

Anomaly

Literary Journal

Issue 5

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CONTEMPORARY POETRY & FICTION

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Editorial

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Welcome to Issue 5

We want to open *Issue 5* by thanking Joseph Birdsey for all his outstanding work on all previous issues. Along with myself, Oliver and Roseanna, Joseph was a founder of *Anomaly Literary Journal* and his constant hard work on the graphic design of the magazine has given us its unique, eye-catching look.

Issue 5 is the first issue without Joseph's blood, sweat and tears involved and I hope I have done his previous work proud by attempting to continue the look and feel of *Anomaly Lit* with the same style and finesse he instilled in it from the beginning.

Of course, it helps to be working with such sumptuous and gorgeous artwork provided by the deliciously talented Mario Sánchez Nevado. Nevado's work is alive with colour, detail and a sweeping sense of vibrancy that is difficult to ignore. It electrifies the pages of the magazine and enlivens the written word it so elegantly accompanies.

This issue was a challenge to put together, mainly due to the sheer number of submissions for this issue—more than any previous issue—and we really struggled to choose at times because the over-all level of work received was impressive, which makes rejection letters all the harder for us to write.

POETRY: PART I opens with three poems by Jodi Andrews ('*New Life*', '*My Fish Transfers Tanks*' and '*My First Dermatology Appointment*'). Andrew's voice is at once direct, unemotional and yet still manages to puncture the reader with a pin-prick of emotion. Especially in the opening poem, '*New Life*', in which the speaker juxtaposes her friend's pregnancy and birth with the growth and development with the speaker's own cancer: '*Scans show the outline of limbs, head,/mouth, nose and genitals. My scan shows/suspicious lymph nodes.*' Her work is unflinching, direct, head-on yet emotive and immensely readable.

Rebecca Guess Cantor follows with two poems, '*What We Couldn't See*' and '*Morning*', both poems, in a way, dealing with marriage. Cantor's second poem in particular sees the speaker, bogged down in domesticity, acknowledging a flicker of anger, boredom and stultification that I think anyone in a longterm relationship or marriage can, at times, identify with whilst also acknowledging the comfort and beauty within it.

These poems are not over-done. They are not dramatic, they are matter of fact and the balance here is just right. Cantor does not, at any point, enter into melodrama or veer toward the saccharine, she remains perfectly in the centre, where most things in marriage are conducted.

Laura Page presents '*Where the Wild Things Are (Hungry)*' in which the speaker in her '*wolf suit*' battles against an eating disorder in vivid, biting style—'*I said I'll not eat another bite—/and was sent to a counsellor who also tried to help the Lord/articulate. But a forest grew/between her clipboard and me and all I could see were/rosaries of teeth and scraps of moon...*'

For such a heavy subject, this poem is delivered with a level head and a delicate use of language that is not only beautiful to read but which flows elegantly, sound to sound, line to line and greets a much written about subject in an almost pretty and unique way.

In some ways, what these first three poets do, is ease us into what we later realised was in some ways the underlying link that threads all of these selected pieces together (because there's always an underlying link isn't there?) which is that the majority of these pieces in this issue seem to take their subjects and look at them from perspectives not usually taken. For example, in the case of Isabel Miles' short story '*Badgered*', Miles explores the main character's unusual realisation that his interactions with a badger on a lonely road at night, over and over, might be an aspect of his subconscious, underlying guilt: an emotion he does not consciously process. It is, effectively, a story about a cheating man who does not feel guilt but Miles' way of approaching this is lightyears away from the usual psychopathic-cheating-husband short story and is all the fresher for it.

This way of approaching something is there too in Cliona Saidléar's short story '*Fada*', which could simply have been what it is— a woman walks into a bar to meet her boyfriend. Except what Saidléar does is take the act of walking into a crowded bar— squeezing between raucous, crowded bodies, quick gestures one must quickly react to, maintaining one's balance as you pivot around closing compacted bodies, trying not to get a pint of beer split over you in the process and makes this simple act, an act we don't really consider in day to day life and breaks it down, in expressive, exquisite detail to the physical details of what a body does, piece by piece, in the process of moving through a crowded, busy room:

'I billow out my shoulders to arc around the solid curve of a beer belly perched high on a bar stool, a sentry challenging my passage.

Breathing in, near grazing the bony antlers of a back which hangs in the air like the turf-held overhanging edges of a crumbling cliff, I note a corded neck emerging from the frayed stitching of the t-shirt of too many yesterdays which films the thin crack between us.'

As I said to Cliona, this piece so dangerously straddles the line between being over-done and just that bit too much and yet manages, much like the woman in the piece itself, not to falter as it navigates its way to the conclusion. Perhaps it's something a lot of editors would be on the fence about but for us, it was an intriguing description of a completely bland, totally ordinary act any one of us do on a given week and infuses it with an almost electric sensuality.

All of the fiction in this issue does the same thing: looks at situations from a slightly different angle. Ally Butler, in '*Kaeru No Wa Kaeru*' displays the close relationship between two sisters in the 1970s who came to America as immigrants— and this one, to me, almost feels like there is more to this story. I wanted it to be a novel. I wanted to keep reading, I wanted to get inside the lives of these two very different but nevertheless close sisters and follow them around.

Tiffany Jimenez does something similar but with a very difficult, far more awkward situation but again, paints the relationship between these two sisters, Phoebe and Penelope, as light and airy, clearly close and affectionate: and then goes beneath the surface. Beneath the ease with which you gather the sister's normal relationship unfolds day-to-day there is the edge of something that becomes clearer and clearer to Phoebe as the days go on. Something is just off and as ever, the devil is in the details.

Adam Falik, with ‘*Oscar’s Letter*’, brings us a somewhat short but vivid depiction of the protagonist’s rather idiosyncratic, fearless and somewhat antagonistic friend Oscar and though this piece is somewhat brief (or perhaps the style makes it seem shorter than it is) it is very memorable.

Finally, Kristien Potgieter befuddles, excites and confounds us with her rapid style description, a sense of growing, quiet panic and selective amnesia in ‘*Dead Man Walking*’— the antithesis of the kind of hangover where you know you’ve done something terrible the night before but can’t and don’t want to face it— even when it confronts you head on. You can run but, like a dog chasing it’s own tail, you can’t hide:

‘I glance over my shoulder as I walk quickly away. Behind the shop window, his frowning foxy face trapped in the dead centre of the ‘O’ in GREAT LIQUOR, the owner barks. Into his phone. The police. Asking for him now. The detective. I’d thought this part of Hillbrow would still be okay, but the poster with my face was on the wall behind the counter. Why was my face on the poster? I need to get out. I need to get home.’

Johannesburg is portrayed almost as a representation of the protagonist’s own mind— and just for anyone who might get confused, in South Africa, a ‘robot’ is a traffic light!

Dennis Walsh and Thomas Stewart (who joins us again!) bring us ‘*Wake*’ and ‘*A Misunderstanding*’, respectively. Walsh’s ‘*Wake*’ is exactly what it sounds like: a short story about attending a wake but it’s one of those wakes anyone with numerous wake attendances under their belts will probably connect with— you sort of knew the person enough to go but it’s awkward, perhaps, like the protagonist, your personal life is a shambles and this is not the thing you want to be at right at this moment.

Stewart’s ‘*A Misunderstanding*’ explores one of those relationships where one person is sort of going along with it but hasn’t the heart to deal with the problems within the relationship or indeed go deeper or break it off. It’s that grey area, the no–man’s–land we all, at some point of another, fall into in a new–ish relationship when maybe the other person isn’t quite as best suited to us as we wished they were.

POETRY PART II contains, like PART I, so many gorgeous poems we cannot mention them all here. To continue with our accidental theme of looking at things from unique perspectives let me just single out a few.

David Ruderman’s ‘*Days Without Caffeine*’ also springs to mind. He manages to weave an entire, personal narrative out of the experience of a few days without caffeine in one of those poems that makes the speaker sound confessional but maybe isn’t— considering the title, we weren’t sure what was coming next in these poems but it turned out to be quite a beautifully put together treat. Douglas Collura’s ‘*I Knew You When You Were An Asshole, But I’m Not Perfect Either*’ is a brief but wonderfully evocative poem that draws on a moment of memory and the disgust felt in that moment by the speaker so quickly and so intensely you can picture the scene so easily— and it’s not without judgement for the character involved or even the speaker themselves.

Celia Hauw’s poem ‘*The Birth of the Universe*’ contrasts the ephemeral and untouchable (for the most part) beauty of deep space with the untouchable nature of love in the aftermath of the speaker’s mother’s death—

*‘That is what it looked like light years ago
thousands of it: this is her belated deliverance.
I wouldn’t have known, in all the time it took*

her light to reach me, what I had lost.'

For anyone who's ever lost someone close to them, there is, if you'll excuse us, an almost cosmic sense of loss it feels utterly untouchable and unspeakable but Hauw easily and seamlessly does it here through a contrast that should be difficult but isn't and delivers a poem whose core of emotion is recognisable to anyone who has ever lost anyone who was irreplaceable to them.

Alexis Rhone Fancher, in two poems, discusses two very different kinds of relationships. In '*Pas de Deux*' she cuts right to the core of hurt in a relationship gone wrong between two people who have a great deal in common and in what feels like tones of both disappointment and resignation in '*Today, in her garden, my sister says 'This plant came from the birds.'*', she (or more correctly, the speaker) reflects on the fact that sometimes in life, you can do everything right but the results just don't always come together in the way they ought to, no matter what you do:

*'Maybe that's was how it was with Anna, demon seed
dropped into my sister's womb like a time bomb.'*

Both of these poems make the reader feel, though the stories within both are staggeringly different, on the face of things, there's no reason they shouldn't work out except that they don't work out and it's largely due to no-one's fault in particular but someone always ends up being the one who gets hurt, no matter what.

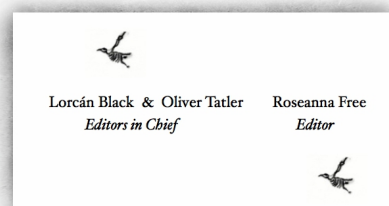
Of course there are beautiful contributions by Annie Blake ('*Thanatophobia*' & '*Beyond the Pleasure Principal*'), Kevin Higgins ('*Grasp*') and others— we really weren't left wanting for gorgeous poetry.

NON-FICTION was a pleasure to choose from. There were so many this time around that we really had to be discerning and whittle it down to two: Autumn Shah's piece '*Klepto*' which delighted and surprised us. While '*Klepto*' straddled the line between her own childhood perspective and her later perspective on the same situation as an adult woman and mother, it's so relatable (or is it just me?) and readable we were delighted to include it.

Finally, this brings us to Pam Munter's '*Grace*' which though the subject matter is sad, remains oddly comforting and in reading about the experience we found it oddly at ease with the circumstance she found herself in and it's all, really, about life experience. Or the amount of funerals you've been to in your life and for me personally, being Irish, there's been quite a few over the years but there was something about this piece we all felt worked as a whole. The characters, the setting, the emotion which runs through it, though it is not by any means a heightened, flowing emotion but perhaps it's fair to say it's weighted emotion borne from experience and time.

As I've said, there are so many pieces to mention and to touch on that to do so would take many more pages and we don't want to hold you up anymore, dear readers, so go. Peruse, download and share *Anomaly Literary Journal: Issue 5*.

Most importantly: enjoy!





Shame © Mario Sánchez Nevado

Poetry: Part I

Jodi Andrews

New Life

Pregnant with a scar-tissue baby— vertical incision from my belly button down.

My friend's belly expands. Little feet and hands move across her globe.

Scans show the outline of limbs, head, mouth, nose and genitals. My scan shows

suspicious lymph nodes. The OB/GYN cuts through layers of skin and abs and

eases baby and placenta out. My friend's awake, can hear the cry. I'm under general

anesthesia. The surgeon plucks out lymph nodes—stacked—ballooned.

She has a new life to show for the scabby line of scar and so do I. She absorbs each

facial expression, each yawn, squirm. People travel miles to coo, to hold, to adore.

My proof of new life beneath shirts. Alone, I study its details, wait for one of us to blink.

My Fish Transfers Tanks

I reach blue handled mesh
into disappearing water.
My burgundy beta eyes it
and drifts to the opposite side
of the bowl. I move netting
closer. He swims the other way.

I think of the follow-up ultrasound
scheduled a week from today.
A cyst on my ovary. The scar
near there ached earlier
in the cereal aisle.

I wish I could swim forever
away from this body's downfalls,
but I can feel the mesh moving
closer. It chases me around
in circles until it snatches me,
and I am exposed: jerking,
breathless and afraid.

First Dermatology Appointment

I slide the robe on, just underwear underneath,
boobs sag against skin. I hold my elbows,
shiver in the open back.

She starts—a bright light in my hair,
Fingers, a fine toothed comb.
She scans my moles like a quilter
searches for imperfections—
a frayed string, bunched cloth.
She pulls out her handheld magnifier
on this one and that

and marks one on the right side
of my right breast.
The nurse takes a photograph.
“You’re going to feel a poke,
a sting, and a burn.”
Anaesthetic enters, scrape severs.

It was the first chunk of skin I ever lost, and I missed it

like those black low top converse I rescued
from the trash can. Black Hills dirt still
sparkled in the fabric.

The doctor carried my mole to pathology—
the body’s glitter: tested and trashed.

Rebecca Guess Cantor

What We Couldn't See

Sonoma Valley, 2010

As our van gave up trying at the edge of the dark woods, I was still a bit tipsy from our afternoon of wine tasting, when the hills were smeared with yellow flowers broken up only by stripes of grapevines and one red barn, which I examined through the legs of red wine, of cabernet, that held to my glass.

In the dark that night, we took on disparate roles: my husband and Eric walked to find a phone, while Julie and Eve talked about the upcoming wedding from their bucket seats, and Paul and I stood behind the van with our otherwise useless phones making timid jokes about bears and waving our lights at each eventual car. One stopped, kindly, and promised to call a cop upon reaching town.

That was seven and a quarter years ago. Paul, whose business card had resulted in free tastings all day, has since passed away from complications. Julie grieves him on social media. Eric and Eve are divorced—dating other people. And my husband and I have a six-year-old, conceived later that week, who, as he plays with his younger sister on the floor recounts his most recent nightmare: It was dark, he says, working blocks into a bridge. It was dark, and we were afraid of what we couldn't see in the woods—but we saved each other from the world.

Morning

The morning stings me
from the first. Sifting through
the dark, water left running,
a too-bright lamp, a tangled
slip, cat staring, ignored.

He snores. I brush through
tangled morning hair,
pull three gray ones—
wonder how long
my mom's been dyeing.

I stand in my closet,
trying to remember the last time
I did laundry, the last time
I felt comfortable in my skin; and
he snores as the cat paws

at his nose, expecting more
luck with him than me.
I overflow her bowl just to show her.
Outside the day is clear and blue
and smells like pine

or fabric softener. I stop—
frozen in the early sun, angry
at the discordant scene,
at the simple, at the beautiful—
just angry. Keys in my hand,
I melt beneath the weight.

Where the Wild Things Are (Hungry)

With apologies to Maurice Sendak.

The night I wore my wolf suit
and ground my head into the pillow one way, then the other,
my mother called my father in to help God say the sentences
God has always choked on, always sentences to
to girls in wolf suits. I said I'll not eat another bite—
and was sent to a counselor who also tried to help the Lord
articulate. But a forest grew
between her clipboard and me, and all I could see were
rosaries of teeth and scraps of moon, like sheet music to howl by,
and I got smaller
and smaller
and the scale situated prominently in that office room
became the whole room, its fat window sliding this way and that
over increments to balance, like a ship tossed
in and out of weeks
and almost over a year
until I collapsed in the hall.
When they rushed at me, I screamed BE STILL
and stared into all their wide eyes until they saw me
and were frightened and let holy off the hook a while.
Still, I wasn't up for a rumpus. I wanted to be
the size they loved best of all. And still
I wore the wolf suit, hoarded the moon's trebles and clefs,
as if I might soon paste them to me, breasts and hips, moon piñata.
It took infinite small bites, clumsy with the rosary of bared teeth
in and out of weeks, and
almost over a year
before that scale got small again, smaller than me
and I woke up into the night of my very own room, no one lisping,
serving sentences hot.

Annamarie Benson

Weather Underground, 1969–1977

Revolution was a bomb,
a mushroom mass spreading in our eyes.
We saw minds burned by madness in the streets,
limbs without faces tangled in erotic hysteria,
the air loud with ideas shooting off lips.
We all tasted of each other,
the smell of the underground spilling on our tongues,
and at night, when we hit the city like a thunderclap,
Che raised his fist with us in the crowd.

Or maybe we were alone.
Maybe Mom and Dad didn't know us anymore
and maybe the war went on like double-talk
because we didn't speak out for "God."
Everybody loves heresy.

Over again, the grinding fantasia
of America stirred us like mules.
We fired bullets from our mouths, and
look! Now the Weathermen are prophets.
We melt the world like plastic
with big arson and an explosion of revelation.
Watch how we fight the good Germans:
Frisch weht der Wind. Wo weilest du?
Fire scrapes its spine along the wall,
the soot of empty buildings wringing
through our hands.



Closer © Mario Sánchez Nevado

Natalie Solmer

Woke Up Looking Slavic

I

In my mirror there's always grandmother,
the one with birds in her laundry.

She writes that fig tree in her small
California yard took up all the air

and brought those birds to her clothesline,
shitting and singing. When I wake up,

Elfriede hovers around my cheekbones,
Elfriede hovers around my mountain—

the floor-pile of laundry I leave all week
and pluck my children's outfits out of.

II

When I had courage once, I asked Elfriede
where she was born—under a lilac bush

on some mountain, for all I know. After her death,
my uncle sent me photographs of the village,

its faded Pomorzowice sign—black on white,
vandalized by someone who wrote Victoria

in a red like lipstick or blood. Around it,
the tall grass had gone to seed. Elfriede was

two years old when she left Upper Silesia.
In her twenties, on the train leaving California

She cursed Indiana, her husband's crooked house
that waited there, she cursed her husband's wine

bottle, the time she slapped him for throwing
the cat, she cursed everything he did back,

pregnant with another son
on the train.

III

Notes from her typewriter—
a white Compton, California 1945

Other white immigrants, small house,
a lot of fields, husband, baby, stray cat.

When it rained, the high curbs filled
with water and even the shoes

turned green in the closet. Newspaper
curtains. One frying pan. Knew

where the toddler was by the cat's tail—
it followed him into the yard.

Fig tree. Stars in the ceiling
at an Italian restaurant.

She never liked her food drowned
in tomato sauce. When she wanted to

sit down on something soft,
she would go visiting across the street

or she would watch the neighbors
baste their turkey through her window.

Stage play. A lot of mutton.
Finding coins with the baby in the park.

She could take the bus downtown and waltz
with these coins in her purse, completely

free from the Old Country feud in South Bend,
Indiana. It was all a game.

He was repairing ships coming in from the War.
He lost it. Meteor showers for days.

IV

They left Compton just before the second
great migration of blacks; they left the earth

before I had my half-black babies. I was relieved
and question now how I knew anything,
how you can know something without
hearing a word. But I'm wrong

that they were all dead—Elfriede
was finally back in California,

but her mind long-gone.
I wondered if she recognized the palms?

Did she remember that which she wrote
once—she and her husband one evening

helping a confused old woman home
as an owl followed them, flying palm tree

to palm tree, ready to swoop and deliver
the old woman's spirit past the pinkening sky.

Dumb Dove

What it felt to be a white girl
When the mint bloomed
In the suburban drainage ditch—

a dumb dove. Ignorant birds were
singing with me to En Vogue and SWV
all along my white street.

I didn't ask my mother why
there was only one black family
around the corner and only one

at my Catholic school, did I?
My voice was the creak of swing-sets
and the low hoo-hooing of mourning

doves. I didn't speak past the clipped
green lawns of our neighborhood until
I was a teen. I felt I was a bunch of violets

without their roots and wanted vainly
to be some other girl standing in line,
buying my first Tupac CD, self-conscious as hell.

