. Cal was still standing behind me, watching in silence, and I wondered if he even cared that a fish this beautiful would die, and that it would be our fault.

I picked up a rock and met eyes with the fish. I could see the life that was

still in him, if only for the moment, and when I put my hand on the fish, I thought I could hear the heart beating, but I was listening to the sound my own heart made in my ears with the adrenaline I felt. I spun the trout onto the stomach, gripping him by the spine, and I brought the tip of the rock down hard on the back of the head. The fish squirmed from the impact the rock made, and I brought it down again on the head, and one more time before the fish stopped moving and the gills shut for good.

Then I turned and looked at Cal and he walked up to me with his head down. He stood over me for what seemed like a very long time without speaking, and I could hear him breathing deep in his lungs. Eventually he sighed heavily. He wasn't crying, like I thought he might be, and all emotion had disappeared from his face. He shook his head hard and, kneeling beside me, reached out and took the trout by the tail, swung his arm fast with the whole weight of his body behind him, and flung the fish far out over the water. The dead fish flew through the air—the tail shaking, the fat bouncing—and smacked hard into the cliff across the stream, settling on a thin ledge that jutted out of the rock. Even that far off, I could see the blind eye staring back at us, and I felt almost as if I would puke from the shame.

Shaking his head, Cal turned to me and said, "Let's go," and I walked down the gravel bar, grabbed my rod, and caught up with him as we crawled up the scree field on all fours, breaking our rods down to keep the graphite from snapping. The whole time I wanted to say something about the shame I felt seeing that fish land on the rock when it should have been in the water, knowing we had taken something beautiful from the world. But I couldn't find the words, and when we made it up to Cal's father's truck, we tossed our rods and packs into the bed, hopped into the cab, and cracked fresh Shiners.

Cal pulled out onto Highway 70, heading back in the direction of Quincy, and as he shifted gears, he said, "I'm gonna try and fuck Sky Larson tonight before I leave town. I heard she's a fuckin' liberal." I wasn't sure what to say to that, but I laughed, and then we both laughed and I listened to the sound of our laughter filling the cab of the truck, thinking about the pain I would stuff down tomorrow, watching the only friend I had left in the world leave Quincy for good.

POETRY

“My Father Was a Firm Believer,” “Listening Wind”

Jim Natal

MY FATHER WAS A FIRM BELIEVER

in Reader’s Digest. Every year he’d gift me
a subscription and every year I’d tease him
that I’d never seen a magazine so perfect
for the bathroom, regular as bran, one muffin
of reading a day, every day of the month—
31, 30, and one with 28—features you could
get through in bowel movement time and maybe
sneak in a “Laughter Is the Best Medicine” joke
or “Life in These United States” anecdote
before flushing. Even the page size, the cover
format, was a perfect fit for a toilet tank.

Whole novels were condensed to editorial
essences, first-person essays reduced to chance
crossings of paths, one shared intersection,
a single transformational incident recalled or
character encountered that left an impression
enduring as dinosaur tracks in high mesa clay.

The Digest, like my father, accentuated
the positive, skirted the evil footloose in
Chicago and the world. No matter the subject,
the pieces skewed inspirational, motivational,
the journalistic equivalent of geologic upthrust,
capturing a cataclysmic moment of time
in mini-memoir perspective that exposed
a fossilized artifact sandwiched between
strata of sentiment, layers of birth and death.

My father believed that people were good,
that given the choice they would choose right,
that they could be steadfast in their choosing,
and that even reading about their testings and
temptations had vicarious power to redeem.

It didn't matter that the articles, the lives,
were abstracts or formulaic, that the stories
had been pre-cooked and regurgitated
in an easily assimilated form, as if offered
to assuage wide open beaks and swollen
throats of hatchlings, giving them the strength
to fledge; regular feedings measured out
in daily portions, twelve times a year.

LISTENING WIND

There were gale force winds the day my father told me
he was dying but I did not hear him or listen close enough
to fully comprehend. His words on the telephone scattered,

like sycamore leaves on sidewalks, downed
palm fronds and power lines, like my neighbor's roof
that blew off into hillside brush later that afternoon.

