

déraciné

an independent literary magazine

Winter 2019

Volume V

Déraciné

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Editors' Letters

Dear Reader,

This month we celebrate the second anniversary of *Déraciné*, and we are thrilled to have spent another exciting year of literature with you.

December also marks the release of our fifth issue, which is packed with diverse poetry, fiction, and artwork from voices all over the world. Whether chilling, sorrowful, or brutally honest, if you're looking for experiences that will leave a mark, you've come to the right place.

Thank you to all our contributors for entrusting us with their stunning work again this year. We're excited to share with you another piece of our gothic literary world and hope you will continue to stay with us in the years to come.

Remember that your presence can be a warm light in someone's long, cold night.

We hope you have a safe, warm, and happy season.

Victoria Elghasen

Editor

Dear Reader,

Every issue we publish fills me with a sense of gratitude and warmth. As we present Volume V to you, I can't help but think about how blessed I am to be part of *Déraciné*, to view challenging and gorgeous works that move me deeply, and to read hundreds of moving and inspiring submissions.

Our Winter 2019 issue is full of pieces that deal with a lot of hard topics. Grief, disconnection, isolation, dysmorphia, loneliness, the haunting nature of one's own thoughts and experiences, among many others you will have to discover and feel for yourself.

At times these pieces have felt jarringly relatable, while others have provided intimate glimpses into things I have not personally experienced. Giving voices to those who struggle and to various struggles is a step towards healing, understanding, and hope, and I am so happy to have the honour of granting these powerful works a home.

It is my sincere wish that you will feel the emotion emanating from each piece when you enter these pages, and that you will experience something personal when you engage with the works presented in this issue.

I am so thankful for the chance to share the works collected here with you. I am so thankful for all of our contributors, for everyone who submits their art and words to us, for everyone who supports us, for our families and friends and all those who help us keep going, and for you, dear reader.

Thank you for embarking on this emotional journey with us. I wish you a joyful and warm winter, and that you will see a light of hope even in a sea of darkness.

Michelle Baleka

Editor

JASON FISK

A Christmas Poem in Four Parts

Part I

Winter holidays were
just around the corner
and five of us went
out after work
We were sitting
around the fireplace
in leather chairs
drinking wine and beer
and our conversation
splintered from the three
others and you talked about
a poem I had written
and how the vulnerability
was just too much
and how others
called it beautiful
but you just couldn't
bring yourself to call it that
and then I told you about
how I hated the holidays
because Christmases were awful
and I rambled on about one
where we couldn't open
presents for an hour after
we woke up because our parents
were arguing in their bedroom

and then the one where a church
bought our family presents
because we were poor
and I was like, *What? We're poor?*

and the moment we got
off our bus to start Christmas break
and mom sat us down and told us
that she had packed our things
and that we were leaving dad
and we spent a month living in a motel

and the Christmas where my sister
was with me at college in Chicago

and she was suicidal
and I got her out of the hospital
and I spent evenings with her at the hotel
during her outpatient treatment
and how one evening we were watching
It's a Wonderful Life
and I started crying at the end
and I looked over, and she was asleep
The new meds made her tired
and I felt alone

You nodded
and I stopped talking
and looked around
at the silence
and the other three
had been listening
so I stopped talking
because I tend
to share way too much

Part II

At a holiday party he told me
that he had heard or read
that people who overshare
either grew up poor
or were not very intelligent
and that thought hung on me
like the smoke from the fireplace
In the car on the way home
I was suffocated by the thought's smell
Was I stupid?
I had to roll down the window
And absorb the cold air

Part III

I enjoy the Christmas tree
the most the week between
Christmas and New Year's Eve

That week
it is free of
weighted
expectations
social gatherings

and anxiety

Part IV

I write about Christmas
to fill the blackhole
inside with something
other than emptiness
and replayed
worn-out
conversations

And when I'm done
for a moment
I feel relief
My sky no longer
sags and threatens
to fall like a heavy
curtain on a final act

In that moment
I see moon wisps
that smell like
cotton candy vapors
and I taste eternity
and it soothes my dry
cracked brain

When I write
my head expels
everything in it
like a shark turning
its stomach inside out
purging
what it can't digest

And I start over
on another line
Unease wrung
from me
like water from
a sponge

RICHARD LEDUE

Alone Together

Sometimes I try to forget who I was,
but I can't ignore the voices in the wind
who laugh with their children,
each air molecule an invisible smile
only I can see.