Rap music was a door. Rap was my father
saying, "I don't really like Black music."
while The Rolling Stones spun from his speakers

on repeat, none of us hearing the stolen Howlin'
Wolf, Chuck Berry, and Muddy
Waters' licks and lyrics. Behind

the all-white Television, all the dolls
in my bedroom—their white faces
and all the white protagonists in my books.

My mother says this poem is not a poem,
but a manifesto made to make her
look like a racist, didn't I know how

she defended the Motown on her teenage
turntable to her father who called it
something far worse than "black music?"

Didn't I know she had one black friend—
a tennis partner in the 80's who never
crossed our threshold? She says

to me, "I know your kids are half-black,
but I don't want to hear this from you.
I'd rather hear it from a black person."

I say I know your good heart, but you're going
to hate me for this—and I keep talking
to you, and asking who exactly White America

will listen to when what's buried so deep
in our bodies plods and plods complacently,
directing our lame feet until we lift its veil?

The Almost Husband

Every time he walks by my water glass,
he drinks it down.

His skin still smells like the sea
and he's homesick for it.

Last time he was out of work,
he sliced limes, brought the halves

into the shower and scrubbed his skin,
cut the curse, got a job.

I've stopped cooking
since our last baby started crawling.

He makes us curries and brown stews,
ackee and saltfish with callaloo.

When he comes home at 3am,
first he slips off his colorful sneakers,

takes off his earrings, chain, watch
and nestles them in his removed hat.

Then he reheats dinner
and brings it to bed.

I wake to his teeth
snapping bones, sucking marrow,

spitting fragments to his plate.
He tells me of all the girls tonight

pulling him to dance at the reggae bar—
how his body is their sugar,

how they all wish they were me—
birthing his children, sleeping in this bed.

He says I no longer need to worry,
he's tired of it all. I will transcend,

I will make a saintly quiet.
I won't allow him to make me

a garden variety
crazy. Instead I will

pray and pray.
It will work for awhile.

In the mornings, I will scrape
the hunks of goat bone into the trash.

Shenau Brannigan

This Poem has a Gun in It

Not the one I held
to my temple at age 12 after mother
kicked father out,
a bullet from the chamber
in the gun
I held when I was eight,
learned I was a mean shot
for a girl,
could take down a dozen tin cans,
my best friend's grandpa said he didn't
want to be the man who broke my heart,
who wasn't Ed,
the 17-year-old a year ahead,
who showed me the gun in the glove box,
the one that jostled in his jacket pocket on his way to Spanish Class
where he almost shot up the room, he told me
not to tell anyone, maybe he loved me,
why else would he have given me that secret
I should have shared.
When I was 13 Sonya and I watched
the news on Columbine,
long trench coats making their way through grainy halls.
Sonya and I put oranges in our bras, teetered in her mom's high heels,
and decades later I remain unsure on my feet.
I am often told I am too sensitive.
Here is the gun.
At this moment a woman next to me
is talking about her friend's rape and laughing.
I am silent as flashbacks
recoil through my body,
up my eight-year old arm—
no man broke my heart or they all did,
growing older did,
as a child I reached for any man with a beard,
now I reach for only one, only sometimes, when
I can clear thoughts like knocking cans from a fence
before they're reset.



William R. Soldan

Road Work

Beneath a fallen tree he lies pinned flat and broken does not
know he's going to live but to regret it does not know the ripple
of the scrip the cloud cure the half life of running out and
running searching shifting gears when the role takes over
does not know he'll take a baseball bat to his exwife's lover their
little girl watching from beyond a split curtain does not know
he'll recall it to a room behind iron gates and stone walls cry in a
place where there's no place for tears where tears will bleed you
jack you up and slit your throat does not know he'll pistol whip a
dude's poor sweet mother for five minutes of blasting blind
does not know as he lies in the road of a New South holler
kissing the curve where the ground spills down a slope of old
growth the rain scything through the digger's white beams that
this is where the story the one he'll tell for years to come has
just begun does not know it won't let go when he sees a fallen
limb smells the musk of crushed leaves hears the rage of his own
blood's rush the taste of it bitter on his tongue or when he feels
the slim fingers of a strange paid encounter walking along his
ruin the scar glyph left by a centipede suture does not know
this on-call overtime it will pay him well but cost his life.



Fiction: Part I

Charade © Mario Sánchez Nevado

Tiffany Jimenez

What the Window Showed Me

“Phoebe, I love you.” My sister, Penelope, tells me. She and I used to be very close. She is younger than I am, just short of two years, and if I am completely honest, much prettier, too.

“I love you, too, Pen.” Her face is flushed. I wonder if her blood pressure is high.

She grabs for my hand, but I shake it off. Theo had come home the night before drenched in sweat. He smelled like Pleasures by Estée Lauder, Penelope’s perfume. I had asked him how he could smell so sweet but feel so sticky, and he laughed. His laugh let out an overpowering smell of bourbon, and my stomach had instantly wretched.

“Where were you the other night?” I pull the earflaps of my beanie up. The frost of the New York air bites at my ears’ grooves, making it harder to hear her.

“‘New News.’ It’s that cool new bar that’s tabloid themed.”

“Tabloid themed?” What will these overpriced cocktail places think of next?

“The menus are made on newspaper material, and the cocktails are named after famous papers.”

“That’s all it takes, huh, to have a gimmick?”

Penelope laughs, but I know she does not feel the way I do. She goes out a lot. Mostly to overpriced cocktail places. “Can we stop at the dry cleaners? I actually want to pick up the dress I wore to it,” she says.

“Sure.” I watch her scurry across the street, expecting me to follow at the same pace. I drag my feet behind me to hear the way they sound against the gritty pavement. I watch them. When did the streets become so dull? The bubblegum doesn’t even stand out anymore. I am sure they just paved this street a few years ago. How old am I now?

“Come on, Phoebe! Slow poke!” There! Right there. Penelope shows her youth so aggressively. She hints at it every other sentence, it seems. She flaunts it with the way she jumps while she steps, taps her nose while she talks, her eyes shifting from one item to the next.

“I’m coming,” I call back, throwing my hand at her like just be patient. I glance at my hand. My manicure is well kept, but my knuckles look big, they’re noticeably dry, too.

After waiting for a taxi to pass, I jog the rest of the way across the four-lane street.

“This is the BEST place to take your dry-cleaning,” she says as we enter through the glass doors.

“Here you go, Miss Penelope.” The woman hands Penelope a plastic-covered green dress. It looks velvet. It looks like something I would wear—used to wear.

“Cute dress,” I say.

“I know! When I saw it, I had to have it! It reminded me of you.” She pays and then hugs the dress to her as if for good luck.

“You know Theo went to a bar the other night, too,” I start. “I think he said it was tabloid themed.”

“Oh my god, you’re totally right! I forgot that I ran into him there!” My head, which was down previously, swings up instantly. It has to face hers. Even if it was just a smell, I know that smell. I don’t know anyone else with that smell. Pleasures. I used to laugh seeing so many bottles of it at Macy’s as I reached for my own perfume, Eternity, always just a few bottles away from being sold out.

“Yeah? What did you say?”

“I said ‘hi there, stranger!’ and then hugged him. He seemed pretty drunk to be honest. He was with a big group of men in suits so I left it at that.” Penelope twirls the hook of the hanger holding up her dress as we walk. I wanted it so badly to break off.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. My girlfriends wanted to butt into Theo’s group, but I said no. I don’t blame them. Lot’s of handsome suits.” She smiles, her teeth look like snow. “Lots of rings, too, though,” she adds, letting her smile drop.

“You know for someone who wears so much perfume, it sure doesn’t stick on me when you hug me hello,” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if mom were to hug someone, you’d smell like her the rest of the day. If our aunt hugged someone, it wouldn’t stick unless she spent A LOT of time with that someone.”

“That’s funny you notice that, Phoebes.” We are almost to her townhouse, and I can tell that her attention has shifted to digging her key out of her purse. I reach for her dress so that she can properly search. I bet it would fit me, and a bit better, too. Penelope’s body is killer and fit, but something about having a baby makes a woman get a little softness—a good softness—that a childless woman doesn’t have. I’d fill out the dress really well, I bet.

“Theo smelled like you the other night.”

“What?” Pen is dumping the contents of her purse out onto the ground.

“Your perfume. Theo smelled like your perfume the other night.”

“Ack!” She pulls the single key from her skirt pocket. “Forgot I put it there,” she laughs, gathering all of her lipsticks, pennies, and tissues, and placing them back into her sack of a purse.

“Penelope, did you sleep with my husband?” I stand on the last item, a stuffed cow keychain she likes but won’t attach to her key.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Phoebe?” She looks up at me, but then turns to the cow underneath my foot. I push my boot down a little harder. “He smelled like your perfume.”

“So you automatically assume he slept with me? You think I am the only woman who buys that perfume?”

“You are definitely one of a very few,” I retort. She pushes my boot with her fist, and pulls at the poor cow. It’s head tears off.

“Phoebel!” “This isn’t a game, Penelope. Did you or did you not sleep with Theo?” I watch her closely. She looks like she wants to cry, but instead she throws the cow head at me and turns toward her house. Forgetting the remainders of the cow, a pack of cigarettes, and her velvet green dress, still tightly gripped in my hands.

“No, I did not,” she calls behind her. I sprint towards her, and she then turns around to face me.

“Phoebe, you have a problem.”

“He smelled like you.” I point my finger at her as if she doesn’t get it, but she just takes a step towards me like I’m the one lost.

“If he did cheat, which I am positive he would never do, it was someone else who happens to wear the same perfume as I wear.”

“You have always said he’s handsome.” I can feel the tears falling, helpless and grasping for any piece of my lashes, clouding my vision, making Penelope look like a sparkling circle of pink.

“He is handsome, Phoebe, but he is your husband, Phoebe.” She grabs for my hands, and this time I let her. “You need to stop running away with things in your head like that.”

I push her away the moment my head is in her neck, and her perfume attempts to smother me.

I haven’t spoken to Penelope for a month now. I used to speak to her daily. Before I even had a her, I used to talk to myself. I am not as comforting as she is, and I can’t seem to shake her off of my mind even though I still believe that she slept with Theo.

Theo and I have been married for five years now. We had Ingram before we were married, when I was twenty-five. I have never been sure we would have married if it hadn’t been for Ingram. When Ingram was born, I wasn’t sure if I could love Ingram as much as I love Theo. Penelope told me that it would come naturally.

Today it is hard to get up. When I finally do, the sun is already settling into the trees, and my head hurts. I have been getting headaches quite frequently for the past few weeks or so, and I attribute it to my constant need to fall asleep. Any time Theo and I are out, whether to dinner or to a school event for Ingram, I cannot find a break from yawning nor can I find a break from the splotches of psychedelic colors dotting the blinds of my eyelids.

“Phoebe!” I hear him calling from the kitchen. It’s Sunday, and Ingram is at a birthday party. I turn onto my belly, and lift the quilt over my shoulders while holding my ears.

“Phoebe, it’s almost time to pick up Ingram.”

“Can’t you pick him up?” I yell back.

“He asked for you, Phoebe.”

“I’m not feeling well, Theo. Can you please get him?” I push my body deeper under the blankets, letting the quilt take my hands’ place over my ears. I can hear Theo moving toward the room. I can sense his body breathing a foot away from the bed. It scares me.

“Phoebe, get up.”

“I’m tired.”

“You’ve been asleep all day.”

“Because I am tired.”

“Phoebe! You’ve got to get up. Your son is waiting for you.”

“Theo,” I uncover my face from the quilt. “Our son will be fine if you pick him up.”

“Why are you punishing him for what you think I’ve done?”

“I am not punishing Ingram, Theo,” I say. “And I don’t think you did it, I know you did it.” As I stare at him, mostly at his hair because his eyes are too misleading, I notice that his once thick black hair is now covered with splotches of grey. When did that happen? “You need to have Sandra color your hair.”

Theo reaches behind his ear and laughs. “You need to get up, Phoebe, and pick up Ingram so that I can go have Sandra dye my hair.”

“Fine,” I sputter. Beneath the quilt, I am mostly naked, save for a nice lace thong I bought for our anniversary in the next few days. I bought it before I suspected.

When his hand taps my butt, I drop to the floor. There is no stopping the flood of tears. I have tried to be brave, but just a small touch from him defeats me.

“Don’t touch me,” I growl.

“Phoebe, come on. I love you.” He kneels next to me. The grey of his hair sparkles. I reach for his hand.

“Why my sister, Theo? Why not Sandra or Pauline?”

“Why not you, Phoebe?” he coos. When I do not respond, he says: “I did not come on to Penelope. I did not try to kiss her. You made it up.”

I lift my head. I can feel how hot my cheeks are.

“You made it up, Phoebe, in your head.” I slam my hands on the hardwood floor and push myself up.

“I have to pick up, Ingram,” I say.

I cannot tell what I have imagined, if I have imagined anything.

Penelope is over, and we are eating cake, a sweet lemon cake with chocolate frosting. It’s Ingram’s favorite. Penelope made it for him. It is Christmas Eve.

Penelope is wearing a red turtleneck and black pants. Theo is wearing a dark blue sweater I bought him last Christmas. I am wearing Penelope’s green velvet dress. She hasn’t said a word about it. When Theo saw me in it, he asked, “you think you’ll be too cold in that?” We went out for dinner. And people looked at me, I felt it. A man a few tables over winked my way, so I waved back. Theo laughed at me, “who are you waving at?”

Penelope ordered soup. Theo ordered soup. I ordered lobster. It took me the longest to eat, but it was delicious.

Now we are eating lemon cake at home. I eat mine quickly so that I can linger by the window while the others sit and eat with Ingram on the couch in front of the fireplace. He’s falling asleep in his cake. Sweet things never get him hyper like they do the other kids.

“Honey, come with us to the fire so we can open gifts,” Theo says.

“Be right there,” I say, but I think I’ll just stay right by this window. I can see the fireplace from here. I can see the back of Penelope and Theo’s heads as they sit on opposite ends of the couch, Ingram stretched between them. I can tell when Theo looks towards her, or she him. I am waiting for one of them to choke.

When Ingram was born, I didn’t cry, but as the picture Theo snapped of me and our newborn shows, I frowned. The baby, a little slime curled around his ear, looked nothing like me. It felt too warm to be in my arms. I secretly wondered if the doctors had got it wrong. I waited for the love to hit me. It hit Penelope instead. She babysat him for me weekly. I needed to get out a lot. I pumped and packed bottle after bottle, dating and then saving them in the fridge for Penelope. I remember how Theo noticed how well he responded to her. He said, “Penelope will be a great mom.” I remember saying: “If she ever gets a man.”

They haven’t looked at one another all night, except when either of them is talking, and the person talking usually stares at me. Why put in so much effort?

Outside of the window, I see a pair of birds tweeting this and that at one another. The snow has covered most of the yard and I wonder if the birds are cold. I move my hands up and down the sides of the dress. I move them faster and faster until my hands are hot and tingle.

“Phoebes, you coming?” Theo calls.

“One minute, Theo, geez!” When I stopped getting up at all, Theo called Penelope over. That was two weeks ago. They retold me the story of that night they ran into each other at the

tabloid themed bar. “I hugged him and that was it,” Penelope said. “I hugged her and went on drinking with my co-workers,” Theo said. That was it. The smell of the perfume must’ve stuck to Theo’s coat. “I wear A LOT of perfume when I go out these days,” Penelope had said. “People really stink.” I told them o.k. I was o.k. Who knows what got into me, I said. I must just be feeling lonely. That made Theo cry. He hadn’t cried since Ingram was born and before that I only saw him cry when he found his bulldog dead on the side of the freeway. He hadn’t even known he was missing.

I turn back toward the window, but the birds are gone. I can actually see the reflection of the fire, a little flutter of flame at this corner of the windowpane, another flutter near another. My hands aren’t tingling anymore so I try rubbing them against the glass.

Badgered

We met in early June of last year, late at night and half-way along the lane that leads to the village. Turning a familiar corner, I saw a moving shadow, then a flash of white, nothing coherent. I braked just before the jolt, and the car skewed then stopped. Whatever it had been was behind me now, a dark mass on the road. I walked back before I so much as glanced at the front of the car. The only sound was the creak of an old elm and the soft whish of the wind through the birches that flank the lane: nothing from the thing on the road. Then I heard scraping and, as I got closer, made out a paw groping at the tarmac. The creature dragged a few inches forwards before a pair of dark eyes looked up at me from a barred face. It was the first live badger I'd ever seen and I suppose it will now be the last. Obviously the dark liquid trickling from its mouth was blood. Obviously its back was broken. Yet it was quite beautiful. Its loveliness struck me before the horror. Horror for the animal of course, but sharper, for mine own, horror at my predicament. I can't bear to think of anything in pain.

A quick clean death seemed best for both of us, and my first thought was to reverse over it. But that might simply maim it further, risking the unthinkable need to try again. I hate mess. I did consider taking it to a vet, but it was after midnight. Besides, I'd have to get it into the car. The thing was surprisingly small but relatively speaking its claws were huge. Those paws could shovel out kilos of earth; they could gouge out flesh. I looked at its teeth, fangs really, and remembered reading that badgers have super-strong jaws that never let go. It was watching me warily but with no sign of reproach, perhaps even with a trace of hope. Probably it did not associate me with the blaze of light that had hurtled out of the night to crush it. If only I had had a gun and had known how to use it. There was a dry stone dyke further down the road, but a blunt heavy object would just add personal risk to uncertain outcome. So I drove home.

Louise had her back to me, pretending to be asleep. I wasn't interested anyway. Next morning I booked the car in for repair. Over muesli, I told Louise that I'd taken the ford too quickly and skidded into the dyke by Crathie's Farm. I didn't mention the badger. 'Where had you been?' she asked. 'Drinking? Who were you with?'

'Work,' I said. 'As you know.' She wrinkled her nose, like she'd just stood in dog shit. It was still red from last night's self-pity. Sometimes it's like she's incapable of pulling herself together. Driving to work I saw no trace of the animal, so it must have managed to drag itself into the trees to die. Of course, the rain would have washed the blood away. I hoped the creature was dead and not flailing about in some ditch trying to get away from the corbies. Time passed and I became sure the badger was dead. I still carried the beastly thing around with me, but more lightly. Sometimes I was round that bend before I thought about it.

That summer Harry and I had several business trips together, so I didn't need to see him outside of work. It didn't return till the nights were lengthening, and the first time seemed coincidence. Harry and I had gone straight from work to Poldino's. We both ate wild boar with

olives but Harry drank most of the wine, since I was driving. The wine was dark, almost black, but good, earthy and vibrant, a perfect balance for the strong, dusky, meat. Afterwards we went straight to bed for I couldn't stay long. Louise complained endlessly about my work though she was happy enough to spend the money I brought in.

Harry was feral that night and it was past Louise's bedtime when I left, but I was planning to be more disciplined in future. I was thinking about Louise as I rounded the bend, how soft and warm she is when she's asleep. Occasionally I enjoy waking her up. Then a shadow crossed the road. I braked and the car juddered to a halt in almost the same place as before. 'Shit!' I said. I don't normally swear, but that made two animals in one summer. This time I checked the car first. It seemed undamaged. The moon was low and huge and the exact colour of marmalade. Under the car was just tarmac. 'Thank Christ for that,' I said aloud and drove home. I don't usually talk to myself but I needed to hear a voice.

Louise was waiting up for me, her eyes a bleary red, made redder and blearier by her white face, and there was an unappetising pimple on her chin. 'Where have you been?' she asked. 'Your phone went straight to voice-mail.' I explained: how we'd all been in the conference block; how we'd ordered in pizza which is why I smelled of garlic; how we'd finally settled on the new product name and had a drink, only one, to celebrate. Eventually she calmed down. Next night we went to the cinema, returning after dark. Louise was stroking my inner thigh as I drove, and I approached that particular bit of road slowly. Of course there was nothing there. I mean what are the chances? Still, three nights later, coming home from Harry's, I steered cautiously. As I crawled round the bend there it was, trotting purposefully across. I braked, nearly cutting myself in half with my seat belt, and stalling the car. When I looked up the badger had gone.