I should have gone immediately. In hindsight it's clear.
Instead, I waited for morning, showered, shaved,
brushed my teeth, drank another cup of tea.

"My heart is failing," I believe, is what he said to me.

On the two-hour drive to the hospital I remember music
I'd chosen to play: "West Texas Plains," "Love and Danger,"
"Bandera Highway" —songs I don't listen to today.

There was little traffic on the freeway, as if to speed
my passage, rush me to lifelong regret. My father
didn't wait for arrival. Sometime near dawn he left.

No nurses, no orderlies, blank monitor screens. His body on
the sheets still lay. Too late for listening then. His voice was
drowned by November gusts and already he was so far away.

I spoke to him though, really, there was nothing I could say.

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

Alias Intrepid

Melissa Haley

1. Traffic Patterns

I worked hard on my pilotage the summer of 1994. Pilotage: aircraft navigation by observation of ground features and the use of charts and maps. My Manual of Flight instructed me to use good checkpoints for proper orientation, to know where I was. A grain elevator perhaps, a racetrack or stadium. Bridges make excellent checkpoints. I could see the bridges of Portland from the window of my studio apartment. I could see all of downtown and the hills beyond, the yellow Go-By-Train neon sign blinking in stages at Union Station and, closer in, the 24-hour bowling alley with its Pump Room cocktail lounge and the street lamps down Alder, lit up in winter fog.

I flew to Eugene solo, getting lost in a desolate stretch of the Willamette Valley. I found my way again with the help of a particular bend in the river. In the air, I could find my way. On the ground, I was still lost, looking out my window at the morning clouds burning off, at a carnival along the river, at unseasonal fireworks. I fooled around with Will, who had a girlfriend; I helped him cheat on my single futon mattress after too many rum and sodas at the Monte Carlo. The wind was blowing hard, stirring up all the loose debris in my messy room—my floor with its tides, clothes and papers drifting toward the walls and gathering around chairs.

Most pilots are subject to certain illusions during night flying, the manual says. My journal notes a dream I have of taking off at night, barreling down the runway and lifting into pitch darkness, no lights, only stars.

In my logbook, I record practicing my touch-and-goes: landing on the runway, then immediately gunning the throttle and taking off, back into the traffic pattern and around again, over and over until I get it right, repeating the circle but still, somehow, moving forward.

2. Cockpit Management

In 1994, I was twenty-six years old, exactly half the age I am now. My lipstick shade was deep red with brownish undertones: "Toast of New York," Revlon 95. In the summer, I developed the habit of wearing skirts without pantyhose or underwear, usually just to the Fred Meyer supermarket ("Freddie's") to buy cheap red wine but occasionally out on the town and, once, bowling with Trent, whose name is never noted in my journal though the entry he's a CAD must have been about him. It didn't last long. Trent broke up with me by standing me up one night and that was that. Trent called me Peaches and took me on picnics to Mount Tabor Park with crackers and a spray can of Cheez Whiz. He watched me apply Revlon lipstick in the side mirror of his vintage car. We sat near the pine trees looking out at the city and I don't remember what time of year it was or what we could see.

Portland was a city bracketed by hills—Mount Tabor on the east side, and on the west, the one that held the International Rose Test Garden with its neat lines of hybrids and my favorite, the crimson Happy Wanderer. In the distance were greater peaks, seen from the city when the clouds lifted and there was no fog: pointed Mount Hood, and Mount St. Helens to the north, its top long since blasted away. I was advised to avoid the mountains by my flight instructor, warned of their deadly updrafts and downdrafts, how easily they could suck your two-seater Cessna into their snowy, timbered sides.

I have limited sources for excavating my Portland history, only two incomplete journals—a black sketchbook and a maroon lined notebook—and my flight training logbook. All are inadequate and tell me nothing of how I felt. There are few photographs; I didn't own a camera. I took flying lessons. Somehow I knew to aim upwards. This would be good to relearn now but the documentation is thin.

The logbook records my flight lessons: date, aircraft make and model, points of departure and arrival, remarks, procedures, maneuvers. On February 20, 1994, for example, I practiced four crosswind landings at the tiny

airstrip in Mulino with a Cessna 152, N64942. There is no mention in my logbook of the fifty-foot pine trees to avoid near the runway, the skydiving activity, the power lines through the valley, or the towers blinking red far away. No mention of how small Portland looks in the distance or how the green world looks from above.