I tried to be resilient,
tried not to look
when you were sad,
your eyes a hard pond on a snowy day.
I closed my eyes,
pretended to sleep
while you cried.

But his room so silent, so still,
struck me worse than any sobbing.

Then one day, I saw a stranger's face
watching me as I shaved.
One cut became two,
my temptation redder and redder until I drowned.

It wouldn't be fair
to call this hell,
no demons lurk,
no pitch fork hides in the shadows.
There's just two people, ruined.

HOLLY DAY

The Rescue

my father's hands parting
the water, trying to see
past leaves, dead fish, floating branches
diving down and finding
nothing

every time the wind blows the curtains in
every shadow that doesn't belong
where is she

thirty years later and I'm still
waiting for her ghost

Formless

my daughter lies in her crib screaming
and screaming and screaming and I wonder
if it's me she hates so much or if she's
just angry at the whole world
some formless, aimless rage and I
say to her, because I can, and she
doesn't understand a word I'm saying

what will you say when it's me in the crib
in a coffin, lying back, eyes closed
sewn shut will you suck angrily at your
cigarette and call me a fucking bitch
say you're glad that I'm dead that I
was a horrible woman or will you
cry silent reminisce pat my folded dead
dry hands miss me?

MELODY SOKOLOW

My Mother's Fortress

i can still hear the clink of white milk glass on the shiny green counter of your kitchen, that domain where you screamed in defense of your drugged state, where, one by one, you were grilled like a criminal by members of your own family. the blue rubber of your gloved hands, immersed like lobsters boiling in the hot sink water, steam rising, keeping your olive skin moist and my father unhappy. like a dope fiend in the alley, knocked out on valium and drowning in scotch, hand on your right hip, ready for battle, you always started like a fresh horse out of the gate, all fired up and ready to go, taunting anyone who cast an eye your direction. your cigarettes, Pall Malls, always at hand, red-tipped and held, somehow gracefully, in the contrast of those oversized gloves like shields protecting your most vulnerable places from verbal condemnation. you stood at that sink like a martyr, your forehead drenched in sweat, dishwasher to your left, sometimes past midnight, when everyone had given up. sisters gone partying, my father sunk like a sack of wet sand into his recliner, head in hand, ankles crossed, gone to some other place. anywhere but there, with you. and you, anywhere but there, in your body. your scotch and your cigarettes and your blue gloves and your valium and your .45 pistol. the empty dishwasher, and your hot sink, still full of dishes at one a.m. i cried for you so many times.

KRISTIN GARTH

Arbor Vitae

It changes me the way I grieve, moments
maybe even a month after the strife
you leave. The reasons remain unspoken
though not yet dead, denude the tree of life
inside a head, my arbor vitae where
I felt your hand inside my own grow slack
while I was forced to stand, a witness there
beside a bed a week—amnesiac
to anything but bleak signifiers,
the color of your skin, you will open up
again. Tell me a story or a lie.
Our tangled branches pruned apart, abrupt—
but for my twig purloined you bring to death—
clears space in me to sprout what you have left.



Endless Crosses by Edward Lee.

YVONNE

Recession

Her silent resting place—under broad leaves
Or blue sky—I am not told. The plain roofs
Of the family dead are left unswept to stand
The spiteful eye, the gossip wind.

In exile, no matter the sin, I search
Where her life friends replanted their church
When the law broke faith with eternity.
We grandkids, all in white, like thrown confetti,

Gathered round the closed box in such
Dismay. Her two daughters hushed
All kinfolk final praise. I don't recall hymns...
This late member of the choir, smothered flames.

SIMON PERCHIK

Four Poems

*

Shovel by shovel as if between
this dirt still gets its start
as one stone scouring another

and the fragrance spread out
squandered on a single bloom
already infected with your forehead

though her coffin never stops
is bathed by the others
trying to breathe as openwork

–with all these arms you dig
are turning the sun from under
its shadow, its roots and further.

*

A practice ground: gravestones
taking off, touching down
gathering these dead

as the dirt for loving you
–this is no bird who sings
–this is a bird who circles

by the book, eats rocks
–what's left is a sky
that has stone to it

is bending the Earth
to steady your arms
covered with grass.

*

And though this door is here to love you
something more than death gives it shape
is reaching for the board you sleep on

stretched out alongside the empty dress
all night climbing atop your shoulders
the way small waves come in

and keep going, making room
for your mouth, for the nakedness
you know is yours with nothing to put on.