Soon I'd grasped the pattern. If I'd been with Harry I'd see a badger. Any other time was badger-free. Louise and I could go out to dinner and come home at midnight; no badger. After a business trip without Harry, I could drive up the lane in the small hours; no badger. Post-Harry; badger every time. I started experimenting. If I stopped before reaching it, the thing just vanished into the trees. If I drove into it, there was a thump, but never again any damage to the car, or any animal on the road. My situation was curious, but it became curiuser when Harry had an upset stomach after some dodgy zabaglione. I headed home early, eyes open for my badger. By this time I was resigned to it, but I was rather pleased when it wasn't there. Louise's face lit up when I arrived and even more when I suggested an early night with a glass of wine. That was one of our better nights.

I thought I'd gotten rid of the brute. But, a week later, after an evening with Harry that left me aching, albeit in a good way, there it was again. I reviewed my observations and concluded that this phenomenon was either supernatural or a projection of my own subconscious. In the absence of definitive evidence, I favoured the latter. Not because it's more scientific; if you can believe in quantum entanglement you can believe in anything. However, my stripy friend did not materialise after every evening with Harry. Sex appeared to be a prerequisite. A puritanical ghost-badger struck me as unlikely. I didn't feel guilty, but then I don't pretend any expertise in psychiatry. A projection of a guilt-ridden psyche was a possibility, and might be treatable.

So I gathered more data. One night I faked exhaustion and left Harry's prematurely; no badger. Another time, on the way home from a party, I pulled off the road and had sex with Louise on a very scratchy hay bale; no badger. Apart from my wife, I only ever sleep with one

person at a time, but, in the interest of science, I made an exception and took little Jess from the mail-room for a pizza, then to a car park in the woods. After I'd dropped Jess off, my badger was waiting at the usual place; QED. It had to be subliminal guilt and Jess was a relief in a way. Back then I was hooked on Harry, and, if my badger had been specific to him, a replacement would have become necessary. I'd rather drive non-stop through phantom animals than fuck one solitary person for the rest of my life. I started to consider therapy, or maybe moving house. Louise kept banging on about a fresh start. Eventually, however, the virtual thuds became barely noticeable. I grew accustomed to my badger.

Harry and I were happy that winter, but Louise got more miserable and more unkempt. She listened endlessly to ancient K.D. Lang, and stopped doing her hair properly. Desperate to cheer her up, I agreed to Christmas with her parents. Although she smartened herself up a bit, she spent most of the holiday whispering with her mum and bursting into tears. On New Year's Eve, her dad had a word with me. In the end I convinced him that his daughter was delusional and he had another word, this time with her. That helped for a while. Her mother has never liked me.

By February, Louise was sleeping in onesies, nagging non-stop, biting her nails. Lack of trust pisses me off and she drove me to Harry's oftener than I'd have otherwise chosen. Still, I tried to overlook her whining. Then, one morning in early March, I noticed my phone was missing. I didn't worry because missed calls go to my assistant. Just the same I decided to be home before Louise, but her car was already in the drive. I found her before I found my phone, because she'd dropped it in the bin. She looked terrible, more green than white, with a trickle of orange vomit drying on her chin. Her eyes were closed and, at first, I didn't think she was breathing. Even without the sick, I couldn't have managed the kiss of life. I didn't know what to do, so I looked for my phone. I'd searched the bedroom, and the back of the sofa, and Louise's handbag, twice, before the smell of last night's curry drew me to the open bin.

Maybe she'd read the wrong texts or looked at the wrong photos. I'll never know. By then, she seemed to have stopped breathing, and this time I couldn't feel a pulse. Anyway, I called the ambulance straight away. I remember that quite clearly, because I only deleted my texts and photos later, while I was waiting. After that I checked her phone. She'd messaged her office that she was sick. There was nothing else. The coroner's verdict was accidental death and it's possible. Apparently Louise had taken the pills throughout the day, not in one go, so maybe it was unintended. I'd like to believe that, except my phone was in the bin and my favourite silk shirt had been clawed to shreds. All the same, I hope it was painless.

A few day's after her funeral, the impact nearly took me off the road and I reconsidered my hypothesis. Same circumstances, same absence of any dead animal, same undamaged car. It seemed unlikely that subconscious guilt could physically knock someone sideways, but not impossible. Nevertheless, I was puzzled. My wife was dead so it wasn't even adultery. But the mind is a strange thing. Naturally, I returned to rounding that corner cautiously. I also put the cottage on the market. It's unpleasant driving up a lonely lane to an empty house. Sometimes I miss my lovely Louise: the yin to Harry's, no-longer quite so sparkling, yang. But you have to move on.

Till a week ago, I was enjoying my fresh start in a flat in town. Then Harry and I had a business trip. The first night was fun, but needy people bore me. Heading home, I was glad we'd travelled separately. As I pulled into the middle lane, I pictured my new neighbour's plump little bottom and tried to remember whether I had left any wine chilling. When

something ran in front of me I didn't see it clearly. Only a fool would swerve on a motorway to avoid an animal, so I braced myself. The jolt knocked the car under the truck in seconds. But they felt like minutes and I had time to recognise my furry nemesis, and to notice that it was daylight and the wrong place. For some reason, this time, its eyes recalled Harry's. That was my last thought for two days.

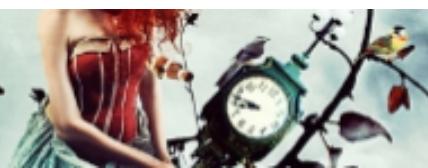
The consultant's been quite reassuring. Once I've learned to handle a wheelchair I'll be able to live normally again, go back to work, have full relationships. Mr Gandhi seems fairly intelligent, and I was briefly tempted to share my dilemma, but thought better of it. Like all medics, he'll be a second-rate scientist, and I don't want anyone thinking I'm mad. Even if that badger is my subconscious, I've become less hopeful that it's curable. It seems quite hard-wired. Besides, it's practically irrelevant whether it's a vengeful spirit or a psychotic delusion. Either way, I have to stop driving after sex and it's lucky I've moved to quite a lively area. At first I was surprised Harry didn't visit me in hospital. Of course I didn't know then that his car had been just behind mine, and had ploughed straight into the crash. He'd probably been stalking me for weeks. That felt a bit spooky.

Thank goodness, by then, Harry was expendable.



Delirium © Mario Sánchez Nevado

Ally Butler



Kaeru No Wa Kaeru

It was the tenth day of the 1972 Louisiana Frog Infestation. Inside her duplex's kitchen, Kathleen Wanatabe fanned butter mochi with a copy of Newsweek. The cover's helicopter fluttered as she swayed her wrist, and villagers cowered beneath peach lacquered nails, protecting their children with bamboo baskets. Even when Kathleen instead used her sister's desk fan, they remained still, defensive, and watched as she paced along the linoleum.

As the clock's hand inched closer to "V," Kathleen grew anxious to catch Mr. Harrison before he left for the packaging plant. She had been growing anxious, stir-crazy, just watching the frogs occupy her neighborhood. On her flight to Louisiana just a month ago, she planned an elaborate garden, full of any and all flowers the southern soil would allow, but the one iris that had bloomed was immediately host to an army of cricket frogs. These armies spread across the lawn and through the street, preventing both Kathleen and Keiko from even opening a window. Their inability to take their weekly supermarket trek left the wheat flour jar empty. The best substitute Kathleen could find in her wallpaper-lined cabinets was an old box of rice flour her mother stuffed in her suitcase. The box had a recipe for "Grandma's Butter Mochi," including a photo of an elderly Japanese woman with coke bottle glasses and Brillo Pad hair. Below her Chicklet teeth smile was the caption, "Tastes Like It Was Made by Mama-san Herself." Their mother reiterated how it was the only mochiko she could find in San Diego, and it was still oishii. Kathleen tried to hide the box amidst her starched laundry, but Keiko, with her self-proclaimed "bigotry sniffer," snatched it from Kathleen's blouse within minutes of her arrival. That night, Keiko shoved the mochiko in the back of their baking cabinet and told her sister they'd only keep it for sentimental reasons, nothing more. As Kathleen now watched the mochi's steam rise to the peeling ceiling, she tried to rationalize how Mr. Harrison would appreciate the sentiment before her.

A small, light-footed woman, her sister, Keiko, seemed to take pride in her ability to move through the duplex unnoticed. Unlike her Kathleen's size seven shoes, hers were a modest five and a half—with a proportional waist. She owed her figure to the "traditional Asian woman" diet of fish and rice ("Catfish sashimi may not be safe, ne, but it's better than risking the salmon here") beside Kathleen's pot of spaghetti with extra Ragu. Kathleen didn't mind being the debu daughter, but as an unwed woman at the age of thirty, her mother often assured her that her weight was the main reason. With the fan running on high, and her paces becoming staccato stomps, she didn't hear her sister skip down the stairs. Keiko rested her chin on Kathleen's shoulder and dug into the bone.

"Mochi?"

"For Mr. Harrison. For helping us fix the gutter."

Keiko smacked her lips against Kathleen's earlobe and expelled sharp dissatisfaction through her nose. "Americajin wa mochi ga suki?"

"Nakarou." Kathleen shrugged, both to show uncertainty and to remove her sister from pinching a tendon. "It was either this or Jell-O Pudding."

“Soo, soo, soo.” In Kathleen’s peripheries, Keiko glided to the counter and flipped over the rice flour box. Clicking her teeth, she sighed, “Ideya. You used the mochiko mom brought, Haruka?”

Kathleen didn’t use her middle name beyond family. Southern hospitality dictated her neighbors get to know her on a first-name basis, even if they were simply in line at the store. “Kathleen” couldn’t disguise her complexion, but the way the cashier seemed to nod at the name led to a ruse of acceptance. In San Diego, where her family settled after the move from Honshu, a name like Haruka was not uncommon. However, when their girls’ mother, Ayumi Wanatabe, found out she was pregnant, she was in Shack 4597 of the Manazar Relocation Center. She had been named after her grandmother, and she wished to pass on the tradition to her first daughter. However, the mothers around her, including the two who shared a room with Ayumi and her husband, lamented their children’s names. Yes, the children would be nissei, free from the Japanese lisp and scolding glares from landlords. But as the women crowded on hardened cots, they could only hear Americans spitting their family names, crumpling ancestral titles to no more than slurs. Kenshin Wanatabe ran his finger around his wife’s distending navel and begged for his child to not be seen as a curse, swallowing his lengthened issei vowels with each plea. Nights after tilling barren soil, the couple would discuss new name possibilities. Eventually, they settled on their neighbor prior to internment, a stout Irish woman named Kathleen. On the morning of Roosevelt’s speech, Kathleen arrived at their apartment with seed cake leftover from an earlier party. They sat on the Wanatabe’s couch in the stillness of the country, eating the cake as if they’d eat just as well the next day. Ayumi held that memory without contempt, and by the time her first daughter was born, she was named Kathleen Haruka Wanatabe. When Ayumi told Kathleen this story decades later, she became lost in her daughter’s coarse hair. As Ayumi brushed with more force, Kathleen’s younger sister, Donna, was off gallivanting with flowers in her hair, reclaiming her heritage as “Keiko.”

Keiko Wanatabe was no more than twenty when she joined Osamu Takafuji’s “Summer of Love” exodus. Osamu had returned from San Francisco with stories of peace, music of love, and fifty squares of LSD. Ayumi had tolerated the galivanting and constant Velvet Underground on the FM radio, but when Mrs. Maki found Keiko layering paper blotters on her tongue in the community Friendship Garden, Ayumi smashed her entire chawan set against the floor. As Kathleen picked the shards out from her mother’s slippers, Keiko slipped out the window, “All Tomorrow’s Parties” overshadowing the noise of her shimmying down the fire escape. After years of blotting tears into customer’s suits, they finally received a letter from Keiko, explaining how, once Osamu Takafuji ran out of LSD, he took the peace and love with him. She had been living in a trailer in Louisiana with the rest of the “blossom children.” No daughter of Ayumi’s would be living in a trailer. She sent Kathleen to patrol her sister in the bayou, stuffing a suitcase full of rice, nonperishables (“What’s there to eat in swamp? Snake?”), and the dry cleaner’s tip jar. As Kathleen filled the remaining space with Keiko’s abandoned possessions, the chawan shards stayed on her nightstand.

Ayumi couldn’t toss out family tradition.

At that time, Kathleen could still tolerate Haruka within her community, but after the first dozen or so squints she received before her taxi even arrived at Keiko’s trailer, she knew “community” was now 2,000 miles away. She wanted to believe “Kathleen” was how she secured a job as a seamstress at the local dress shop and was able to send half of her paychecks back to her parents. Before the interview, she practiced speaking in the bathroom mirror and made sure each letter was formed with nissei precision.

Keiko leaned closer to the cake pan and chuckled into the humid air. “Even if you used that racist flour, you still added some authentic Nihonjin.” She ushered Kathleen over to her side and noted a small black hair that snaked across the top of her mochi. It seemed to curl into a quarter-note shape, whimsical yet still prominent against the light brown crust. Kathleen tapped her nails on the rim, her anxiety peaking, and wondered if the aesthetics of dug-up mochi outweighed the aesthetics of a hair baked into her dessert.

“Do you have tweezers I could use?” she asked.

“Eh, leave it.” Keiko sneered. “Do you remember when we had Mr. Harrison over after moving? He called us prudes for asking him to take off his sneakers, then he tracked mud all over the rug. He was rude, yes? And just last week,” she glared at the drywall, “he was talking to some other idiot on the phone, praising America for ‘blasting gooks.’ I say let him eat the stray hair. Fat man probably won’t even notice.”

Kathleen batted her sister on the back of her skull. “Keiko! He’s rough, yes, but he did make sure these frogs wouldn’t be ruining our gutters. The wire he used wasn’t cheap. Do you want those frogs coming into the home?” She gestured to the screen window, worn from years of hungry cats’ claws. They had been able to keep out the frogs for ten days, but their screen wasn’t very secure, and Kathleen was planning on asking for another favor with the mochi offering. Cricket frogs lined the bottom sill of the window, their eyes peering into the kitchen like reckless schoolboys. Across the lawn, they hopped about and blended into the hurricane season grass. When it was the first day of the 1972 Louisiana Frog Infestation, the sisters couldn’t make out any of this, as every window and door was covered with these tiny croaking things. In the living room, the radio reporter assured listeners the frogs would be gone soon. And now to Todd Angels with more information on our troops overseas.

Past the frogs exploring the dewy summer lawn, children rode their scooters in zig-zag formations along the gravel road, aiming to run over the most frogs in one pass. The one in the yellow shirt sat down to examine his wheels, then jabbed three chalk marks onto the body count boulder, and the one in the orange sneakers nearly tackled him to add seven more. As it was the tenth day of the 1972 Louisiana Frog Infestation, the parts of the boulder not covered in dried-up bodies were a scribbled rainbow, the death toll of days one through five in neat, organized tallies; days six through ten in haphazard squiggles and checks. Still, the children rode their scooters with the same zeal they had the week prior.

Kathleen wondered where their parents were, if they were also hiding behind torn screens. Keiko spit on the screen then pulled the curtains closed.

“Osamu told us that all animals have souls. Can you imagine, the amount of frog souls stuck on this planet because those, those killers think it’s all a game?”

As a young child, Kathleen would stick her fingers through the wired fence and watch the soldiers stand guard in full uniform. As the summer went on, she became more aware of the sweat running down their faces. They were never close enough for her to call, but she persevered in giving them scraps of her quilt to wipe clean their dirt-smudged skin. One day, she dragged her quilt from Shack 4597 to the fence and called to soldiers, “Sumimasen! Sumimasen!” The soldier closest the fence turned around. At the time, she saw a faint smile, but looking back, it may have been a twitch from squinting in the California sun. He quickly turned back to his post, but she continued to call, afraid the excessive sweating would cause mud to get in their eyes. The curfew siren rang. A squirrel ran between her legs and out beneath the fence. Kathleen admired the squirrel’s freedom, something she would not attain until a year later.

Coming down from her post, Keiko pulled a pin out of her bun and tossed it on the counter. “For digging out the hair. But don’t come crying to me when the baijo begins commenting on your ‘admirable Asian womanhood.’” As she leaned against the counter, the Newsweek slid off, floating to the linoleum like a stray dove feather. Keiko nudged it under counter with her foot, but Kathleen dipped down and caught it before it crumpled against the wall.

“I haven’t read this week’s issue yet,” she said. We’ll have the latest on chemical warfare after these messages.

Bending over the mochi, Kathleen neared the hair with the makeshift scalpel. She outlined the hair with perforating dots in hopes they’d keep the rest of the crust from uprooting when she began the excavation. It was a skill she kept from her childhood. As the other neighborhood children went to the community center for weekend games, young Kathleen would sit at home with her mom’s sewing machine and practice backstitching. Her ideal self worked as a receptionist or bank teller, but as she poked even holes into the dessert, she couldn’t deny the womanhood her sister scoffed at.

Cautiously, she dug below the surface and slid the pin under the center of the hair. Then, she pulled the quarter-note curl out with the ease of a conductor on the upbeat. Keiko pressed her cheek against her sister’s to admire the mere fault line crack left on the crust. The scooters’ wheels let out a graveled applause, the cricket frogs chipping, yatta, yatta.

“Now go make the delivery before Mr. Harrison leaves,” Keiko said. “If this is left on the counter overnight, I will eat all of it with a serving spoon.”

The mochi was still warm to the touch, but when the Gunsmoke theme began on the other side of patchy drywall, it occurred to Kathleen that Mr. Harrison wouldn’t eat the dessert until after he returned from his shift anyway. She could stop by his porch, thank him for his help, offer her gratitude, and drop the idea of fixing their screen window before walking back through the frog hoard. Long enough to express her thanks, short enough to not disrupt his evening routine.

“Do you think the children will add a tally if I step on one on my way over?”

Keiko slammed their pair of rain boots on the doormat.

“Mr. Harrison will probably praise your patriotism.”

Since birth, Keiko had assumed the role of younger sister without complaint. She was born in 1951, after their family was back in civilization, but before their parents could comfortably reenter the white neighborhoods. At the time, they lived in a San Diego tenement with the Maki family. The Maki children were grown and off working in the local factories; their twelve-hour shifts caused Kathleen to be home alone for most of the afternoon when she returned from school. While waiting for everyone to return, she’d watch television and design paper dolls. The dolls, Mary Livingstone and Lucy Ricardo, danced along with their programs, and Kathleen often made-up crossover episodes where they tapped across the makeshift kotatsu. Once Keiko was born, Ayumi had to leave the drycleaners, where she was an associate at the time, to raise her new daughter.

“She’s not as tough as you, Haruka,” Ayumi would say, “and the other moms are busy working or helping out their own families. I have to help her grow. You grew on your own.”

Kathleen was makeshift mother starting when she hit puberty. As her mother altered dresses the dry-cleaners sent her way, Kathleen would entertain Keiko and feed her lunches of overcooked rice.

On a particular Wednesday, Kathleen lost track of time while choreographing Lucy and Mary’s newest dance number.

Her mother shouted from the living room, “Haruka! Anata no imoto ni esa o ataeru!”

Kathleen, with her dolls tucked into her waistband, marched into the living area and yanked the pot off the stove. She was just getting to the first chorus and knew she would lose her vision if she

stopped to feed her sister. Instead of the airplane method they showed on television, Kathleen thrusted globs of rice in Keiko's face like a jarring turbine.

Her mother insisted on only a few spoonful's for lunch, to both save Keiko's stomach and food for the next meal, but Kathleen again lost track, and before she could insert the final spoonful, Keiko wretched all over her sister, leaving Lucy and Mary to stew in *kayu vomit*.

Keiko continued to spit crude remarks about Mr. Harrison's "hawkish ways," and Kathleen, who could only take so much anger at one time, made her way over to the living room to turn down a radio caller's Commie-hating rant. Those longhaired draft dodgers, sympathizing for Red China. They'd probably kiss a Vietcong on the mouth if you let them. Kathleen paused equidistant between the radio and the window, which she would soon seal shut from the threat of cricket frogs.

"Those frogs aren't going to hurt you. Stop delaying and go over there." Keiko scoffed.