Instead of photographs, I have descriptions of images in my journals, like the perfect circle of empty Thunderbird bottles around a burnt fire, the train yard Stonehenge I saw one day while walking near Union Station. I have the lists of things seen from my apartment window, a view without humans. I wrote of clouds burning off, clouds descending. (Clouds, another flight hazard. You must dodge every cloud that appears, blowing in from nowhere. You canNOT fly through clouds. They can cause disorientation and lead to a fatal spin.)

I have the remembered image of myself, staring at the city from my fourth-floor picture window. Of my kitchenette, the size of a closet, sink filled with pots and pans. I couldn't really cook, so I ate things made from packages—Stove Top stuffing, ramen, fake fettuccini with white sauce in a little tube. I had my dinner at the red Formica table by the window. I studied my Manual of Flight at that same table, which I sold when I left town.

My building was called The Melville. Nearby were produce warehouses, Sassy's strip club, and a convenience store where I'd make late-night runs for 22-ouncers of Mickey's Big Mouth. I can still see my cheap plastic telephone, peacock green and always on the floor, answering machine attached. Its buttons lit up when the receiver was lifted. I left many things behind when I moved away.

3. The First Solo

My first solo flight was on January 9, 1994; my journal doesn't mention it. Even my logbook doesn't describe the actual soloing, but you can see the Pilot-in-Command column filled in for the first time, with a total of 03 hours. I had been in Portland almost a year then. I'd moved on a whim, to escape a broken heart and my youthful aimlessness in Washington, D.C. But it all followed me. In D.C., I'd become fascinated by historic women aviators. These women gave me a sense of direction, a map to follow. I taped copies of their photos to my bedroom walls. There was Harriet Quimby,

waving from her triumphant perch atop the shoulders of fishermen after flying the English Channel in 1912. There was Amelia Earhart shaking hands and telling startled farmers she'd just come from America after her transatlantic solo in 1932.

On the day of my solo, my flight instructor and I practiced touch-and-goes at the Aurora airstrip south of the city and then she said, "It's all yours" or something like that and got out of the plane. That's the way they do it; they spring the solo on you when they think you're ready, so you won't be too nervous in advance, and there you go, taking off alone. It was a Sunday, probably in the afternoon. It got dark so early in the winter there; too dark to fly after work and weekends were often blanketed in fog.

I made twelve landings on the day I soloed. I would have flown the legs of Aurora's traffic pattern over and over, turning downwind to parallel the runway, turning base, then final, announcing each position to anyone tuned to the airfield's frequency. On final, the red and white VASI lights at the side of the runway would let me know how my descent was going, if my angle of approach would work. Flight instructors teach a series of rhymes to remember how to read the lights: White over White—You'll Fly All Night (you are too high). Red over White—You're Alright (self-explanatory). Red over Red—You're Dead (same).

I was dating Frank then, I think. Or was I? Frank, whose only presence in my journal is two lines: Have a good little story now about me & Frank, and a month later, The 'story' of me & Frank, so much for that.

I destroyed the story by making it real, I also wrote. So why do I wish for things to happen? And why am I trying to fly?

4. Visual Flight Rules

The sectional aeronautical charts we used for navigation were made of paper. These charts divided the country into segments, showing terrain, elevations, landmarks (stadiums, lumber mills), and airfields of all sizes. There were blue and purple lines of navigation and the outlines of airspace. The sectionals showed the shapes of towns and cities as seen from the air at night, bright yellow patterns imitating the contours of imagined electric lights gleaming from below.

My Northwest area charts—Seattle and Klamath Falls—were well-worn,

held together at the seams with Scotch tape. Routes once flown and marked in pencil were still visible although I had tried to erase them. Some of the landmarks doubled as warnings, things to avoid: power lines, for example, or towers with lights that might only operate part of the time. Other hazards were not spelled out but I was aware of them. The vast stretches of land to the east with no habitation, only mountains and canyons, woods and desert. You must stay away from the desolate landscape, especially the dense pine forests where no one goes. "If you make an emergency landing there," my flight instructor told me, "it'll take two weeks to find you."