*

Every love note starts out warm
sent by one hand over another
is pressing down on this snow

making a fire on her grave, covers it
with those songs from the 40s
still trailing smoke, longing for rain

that's not one night alongside another
each falling off as the name
at the end, a pet name, a secret

you would write on a wall
to whiten it, begin again
already winter and bleeding to death.

LIWA SUN

Self Portrait

A dead head, I am. Congesting the fridge. My hair
smothers a container of cream cheese—he didn't
cut it off. My skin purple, my smudged eyelids
pink. My neck severed. Mother carried this in her
tepidity, but now I'm frozen and forgotten like father.
My nonexistent daughter will not miss me.
In front of my lips sits uneasily an onion. We share
a purple, but it doesn't want to: it flakes.
Disappointments dribble through the night.

Let there be fire, please. Fire
to erase the frost. Fire
to annihilate me, once
and for all. The most
gruesome scene I already
smelt. The light I last saw
lit his erotic face when he
opened the door to me.
He drank profusely from
a milk carton. We locked
eyes. He barfed.

I had lived my life exactly the way
it takes to end up as a head.

The onion jittery,
sturdy,
repetitive.

A. MARTINE

So You've Got a Dinner Party

Do you split yourself, keep her at arm's length?
It's the only way to do it so you don't feel like
scream screaming. A scam, a scam, all of it
(although you've done a good job of playacting).
So you have accepted another dinner invitation
where you will slink and slink colorful around
others, as if to say *in all its glory, this is it*
nothing else to see here. They will lap it all up—
hell: you might even too. A scam, a scam, a scam.

And truly, I can only laugh.

I've seen the milk of the moon thaw into the water sky
have seen starlight work its way into the sootiest
corners of my soul. Oh do I know, it is a thing that exists.
Beautiful. Even as I dissipate my definitions of beauty,
I know that it is beautiful. So I try it on myself:
You look fine, you look absolutely fine
She rebuts: *revolting, don't you dare step outside.*
Don't you know better by now? Why did you think
you were the moon? No that's not right, you did not.

So really, I can only laugh.

Carve into your arm again to stop yourself from screaming;
Scam, scam, all of it. Split yourself, and by all means
go to the damn dinner already. Stop asking permission,
you are the one stepping into your shoes,
she no longer has a say (although she has more to say than you).
Convince yourself the body you are looking at is not yours
because you have split yourself, although she is more you than you.
Brace yourself for your friends, for eating disorders as
cheap fodder, for would-be edgy dinnertime conversation.

Just laugh it off, if that is all you can do.

Yet: how can I trust these eyes when I have seen
the milk of the moon melt into the water sky
and take the shape of the mellowest pond?
In it I cast the debris of my convictions
and hope they simmer in that moonlight and those stars
and hope that when they come back to me
I, too, will be made of constellation cinders and luminescence.

How can I trust the triteness of my senses?
They rest on place cards with my name—no, her name—all over them.

And laugh, laugh, I can only laugh it off.

Fine, bring her along, pretend you are both normal, then;
when you laugh she'll try her best too,
emulating the pull of your muscles, the arch of your neck,
grinning, howling, screeching with abandon
as you both fondle the flab around your belly;
caress the creases and dips on your thighs;
paw at the thickness underneath your bra;
and keep it together, keep it together, get a grip,
even as you plead with her *work with me here*.

And laugh, laugh, laugh, no really, please, just laugh it off.

The Thrill

Hands are blossomed open, like vulgar vines
Like elongated petals, finger flowers, palm of patterns
Water hits like a salve, blurs their contours
And that is how I like it, is how it should be

Like elongated petals, finger flowers, palm of patterns
I should feel should be fine should be lucky should be fine
And that is how I like it, is how it should be
I am alive I am alive I am alive, alive, I, I am alive

I should feel should be fine should be lucky should be fine
Nothing does it, nothing ever does, nothing ever will
I am alive I am alive I am alive, alive, I, I am alive
Water graces aching skin, yet never more a part of me

Nothing does it, nothing ever does, nothing ever will
It does not sink in like it should, the thrill, live wire
Water graces aching skin, yet never more a part of me
Errant word wandering notion stray thought, and I begin to fray

Echoes, Afterthoughts

Technicolor childhood, stop motion fun
Pain tastes like salt, smells like rain, looks like sea
Watercolor coming of age, echoes of a gun
Hurts me like a fire that will not sear
Yet to ring out, pressed against your temple
No. It pains like echoes, afterthoughts, quails
Go, give way to your nostalgia, be gentle
Like a waif, pretend you are not there
I've forgotten how to comfort other people
I'm an animal, I seldom respond to the Call
I come on too strong, or else I get feeble
Somewhere along the way, I'll learn to have it all