"Then how come you haven't left the house at all these past ten days?" The other southern women were the verbose and clamorous. As the caller's diatribe continued, an anxious Kathleen decided to finally give in to the ways of her new womenfolk.

"Maybe I wouldn't have had to make mochi then. I could have made muffins or bread, hm? Maybe this is God's way of putting you under house arrest. He's only five years too late."

Kathleen finished her task of shutting the radio off. She could still hear Lou Reed lamenting over what the poor girl would wear the next day.

"Nandatte?"

"I'm saying that if you didn't leave five years ago, then you could have lived your best Japanese life being the seamstress with your tiny, delicate Japanese hands. But instead, I had to take care of mom and help run the drycleaners and respond to 'Haruka' while you got to travel the country without repercussion. You said you were reclaiming your Japanese roots, but you weren't at the camp. You don't know what *kazoku* means. It's different for you. You know that, right?"

Keiko responded, taut lipped, by dangling an umbrella in front of her sister.

"I do know that mom always said a good Japanese woman always carries an umbrella. I don't know if these frogs can jump this high, but if you were worried about a hair, I don't think you'd like an animal in your dessert." She was back in her bedroom before Kathleen could finish putting on the rain boots.

A wall away, Mr. Harrison was packing a tin pail of cornbread and yesterday's beans, waiting to receive Kathleen's generosity before trudging to the third shift. Unlike the dress shop, the packaging plant did not close for such trivial reasons as freak frog infestations. For the past week, Mr. Harrison had walked past their torn screen window at six p.m. sharp. Safe in her home, Kathleen never thought of the frogs he stepped on, or the ones who crawled into his boots at the trolley stop. Her thumb's knuckle began to tense on the door handle. One wrong step, and she'd add to the body count boulder and have her murder set in pink chalk. She didn't have the cat-footed reflexes of her sister. She couldn't shimmy away from this. She had to fulfil her "admirable Asian womanhood" duty.

But the frogs paid no attention to their new visitor. They continued to hop about the grass, using the toes of Kathleen's boots as diving platforms for the seasonal marshlands that formed around the base of her doorway. She recalled the older children crawling up on the roofs of the shacks at the internment camps to test how high they were. They'd fall in an almost cannonball-like position and hit the sand as if it were a swimming pool.

"Sore, sore, Haruka! Come jump with us!" they'd call to her, but she'd only watch, both too young to climb up the shack and too scared she'd twist her ankle. Once the Takahashi's son

damaged his spine during a jump, everyone was to stay on the ground at all times. There was one night, however, when young Kathleen saw a figure crouching atop a shack down the way. It rose up like an arching cat, and with that, leapt off the building. It was almost a swan dive, graceful, the figure's hands aimed at desert dirt with missile-like intent.

By the light of their dimming streetlamp, Kathleen swore the figure dove into the dirt, leaving only a faint splash of sand behind en pointe feet. She was rushed back into Shack 4597 once a crowd began to form, the air thick with whispers of jisatsu. Kathleen didn't know the intent of the frog that now rested upon her rain boot's toe, so she rolled her foot to the right and let the frog make a small step back to safety.

Around the duplex entrances, the frog death toll seemed suspiciously low. Kathleen took comfort in Mr. Harrison not trampling over the animals on his walk to work. Still, she wouldn't accept the idea that perhaps she could be as lucky too. From the torn screen window, she couldn't make out the villages now forming below her galoshes. They hunkered within the thick crabgrass and thistle she planned on ripping out with a spade. On a broad hosta leaf rested gelatinous blobs with sesame dots staring back at her. Some had budding tails, like sperm within an egg sac. In school, they learned about the life cycle, drawing arrows from egg to tadpole to frog. Kathleen would ask about a step in-between tadpole and frog, where maybe the legs were just bumps, where the frog still wasn't sure whether to hop or swim. Her teacher told her that unless she was going to be a frog scientist, that step wouldn't be important for the test. They'd all become frogs in the end.

The frogs huddled around Kathleen's boots. When Ayumi told the story of Kathleen's name, she painted scared, hungry people from all different families huddled on the hardened cots.

"The soldiers acted like they were good to us, helping us," she said, "but we still hid from the doorways and stayed up all night telling stories of home. The idea that Japan still went on gave us comfort. This was the thing with Americans, Haruka. We couldn't tell if they feared or hated us. The community we built kept us from fearing and hating them."

Her mother's memory grew dense in Kathleen's palms. She questioned frog ancestry, the stories they needed to tell. She set the ceramic pan on the stoop, and the updraft lifed her protective Newsweek off the mochi and riffled the pages to the centerfold of soldiers cleaning their guns on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Frogs eyed the exposed hairline crack in the mochi's crust, ogling its warmth, its custardy protection. Kathleen eyed the eggs. Like pulling a sprig of thyme, Kathleen snapped the stem of the hosta leaf. The eggs jiggled in place; Kathleen cupped the base of the leaf with both hands.

On tenth day of the 1972 Louisiana Frog Infestation, she caressed the gelatinous blobs, watching their shelter float onto the stoop-surrounding marshland. By the next time Kathleen left her house, perhaps they would be tadpoles and slide into the marsh. Perhaps they'd be frogs resting their heads on the sill of her torn screen window. Or perhaps there'd be the intermediary step.

The doorway cracked open, and Keiko poked her nose out into the sunlight.

"Haruka? I'm sorry, but you have to understand how it was for me as a nissei. I didn't..."

Both sisters held their breath as the frogs spread atop the mochi. Mr. Harrison tipped his hat as he walked by, pail in hand. But neither woman turned her head.

Fada

My name has a fada; a stroke above the vowel that reveals a truth beyond the letters. But my name sits amongst the earth bound stumps of a foreign language, its fada, at best, cause for suspicion. So I bend. Yet my fada, though largely erased, still sings under my skin with its want even as I push open the glass panelled door of the pub and step inside where he is waiting for me.

His brown hair is a distant but unmistakable peak. Two pub-leagues separate us. I begin moving through the narrow lounge, densely peopled and possessed. I billow out my shoulders to arc around the solid curve of a beer belly perched high on a bar stool, a sentry challenging my passage.

Breathing in, near grazing the bony antlers of a back which hangs in the air like the turf-held overhanging edges of a crumbling cliff, I note a corded neck emerging from the frayed stitching of the t-shirt of too many yesterdays which films the thin crack between us. I dip my knee, letting my breast dip under the angles of that danger and then, rising to my toe, rounding the stool at my shins

I move through one more point of the throng.

I lose sight of his hair. A miasma of tobacco laden words shapes the air against my cheek as Joyce is invoked to shame the nameless shade of green of the carpet. Finding the space in all this bodily resistance I let the snot invocation dissipate without provocation.

My arm up for my hat, I sweep it, damp and dampening, off my head; my hair, hat-dry and static, reaching after its sheltering rim as it comes away. Through the gap between one batch and another, I lower my arm with hat, elbow scribing the air, to the side of my thigh. His green eyes now on me, hot and fizzy, behind the half smile I know is on his lips still obscured by heads, hats and collars.

Locking eyes with him I hitch my left hip bone as I turn the hollow of my pelvis to circle the bum cheek of a woman pressing into the envelope of air between the two of us.

She suddenly flings her head back abandoning her constraint to raucous laughter, her teeth biblical against the shrinking cynicism of her companion. As she straightens and turns out of pace with my advance, I pivot on the dimple below my rib cage as far as my balance will allow. But still, my breast grazes hers, peak to peak.

I force a distance through the dip of my chin, the breath-held angle of my cheek to her face and the cast of my eyes, through her, to the green eyes of my love, now serious. Then I am past her and the possibilities that that moment had formed and unformed in the hitch of a hip, are undone.

I work forward giving off the half hellos that acknowledge without pausing. I grip the end of my scarf and draw it, a long caress on the down of my neck, until it is trailing amongst the slippers, stilettos and brogues and boots— a tease. I curl it up and up and into a ball to tuck it away into the warm damp cavern of the hungry hat. His eyes on me, I lengthen my exposed neck— by a hairs— breath and letting my head fall back— a fraction, set off on the white column a want he knows is his to meet with the soft press of his lips and the scratch of his evening stubble.

Now halfway there I turn sideways sliding my arm around the pillar, finding purchase, my fingers graze the ridges of the slats. I lean my weight away and leverage around while shrugging my

free shoulder so that the collar of my jacket edges off. Feeling its grip on my upper arm I worry my shoulder to inch it lower. Now I am at the door separating the lounge from the bar. His eyes have not left me.

I step off the crushed carpet onto the hard floor of the men's half of the bar while letting my half hung jacket swing about my back until it comes away from my other shoulder, its leather kisses trailing down my baring arm. Switching my hat bundle from hand to hand I catch the jacket on the way down and the momentum moves through my body as I take the next batch of drinkers in a two three beat, wrapping their stumble in my sweep; Past them too now.

Then I am here, dropping my hat and scarf and jacket on the stool at his feet. He stands stone steady. Only there in the beat of his heart, tapped out by the artery throbbing in his forehead, is my fada - seen and witness - soaring. His fingers about the cold pint glass a promise, his forearm a commitment, his shoulder a bastion. I settle finally on his eyes, an eye for an eye. He speaks.

'What's yours then?'

Kristien Potgieter

Dead Man Walking

I glance over my shoulder as I walk quickly away. Behind the shop window, his frowning foxy face trapped in the dead centre of the 'O' in GREAT LIQUOR, the owner barks. Into his phone. The police. Asking for him now. The detective. I'd thought this part of Hillbrow would still be okay, but the poster with my face was on the wall behind the counter. Why was my face on the poster? I need to get out. I need to get home.

Down Pretoria Street, towards the violent sun. It squeezes my already aching head like it's an unripe orange and I can't take it today, I can't take it. In my left pocket is the key. I loop my finger through the keyring. Here's the plastic cartoon lion Refilwe got me. Here's the key's metal ridge.

Go home, go home, go quickly. Home is through the doorway, is melting sunlight, is kissing Refilwe, is playing hide-and-seek with Jonah. Not bruises bluing, not smithereens on the carpet, not little hands braced in fear.

Quickly, past the China shop, past the fruit vendor's table, past the gossip of Pyramid Hair & Beauty, before they can call me over. I glimpse the hairstyles pinned up in the window – is that my Refilwe's face? Surely not. It's not. My finger loops through the keyring again. Home again, soon. People shout greetings at each other across the street. Shoppers and schoolkids and beggars and loafers. Smell of fried things and petrol.

A taxi driver hangs out of his window, yelling, 'Hey, you! Stop! Stop!' I look round, heard thud-thudding, but it's not for me. The driver's got a cheating passenger by the greasy collar of his shirt.

'I said it's thirty-four rand, brother,' he says, shaking the man, who cries, 'Voetsek!' I look round again. The Great Liquor owner hasn't emerged from his shop. But the detective will be on his way by now. I wish I had a drink. Just one. Just one. (I'm just having one drink, Refilwe. Promise.)

At the robot someone says into my ear with beery breath, 'Saw'bona, my brother,' and I whip my hood over my head. But it's the beggar with his cupped hands and scabby lips, and I ignore him and turn left, down Banket Street, feeling the key in my pocket. The beggar waves me away with an angry 'Hamba kahle to you too, hey' but I don't look round, because I'm going home. The plastic lion in my pocket. The metal ridge. Refilwe. Ridge. Refilwe.

Up ahead a man in a red shirt fishes through a bin. He lifts his head and looks up at me and his eyes are milky white. I push past him but he puts a hand on my elbow, pauses and says, 'Here it is.' The blind man hands me a scrap of paper he's taken from the bin. Walks away without a word, back towards Pretoria Street.

Is this a message from Refilwe? My heart leaps at the thought. I haven't heard anything in so long. (Have I?)

But it's not a message, just some scrap of nonsense. Torn from a notebook, in messy handwriting it says be so bad; anyway, when you're with someone you love, you can almost forget their presence. I'm so sorry, but I have to go. We have to go. I can't do this anym –

The words rattle in my head I'm so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so sorry with a ring of familiarity. Is it a coded message? But the meaning is impenetrable. They sing a boy-shaped hole in my head. Jonah, laughing at the dog. Jonah, crying in his crib, arms flung up to the sky. Jonah, his snotty little hand in mine.

'Wait!' I call out to the blind man. I follow him back up Banket. He discards more scraps of paper behind him like snowflakes in a flurry. 'What do you know? Who sent you? Wait, wait,' I call after him, but he ignores me. I snatch the bits of paper from the air but they're just more of the same. One says mute perfection. Another, escape this living hell, paralysed. Then your mental mazes, and sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry.

I read them frantically. Read, reread. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle. But there's nothing to understand. Clues with no solution. And before I've caught up with him, the blind man has disappeared into a taxi. Zipped away into the maze that is Joburg.

A group of people cross the sidewalk in front of me and as they clear away I see the police car, parked at the side of the road.

The officer inside the car is leaning out the window, lazily chatting up a girl on the sidewalk, while his partner buys cigarettes from the spaza shop. If the officer looks up he will see me, and then I am done. (Why will I be done?)

I stop dead and loop my finger through the keyring. Feel the ridge. The plastic lion. I'm going home. Home to Refilwe and Jonah. Turn around slowly and they won't notice you.

I glance over my shoulder and walk quickly away, back down Banket. The policeman's laughing, showing the girl his wolf's teeth, sweat dribbling down his fat neck.

Past the bin the blind man was rummaging through. I look inside but it's empty now except for Coke cans and chicken bones and KFC cartons. The sidewalk around it is littered with cigarette butts and chips packets, nothing else. Where has Refilwe gone?

Further down Banket, across Kotze, and then right into Esselen. Here the litter on the sidewalk is even thicker. Step carefully over bottles and takeaway cartons. Plastic bags and Kit-Kat wrappers.

Here's a broken clock radio, a doorknob, torn old photographs, a doll with no arms or legs, notebooks with the pages ripped out of them. Spoutless teapot. Flattened soccer ball. And scribbled pages; pages and pages and pages with handwritten notes on them. Do they never clean this bit of the city? Where does all this debris go?

A chicken drumstick snaps under my heel and I glance down. Here's a teddy bear with an arm ripped off. Wisps of white stuffing blow away in the wind. It looks just like the bear – like what bear? A bear I used to know. A red bow tie around its neck.

The bear is grubby, but I pick him up. On the ground, underneath it, is an old photograph. At first I ignore it, but the girl in the picture catches my eye, and I pick it up too.

She's wearing a yellow dress with blue flowers on it, and she's kissing the man standing next to her.

I know that dress. I know that girl.

What is our photo doing, lying here in the filth and the muck?

The next moment, a telephone starts to ring. It's coming from the phone booth up ahead. My hands tremble and I nearly drop the bear and the photo. Those phones have been out of order for years. Haven't they? I feel for the key in my pocket. The plastic lion. The key's metal ridge. My finger through the keyring. Refliwe. No! Refidge. Rifidgwe – dammit. Stop it, stop it. Ignore the phone. It's a trap, a trap.

The phone rings. Rings again.

Perhaps it's Refilwe. I start towards the booth.

Inside the shadow of an empty doorway down the street, there's a blur of blue. A man steps out onto the street. Oh, shit.

I turn around and start running. I can't feel my legs.

He is running after me. He shouts, 'Stop running away, brother! Stop! It's no use. You cannot escape. Don't be selfish! You cannot get away with this!'

'I'm going home!' I shout, without looking back. My head hurts more than ever but I keep running.

He is still shouting, but I turn left into Catherine Avenue and for a moment I can't hear him anymore. I ignore the people looking at me strangely. I run.

The sun is bright in my eyes and it hurts my head and I nearly run into a woman pushing a pram but then I keep going and I'm on the corner of Pretoria Street again and I turn left and I can breathe.

Up ahead is Great Liquor, where I get my daily fix while Refilwe is at work. What a relief to see it. My hands are trembling with need. I can't go without my medicine, it's just my medicine, Refilwe.

I go inside and start to ask for my usual, but then I spot my face on the wall behind the counter. Stop talking. The words trip up my tongue. The man behind the counter looks me up and down.

(Has he always worked here?) He glances at the poster: WANTED FOR MURDER.

'Never mind,' I say hastily, and turn around to exit the store. (Wanted for murder?)

I glance over my shoulder as I walk quickly away. Behind the shop window, his frowning foxy face trapped in the dead centre of the 'O' in GREAT LIQUOR, the owner barks. Into his phone. The police. Asking for him now. The detective. I'd thought this part of Hillbrow would still be okay, but the poster with my face was on the wall behind the counter. Why was my face on the poster? I need to get out. I need to get home.

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Go home, go home, go quickly. Home is through the doorway, is soft rain on windowpanes, is brushing aside Refilwe's hair and kissing her neck, is tickling Jonah's tummy. Not vomit on the bathroom floor, not hot tears down small cheeks, not knuckleblood.

Quickly, past the China shop, past the fruit vendor's table, past the gossip of Pyramid Hair & Beauty – but. Fuck, there's something wrong about this. I've been here before, I think. Very recently. Down Pretoria Street, past the China shop and the fruit and the salon. Refilwe's face – not Refilwe's face. The shouting taxi driver and the trembling passenger.

'I said...!' I wish I had a drink. Just one. Just one. (I'm just having one drink, Refilwe. Promise.) The beggar at the robot, breathing into my ear. 'Saw'bona, brother.' What? The warm breath of beer again.

Left onto Banket. There's the blind man in the red shirt. No. Blue shirt. Check shirt? His blank gaze glints in the sun. He hands me the scrap of paper. Yes, I've seen it before. Not a message from dear Refilwe. I'm so sorry, but we have to go. The blind man leaves and I follow. I'm so sorry, but we have to go. His fists leak more fragments from my past. There's the police car and the flirty policeman.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I've seen this all before. I'm so sorry, but we have to go. Yes, I must go home, I must go home. Turn around now. Fuck.

Back down Banket past the bin. Right, onto Esselen and the rubble. The rubbish on the street. The litter on the sidewalk. Cold snap of a drumstick under my heel.

I've seen this dusty teddy bear before. It only has one arm. Cloudy white bits drift from the hole in its side. Bow tie hanging skew. Jonah falls asleep hugging this bear. And here's the photo, the photo of us. Refilwe in the yellow dress. I know this. This is ours.

Then the phone's ringing again and there's the detective stepping out of the shadows. Again.

'What do you want?' I shout. 'Leave me alone, I'm going home. I'm going home.' Back away, back away.

He comes nearer and his face twists into focus and it's filled with pity. Back away. Towards home. But is home that way? Feel the key, feel the lion. That way. No, this way. No, there. Or here—

'It's over,' he says. 'You can't run any longer. It's time you face what you've done. We have you surrounded.'

'What? What have I done? I'm just going home.' To Refilwe. Jonah.

There. There it is again. His flinch of pity.

'You can't go home.' He takes a step closer. Holds out a hand. 'Don't you remember?' Almost kindly.

'I'm going home to — to Refilwe. And Jonah.' Voice shaking.

He shakes his head. 'You can't. Don't you remember what you did?'

'I'm going,' I say. I don't want to remember.

I don't.

And then I remember again.

Coming home, the struggle with the key. Plastic lion swinging against my fingers. But it would not fit, it would not turn. Fucking key. Then Refilwe crying through her blueberried eye. Through a slit in the door. An envelope.

Please. Just let me say goodbye to Jonah, just goodbye. Just let me say goodbye.

Headshake. 'He's afraid of you,' she whispers.

And the door shut. And I tremble. Fists pounding on the door. My fists.

She doesn't open.

But then I drank my daily medicine (it's just my medicine, Refilwe, for fuck's sake). I drank my daily medicine to steady my hands. Just to steady my hands. Just a bit more. Just to steady my heart. Just to steady the thunder. A bit more. And I went back. A bit more. Just to steady my fist as I raise it again and again and again and —

No.

No. I don't want to remember. 'I'm going home,' I say. I turn around.

'You have no home,' the detective says.

And then I remember again. (The blood and the rage and my aching fists. So light. So empty.)

Reach into my pocket. The lion. The key. Go home.

The detective takes one careful step towards me. 'You can't escape, brother. So don't do anything rash,' he says, holding out his arm to say, stay.