I was convinced that my tiny apartment was haunted. Sometimes at night, there was a rustling and blankets moved as if being lifted. I sat upright in the dark, but no one was there.

From the air, I could see the entire city of Portland at once. On the ground, only pieces of the city, laid out in quarters, were visible to me. I crossed the Willamette River daily to go to my job at an alternative newsweekly, where I worked in the classified section selling personal ads. I went from SE to NW, then later to SW when the paper moved from seedy Burnside to nicer digs downtown. The office's new layout meant staff and freelancers no longer passed the classified desk, stopping to chat on their way in and out. I spoke mostly to our advertisers after that.

Selling personal ads did not pay well but the rent for my studio apartment was low. I bought cheap red wine, used furniture, thrift store clothes. I dyed my own hair. I was a miser about the gas heater, rarely turning it on. There was fog, always fog. There were giant trees dripping. I had enough money for my sporadic flying lessons, which grew even more infrequent in winter's gloom.

In my journals, there are fragments of a short story I was trying to write called "Alias Intrepid." The plot was always changing. In its early stages, it seemed to be about a girl whose grandmother in the 1930s had fantasies of flying but those dreams went unfulfilled.

5. Communications

As my flight lessons progressed, I grew bolder. I got better at talking, at speaking out loud. At the small Aurora airfield, I would get on the radio sometimes, like when announcing my positions in the traffic pattern be-

fore landing, but after my flight instructor switched to a school at the larger X-shaped Hillsboro airport, I had to get used to talking more. You were required to tell the tower everything, timing your announcements so as not to "step on" the words of other pilots. I'd find the right moment, push the call button, and speak forcefully, something like "Hillsboro tower this is seven-five-seven-Foxtrot-Yankee ten miles out landing on runway three-zero."

It was as if someone else were talking.

I haven't spoken to anyone face-to-face in a week, my journal records, soon after arriving in town and unemployed. At night I'd sit alone at the bar in old school cocktail lounges with their whirring neon signs, drinking whiskey sours while Keno games spat out numbers on the TV. One night I drove into the hills west of the city to see the Perseid meteor shower, determined to witness a shooting star. There were cars pulled off to the side of the road at midnight, stargazers sitting on their hoods. I went into a cemetery where small groups had gathered with lawn chairs; I sat on the wet grass near a cross, not heading home until I'd spotted a meteor, falling fast and white through the dark sky.

The plot of my story shifted again: the protagonist was a young pilot now. The setting became the late 1930s, after everything had been done: records already set, oceans already crossed.

The heroine is fooling herself and she knows it, I wrote.

6. Cross Country Operations

In the spring of 1994, I flew solo to the Hoquiam airfield, which sat on a peninsula in Gray's Harbor in western Washington State. As I turned onto final approach, I could see the smokestacks belching, the timber town of Aberdeen. I was heading into a strong wind. The flaps were lowered and I was going down, down, down. I could see the harbor fast approaching below. Suddenly, I realized I was landing over water, which I had never done before.

It was only my second "cross-country" solo, which meant simply that I took off from one airport and landed at others before returning to my home base at Hillsboro. I'd penciled my route onto my worn sectional; it took me north past Portland following Interstate 5. I'd land at Olympia (first of three required landings) and swing west to Hoquiam, where I'd gas up before

heading back. I'd calculated the fuel consumption and checked the wind and weather forecast. My instructor approved the flight plan, then waited, a little nervously, for my return. The trip took nearly four hours, just me and my rented Cessna 152, N5494P. On my last leg, I got knocked around by gusts blowing off the green ridges below. I saw mountains and hills, the wide Columbia River, the Pacific Ocean in the distance. I saw no other planes, anywhere.

I had a recurring dream in Portland—a young woman walked into my apartment, through the living room and into the kitchen, then out again. I asked what she was doing but got no reply.

7. Weather Patterns

During the spring of 1994, I wrote in my journal that I had a sense of something stirring. I drove to the coast alone. In the air, I practiced my "turns around a point," circling a solitary tree in the middle of a field.