Long Simmer

Look into the light
Really, really look into the light
See that it's just tricks and shadows
Let that realization change you slowly

Give up your pipe dreams
Let go the razor blades
Trade your disaffected youth
For a semblance of adulthood

You've managed the pretense
Now pursue it to its end
Cut off your phone lines
And throw away your clothes

Shapeshift your face, your hair
Look like anyone else
Latch onto their sense of worth
Superpose it with yours

Hope this fancy sticks
Lose Her, then find God again
Make Her laugh, laugh at yourself
Quit your job, then change your name

Toss out your unread books
Jump out of cars, dance into traffic
Stand on corners and scream at the sky
Go ride the waves, ride them all the way

Win the lottery, better buy a boat
Abandon your loved ones
Shred the visa you were waiting for
You're not going to be there

Choose the pain, always the pain
Choose to turn yourself in
You are a caricature
Let them see the swindler behind the smile

Swallow the pills, swallow some more
Drown yourself in music

Hand over your tired thoughts
Swirl your finger in your numbness broth
Talk to your dead grandmother
Remember to bankrupt yourself
Spend your very last penny
On art you barely like

Be him, be Orpheus all the way
Look where they said not to
Upend the manner in which
You've been contemplating your inadequacies

Listen to the voices
Tell them "give me a minute"
Try to break your wrist again
Then hug yourself to sleep

Go on long and happy trips
Shout yourself into submission
Spiral like a spinning top
Find new places to live

Kill your little sister
Try to hang your shelves
Be the balance beam
You've been revering in others

Shatter hollow promises
Admit you are a child
Let your actions speak for you
Then let them loose again

Unleash your inner optimist
Then chuck her in a box
Call yourself by your old name
Let it go to fun and hell

Decide not to wake up
Take pleasure in your apathy
And: favor the long goodbye at
The end of that crooked road

DANIEL DYKIEL

Orpheus to His Muse

You must forgive me, Eurydice,
for seeing your skin in flowers when they push
from the earth, the fine hair of your arms
glowing on their petals; and for hearing
your voice in the sound of shoots
breaking through frost.

You must forgive me because I love you
and when you died it was as if the world had opened
for me, fresh spring growing from
the cool dark earth that has eaten
your skin, your teeth and bones;
that has drunk your soul and churned it
with a farmer's till.

It was only when you left I realized
the beauty of your pieces is greater
than your whole. You must understand life
has no meaning but for death, and we cry
for Persephone's kiss because we have felt
the teeth of winter.

Eurydice, forgive me!

I turn to send you to the land of things devoured.
I am glad you have returned.

Icarus, Now Fulfilled

You could have touched greatness, spilled
its light across your fingertips and brought it
to your lips, to coat your tongue
in molten ore.

Yet it was never enough for you
to eat the sun, when you grew up dreaming
of bones split and crunched, your being
gorged by fire.

Bleed, Do Not Blacken

The city had teeth in asphalt,
In jagged edges, in brutal
decadence that sinks earth:

And we walked cold, hungry,
Sprinted on trains that took us
to new streets of stone, where we
bruised our mouths on building-
sides, searched for a force to
break us,
 crush us,
 meld us.

Listen, I moved to heal
In purple skies, open water.
Now I know nostalgia as
sickness, a mesmerizing
simplicity:

*why always
write of
the city;
what dark
hold has
it over
you?*

So miss the days
of violence, where mother-touch means
revulsion, where best friend means to
drive at night in curtains of rain, to
feed the mechanical apathy of wind-
shield wipers: *devour wishes, crush
our weakness*. Remember to *dance,
sing*, bury in sidewalk cracks bones
of birds we've killed—

*giving us
rotting
earth to
grow from.*

What sweet self-sacrifice.
 What rich exploitation.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

At Seven

gullies are the primary source
of bodies in this little burg
another one yesterday after the flood
waters rescinded, naked
but for one high top
the predators had eaten its eyes

PHILIP BERRY

Old Injuries

The tragedy that shatters windows
collapses into a fist of rock
hangs in the air, rotates,
sucks the shards and splinters
back from their apogee, all aligned
so that the close ones, the ones who care
are cut front and back on fate's deep drag.