This makes me laugh. 'Fuck you,' I say, and start running, no feeling in my legs. No feeling except go.

He yells something but I don't hear. I need to go home, I'm going home. Home, you hear me?

'You can't go home,' he shouts behind me. Tears mingle with the sweat on my cheeks.

I turn onto Catherine Avenue and a silly lady with a baby almost crashes into me. (Haven't I seen her before somewhere?) She shouts an obscenity at me but I don't care because I'm crying and

I'm going home. The key is in my pocket. Loop my finger through the ring. The plastic lion and the key's metal ridge. Refilwe. Ridge. Refilwe. Ridge. Jonah. Home, home, home.

Further up Catherine Avenue and here's Pretoria Street. I turn left and I can breathe.

Up ahead is Great Liquor, where I get my daily fix while Refilwe is at work. What a relief to see it. (Have I already been here today? Surely not.) My hands are trembling with need. I can't go without my medicine, it's just my medicine, Refilwe.

I go inside and start to ask for my usual, but then I spot my face on the wall behind the counter. Stop talking. The words trip up my tongue. The man behind the counter looks me up and down. He glances at the poster: WANTED FOR MURDER.

'Never mind,' I say hastily, and turn around to exit the store. (Wanted for murder?)

I glance over my shoulder as I walk quickly away.

At the corner appears the detective. I speed up.

'Stop running,' he cries.

But I can't. I'm going home.



Oscar's Letter

Oscar hated when I described dreams, dreams didn't interest him, life was enough for Oscar, internet newsfeeds and daily talk-show hosts offering a perpetual stream of atrocities, horrible stuff, I'd always felt, that really got him off: acts of self-mutilation, cannibalism, wives castrating husbands. He was always e-mailing me stories like the one about the German who listed a want-ad for someone he could kill then have sex with then eat and was only caught on the second go-around, having already performed the ritual once fully before the second candidate's partially consumed cadaver was discovered in his freezer. Oscar loved stories like that, and though I rarely read more than the first sentence, I never requested he stop e-mailing them. But dreams didn't interest him, so when describing the girl on the train I wrote what she might have been dreaming as I watched her asleep in her subway seat, head fallen to the left, black hair spread against the cold steel subway hand-rail. While I watched her sleeping, a legless homeless guy in a wheelchair, being pushed by another presumably homeless, came through the car chanting something incomprehensible. He rattled a can of coins and together the coins and chanting created an effect that I imagined filling the girl's sleep. There was a rhythm to it, two shakes side-to-side then all the coins dropping to the bottom of the can, two shakes drop, two shakes drop, and I wrote Oscar how the woman dreamed of being led up a steeply sloped hill, the ground beneath her sharp with stones, guided by a strong hand on her cool naked arm. Oscar had a powerful mind, though he'd never applied it to any particular practice or school of thought so that, in my opinion, his fierce intelligence was mostly wasted.

Family money made a career unnecessary, thus his days spent collecting ultra-violent news items. He'd scour on-line libraries, investigate subcultures, counter-cultures, e-mail me and whoever else articles on infamous and unknown cult murders, Mayan embalming techniques, transcripts of Hague trails of crimes against humanity, links to sites that collected photographs of mass Muslim graves found outside Sarajevo. He loved that shit, loved to assault us from afar. I haven't seen him since he visited several years ago, when we'd spent four long nights in that chess shop on Thompson Street, playing hundreds of three- and two- and one-minute chess matches.

He was a hell of a chess player. It was in keeping. I've known more than one of his ex-lovers and they were never shy to rattle off Oscar's most intimate peculiarities, his talent for gamesmanship, for manipulation, how he left his journals open for them to discover and read and how the entries scared the hell out of them. (I already knew of this side of him. In college I'd seen him bring our Existentialism in Modern Theater professor to tears, an old man of more than seventy who Oscar taunted by forcing him to admit that Sartre's admiration for Genet was bound to his, Sartre's, propensity for sexual cruelty. Oscar cornered the old man with lingual gymnastics until the old man literally choked on scorned intellectual approbation and fled the lecture hall, notes scattering to the floor. The entire room was silenced, ready to tear Oscar limb from limb, but Oscar sat there very cool, no hint of victory or shame until he flipped close the notebook he was doodling in, slipped pen to pocket and said aloud, I guess class is dismissed, and moved unhurried for the door as if off to his next excellent meal.)

One of Oscar's exes told me how he'd taunted her with infidelity, assured her he would never betray her but that she should be the one to experiment, take lovers, sharpen herself against other bodies. Only she shouldn't tell him about it, that would spoil everything, he would never get the image out of his mind.

His lovers were never shy to report how he liked to be tied up and left alone for entire nights, how he'd make them wear masks, they should insult him during sex, etc. Women will tell you anything. Oscar knew that I and several others were well informed of his proclivities. It was part of his overall scheme. For the most part he kept us in separate niches: Oscar would never gather all his friends and acquaintances into a single room. But he required his comrades and ex-lovers the way an actor mandates an audience.

Witnesses were requisite, our participation an essential ingredient. We must have come out about even, that week of all-night chess matches, when the drawn knife luckily closed the chess shop doors early. I was starting to lose it from lack of sleep. I still had to be at work each morning to negotiate musician contracts while Oscar slept all day on my sofa, only rose late afternoon to groom and preen himself, shower with his expensive scented soaps and hair-generating shampoos, showing up at my midtown office at six or seven o'clock at night. We'd head downtown, stopping for a great meal along the way, Oscar's treat.

He could really put the food away, as if it were necessary to fill his six-foot-two frame with every feeding. It was a pleasure to eat with him because he took such fantastic indulgence in every bite. Waiters looked on with wonder as he ordered a second steak, another baked potato with sour cream, butter and chives, two desserts, washed it all down with plenty of black coffee. Everything he did was with showmanship, grandeur, fully aware of the effect and relishing it as much as the meal. As he ate he talked about Michel de Montaigne's writings on medieval gender-switching, then to the capturing of Eichmann, then to how the European Union would prove a failure, no topic any less vital than the next or last, Oscar with lacy descriptions stitching together the tale of our time, our time being the conglomeration of all time, all of history at our digital disposal and therefore contemporary, a brutal, spicy, hypnotically woven tapestry that Oscar with his telling made the listener partners of, stabbing into the arras of this living, breathing, ever-accumulating history, twirling it round his fork prongs and swallowing it all down with another cup of coffee. Oscar claimed that he never got depressed, had no sympathy for suicides, though their methods interested him, as did every form of psychosis, religious ecstasy, the visions that preceded epileptic seizures.

He liked Anne Sexton, knew all about Joan of Arc, was interested in William Blake, the Marquis de Sade (obviously), what could I tell him about Golda Mier, did she really disguise herself as an Arab for a secret meeting with the King of Jordan? Oscar didn't want to play chess in my apartment, it wasn't filled with West Village super-freaks, and he needed those too. For four nights we played chess on Thompson Street until the shop closed, though the last night only until 2 a.m., an excellent bottle of single-malt scotch (Oscar's treat) and two plastic cups beside the board. We drank and played, hands moving fast, slamming the clock, resetting the pieces while Oscar leaned over the board to whisper for me to check out the tranny a couple tables back, her game's lousy but she keeps adjusting those fake tits to distract her opponent, hilarious, you can see the outline of nipple-studs right through her shirt. Oscar made his own impression, back straight to attain maximum visibility, shoulders rigid and head long, as if cast from a Roman war mask, hair trimmed, skin scoured by those expensive soaps, green eyes blazingly alert.

He loved the game, loved being in that room, especially when the chairs at the next table were suddenly kicked out and the players stood staring one another down. One of them was a street hustler, a black kid in a basketball jersey, one of those unbeatables in Washington Square playing

for twenty bucks a game, you can even start with one of my pawns as a handicap. His opponent looked as if he'd done a stint in the Israeli military. He wore a ribbed muscle shirt and a yarmulke, a Star of David tattooed to his left shoulder. The chess board was toppled between them, rooks and queens spilled to the floor as the 2 a.m. crowd hopped onto chairs and tables because the shoves quickly drew a small but dangerous blade from the Israeli's back pocket. That knife would certainly have been used had Oscar not stepped in, yelled, No! and snatched the knife quicker than a card is slipped from the bottom of a deck. We were all startled, especially the two Oscar interrupted from killing – or at least hurting – one another.

Oscar now held the knife in his thick right fist so that only the blade jutted out, staring each of them down from his height, not saying a word. When he knew he had them he screwed-up his face and screamed, Is this what you want! and stabbed the blade into his opposite arm. He scared the piss out of them both, as well as me and every one else, yelled it again and again stabbed the blade, his screwed-up face taking on all of the world's sin and cruelty. The street hustler called him a crazy fucker as he beat it out the front door because the owner was on the phone with the cops, but the rest remained, watched as Oscar flicked away the knife to where it skidded beneath one of the abandoned tables. He grabbed his stabbed arm, motioned for me to snag the bottle of scotch, and slipped between the gape-mouthed 2 a.m. gawkers. I found him across the street halfway-down the block, leaning in that way of his against the shuttered grate of a record store, unruffled, perfectly at ease. He motioned for the bottle, took it by the neck and drank deeply. I realized he shouldn't have been able to lift his arm like that and turned his shoulder to find it bloodless, not even his shirt scratched.

He appreciated my bewilderment then said, *You ever see those crazy fuckers on Easter Island? Every Christmas Day one of them crucifies himself, I mean really does it, has stakes pounded through hands and feet to a wooden cross and hangs there for the amount of time Christ supposedly did. I could do that, but not for such a useless cause.*

After another long swig at the bottle he sauntered off into Washington Square as if the timid pre-dawn were meant for his sole glorification. He didn't care whether I followed him or not, only assured that I would. He was like that, capable of magnificent indifference. Yet dreams didn't interest Oscar. I could never quite grasp it. His esteem for Dali and Bunuel and their gang, his admiration for the subconscious and drugs and all things hallucinatory, but never dreams.

So of course when describing the girl on the train I wrote about the legless homeless in his wheelchair, how through the chanting and crashing coins her beautiful head (she would have to be beautiful, and was) and black hair against the steel subway hand-rail never stirred. I wrote how I imagined her dreaming of a vast, star-filled sky, she unafraid, led by firm hands on her cool arm, how those hands laid her down, spread her hair over the slab of stone, exposed her breast, lifted the black knife filled with stars.

I knew how Oscar would take it, the crash of coins, the girl's head of black hair perfectly undisturbed, all of it except her dream, which was of course why her dream, just so that I could picture Oscar on the day my letter arrived, his six-foot-two frame leaning against the kitchen molding as if supporting the entire building, my letter in one thick hand, the girl – certainly beautiful, she definitely affected me – only an excuse, her improbable dream just so that I could picture Oscar in his kitchen saying aloud, *Screw her dreams!*

A Misunderstanding

He bit my ass cheek like it was a compliment, like his desire was something to be admired, something to find endearing. I said nothing the first time, just dug my teeth into the pillow, as a means of numbing myself, and when he returned, grinning, I merely smiled back and turned to face the pillow. When I fucked him, I felt his hands on my ass, he told me to push harder, go deeper, he gave me directions I didn't ask for. He bit my ass cheek a second time, with more force and venom. He called my ass a "bubble butt" and told me he wanted to consume it. He wanted to devour me. So he bit down hard and I felt his teeth. I shouted out. And when he heard my yell, he stopped and apologised and asked, "did that hurt?"

"Yes, it fucking hurt," I said.

I stared at the mark, studying the red pimples, the gnawed pieces of flesh, the bruised skin. I wondered if the man that bit me had bitten his boys before me. I wondered if any of them still walked around with those marks, I wondered if some of them were proud, wearing it like a badge of honour and the others saw them as scars.

"You've got me," he said when we lay in bed once, his arms around me, like a noose, tightening as I tried to pull away. "You've made me fall for you."

"You did that yourself," I mumbled as I fell asleep, feeling the pressure of his arms grow stronger around me.

"I want to know everything about you," he used to say. Usually with a cigarette in his hand, or a joint. He'd say it and all I'd want was for him to resemble something wise yet through the blurred fuzz of his irises I saw only necessity. The necessity to learn about me, to understand me, to consume me. To do it quick. To get it over with. He wanted to move onto the love, to the life lived together – I wondered, only infrequently, if he wanted to move onto the life lived after.

He told me that his mother died of leukaemia when he was nine but I knew he was lying. I think it was the way he told the story to the wall, just above my head, only occasionally making eye contact. He told it so earnestly, as if it must be true, that I wanted to believe him. But his story ended on a cliff-hanger.

"She left you," I said when he mentioned the death-day again. "She didn't die."

"She might be dead," he said.

"But she abandoned you."

He looked into his teacup and muttered: "I remember she took her jewellery and her spatulas, that's it."

And we didn't speak of deaths for a long time. Only when his uncle died did the subject come up but his response was: "I hated him anyway."

"I wanted to die once."

"What?"

“What?” He’s looked at me angrily, all brow furrowed and eyes slanted, agitated, lying beside me in the bed, one hand gripped onto my arm, the other touched my chest. “You said you wanted to die once,” he said.

“I didn’t.”

“You did,” he snapped. “When did you want to die?”

“What time is it?”

“Nearly three. Answer my question.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I must have been sleep talking.”

“To who?”

“Maybe to death. I don’t fucking know. Let me sleep.”

“You’re such an asshole sometimes.”

“I know.” I said and forced myself back to sleep.

I woke with a gnawing stomach cramp, like someone punching my bowels. I opened my eyes and he wasn’t there, maybe in the toilet or left for work already. But I could smell him, somewhere in the room. And I realised my ass cheeks were parted and there was a tongue running against my asshole, occasionally sliding all the way in, deep and hungry, like an invasion. When I came to consciousness I felt a mixture of pleasure and confusion. His tongue rolled in circles and pushed inward, his hands prised me open and he started sucking, vacuuming me into his mouth.

“Stop,” I said.

He pulled away hesitantly but immediately. He remained an oxymoron. But before he sat up he dragged his teeth against my asshole. A quick, scratched mark, like he had done it in passing, like he was running away.

“Tell me you want me for me,” I said.

“Of course I do. I want all of you,” he said.

“That’s not the same thing,” I said.

I found a note in his desk drawer from his father dated 1998. I didn’t mean to read it but my intrigue took the better of me. The letter began as a memoir, a rundown of the man becoming a father, loving his son and his family but then I realised the paper in my hand was not a letter but a suicide note. I put it back, as if it were poisonous.

When he came home I pretended I hadn’t read anything, pretended that I saw him in the same way, that I saw myself in the same way. As he made dinner I sat at the window, biting my nails, curled up.

When we fucked that night, I couldn’t kiss him properly. I had to keep pulling away, his being too close felt suffocating, exhausting, I felt like I was going to die.

“Fuck me,” I said.

“OK,” he replied. On all fours, head in the pillows, feeling the pain. He fucked me and kept asking if I was alright, if he needed me to go slower, if I was sure, I kept telling him to fuck me.

With my head in the pillows I fell into the blackness and somewhere amongst the pain of his thrusts I managed to find some pleasure, and hold onto it.

I decided we were going to have steak and bought two rumps. I set them down in the kitchen and found him in the living room. But he wasn’t in his usual spot or at the window or even on the sofa, he was on the floor, surrounded by notebooks, some with newspaper clippings, others with black handwriting, photos sprung out of the pages, cinema and train tickets, drawings and lyrics.

“Why are you reading my journals?” I asked.

“I wanted to get to know you,” he said.

“Why aren’t you embarrassed?” I snapped.

“I shouldn’t be embarrassed about loving you.”

“This isn’t loving me.”

“You don’t tell me everything.”

“I don’t want to tell you everything.”

“That’s what makes me question you,” he said, “and us. I want to tell you everything and I want you to tell me everything.”

“I think...that when I look at you sometimes it’s like I’m watching myself die in slow motion.”

There were two bookcases in the living room – one his, the other mind. In the darkness, I walked over to his, which was stacked with copies of Kuzuo Ishiguro, Daphne Du Maurier, Gillian Clarke and so many more that they blocked the spines of other books. Around them were framed photographs of the two of us. I stared at one in which we sat on a bench amongst flowers, both smiling with beers in our hands. I studied the photo like I hadn’t seen it before. I looked at it with a new perspective, I focused only on myself. As I looked into my eyes, as I stayed transfixed on that captured moment, I imagined that photograph being only a memory of me. I imagined him looking at it and glancing over his shoulder to try and find me. There are more photographs of the dead than there are of the living. I wonder how long before I join them.

I wonder, if they found me so deformed and ruined, what would be my distinguishing features? The mole on my little finger, the scar on my wrist, or the teeth marks carved into my skin?

Dennis Walsh

Wake

A pressure suddenly rises in my chest and I release smoke through a series of muffled coughs. I quickly bring the joint back to my lips and inhale deeply, watching the orange glow magnify and then dim as I release again. Another quick succession of gentle coughs follows. I hold out the joint to Amanda.

“I’m not smoking,” She waves the joint away, cutting through its smoke.

“Are you serious?” I continue to hold the joint between us.

“Yeah, I already told you that.”

“No, I thought you said you wanted to,” I wiggle the joint at her like I’m trying to be cute, but I’m pissed.

“No. I said that you could if you wanted to,” Amanda pushes my hand back toward me.

I bring the joint back to my mouth. I really fucking hate her sometimes, we’ve been dating 3 years and it feels like it. I take a long drag while she stares at me with those blue-grey eyes. I wonder what she thinks of me. “Babe, are you sure?”

“Yeah Lewis, I probably wouldn’t be able to hide it in there,” Amanda gestures beyond our cover of trees to the funeral home where the grandfather of our close friend Dee is on display. The funeral isn’t until tomorrow. However, being a proper Catholic family, they decided to host not one but two wakes today. I wouldn’t have volunteered to come but Dee invited us and I guess you can’t really turn down an invite like that, so we decided to come to the late one praying it wouldn’t be as crowded as the first with grief-stricken strangers.

“I wish I knew you weren’t going to smoke, I wouldn’t have even lit this then. Are you sure? We still have time before Dee shows up,” I extend the joint to her again.

“Honey, Dee is already here,” She waves the joint away again.

“I thought we were waiting for her this whole time.” Why didn’t she say this earlier?

“She’s been here since the earlier wake, I don’t think she ever left.” I watch Amanda step out of the range of my smoke. Fuck it. I take one last long pull and then I toss the joint on the ground. I stomp on it and see the small sparks fly from under my dress shoes.

“Well then let’s go inside,” I put my hands in my black pants and walk directly out of the woods. I can feel Amanda following me, but I don’t look back. I don’t want to look at her right now. I want her to know that I’m angry at her. But I don’t know why I’m angry at her. But she better know that I am.

The funeral home is a little brown building next to a much bigger parking lot that is only a quarter full. We’re all the way out east and completely unfamiliar with this area even though it’s only an hour from our town. Something about the late afternoon summer light suffocating the air makes me both hate and love the way things look in its glow. It should be beautiful I guess, and it is, but something about it just irritates me. This goddamn tight collar isn’t helping. The top button and tie are pinching my throat closed.

“I wish you would have told me,” I say without looking back.

“I did tell you,” She says without any emotion. I want to fight her. I want her to fight me. I want to smile but I want to stay angry at her, so I do.

“You’re a liar,” I say as we approach the door. She doesn’t say anything back, doesn’t acknowledge that I spoke at all. I hate her. I’m glad she decided that we should break up at the end of the summer, she can start her new life across the country in grad school, and then this will all be over.

These doors look like a bit much for a place like this. Huge wooden doors with some kind of gold pattern and giant handles. Okay so why won’t these doors open? Is this the right door? I feel Amanda staring at me as I push harder against the shitty doors. I turn around to face her and shrug. She pulls on the handle next to me and walks right in. I shouldn’t have smoked before this.

As I follow Amanda through the door, I trip over the metal threshold and stumble in after her and right into Dee’s arms who quickly rests her head down on my chest. I realize what is going on and squeeze her tight for a moment before letting her go. Amanda then takes her turn hugging Dee as I stand there quietly remembering Amanda holding my hand when I cried at Gran’s funeral. I shake this thought away.