In the air, I practiced recovering from stalls. A stall occurs at certain airspeeds and attitudes when the wings no longer have "lift" and the airplane suddenly drops through the sky. You have to practice recovering from them, just in case, so you and your instructor climb to a good height and force a stall. You pull back on the wheel and the aircraft's nose rises upward, and you have to keep pulling back until the plane drops—you're heading straight for the sun, it seems, with the stall warning alarm blaring, its high-pitched wail of imminent disaster piercing your ears as you wait for the inevitable fall.

Could I really see all of Portland from my window? In my journal, I reported seeing the HILTON sign, its letters glowing red from the hotel's rooftop across the river. I recorded a fog that hid the bridges. I noted seeing seagulls and sandpipers in the train yard. (Birds were another hazard of flight—they could bring your plane down if you hit them just right.) I mentioned that a man slept with my letters to him under his pillow, but I didn't say who he was.

I don't remember now.

In "Alias Intrepid," the heroine gets grounded in a small town due to engine trouble. A local who doesn't want her to leave sabotages her plane.

In my dreams, I lock the door against the ghostly woman, but she gets in

anyway. She is still silent, never speaking to me.

8. Pilotage

In my final months in Portland, I hatched an escape plan to head back east as I worked toward my pilot's license, which I got two days before leaving town. I didn't record this in my journal, but the license exists, tucked inside my logbook—a flimsy, gray rectangle of paper signed by me in youthful scrawl. That young woman, who I once was, piloted a plane sliding sideways, plummeting toward a runway for a crosswind landing. She got knocked off her seat by turbulence in the foothills of the mountains, 2,500 feet in the air.

I got a pilot's license, then left town and hardly flew again.

My journals and logbook record the countdown to my departure from Portland: On June 8, I feared a borrowed or stolen persona, too late. On June 12, I practiced another stall series, power on and power off, falling briefly from the sky before recovering.

On July 2, I flew solo, navigating in the air.

July 4

Went flying this weekend, I wrote, both days got kicked around. Flew over burning crops, could smell the smoke. Saw Mt. St. Helens ominous through the clouds … Clouds all weekend. Firecrackers.

July 11

Not the day it was supposed to be! The L in HILTON was shaking last night, tonight it's gone.

On July 22, I practiced my night pattern work, taking off into the dark sky.

On August 28, I practiced slow flight, and turned around a point, probably

a solitary tree.

September 2

Portland on the wane. Went flying in big circles, some birds passed me.

September 13 (final entry)

Damn neon blinking in the puddle again … Two more weeks! Clouds, fog.

I left many things behind when I moved away.

Contributors

Rob Bowman moved to California eight years ago from Denver, his longtime home and setting for his in-progress novel *Like the Animal*. His fiction has appeared in *Palm Springs Noir* from Akashic Press, *The Coachella Review*, and *The Donnybrook Writing Academy*, among others. His nonfiction credits include *Modern in Denver*, *Book and Film Globe*, *The Desert Sun*, and others. He has been awarded the Barbara Seranella Award, a grant for emerging writers of "great promise." He has also been awarded a Keep Arts Alive grant from the California Desert Arts Council for his nonfiction work. He is a graduate of the University of California Riverside Palm Desert MFA program. He teaches and lives in the Californian desert with his wife Mindy and their sons, Jetson and Rocket. Follow him on Twitter @UmRobBowman.

MICHAEL CHANG (they/them) is the author of *Almanac of Useless Talents* (CLASH Books, 2022) and *Synthetic Jungle* (Northwestern University Press, 2023). Tapped to edit Lambda Literary's Emerge anthology, their poems have been nominated for Best New Poets, Best of the Net & the Pushcart Prize. They were awarded the Poetry Project's prestigious Brannan Prize & serve as a poetry editor at the journal *Fence*.

Anne Germanacos is a writer, visual artist, activist and educator living in San Francisco. She contributes time and other resources to a wide variety of individuals and organizations through Firehouse Fund: Cultivating Sparks. She invites individuals to form creative communities through the Firehouse—a real place in San Francisco as well as a concept, a method and a form of social practice. For more information on Anne's books, teaching and philanthropy, see: www.mergemerge.com.