Ignore the gaps where structures split,
where wildflowers cling,
tenacious invaders who will soon lay
down so that others can take root:
Hart's Tongue, Toad-flax, Stonecrop,
harsh adapted to minerals that seep
from lime and mortar, feet splaying in
the memory of water.

A man kicked the chair in a room
above the corner shop I pass twice a day,
maybe just as I walked beneath the peeling
window frame. Maybe I crossed the final
ripple that he pushed across the city.
I felt nothing. We overlap,
but there is no connection.

I tap a sooty brick.
It rings with the pattern of the accident
that was witnessed here,
from which the wall turned its high industrial
shoulders. There was murder,
in this angle of shadow.

Here the iron flowed and spat and scarred
men in the places that their leather aprons
did not protect. The very air burned
their cracked lungs. All is quiet now.
Flowers bend to kiss the rivets,
grass sways between parallel tracks.
Old injuries, the wounds of others,
are long forgotten.

Witness

that jagged chunk, turning on a dust trail
the grey wake, the powder I taste all day
punched out from the bleeding sides
of the homes of the families who flee or lie,

powdered hands flexed in the all-day heat
near crippled chairs and splintered beds.
Christ, don't peer in, 'case you see a kid
looking up into blue space through dusted

eyes that do not blink. This spinning fragment
I predict its flat parabola, charging out from lesser arcs
magnesium white, fizzing, it's hit home already
piercing closer men, taken by the waist

sudden chevrons, heels off the floor
slow moments, they see all that has come before
there is time
 for me there was time

this time, there was time.



The Ghost's Home by Fabrice Poussin.

PRADEEP SEN

The Forgiven Spaces

As ashes of dust gather on gardens and shades,
And your terrace narrows in columns of smoke,
And cactus grows where once lotus spread its wings,
And the sun's rays disappear from the depths of the sky,
You can meditate in silence on the floor of a dry riverbed.

While the trees expel birds and toss their feathers to float,
Like petals dropping in languor and scattering in drifts;
When dawn and dusk are mantled in dark miasmic hazes
And days gripped by the silence that remain in echoes
You can find solace by the peeling ruins of broken pillars.

When snow breaks, and the water's swell rises in clouds,
And jetty and sand banks begin to plunge under its charge,
When motors roar and masts sway on agitated waves
And battle ships and cruisers crawl like a legion of giant ants;
When morning walkers hurry past granite-laden paths
You will find silence in sand grains, tossed into forgiven corners.

As the soil burns, and circling vultures in masks begin to gather,
And starlight slips out of your fingers in the shape of blisters,
And as the rainbow colours begin to strip from its varied hues,
And street lamps that shelter the tramp are reduced to coils
You will find peace in burial grounds, pounding out its final beat.

EMMANUEL ODEKUNLE

in your garden

there are leftovers, trees
that resist burning

the faint blue after an
unforgiving rain,

it is your country but your
bones are nude,

laterite soaking.

a garter snake is in
your stomach

and the doctor comes for a
removal-surgery

you say leave it, it is
helpless like me.

I have holes I have also crept
into.

You motion with your hands,
tracing the empty
space around you,

on your lips, there is one word
floating:

this.

decaying

you have
in your mouth,
the taste of saltwater
and in your eyes are ghosts
of bald birds, sad music in their chirping
a black thread shivering after your cold laughter
your crucifix is made of metal; it is heavy, and falling
into the whirl of rotten leaves after the autumn, your shadow
in the negative, the rattling of a lax body floating, and a progression of the
humming of a man digging with a shovel, it is you, digging up your former self
and not for resurrection, you are a necromancer, and you love the taste of rotten skin,
the moulting of darkness, the soft metaphor. this grief has not left, it is here, fully.

MARGARET KOGER

As It Was

A tree stands like that sometimes. Branches stretching left & right so widely I begin believing it's in a separate hemisphere. An arboretum coddling its new shoots, picking a few to strangle. Even the park our children play in / as if in heaven / hides elves & the forests of our interiors fear we'll ask them for fire. It's the trauma of my mother's abortion & how it brought longing for another baby she couldn't bear / except as it came to me / coined in a different modality. She trees for awhile, gazing into oak or maple eyes. She knows the acorn that doesn't fall far. Sees the maple sap on happy-face pancakes & when she bends / her branches scissor my shoulders until I am the one & both / legs & arms like cordwood stacked for the bonfire.