“It’s this way guys,” Dee nods with a small smile toward some velvet carpeted stairs. “Teresa is already here and my mom has been looking forward to seeing you.”

“Aw, that’s sweet of her to say,” says Amanda.

I walk silently behind them up the red stairs. Parallel to each other on opposite ends of the carpet are these small pretty golden flowers. My eyes follow the yellow pattern until we are in the room with the Little family and the body. There are several rows of dull metal chairs on top of the nice looking rug, which bothers me although I shouldn’t care.

We stop at the top of the staircase and Teresa, who was clearly waiting for Dee to return, walks over to us. Teresa is another one of our close friends, her and Dee have been best friends for far longer than I’ve known either of them, and if any friend would fit in at this wake it would be her.

She hugs Amanda and I give her a silent little wave. I make sure to be as quiet as possible because the last thing I want here is any kind of attention. Dee leads us behind all the rows of chairs and says that she is going to get her mom. I really hope I don’t make an ass of myself.

“So what did you guys do today?” Teresa asks and Amanda and I shoot each other a glance.

What did we do today? Maybe I could tell her how I spent the last few days wondering why Amanda won’t hold my hand in the car anymore? But I know the reason.

“We just hung out at his house and watched some Netflix.” Amanda ends her sentence with a chuckle that seems genuine but I know isn’t.

“Of course, I shouldn’t even ask anymore after all these years,” Teresa chuckles too. Not for much longer. Are we hiding it that well?

“Why fix a good thing?” I smile and rock back on the balls of my feet, then half listen to Amanda and Teresa bullshit.

God this shirt is too tight, I find myself fingering at my neck, trying to pry the tightness of my collar away. The clank of glass brings my yearning eye to the sight of a small table of whiskey off near the front. My heart grows and my mouth waters. All thought of my collar is gone. I need a drink. The glasses are even those thick classy ones. I watch old men in big cheap suits drink together at the table and want to be one of them.

My foot extends in the direction of the whiskey but the sight of Dee’s goddamn mom approaching pulls me back. The mother and daughter look nothing alike. Mrs. Little’s tiny blonde head barely reaches the bottom of Dee’s long brown hair as she opens her arms wide and goes in to

hug Teresa and Amanda. I just stand there like some awkwardly grinning asshole until Mrs. Little looks at me and says, “Thank you for coming, Lewis.”

I feel a genuine smile spread across my lips, “Of course.”

My hands are holding each other together behind my back while I continue to pretend to listen to the small talk that I dreaded being subjected to the entire time I was here. Shit like: how long was the trip, did we find it okay, how’s everyone at home? I don’t answer any questions but make sure to smile and nod in sync with everyone else. Then when all the empty crap is done no one smiles. No one talks. It’s that sweet sweet awkward silence.

Mrs. Little stares at the girls. I look around and feel my collar starting to compress again. I pretend that I don’t want to rip my throat out while she is still silent. Please talk. No don’t look at me. This is even worse. What is happening, should I say something? God, I’m going to tear this fucking collar off. Oh those guys are gone from the whiskey, now would be a good time to mosey on over.

“So did Dee show you the collage she put together?” Mrs. Little finally speaks up. Never mind.

“What collage?” Teresa asks. At a wake. What could possibly be the mysterious subject of the high art masterpiece our twenty year old friend has birthed into this world?

“The collage I made with pictures of our family and Grandpa,” Dee looks a little embarrassed.

“It’s over here.” She turns around.

The backs of my dress shoes slip off a little with each step so I walk carefully with my toes pressed against the front. I can’t have my shoe just fall off in front of these sad mourners without looking like a fool. I make sure I am not going to step on the back of Amanda’s heels as we follow Dee, but I stay close to her.

The central aisle between the legions of bland chairs gives me anxiety, the thought of all these sad wrinkly old strangers watching me makes my skin crawl. I don’t want to have an interaction with any of them.

Well holy shit, except that one.

Wow that ass looks nice. I can’t turn my head away. That blonde chick has quite the keister. That tight white dress honestly should not be worn here but I’m not going to complain. I feel the corners of my mouth started to curl upward. I look forward only to dodge Amanda’s heel. Then it is back to the blonde whose long hair curls down her back. The memory of Amanda’s warm black hair resting against my bare chest creeps into my mind. I cast this out and turn back to my group.

Here we are, the front of the room opposite from the whiskey, standing in front of the collage. I’ll naturally make my way over to get a drink after this. The collage is sweet, I don’t think I’ve seen a collage since the one mom made for my sister’s sweet sixteen. Dee is talking about each picture but I am just wandering through all of them playing Where’s Waldo with her grandpa. Most of these pictures don’t even have Dee in them but I am traveling across time putting together this dude’s fall into old age. He was pretty handsome at that wedding, still color in his hair. But this Christmas he looks terrible, on death’s door. Oh but holding that baby he still looks old but not like that.

Now that I’ve pieced together grandpa’s timeline my eyes begin to wander. I rotate a bit and notice the dude from the pictures is lying right next to me. My shoe slips off as I step back. My neck fucking hurts again so I pry my collar away as I lean down to slip my shoe back on.

He looks a lot better in that wooden box than in some of the pictures. I’m glad his eyes are closed. I didn’t think that they would be open or anything, but it’s just nice to know for sure so there’s no big surprise. I couldn’t handle a dead grandpa with open eyes, just staring at you. Judging. I really should not have smoked. I need that whisky now.

“Oh yeah, there he is,” Mrs. Little points to me looking at the casket.

No, God dammit.

The girls walk closer to me and look at the corpse. Amanda gently touches my fingers. My hand instinctually wraps around hers and she rests her head on my shoulder. I can't help but to look down at her raven hair and kiss the crown of her head. What is she thinking in there?

Compliments of how nice and peaceful he looks are softly offered. He does look peaceful, maybe even happy. Amanda's thumb rubs the back of my hand as we stare together at death. A feeling of warmth comes to my chest. This is a nice moment for me. Extend this warm feeling as far as possible. Absorb this moment to remember always.

“Oh great, the priest is harassing people for more donations. Excuse me guys,” Mrs. Little says and storms off. We stand there in confused silence for a bit, except Dee who must already know the priest to be a beggar. Then Teresa and Dee begin talking about the summer camp they work at. This leaves Amanda and I alone together. Exactly what we need at this stranger's wake.

“Did you like the collage?” Amanda, still on my shoulder, suddenly whispers up to my ear.

“Yeah, I thought it was sweet,” I whisper back down.

“Did you see what he looked like when he was young?”

“In the navy uniform?”

“Yeah,” She giggles and I smile. “He looked sort of like you.”

“Like me? Ah, so you found him irresistible then?” I whisper as I kiss the top of her head again.

“Maybe, bring a navy uniform next time and we'll see what happens,” She flashes me those blue-grey eyes and a suggestive smile meant only for me. I love her.

“Maybe for your next birthday,” I say trying to flash her back the same look she gave me. But hers quickly fades away into nothing and I remember why. What is she thinking? I need to get away. I step back as she crosses her arms against her heart. The whiskey is right there and suddenly it is in my hands. Pour faster.

I down one glass in a gulp and hate every second of it. Another. This one tastes better and my chest is starting to feel warm. I take a breather. My eyes causally move around the room, purposefully landing on Amanda staring at the corpse. Is she as alone as me? I see her head stir in my direction and promptly move my eyes along as if I'd never seen a more interesting ceiling design in my life.

“Excuse me,” I turn my head to see the blonde reaching for the whisky.

“Oh sorry,” I step backwards and my shoe almost slips off my goddamn foot again.

Don't stare at her either. My eyes flicker back toward the world's most amazing ceiling while she pours herself a glass. The soft sound of alcohol flowing steadies my heart and I look back just as the blonde is downing her whiskey. She daps her pink lips with a napkin and looks at me. Back to the ceiling!

“That's good shit,” She says to me. Oh fuck.

A nervous chuckle comes from my chest, “Yeah, hits the spot.”

She smiles, “I'm Jen.”

I think I love you, “I'm Lewis, Dee's friend.”

We both turn to see Dee, Teresa, and Amanda chatting near the collage together, “How is Dee doing?”

“Well she's doing, you know? I think she's fine,” Do I just stand here? I'm so awkward, quick do something with your hands. My arms reach out and grab the bottle of whiskey again. The liquid is shaking inside as I go to pour. Please don't notice.

“I need air. Would you be interested in smoking a cigarette with me?” Jen places her glass down. I glance back at the girls and see Amanda smiling. Without me.

I’ve always wanted to get with a blonde. I wonder if she can fix my collar. Nah, if Amanda couldn’t then I doubt it can be done. Did I even ask Amanda? I pour myself another glass then my eyes meet Jen’s. They are not the eyes I’m used to. They are too blue, too perfect. I force the brown liquid into my stomach and feel some of it dripping down my chin.

“No,” I cartoonishly extend my suddenly wobbly legs and dash away toward the back with a sketched on smile. Before I turn the corner to the bathroom hallway I look over my shoulder and watch Jen heading toward the exit.

I push through the bathroom door and am suddenly aware that my breathing is heavy. Take a deep breath and try to calm down. I begin to walk over to the sink and my legs wobble a bit. My heart is trying to breaking out of my chest. I get over to the sink and my two shaking arms hold up the entire weight of my body.

The room tilts back and forth. I look up into the mirror and see my portrait reflected back at me traveling through time. I am not at our wedding, it is not our family’s Christmas, and we have no baby to hold in our arms. I am alone. Why are my eyes watering? I’m such an idiot.

I hear footsteps from outside and quickly stand straight. I begin to wash my hands in the sink and splash my face with some hot water. After I rub the water from my eyes I see Teresa in the mirror.

“Oh, shit,” I turn around.

“Hey Lewis, what’re you doing?” Teresa asks from the doorway.

“Sorry, I thought this was the men’s room.” Yep I’m definitely a goddamn idiot.

“Are you okay?” Teresa asks with the door closing behind her.

“What? Yeah I’m fine, I’m actually just a little drunk,” I put on my dumbest grin for her and she chuckles at me.

“Well alright, I’m going to the bathroom,” Teresa begins to walk toward a stall.

“Wait, could you fix my collar? It pinches me a bunch and it hurts,” I point to it as if she doesn’t know what a collar is.

“What?” Maybe she doesn’t.

“I think I need to find Amanda now,” I stagger through the bathroom door.

I step forward into the hallway and stumble a bit. A singular burst of silent laughter rages from my chest and forces my mouth into a painful Cheshire grin. After a moment I straighten myself up and walk carefully back toward the main room.

Standing in a small circle I see Mrs. Little, Dee, and Amanda. This should go well. I walk over to the group and make a space for myself by Amanda’s side. She looks so pretty in her black dress. I give her a quick wave but I don’t get one back. Maybe she didn’t see me. I instinctually go to hold her hand but then think again.

“Hi beautiful,” I whisper.

“Hey,” She whispers and then turns back to the morning mother and daughter.

“I just couldn’t be more grateful that you’ve both come,” Mrs. Little says to us.

I feel my heart stop. She’s looking right at me and I can see tears peaking out from the cover of her eyelids to say hello. I glance at Dee and in this instant the pair of them look identical.

“Of course, Mrs. Little. We wouldn’t have missed it,” Amanda says, thank God.

“I know Dee cares about you a lot,” The short blonde mother takes this moment to grab her daughter’s hand. “The last few weeks were hard for us, you know? I think it’s because we knew that our time together was coming to an end and there was nothing that could be done about it.” I see

Teresa walking over out of the corner of my eye and part of me wants to signal for her to run, but I dare not. Twin pairs of sad eyes are staring into me.

“So we tried to fill it with as much as we could. He loved his movies, Dee might have told you that, so we spent one day watching all the Star Wars movies.”

“Other days he would be so angry with me though. We fought often the last few weeks. Some days I couldn’t even get him to come out of bed. He would yell at me to leave the house. But it wasn’t my time to leave him yet, so I stayed in the living room. And often enough he would eventually come out and sit on the couch with me and watch some TV.” I see Dee start to cry a little and her mom rubs her shoulder. I can see Amanda asleep on my couch, tucked under my blanket.

My eyes feel waterlogged.

“But those last few weeks were also some of the best times we shared. On his happy days he’d play his old records and sign along as loud as he could. He’d be so happy and seeing him like that would always make us happy even though his singing was awful.” Mrs. Little laughs under her breath for a quiet moment. In this moment I swear I can hear Amanda in the passenger seat of my car as we both blared out 90s punk at the top of our lungs. My throat is tightening.

“I don’t regret staying in the house after he told me to leave. God only knows it was not always easy being with him, but I wouldn’t change our time together for the world. I loved him so much.”

In a burst of speed Mrs. Little’s voice cracks and she rushes to hug the three of us, then Dee practically knocks us all down when she joins in.

The pair of them sob onto us. The cracks in my eyes grow and leak as they squeeze. I pull away and stumble backwards a bit while quickly wiping my face. Amanda has also broken free from the mourners who now only clamp onto Teresa. Amanda turns toward me and I reach for her.

“Are you okay?” She asks and takes my hand.

“No. I don’t feel so good,” I know she’s disappointed in me.

“Are you drunk?” I nod my head. “Do you want to leave now?” I nod again. “Okay, give me your keys and we’ll go,” I hand her my keys and she starts to guide me away from the group hug and down the stairs.

“Wait, we have to say goodbye. We can’t be rude,” I whisper to Amanda.

“Okay let’s wait and-”

“Okay goodbye everybody!” Shit. “That was bad,” I whisper to Amanda again.

“Let’s just go,” She leads me down the red stairs, out the big wooden doors with ease, and past the cigarette riddled blacktop to my crappy old car. She unlocks the passenger side first and guides me into my seat.

“Wait baby,” I say and she stops to look at me, “Could you help me with my collar?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s too tight,” She reaches for my throat, loosens my tie, and unfastens the top button. I practically melt into ecstasy.

It’s hard to stay focused on her as she passes in front of the windshield. What does she think of us? I watch her open the driver’s side door and sit behind the wheel of my car.

“Are you okay to drive?” I ask.

“Yeah I didn’t drink,” She closes the door, “Or smoke.”

“Okay, I just want to make sure you’re safe,” I buckle my seatbelt.

“I know babe, thank you,” She starts the engine.

“I’m going to miss you after this,” My throat is still tight even with the collar loosened.

“I’m going to miss you too,” She buckles her seatbelt.

“Has anything changed for you?” My lip is shaking more than my hands with the whiskey bottle.

“I don’t think so. Has anything changed for you?” She backs out of the parking spot.

“No, I just, I don’t know. You know I still love you, right?”

“I know,” She pulls out onto the summer lit street and continues on.



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POETRY: PART II

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I Knew You When You Were An Asshole, But I'm Not Perfect Either

I hitchhiked along Cold Spring Harbor Road, scraggly haired, jeans more gray than blue, stoned. Your hand reached out of a passing car window and tossed a tightly squeezed ball of tinfoil. Coming toward me, its spines twirled the sunlight. I had to bend over and study it to realize, oh, those are needles, and that's blood.

Forty-five years later, I ask: how have you conducted the rest of your life? Did you have one? More victims? I myself have used others. Am turned inward. Have rolled love into a spit ball and fired it out a straw. But I haven't maimed anyone. Else.

Kevin Higgins

Grasp

In Memoriam poet of page & stage Eiléan Ní Faitíos

grasp at roses growing happily
red in other people's gardens
snip off every last fucking one of them
with the hedge clippers
you use to clear a path through the forest
on your lover's back

drive laughing through the streets
texting minor celebrities
whose phones all allegedly died
in Adam Clayton's former bidet

grasp the golf stick
and learn to beat in
heads no longer of use to you

wake the opportunists
who'd re-Tweet anything
jaysus do
some say let them stew
in piss pots of their own making
each of them a cross between
a chimpanzee and a yeast infection
but they're your chimpanzees

grasp the corpse of Eva Gore Booth
and go about the place in a people carrier
owning it dump your agent
your auctioneer
your orthodontist
they are not worthy

grasp that microphone and shout out
how one night
you tore the big wet lips off her
and made them your own

tell them grasp the pipe and blow
white smoke up all the right holes

given the chance
to do the necessary
grasp it both hands
and talk so fast no one notices they're dead.

Thanatophobia

i have always given death
far more than it deserves. an asthmatic flower
with her nose digging up a dark house under the earth.
your long fingers are trying to be roots. but hands have minds. the door
is wet in the dark. the handle wants me. i will wait for you.

you are edging down the stairs. you know nothing of me. try to open me
one more time—open me, so i can learn to open you.
i have an armful of keys that are as touchable as breath. how they harden to gossamer—
the squashed ribbons of life a child is woven with and too young
to know yet. how death laughs when i drop all that i carry.

your warm breath—the scent of children while they sleep. turn the latch
and i will show you why i am pure. slide across
one slick camisole after the other. unveil this gentle
tabernacle. wipe off this steam that softens the mirror
and how it is teaching me to hold my breath.

i draw faces on it. the water pleats near their eyes.
they don't have bodies.
their eyes are square petals bonier than roots or fingers.
there has been no other man. but you are afraid of me.
i need to show you why i was made for closed windows

and shadows that look like men. i was made for the cold season.
the expanse of somewhere else where we can only starve.
put your hand here and feel how death has curled up—
how my father's forceful arms
are more paradoxical than god.

Beyond The Pleasure Principle

i have to let the curtain fall each day. my body will still move
behind it if i don't see it.

my mother lived an agrarian life. she slept on hessian bags
filled with hay. i am still asking where this child is who i half made.

i am afraid of climbing steep stairs. of sitting on balconies in ballet theatres. i am afraid
of tongues swooning from the ceiling. o hell. o three days of darkness
and candles under the common cabinet. she is waiting for the end
of the world. she has performed her exorcism on me. holy mother,
you must remember water cannot bless what does not burn.

Alexis Rhoné Fancher

Pas de Deux

1. She said: Tell me one thing that doesn't end badly?

2. I wanted her ruffled tutu and toe shoes,
pink satin ribbons latticed up my legs like body armor.

She knew I avoided mirrors, reflecting pools.
What, she asked, do you dislike about your face?

3. Hers was a thoughtless beauty,
while I worked hard for everything,

danced my body into submission,
those endless practice hours at the barre,
legs turned out, toes pointing, pointing.

4. La laisse tomber, she said, when I leapt,
head-first into her arms. She let me fall.

5. I dreamed a solo, spotlight, applause,
not tucked in the corps de ballet.

She, too, dreamed prima ballerina. On stage,
her wicked tour jetés just missed my face.

6. A dancer in love with anyone but herself
is called an understudy,
she laughed when I asked her to choose.

That night, I arabesqued right through her;
she tasted jealousy for the first time.

7. She became a self-fulfilling prophecy,
out till dawn, sex-soaked, sweaty with another,
less ambitious girl's perfume. (See #1).

8. When I found the photos with my eyes x'ed out,
I knew I would leave her.
My eyes— my one good feature.

Today, in her garden, my sister says, ‘This plant came from the birds.’

Maybe that's how it was with Anna, demon seed
dropped into my sister's womb like a time bomb.

God knows, she couldn't be mine, my sister mutters,
overwhelmed by Anna's latest exploits, the bad checks
she's written on her ex's account, her latest romance with meth.

I see my sister standing, big-bellied, in another long-ago garden,
knocked up by an off-kilter artist with trust issues.

She gazes at the rows of sweet peas and chrysanthemums,
breathes in the fragrant yellow roses; her long hair
grazes her breasts.

She'll be the perfect mother,
do everything right.

Her feckless lover breaks another promise. And another.
Hard to picture him sticking around.

But then, she's always been a dreamer.

I want to tap my sister's younger self on the shoulder, say,
don't worry; this will turn out badly,
no matter what you do.