Tara Ison is the author of the short story collection *Ball;* the essay collection *Reeling Through Life: How I Learned to Live, Love, and Die at the Mov-*

ies; and the novels *The List*, *Rockaway*, *A Child out of Alcatraz*, and *At the Hour Between Dog and Wolf*. In another life, she was the co-writer of the cult classic film *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*. You can find her on the web at www.taraison.com.

E. J. Koh is the author of the memoir *The Magical Language of Others* (Tin House Books, 2020), Washington State Book Award Winner, Pacific Northwest Book Award Winner, Association of Asian American Studies Book Award Winner, and PEN Open Book Award Longlist. Koh is the author of the poetry collection *A Lesser Love* (Louisiana State U. Press, 2017), Pleiades Editors Prize for Poetry Winner. She is the co-translator of Yi Won's poetry collection *The World's Lightest Motorcycle* (Zephyr Press, 2021), Literature Translation Institute of Korea's Translation Grand Prize Winner. Koh has received the National Endowment of the Arts, American Literary Translators Association, MacDowell, and Kundiman fellowships. Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *The Atlantic*, *POETRY*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere. Her debut novel *The Liberators* is forthcoming November 7, 2023.

Henneh Kyereh Kwaku is a poet and health educator from Gonasua in the Bono Region of Ghana. He is the author of *Revolution of the Scavengers*, selected by Kwame Dawes for the New Generation African Poets chapbook series. His poems have appeared/are forthcoming in the Academy of American Poets' *A-Poem-A-Day*, *Lolwe*, *World Literature Today*, *Olongo Africa*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Poetry Sango Ota*, *Agbowo*, *2035Africa*, *Poetry Society of America*, *Tampered Press*, *Air/Light*, and elsewhere. He is the founder and co-host of the Church of Poetry & a 2022 resident at the Library of Africa & the African Diaspora (LOATAD). Kwaku is an MFA student at Chapman University, where he is an Assistant to the MFA in Creative Writing program. Find him on Twitter/Instagram as @kwaku_kyereh.

David Martinez is a Brazilian American writer who has lived all over the United States, Brazil, and Puerto Rico. He earned his MFA in creative writing from UC Riverside Palm Desert. His memoir, *Bones Worth Breaking*, is forthcoming from MDC/FSG.

Christopher Merrill has published seven collections of poetry, including *Watch Fire* (White Pine Press), for which he received the Lavan Younger

Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; many edited volumes and translations; and six books of nonfiction, among them, *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars* (Rowman & Littlefield), *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain* (Random House), and *Self-Portrait with Dogwood* (Trinity University Press). His writings have been translated into nearly forty languages; his journalism appears widely; his honors include a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the French government, numerous translation awards, and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial and Ingram Merrill Foundations. As director of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program since 2000, Merrill has conducted cultural diplomacy missions to more than fifty countries. He served on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO from 2011-2018; in April 2012, President Barack Obama appointed him to the National Council on the Humanities.

Jim Natal is the author of the chapbook *Étude in the Form of a Crow* and five full-length poetry collections including *Spare Room: Haibun Variations* and *Memory and Rain*. His work has appeared widely in journals and anthologies. A multi-year Pushcart Prize nominee and a literary presenter, he is co-founder of Conflux Press.

Jose Padua is the author of *A Short History of Monsters* (University of Arkansas Press), which was chosen by Billy Collins as the winner of the 2019 Miller Williams Poetry Prize. He lives with his wife (the poet Heather L. Davis) and children in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Rory Say is a Canadian fiction writer from Victoria, British Columbia. His work has recently appeared, or is forthcoming, in *The New Quarterly*, *Short Fiction: The Visual Literary Journal*, and *The Four Faced Liar*. A chapbook collection of his fiction, *The Marksman*, is forthcoming from Red Bird Chapbooks. Read more by visiting his website: rorysay.com.

Louise Steinman is a writer, artist, and independent curator. She is the author of three books: *The Crooked Mirror: A Memoir of Polish-Jewish Reconciliation*; *The Souvenir: A Daughter Discovers Her Father's War*, and *The Knowing Body: The Artist as Storyteller in Contemporary Performance*. Her essays have been widely published in U.S. and abroad, most recently her