MEGAN E. FREEMAN

Bindweed

sprouting in
my ear
the seed exploded
my hearing
and took away
my ability
to stand upright

it rooted in
my brain
and sent tendrils
throughout
my skull
wrapping around
my eye sockets
like grapevines
on hardware cloth

the roots went south
and plumbed
the depths of
my mouth
drilling through
my teeth
and under
my wet warm tongue

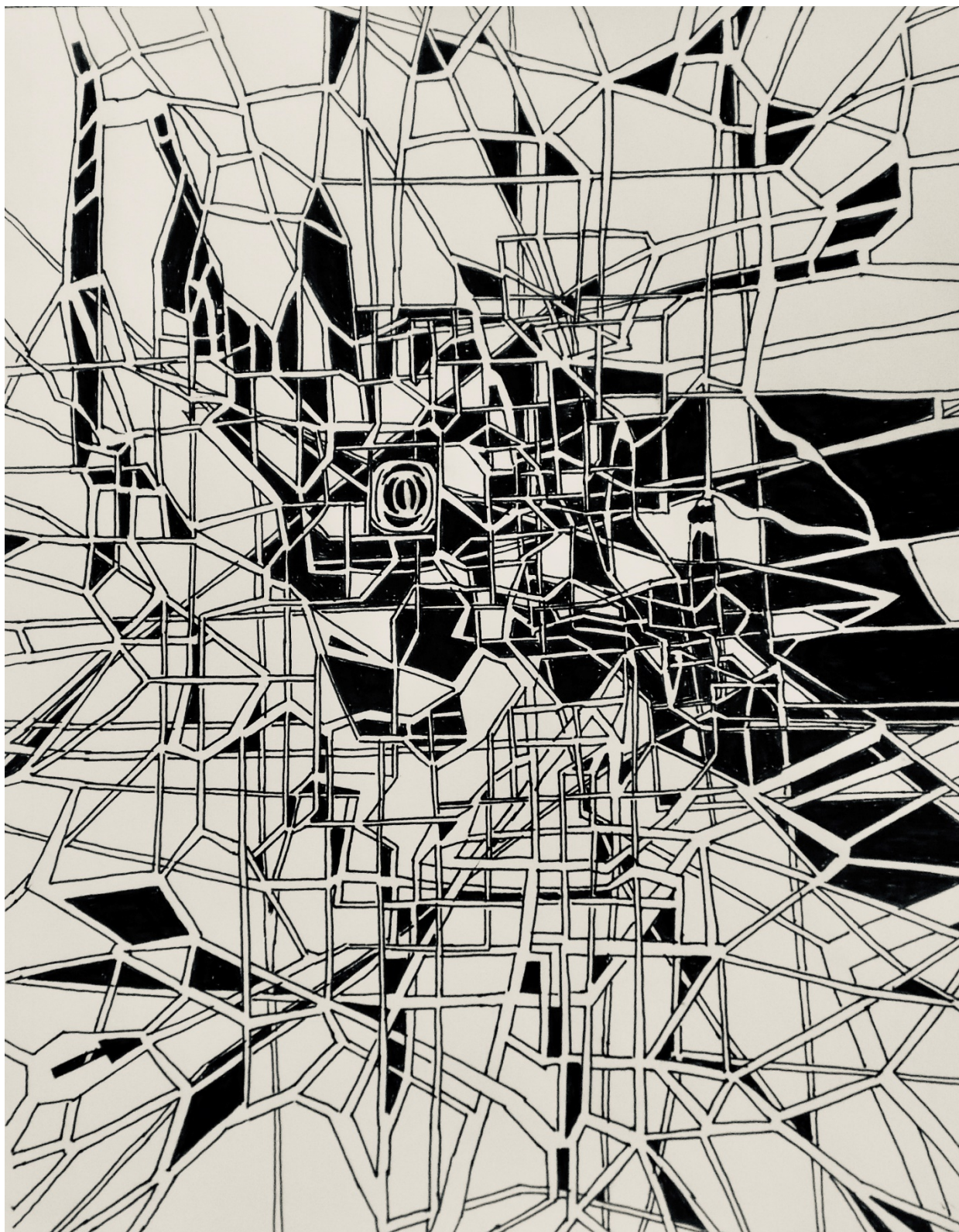
by the time
the vines reached
my throat
wrapped around
my trachea
and wove through
my vocal folds

I had long since
ceased trying
to understand
and had
surrendered
to the tenacity
of the plant/beast

Cement Shoes

"It's like you're in the middle of the street and you're stuck there in cement shoes, and you know a bus is coming at you, but you don't know when." - MICHAEL J. FOX on living with Parkinson's.