Deliberation © Mario Sánchez Nevado

David Ruderman

Days Without Caffeine —a triptych

I

the tendril has a life of its own
so too what seemed to me

a brownish bruise on the face of a woman that I barely know
a history that lives in me

this then becomes a problem
there is always some beyond

some Robert Frank perspective, doubled windows, lakes and clouds
ways to grow away from my last name

and if I said the word divorce
and if I called it music

everywhere I look what isn't there
presents itself as music

today on leaving Miller park
four magisterial crows

and the woman that I barely know
presumably in Japan

this is what I was after
the hollow at the core of here and there

in the song I wrote
the year my father died

when I still believed in substance
stitched together on an old guitar

now it seems impossible this truth
only to be damaging or kind

maybe we are only ever truthful
in the moment that we bruise

and everything I've ever said
just beneath the skin

II

imagine entering a forest
where you are eaten by the humid air

or this is how it feels without you
or this is just awareness

or this is how it has been all along
the body half humidity

the broken bones of trees
the barely noticed tendrils of new life

if fantasy were flesh
you would no longer be a person

distances would all collapse
and with them every emptiness

no more startle, no more pain
no more boy in the hills with his dog

but at the hollow of each core is its negative
and that is what is dragged into light

it isn't fair to have to wait
it isn't fair to have to work so hard

to have the same tired body
to have the taste without the kick

III

morning—an insanity of crows
and the woman that I barely know just back from Japan

I keep getting you confused with her
either way infected with a wish

so why not be afflicted by a schoolboy crush
why not serve as food

the answer is a bit of blood trapped beneath the skin
feeling better watching history expire

feeling fountain, feeling face
feeling lines on the horizon

and then there was that crossing
when the backs of our hands seemed to touch

her husband with his cigarettes
on the other side of campus

my ex-wife's empty office
watching as we turned around the modern language building

her hair (and I keep getting you confused) turned to tendrils
as we sat upon the bench

I will add it to the list
of feelings that rush over

I will tolerate the yellow leaves
bruising into brown

Priscilla Becker

ear bud

sound of hammer
on slate in the not-so-
distant distance and a voice

like wire and knives fighting
with itself. on the other
side of night

a suicide, a heart that beat
itself to death, doors
slamming and furniture

rearranging, phones
trembling next to the beds.
the crow-like man's

eyelashes break as leaves
from a tree, brown [and]
wrinkled, mixed with stinking

pink nuts beneath our feet.
the weather channel pummels
the wall, [that plus] scratched

churning like bedroom cement-
tight sounds of tourniquets
binding in fastidious suppression

something like sleet, near hail,
much like pellets of ice, stones of it,
ice boulders, frozen sculptures

shaped like stiff bodies-
the voice erupts to car
alarms, to sirens of the ear
canal channel

birth of first continent

the ancient
 cactus aged
as the sun could not set
 or rise

the husk rang,
spine vaulted
 in forever
 noon

your unripened
 hands, the ladder
of your torso
 lifted me
to see the fledgling
second continent---
 it wept and screamed
 like a papoose with no
 cookie

I climbed to the peak
of the navel
 mountain
looked forward to pain
like a small oval fan
making the same circle
over and over again

Anthony DiPietro

I Come to Understand Why I Still Want Us to Fuck

The river rages at me: Nothing lasts.
The stones beneath the river echo: Nothing lasts.

I know I have a bad liver.
I know I'm a bad loser with bad aim.

I never murder you in these poems. I never will.
The river otter and roadrunner remind me:

Naked hate is fragile. It's got to be
protected, incubated, like a cure

for a genital infection, or for grief.
Many people are intimate with grief.


Many are intimate with my grief.
Nightmares keep me intimate with grief

and you, you bastard I can't even be
angry at. A sunrise in the country

coming to a boil
tells me None of this is real.

I cover my ears, afraid to hear
what the wildflowers have to say.

My own shadow like lightning in the day.
But nothing, nothing ever scares you.



Celia Hauw

The Birth of the Universe

From the look in my mother's eyes I knew
there was a mistake, a betrayal, an urge
to undo itself in all her entirety.
Only some of us experience retrograde.
In the news they talk about discovery,
never before seen images of exoplanets
skirting the edge of the Milky Way,
rimming the circumference of a basin like a pearl
destined to fall, which we continue
to watch, amid fleeting beauty, its demise.
Body bathed in the ashy exhale of smoke,
rubbed raw, the shade of blooming rust.
That was what it looked like light years ago,
thousands of it: this is her belated deliverance.
I wouldn't have known, in all the time it took
for her light to reach me, what I had lost.
I can convince myself, waking in a lucid dream,
of my reality. My mother's love
from the warmth of her hands over mine
as she looks at me. How she holds me
in the pool like a baby, buoyed up
by the water beneath me. The heat
cupping my cheeks like a fever descending,
my body resisting against what eventually was to come.



Luke Marinac

Mrs. Chaos, Tennessee

Are you a chameleon with lazy eyes or
a Daytona mood ring that's always
green? A worry stone or Seagull Lilly,
dipped in Patchouli and peeled on
teeth? Are you the blue-ringed olive fly,
twitching at a pin-lasso's end? A rose
pink Cadillac that careens Vestal
switchbacks, loping, diphthong'd girl's
crooked laugh, hand on one pregnant
thigh— where is the pebble you
swallowed? The man who put it
there— where is the man who put it
there?

Bus Stop

I liked the cold morning walk, the bus stop. Smoked cigarettes with Kim, her leopard prints,
any given moment a Camel, hairpin, in her teeth. *I'm so tight*, she once said,
a pencil wouldn't fit, and *Tell me, you read that Bible every morning?*
The things I inhaled under the bleachers.
The groping of my breath, lapping the new insouciant air,
cool prickle of humid cold and exhalent mist
the touch of blood in her white lips— how we tumbled
laughing, in the vesper cool of summer mornings on her front lawn.
The way she admitted me, the novitiate delicate unfolding scripture,
or the sticky flake of beehive,
gathered with a hand to the center of her chest.



NON FICTION

Déjà Vu © Mario Sánchez Nevado

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Autumn Shah

Klepto

The Rite Aid Pharmacy was directly en route to the elementary school, and I crossed through the parking lot as a shortcut every day. All us kids that lived in the same village of apartments took this route to and from school. On the way back home from school some of the popular girls that I wanted so badly to be friends with made an almost daily ritual of stopping in at the drugstore. One of the girls, Angela, had an Olivia Newton-John haircut that I envied: short and feathered, and in contrast to most of us fourth-graders still wearing the ponytails and braids our mothers couldn't part with.

To be part of their dynamic group, I followed them in on many of these days. The store was small, and there was a pharmacy at the back where my mother picked up prescriptions. At the front, near the counter, the long rows of candy bars created a colorful, mouth-watering palette: Whatchamacallit, Kit Kat, Twix, Baby Ruth. High up the walls near the ceiling were security mirrors that slanted downward so that employees had a good view of the store.

The Asian man who ran that Rite Aid must have dreaded weekdays after three o'clock when the school kids swarmed his store. We flitted about spritzing cheap perfume on each other, flipping shampoo caps to sniff the strawberry scents and picking things up and laying them down again the next row over. I tagged along on the periphery, waiting for them to beckon me in while trying not to appear too desperate.

I gradually grew suspicious of the girls' tight huddles and eruptions of trills and began to pay closer attention. I don't remember actually catching any of them stealing, but the combination of their behavior and the fact that they were suddenly in possession of a new Cover Girl compact I knew they didn't take up to the counter, made it easy to put two and two together.

I was awed by their gumption and ingenuity, but I was also scared. What if I got in trouble just for being with them? If we were taken away to jail, how would my mother know where to find me?

They didn't steal every day. Some days they just cased the place, other days they actually bought something. Whether they bought or stole, the girls would exit the store loudly and as soon as they rounded the corner would show off their booty. They would swap, brag and swoon over one another's items; tubes of lipstick, compacts with shimmery pink powders, and the blue and purple shades of mascara popular at the time.

Of course I knew stealing was wrong, but they looked like they had so much fun doing it, and no one stopped them. Was it still wrong if you weren't caught?

One day it was decided by a girl that I had a particular dislike for, that I should be stealing makeup like the rest of them.

"But I don't want any makeup," I said, my heart thumping. We were walking through the parking lot on our way to the drugstore.

"So what? Take it and give it to us," she said. She had orange hair and more orange freckles than me and she had a permanent sneer on her face.

At the prospect of acquiring more makeup, a few of the other girls declared this a good idea.

"Yeah, come on, Autumn. Or maybe you're too sissy," one said. It had turned into a dare now.

“Shhh...”the girls whispered as we entered the store. I was swept into the middle of the group, no longer on the outskirts, and ushered into the cosmetics aisle.

They performed their charade, talking loudly and exclaiming over colors they would buy with their allowance. I hoped they would forget about the dare. My yearning to belong now warred with a sense of foreboding. The orange-haired girl sneered at me expectantly.

“Forget it, let’s go,” she said derisively, giving up on me quickly.

This was it, a chance to prove myself one of them. If I didn’t carry through I’d likely never be allowed back in the store with them. And worse, at school, they would tease me so everyone would know that I didn’t belong. The thought of the ugly accusations they’d come up with was more frightening than committing this quick sin and more frightening than the old man in the blue smock running the store.

My hand shot out from my jacket pocket and back in again. I didn’t even know what I had grabbed. It didn’t matter. We walked out as a loud group, talking and laughing nonchalantly. Except I walked amongst them feeling my guilt like a fiend gnawing at my insides.

Once outside they all gathered around me. “So, what’d ya get?”

“She didn’t get anything.”

This time I sneered at the orange-haired girl. “Yes I did!”

“Where? Lemme see.”

Together we discovered I had swiped a tube of lipstick. The girls swarmed around me, their voices hummed as they examined my take and then they moved on. I thrust it back into my pocket.

To my relief, the deed was quickly forgotten by all.

I walked home with the lipstick smoldering inside my pocket. As soon as I got inside I put my jacket upstairs without removing the incriminating item.

It was only later, before bed, that I took the lipstick out of the pocket. I opened the tube and twisted the color up. Coral Pink. I twisted it back down. I went into the bathroom and opened one of my mother’s makeup boxes full of assorted lipsticks, eye shadows, compacts and mascara. They were all coated in pink dust from blush that had escaped the brush. I dropped the lipstick in, shuffling it in among the others and hoping it would blend into oblivion along with my shame.

*

stickers

My Little Pony figures

Star Wars figures

Skor chocolate bars

Garbage Pail Kid trading cards

blouses

100 Grand chocolate bars

Barbie Clothes

She-Ra and Golden Girl action figures

jelly bracelets

lip gloss

Rolos for my mother

ladies’ neck ties

Bubble Yum

Star Wars trading cards

These are some of the things I went on to steal a few years later, after forgetting the awful feelings of shame and guilt from my first foray into shoplifting.

*

We mothers watch as our children chase chickens, fly kites and press their own unpasteurized apple juice, bees hovering all over them as we amble through a local farm's harvest fair. I am there with my friend, Gabrielle, and she introduces me to a woman named Jo Ellen who is an artist. She's the kind of artist that turns junkyard items into expensive multimedia art.

I am watching a fiddler on the makeshift stage and keeping an eye on our children when I hear Jo Ellen comment on how she comes to acquire some of her medium.

"Sometimes you just got to help yourself. It's not like I didn't have a lot of practice as a shoplifter when I was young!"

My friend makes a witty remark that I don't quite hear for all the rushing sound in my head. It's that word (and all its variants)—shoplift. It instantly puts me in flight mode. Heat flushes through my body and a knot ties itself in my throat. But I do the opposite of what my body commands: I turn to the other women and smile my way into the conversation.

"We all did it, right? Me and all my friends did," Jo Ellen continues. "We were all poor growing up. We wanted things we couldn't afford."

Jo Ellen must see that I've leaned into her words, my mouth ajar and my eyes lit with fascination, because she continues to affirm that as a teenager she stole all the time. "I'm pretty sure that most kids go through that phase in their lives. It's almost a rite of passage," Jo Ellen says.

I feel a bubble of air rising in my chest.

"I went through a phase like that too." I say. I push each word out; they are gummy, sticking to my throat, the roof of my mouth.

My friend stands there, listening. Will she judge me—as I have myself all these years?

*

I am a rule follower. Always have been. I actually enjoy spotting people breaking minor rules. I like to imagine I am the bigger person because I can abide by whatever rules are set out for me. Yes, it's easier to cut a straight line through the roundabout, but curling along those drawn lines is so much more gratifying. I separate the metal lids from the rest of the recycling, I return my grocery cart to a designated area. That's why it astonishes me, that as a kid—but old enough to know better—I stole. I broke The Law.

I have a feeling my mother knew. She never said anything, perhaps out of embarrassment or, her own guilt at not being able to provide.

We were poor. We wanted.

We were Jehovah's Witnesses so we did not celebrate any gift-giving holidays, not even our birthdays. Not that we had family who we could expect Christmas gifts from anyway. The opportunities for acquiring the things we wanted and needed didn't exist.

Then, we went through a rough patch with some bad influences. My mother's new best friend, Debra, moved in, both women kicked out of the congregation for the audacity to divorce their unfit husbands. Debra acquired a much younger boyfriend who introduced marijuana and late nights with rowdy friends to our household. She also had a daughter who became my best friend and showed me, as her mother had shown her, how to shoplift--because they wanted also.

After that, I couldn't stop.
But I tried to.

I was scared that I was a "klepto." I heard the term bandied about at school like it was disease, like cooties. What if I was a kleptomaniac? What if I grew up and I still shoplifted?

Sometimes I went to a store and told myself "not today."

Sometimes I declined going to a store because it was the only way to prevent myself from stealing.

Other times, I deliberately wore baggy clothes or an oversized pea coat with deep pockets--even when it was too warm to be doing so.

I didn't always need or even want what I took. So why did I do it? Was it a subconscious cry for help or attention? I prayed at night to my old god Jehovah--with the hope that he would not reject a child for the mother's transgressions--for forgiveness and for help to stop.

No one would have thought mousy little me was a shoplifter. I was respectful, kind and obedient. I was innocent-looking, a barely-there type of kid. I was aware of all this when I walked into the store.

It wasn't just stealing, now that I think about it. I lied. I lied to every clerk and salesperson, every security guard I passed. I lied to my mother. And not just by the act of bringing stolen goods in the house. She would ask where I got the shirt I was wearing or She-Ra's horse. I would come up with something. "A friend traded it to me." "I found it." "I got it from someone at school." I'm not sure she always believed me. But it benefitted her to pretend she did.

*

Getting caught was my greatest fear, of course. Did they put kids in jail? Would the managers call my mother? Would they cause a scene in front of the whole store?

One day after school I walked quite far to get to the Kmart on Brice Road.

The toy aisles were not empty of people but I was good at not being noticed. I was also good at disguising my actions.

I found an item worthy of theft: a Golden Girl and the Guardians of the Gemstone action figure I had had my eye on. This particular one was so "rad" with her muscular body and her blue war paint, and hair you could actually brush. I held the package in my hand as I pretended to browse, when actually, I was trying to find a quiet aisle in a different department.

As I wandered the aisles, I coughed and cleared my throat to cover up the sound of the noisy packaging as I ripped into it. Once the doll was free of the package, I could release her from the backing and plastic ties in my pocket. I did this with one hand working furiously inside the roomy pocket of my thrift-store coat, my other hand hanging slack and casual as I "browsed."

I left the brush attached, as I had no need for it, but made sure her weapon--a cudgel or something--was released into my pocket. I left the empty packaging on a random shelf and walked away.

I was weaving through the circular racks of women's clothing, the exit in sight, when I heard a voice say, "Did you find what you were looking for?" I turned and saw a security guard standing behind me.

Security guards didn't normally ask about one's shopping experience, so right away I was spooked. I'm not sure anything came out of my mouth but I pretended I was looking for my mother

and changed direction away from the exit. The security guard followed me at a discreet distance. I think I may even have called out for my mother, keeping up the pretense. Finally, knowing there was nothing more I could do to save myself, I put on a casual air and walked toward the exit.

I could feel the security guard's eyes following me, his stare hot on my back. I willed my legs to push forward at a steady pace, reined them in from sprinting as fast as they could. As I neared the sliding automatic doors, I waved to my mother's car that wasn't actually there and picked up my pace to a slight jog.

It sickens me, how cleverly deceitful I was.

The whole walk home, I tried not to peek over my shoulder. I was sure the security guard or the manager or even the police, must be following. My shoulders were tense and hunched, my heart galloping ahead of me. I expected at any moment someone would grab me by the scruff of the neck.

But nothing happened. No one came after me. I had gotten away.

That security guard had known and the fact that he could have nabbed me but didn't, tore me up with guilt. The world knew that I was a shoplifter, a criminal. I had been given a warning.

*

After that, I avoided Kmart, Big Bear, Deb, all those stores I had shoplifted from. My mother didn't understand why I always wanted to wait in the car. I avoided going in, not because I would be tempted—I knew I would never shoplift again—but, because I thought “they” were watching me, remembering, expecting to catch me this time.

I knew my days of shoplifting were now over but the guilt and shame, the stigma I constructed around it, made me self-conscious and paranoid. I got sweaty and short of breath at just a glance from a security guard, police or anyone in a position of authority. I would buy something I didn't need or leave before I got what I came for. Surveillance cameras were almost worse. It felt like they were installed just for me. I was terrified that somehow those cameras could see into my past and hold me accountable.

That day at the farm, as I make my confession to Jo Ellen, I am concerned about Gabrielle. What will she think? Our friendship is new and fragile. Will her calls drift to a stop? What if she thinks I'm some kind of deviant? Or worse, that my kids are?

The artist catches on immediately. She can sense my discomfort.

“Don't be ashamed, girl! You were resourceful when you had to be.”

Resourceful? Yes, had I ever been resourceful! Still, it's not like I stole food to feed the family--though a 100 Grand chocolate bar can be very filling.

I still feel the disgrace, but I no longer feel like a deviant. I was not a kleptomaniac; when I made the resolute decision to stop (based on the fear and horror of getting caught), I was able to without intervention. I began to realize that day at the farm, as our children ran freely about chasing chickens and climbing hay bales, I too was being freed of the damaging, false sense of self I had held on to. Jo Ellen had unwittingly smashed through that perception and shaped a new, healing realization that I was worthy. That I didn't shoplift because I was a bad person.

I shoplifted. But I was also a kid who did what she was told, took care of her little sister, helped around the house, rescued injured animals and walked them to the veterinarian's office. I was also a kid who followed the rules. I knew shoplifting was wrong, right from the first coral-colored lipstick and when I had to stop, I did. I never saw Jo Ellen again.

Pam Munter

Grace

I arrived early at the cemetery, just to be sure I was in the right place. The entrance was not well marked and there were no signs that said “Chapel.” I drove in past the many headstones to the only building on the premises. I walked in, accompanied by the resonance of my footsteps.

The first thing I noticed were the tall, imposing marble walls with probably ten engraved plaques placed vertically, exactly how a modernist set designer would construct such a place. I wondered how those at the very top would receive visitors. A ladder, perhaps? Not being versed in such matters, I had no idea if there were visitations to this kind of entombment. Everyone seemed neatly packed into those little drawers.

After a minute or two, I found a person who looked to be a custodian.

I smiled and asked, “Can you tell me where the chapel is?”

“What are you doing here?” he snapped. I wondered what my options might be in such a place.

“I’m here for a funeral.” Grace Dellinger.

He eyed me suspiciously. “I didn’t know anyone was scheduled today.”

It wasn’t exactly a last-minute drop-in, I thought. I held my tongue and tilted my head as if to request the information.

“If there’s anything going on,” he sighed, “it’ll down there on the left. Just keep walking. You’ll find it.”

I found one of the many deep, room-like, doorless niches in the building; this one held the ad hoc “chapel.” It was perhaps 20 feet wide, 50 feet deep and looked to be about 50 feet tall. Though there was still no sign, the folding chairs were all arranged, the only “furnished” area in this huge building, I saw my cousin Al, who greeted me with a handshake.

“Thanks for coming, Pam. It’s good to see you.”

“Of course I had to come. Grace was one of my favorite aunts.” I replied.

“Mary Jo is here. She went to the restroom,” he added. I smiled and looked in the direction he was pointing.

“That’s where I need to be, too.” The only public restrooms in this cavernous building were on the second floor, through a busy office and a slow elevator. I guess going to the bathroom is not a high priority among mourners.

As I made the seven-minute resounding walk, I realized that they were piping Muzak Christmas carols throughout the building. Was this supposed to be comforting or distracting?

Mary Jo and I recognized each other right away, in spite of the decades. She gave me a warm hug.

“So glad to see you. Thanks for coming.”

“Of course,” I said again. “Grace was one of my favorite aunts.” I almost said, “I wouldn’t have missed it,” but that would have sent the wrong message. Both Al and Mary Jo looked pretty good, given they were both nearing 70. They obviously had some work done, which made them look as I remembered them with little of the wear and tear of aging. Al still looked fit and athletic and Mary Jo had not lost her dark-haired beauty or her deep dimples. They resembled a media-ready power couple, all smiles and good will. I was taken aback by everyone’s sunny demeanor. She asked a

bunch of short, closed-end questions, which were easy to field, an effective avoidance of potentially uncomfortable and unfamiliar emotional intimacy.

“Did you have much traffic coming in?”

“Not much.”

“Are you enjoying your retirement?”

“Sure am.”

“Are you going right back afterwards?”

“Yep.”

My mother had been close to her oldest brother, Roy, who resembled her with their blond hair and blue eyes, just like mine. Like many women of their generation, Roy’s wife Grace and my mother were typical 1950s housewives. The uniform du jour was the shirtwaist dress; the hair was always impeccably done, sprayed to withstand even the remotest possibility of gale force winds, thanks to a weekly standing appointment at the local beauty shop. Grace found it easy to spend time with my mother, drinking coffee and talking about their children. My mother had two; Grace had Al, who became a high school football coach and married young.

I had always been glad to see Grace sitting on our living room couch. She was amiable and funny, if inadvertently so. Her good humor and inevitably smiling face compensated for her lack of intellectual acuity. Even well into her 70s, she had perfectly-groomed jet-black hair and not a wrinkle on her face. My mother joked that she was the vainest person she had ever met. Grace’s other foible was that she talked all the time. It drove my mother crazy.

Grace, Roy and Al were part of some of my earliest and fondest memories. We ate meals in each other’s homes and always shared big Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts with other family members. Her cheerful face with the laughing dark eyes appears in all my wedding photos. After I grew up and left home, I’d see Grace sometimes when I’d come back to the Palisades for the holidays. I hadn’t seen her in perhaps a decade, not since my mother had died many years before.

So when I got the notice in the mail that she had died, I was not surprised. She would have been in her early ‘90s, I thought, although no one knew exactly when she was born. I decided to make the three-hour drive for her memorial. She was the last survivor of that generation on either side of my family and I felt the weight of the symbolism. I wondered what childhood memories would be evoked, too. I hadn’t seen Al or Mary Jo in decades, either. It would be an interesting place for a reunion.

When I returned to the chapel from the restroom, I spied a large black and white photo of Grace and Roy prominently displayed in the front of the room on an easel. Al saw me studying it. “You were there. It was our wedding.” They looked so young, I mused, but were probably only in their 40s then. They looked happy, relishing this special moment in their son’s life. I smiled, knowing this was exactly the way I wanted to remember both of them. My thoughts went back to the wedding in which I was a bride’s maid. I knew I was the family place-holder, since at that time I had only met Mary Jo once or twice. There was some kind of minor scandal because Mary Jo was Catholic while the rest of the family was full of unspecified Protestants who never went to church. The ceremony seemed to go on for hours with the incantations and incense.

When I was a young teenager, I had gone into Al’s empty room while my mother was visiting Grace to check out the books in his shelf. He was a jock and I figured I’d find some good baseball biographies. I borrowed one after asking Grace’s permission and took it home. When I opened it, I found some strange rubber-looking folded balloon. I asked my parents what it was and they looked a little uncomfortable as my mother asked where I found it. When I told her, she cleared her throat,

“Um, that’s used during...uh... sexual intercourse.” I didn’t understand at the time, but even in my naivete I realized Al was sexually active in high school, probably with Mary Jo, the good Catholic girl. Al had always been one of my favorite cousins but this added a new dimension to my knowledge about him. Other than my parents, I never told anyone, thinking it was probably shameful. Recalling this obscure memory at the moment of Grace’s memorial made me laugh a little.

Al directed me toward an elderly woman with pink hair sitting at the end of the front row. As I looked around, I heard my name blasted through the marble chamber. “Pam! Is that you?!” I knew immediately it must be Margie, Grace’s closest friend for over 60 years. In some ways, their relationship was idyllic. Margie was child-like and naïve, Grace happily unchallenging. She slept in a crib until she was 12, believed in Santa Claus until she was 16 and bragged about it. To her, Grace was a genius, a Mensa role model. Margie announced in a loud voice that could be heard throughout the building,

“All my family is gone now. There’s no one left to take care of me at 91. And how’s your mother?”

“She died ten years ago.”

“Oh, that’s why I haven’t heard from her in so long.”

She was cheerful and chatty as she warmly reminisced about her relationship with Grace. Our brief, airy conversation was the only time I engaged in any reminiscence about the person we were there to memorialize. I thought she, of all people, would drop a tear or two on this occasion but it never happened.

A little after 11, Al announced we were getting started and the dozen or so of us sat down and waited. Most of the small group looked to be teenagers, probably friends of Al and Mary Jo’s grandchildren. All the kids sat in the back, grouped together in safety. Someone handed out a little Xeroxed program with a quote from John Wooden, the winning former UCLA basketball coach.

The source of the quote seemed to have more to do with Al than Grace. But then Wooden’s words were probably Al’s equivalent to gospel. The brief sentence referred to discovering the dearly departed in heaven.

A man dressed in a ‘70s powder blue, polyester suit stepped to the unstable portable podium and apologized for not hearing he was supposed to start. He said he was sorry he never met Grace (not a good beginning for a eulogy), but recited the basic facts of her life, likely provided by Al. He began with a poem that sounded as if it had been cadged from an issue of Reader’s Digest, then segued on to the 23rd Psalm, to which he intoned he would provide added commentary. Maybe he thought those biblical prophets could use some updating. The essence of his spiel was that Grace was happy now because she was with Roy, who had been awaiting her arrival with impatience. I suppose it was reassuring to some there that impatient people can get to heaven. His voice would catch here and there, clearly throwing himself into the reading, more so into his personal commentary. He spoke of Al’s birth and said he was “probably” the apple of his parents’ eye. “I was a first-born, too, and I was the apple of my parents’ eye.” Oh. OK. Duly noted. He then read a poem by Norman Vincent Peale. This wasn’t exactly higher-level theology or personal in any way. Was there such a thing as Funerals for Dummies?

As I furtively looked around me, I noticed no one was eye-dabbing, or fingering Kleenex. In fact, I thought I heard the electronic beeps of a video game behind me, but it could have been my imagination. Suddenly, loud construction noises intruded from another section of the building.

Didn’t they know how sound carried with all that marble? It went on for several minutes before Mary Jo got up and tended to the problem. No one, by the way, had turned off the Muzak Christmas

carols while the service was going on, adding to the dissonance of the scene. Reverend Polyester, however, refused to even slow down. He seemed late for another, perhaps more pleasant engagement.

As he was visibly winding himself up for his closing poem, he warned us he might have trouble getting through it all, as all this was all so hard on him. The reading, which went on and on, had as its theme, “Don’t mourn me because I’m happy, spending Christmas with Jesus.” I looked around, almost expecting to see a twangy country-western band accompanying him. All at once, the setting, the strangeness of these people, and the entire situation struck me as bizarrely funny. I struggled to stifle a laugh because he was so very serious about his platitudes. I quickly covered my mouth, in case a smile might involuntarily escape.

When he finished, he abruptly slammed shut his sheaf of notes and declared, “That’s it,” as if he expected applause. He walked over to Al and handed him an envelope – probably the bill – and hurried down the marble hall with a cheery wave. Al stood, thanking everyone for coming. We all sat in our chairs and looked around, many of us expecting to hear shared memories of Grace – something personal. When he realized this, Al looked at the floor and said, “If you’re waiting for me to say something, that’s not gonna happen.” I wondered why he hadn’t prepared something for the occasion but perhaps he was obeying the time-honored family tradition of avoiding any public display of emotion at all costs.

I rose from my seat, said goodbye to Margie, then hugged Al and Mary Jo. Mary Jo said that if I ever came to LA, we should have dinner “some time.” They thanked me again for coming as I turned and walked out the door, footsteps providing a noisy coda. The reverberating emptiness felt oddly symbolic. It was 11:20. Nearly six hours in the car for what was a 15-minute pseudo-religious recitation of clichés amid the bizarre products of the minister’s plagiarized fantasies. It was as if no one there knew her.

As I got back on the I-10, I realized the best thing about Grace was that she gave me exactly what I wanted for Christmas. While my parents hesitated to give me “boy toys,” Grace plunged right in. One year I got an electric football game from her and it felt like the best present ever. With my parents, there were always dues with controversial gifts but never with Grace. Her giving was as uncomplicated as her personality and I loved her for it.

I’m glad I went. It was a way for me to honor her memory and to reconnect with Al and Mary Jo after a hiatus of probably 30 years. The vacuous impersonality of the event, though, filled me with at least as much sadness as her death.

She deserved better.



Deep © Mario Sánchez Nevado



WE ARE THE ANOMALY



Index of Contributors

Jodie Andrews

Jodi Andrews graduated with her MA in English in December 2016. She lives in Brookings, South Dakota with her husband and teaches English classes at South Dakota State University. She has had poetry published in *Dark Matter Journal*, *Pasque Petals*, *Oakwood*, *the South Dakota Magazine*, and *Calamus Journal*. And she has work forthcoming in *1001 Journal*, *The Remembered Arts*, *Touch: A Journal of Healing* and *Unlost Journal*.

Priscilla Becker

Priscilla Becker says she fits in well with *Anomaly Literary Journal* as she is frequently asked if she's an alien. She's had 2 full poetry collections published: her first won The Paris Review Book Prize, the other published by Four Way Books, and has a chapbook, *death certificate*, coming out via Ugly Duckling Presse.

Annamarie Benson

Annamarie Benson is a graduate student enrolled in a dual-master's program in English and Theology at Villanova University and is currently interning for the online literary journal *The Sunlight Press*. This is her first time submitting work for publication.

Annie Blake

Annie Blake is an Australian writer who has work published or forthcoming in *North of Oxford*, *Blue Heron Review*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Red Savina Review*, *Antipodes*, *Uneven Floor*, *The Voices Project*, *Into the Void*, *Southerly*, *Hello Horror*, *Verity La*, *GFT Press*, *About Place Journal*, *Gravel*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and more. Her poem 'These Grey Streets' was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize by Vine Leaves Literary Journal. She holds a Bachelor of Teaching, a Graduate Diploma in Education and is a member of the C G Jung Society of Melbourne. You can visit her on <http://annieblakethegatherer.blogspot.com.au/>.

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Shevaun Brannigan is a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars, as well as The Jiménez-Porter Writers' House at The University of Maryland. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Best New Poets*, *Rhino*, *Redivider* and *Crab Orchard Review*. She is a 2015 recipient of a Barbara Deming Memorial Fund grant. Her work can be found at shevaunbrannigan.com.

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Ally Butler is a rising senior at Bowling Green State University, where she is Editor in Chief of *Prairie Margins*. Her poetry has been previously published in *Cardinal Sins* and *Mangrove*.

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Rebecca Guess Cantor's poetry has appeared in *Mezzo Cammin*, *Two Words For*, *The Cresset*, *Whale Road Review*, and *The Lyric* among other publications. Her first chapbook, *Running Away*, was published last year by Finishing Line Press. Rebecca is the Assistant Provost at Azusa Pacific University and lives in Fullerton, California.

Douglas Collura

Douglas Collura lives in Manhattan and is the author of a spoken-word CD, *The Dare of the Quick World*, and the book, *Things I Can Fit My Whole Head Into*, which was a finalist for the 2007 Paterson Poetry Prize. Douglas was also the 2008 First Prize Winner of the Missouri Review Audio/Video Competition in Poetry. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2016. His work has been published in *A Public Space*, *Alembic*, *Avatar Review*, *Coe Review*, *DMQ Review*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Stickman Review* and numerous other periodicals and webzines.

Anthony DiPietro

Anthony DiPietro is a New England native who worked for 12 years in nonprofit organisations on issues such as violence, abuse, and income inequality. Last year, he moved to Eastern Long Island and joined Stony Brook University as a candidate for an MFA in poetry. A graduate of Brown University with honours in Creative Writing, his poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Woman Inc*, *Talking River*, *Assaracus*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and *The Southampton Review*.

Adam Falik

Adam Falik's work has been previously published in *Trajectory*, *ArtVoices*, *The Asbury Park Press*, *XConnect*, and *Cthulhu Sex*.

Alexis Rhone Fancher

Alexis Rhone Fancher is the author of *How I Lost My Virginity To Michael Cohen and other heart stab poems*, (2014), *State of Grace: The Joshua Elegies*, (2015), and *Enter Here* (2017). She's published in *Best American Poetry 2016*, *Rattle*, *Plume*, *Nashville Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Diode*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Cleaver*, and elsewhere. A multiple Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, Alexis is poetry editor of *Cultural Weekly*. She lives in Los Angeles.
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Celia Hauw

Celia Hauw is Singaporean currently living in Chicago. She is interested in how people think about language, and is currently pursuing a B.A. in Neuroscience and Creative Writing at Northwestern University.

Kevin Higgins

Kevin Higgins is co-organiser of Over The Edge literary events in Galway, Ireland. He has published four collections of poems: *The Boy With No Face* (2005), *Time Gentlemen, Please* (2008), *Frightening New Furniture* (2010), & *The Ghost In The Lobby* (2014). His poems also feature in *Identity Parade – New British and Irish Poets* (Bloodaxe, 2010) and in *The Hundred Years' War: modern war poems* (Ed Neil Astley, Bloodaxe May 2014). Kevin is satirist-in-residence with the alternative literature website *The Bogman's Cannon*. 2016 – *The Selected Satires of Kevin Higgins* was published by Nuascéalta. *Song of Songs 2:0 – New & Selected Poems* has been published by Salmon earlier in 2017. *The Stinging Fly* magazine recently described Kevin as “likely the most widely read living poet in Ireland”.

Tiffany Jimenez

Tiffany Jimenez is from the San Francisco Bay Area. She earned her BA in Creative Writing from UC Santa Cruz, and her MFA from Saint Mary's College of California. Her work has appeared in *Hobart*, *Door Is a Jar Magazine*, *The Gateway Review* and *Sonic Boom*. Other than being an ardent supporter of the imagination and the art of storytelling, she writes a lot, laughs a lot, startles easily, and loves potatoes.

Luke Marinac

Luke Marinac is in the MFA Program at Bowling Green State University where he is a transplant from Appalachian Tennessee. His poems have appeared in *The Pittsburg Poetry Review*, *Stirring*, and *Gingerbread House*, among others. He is also the recipient of the University of Tennessee's Margaret-Artley-Woodruff prize in poetry.

Isabel Miles

Isabel Miles is a former scientist and lives, walks and writes on the North York Moors. She has published poetry in *Shooter*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *StepAway*, and the *Emma Press Anthology of Aunts* and short stories in *WTD*, *The View From Here*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Toasted Cheese* and *Northwords Now*. Isabel is currently working on her second novel while seeking a publisher for her first.

Pam Munter

Pam Munter has authored several books including *When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and The Teen Agers of Monogram* and *Almost Famous*. She's a retired clinical psychologist, former performer and film historian. Her essays and short stories have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Manifest-Station*, *The*

Coachella Review, *Lady Literary Review*, *NoiseMedium*, *The Creative Truth*, *Adelaide*, *Litro*, *Angels Flight—Literary West*, *TreeHouse Arts*, *Persephone's Daughters*, *Fourth and Sycamore*, *Nixes Mate*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Cold Creek Review*, and many others. Her play *Life Without* was a semi-finalist in the Ebell of Los Angeles Playwriting Competition.

Mario Sánchez Nevado

Mario Sánchez Nevado is an independent Art Director and Illustrator. He was born in Barcelona, raised in Murcia and currently lives in the Spanish capital, Madrid. He has more than a decade of this, he employs himself in other full-time activities, such as directing the international artistic collective *Hysterical Minds*, as well as writing from time to time, advanced user tutorials for Adobe Photoshop over at PSD Tuts from the Envato Network. His main artistic capacities, apart from an eye for mathematical composition, colour psychology and visual narratives, are photo manipulation and digital painting, that he usually combines to create his own distinctive aesthetic mark.

Laura Page

Laura Page is a graduate of Southern Oregon University and editor of the fledgling poetry journal, *Virga*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rust + Moth*, *Crab Creek Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Unbroken*, *TINGE*, and others. Her chapbook, *Sylvia Plath in the Major Arcana*, is forthcoming from Anchor & Plume Press.

Kristien Potgieter

Kristien Potgieter is an author from Johannesburg, South Africa. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia, where she was also a UEA Booker Scholar. She has worked as an English teacher in France and as a ballet teacher in Johannesburg. She is currently at work on her first novel.

David Ruderman

D. B. Ruderman lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan with his two teen-aged kids and his dog. Aside from several essays on romanticism and poetry criticism and a recent book (*The Idea of Infancy in 19th Century British Poetry*) on Routledge, his poems have appeared in *The Nervous Breakdown* and *The Berkeley Poetry Review*. He won the Hopwood Award at the University of Michigan for best poetry by a graduate student and awards by the Academy of American poets. He currently teaches as an associate professor at The Ohio State University and runs a poetry workshop for people in recovery from drugs and alcohol addiction called *Writing and Rewriting the Self*.

Clíona Saidléar

Clíona Saidléar, has a PhD in international politics from Aberystwyth University in Wales and works for a charity where she gets to write in many forms except the informal. She has recently

taken up writing short short stories. Her first story was longlisted in the Penguin prize and shortlisted in the Cúirt International literary festival new writers category and was subsequently published. She has recently moved back to her hometown, Dublin, after a decade on the West coast in Galway and now spends her spare time familiarising herself with the moods of the Irish sea.

Autumn Shah

Autumn lives with her husband and two school-aged children in Dublin, Ohio. She writes her memoir and fiction in the wee hours of the morning. She gets out in the world by substituting as an ESL teacher or librarian in the local school district. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal* and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*.

William R. Soldan

William R. Soldan grew up in and around the Rust Belt city of Youngstown, Ohio, where he lives with his wife and two children. He holds a BA in English Literature from Youngstown State University and an MFA from the Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program. His fiction, poetry, and hybrid work appears or is forthcoming in publications such as *New World Writing*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Kentucky Review*, *Bookends Review*, *Collapsed Lexicon*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *(b)OINK*, *The Best American Mystery Stories 2017*, and many others. You can find him on the various social media sites, if you're so inclined.

Natalie Solmer

Natalie Solmer is a florist at a chain of supermarkets and an adjunct English instructor at Ivy Tech Community College. She received an MFA in poetry from Butler University, and she is the founder of *The Indianapolis Review*. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Cimarron Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Tinderbox*, and forthcoming from *Yes, Poetry and Glass: A Journal of Poetry*. She was born and raised in South Bend, Indiana and now lives with her two sons in Speedway, Indiana, a mile from the famous Indy 500 racetrack. Find her at www.nataliesolmer.com

Thomas Stewart

Thomas graduated from the University of South Wales (Glamorgan) with a First Class Honours in English and immediately went on to his MA in Writing at the University of Warwick. As part of his course, he spent two months in Milan working with Booker Prize Nominee, Tim Parks, on his novel and graduated with a Distinction. His work has been featured at *Anomaly Literary Journal*, *Litro Magazine*, *Cadaverine Magazine*, *Rockland*, *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears* and *The Stockholm Review*, among others. His debut poetry pamphlet is forthcoming by Red Squirrel Press.

Dennis Walsh

Dennis Walsh was born and raised in the small town of Port Jefferson on Long Island, New York. He is the oldest child in a family of five. Dennis just recently graduated from Binghamton University in 2017 with undergraduate degrees in both History, and English Literature & Creative Writing.