This is not a street.
This is not asphalt.
This is not a reflective yellow line.
This is not a curb.
This is not a center divider.
This is not a traffic cone.
This is not a manhole cover.
This is not a speed bump.
This is not a stoplight.
This is not a crosswalk.
This is not a gutter.
I am not in the street.
I am not in the street.
We are not in the street.
Stop acting like this is a street all the time.
Stop talking about streets.
I think you actually want this to be a street.
It's all about streets with you.
You clearly have a street obsession.
A street fetish.
You can't get off this whole street thing.
I am not in the street.
I am not in the street.
I am not in the street.
Those are not headlights.



goa trance goat by Russ Daum.

JANNA GRACE

I Cry the Brain Decrepit

I sometimes think they think I cry
wolf
about my depression,
that dysthymia is a word
of letters in a silly arrangement
whose most power is in filling your mouth
with your tongue with its second syllable.

Do they think the strawberries are rotten
but I eat them anyway?
That I wash my hands in a Turtle Lagoon
from the 60s?
No one would pretend this to get out of
anything/everything.

Don't they know I'd love to attend,
drink all of the coffee,
and half-hug them in greeting
on the days I feel like I have fresh flowers
in my veins?

Or have they even wondered why
I show up at all?

Ice Fishing with One Hundred Thousand Eyes

When I sold my mirror I was terrified
when I realized I had left some bits of me
in the bevel.

Will I leak out the seams,
pool in their shadows, or will I slither
up their walls and perch, like a spider
in their corners?
Can I inhabit the person we now mimic—
or will I drape about their edges,
a curve or bump out of place?

It's not revenge
porn, but I do not consent
to my naked body flashing like scattered chunks
of rainbow from a spinning piece of crystal
across your bedroom walls.

If anything, let me be
like a stamp
between polished glass,
that only when the light's quite right
and another mirror finds my sisters, will I come out
and paint myself
in oil, across your purchased pane
of sanded stone.

There's only so much air between the water and the ice,
sometimes you have to find the opening, and surface.

DORSÍA SMITH SILVA

Something, Anything

You go straight to the shower,
trying to chisel her from your skin.
Yet, the citrus perfume and lemongrass lotion crust the walls,
the trails of cigarette smoke too.
This lie you wear so nicely like a second layer of satin skin,
I wonder: does it ever fear
when I ask you where have you been and
where are you going?
You hurry out the door again,
glinting like escape.
I turn to my side, dreaming of our parallel universe
where the dots connect.

JOAN MCNERNEY

Pursued

My dark dreams scatter across asphalt streets. Rain splashes
ebony ink, winds snarling my damp hair. My mind in knots
and snags. Throat dry and raw as I step over cobblestones.

Now I am passing a field. My worn shoes sink into moist grounds.
The soil offers up scents of mild vegetation, promises of spring.
Gusts tangle trees and calls from lost trains resound through night.

I keep climbing a hill. My mind twisted into knots. How can
I breathe? White walls meet me head-on.
The rough concrete presses my fingers as I push in.

ELIZABETH OCHSNER

The Reaper Watches, Laughs

dorm windows
draped with prison bars.
squeeze your neck through,
drop your eyes to the shining cement
six floors under, wonder
if death will dress you in white
between breaths,
or if the ground will rupture,
spilling sirens that can't shoot you
& little white pills you can't OD on.

your heart snaps,
& you're back:
reality.
like you never left.
like all is well.
your roommate stares
at the window & back to you.
she doesn't know.

Music to Be Buried By

LETTER, VALERIE GAGE TO MARGARET GAGE

December 1

Dear Peggy,
Do you remember how Dad used to play the piano? How he would hunch over the keys and slam the low notes before gradually straightening, his fingers fluttering across the high notes? How the twinkling song matched our giggling? *A harmony made in heaven*, he used to say.

We talk about him too much. We don't talk about him enough.

The last time he played the war was just beginning. The evening sun hovered parallel to the horizon, washing the living room in a warm yellow glow. Beams of light snuck through the curtains and blinded us all. Dad laughed and improvised a few bars, rocking wildly back and forth, trying to find a spot where the fading sun didn't hit his eyes.

I miss him. ~~Will you miss me?~~ Are you missing me?



VALERIE GAGE'S DIARY

November 22

I heard music behind the diner last night.

It started after I lit my cigarette. I was reclining against the back wall, a few feet away from the dumpster. The smell of old frying oil and spoilt milk mixed with smoke. I closed my eyes, exhaled, and a light tingle of sound drifted behind my eyes. A vibration more than anything. It sounded like a piano. The melody was simple. A child could have been playing it, or even a baby's mobile, swinging delicately above a crib. That's how I knew it wasn't Dad.

I leaned forward, twirling my head like an owl to place its direction. Sound carries out here, in the valley. I know that. The night was clear and cloudless, the moon the barest grey sliver of a waning crescent. Originally, I had no doubt that the music came from either the Twin Oaks West neighborhood or the music shop down on 2nd Street. But it didn't. It was coming from the forest behind the diner. The highway is back that way. No houses until you cross the county line, which is about ten miles south. Just wilderness as far as the eye can see. Though apparently, not as far as my ear can hear.

I stayed bent over, my hair creating a black wall around my face. I let go of the smoke along with the breath I'd been holding.

The melody, once I began listening, was sweet. Saccharine. Like a little kid's music box, one that housed a spinning heart or ballerina. I thought it was a nice distraction from the bustling chaos of the diner.

The music played until my break ended. It faded the moment my cigarette butt hit the ground.



LETTER, VALERIE GAGE TO MARGARET GAGE, CONTINUED.

The last time Dad played the piano, we had spaghetti for dinner. Sauce bounced from twirled angel hair pasta onto the sheet music Dad had left on the couch. He sniffed and said it looked better like that anyway, bending the paper to let the blue television light illuminate the red splatter. *Looks a bit like blood*, I said. We laughed.

We didn't laugh when he went missing, or when they found his body a week later.



VALERIE GAGE'S DIARY

November 23

I had today all planned out.

Peggy and I would sit at the corner booth in Mr. Perk's malt shop. She'd order a vanilla shake and I'd order a chocolate. After our waitress walked away, we'd mix the two. Peggy would ask me for help with homework so we wouldn't talk about Dad. He's all we ever talk about. I remember she's in Mrs. Brown's class this year, so everything is extra difficult. She has five textbooks, one for each subject, the exact same ones I used five years ago. They still smell like mold and wet dog. Seems like some things just run in the family.

Later, Walter and I would meet up and see a film to get my mind off of things. Something romantic. *Gone With the Wind*, maybe. He'd want to sit in the back row and sneak in a few kisses. What he doesn't know is that last night at the diner I overheard Mr. Hammond ask his wife to the same show over dinner, and they're the biggest buzzkills in town.

Instead, I got stuck picking up Gail's shift. Something about her kid. She's usually so reliable, too.

And even worse! Gail bakes the pies. So this afternoon, when Mr. Grundy came in and plumped down and asked for a slice of cherry, I had to say no and watch his mouth twist as he swore. For the rest of the evening, Mr. Grundy stayed in the corner booth, reading his newspaper and letting out a couple of wet coughs when he wanted more of my tainted coffee. Whenever he got up to use the john, he'd kick the jukebox and yell at me to turn it down. After tipping me a single quarter, he left at sundown.

Waving to the cook, I made my way to the back door for a break. The streetlights blinked on. I shook out a cigarette and grabbed my matchbook from the apron dangling from my waist.

I struck a match, and the music began. Tonight, dozens of tiny floating lights accompanied the melody, flashing their way through the forest. I propped myself against the wall, smoking while I kept tabs.

November 24

Gail's son has gone missing.

He's a real cute kid. A bit drool-y in my opinion, but he's only four years old so I don't hold it against him. I hope they find him.

He vanished in the middle of the night a couple of days ago. Disappeared right out of his brand new thrifted 'big boy' bed, something Gail hadn't stopped gushing about. *He's growing up so fast*, she'd always say. *I think he'll be a musician, like your daddy.*

Hammond, the buzzkill chief of police, was out all day yesterday looking for the kid. I only found out about it when I handed him his breakfast—pancakes, two sunny-side up eggs, and sausage, his usual—and he asked me how Gail acted in the past week. He asked if I knew anything at all about her son's disappearance. I told him that this conversation was the first I was hearing about it.

I paused a moment to think and glanced around the room. The diner was quiet. The smell of coffee seemed more pervasive than usual as most of the tiny police force sat for breakfast. They all looked the same: white and soggy, with purple bags under their eyes, boots slick with mud.

"She called out yesterday, which wasn't like her," I said. "I took her shift. We didn't have any pies the entire day. Mr. Grundy was beside himself."

He asked me if anything out of the ordinary happened on November 21st.

A melody stung the back of my mind like a wasp, but I shook my head. He swallowed a bite of eggs and frowned before telling me to call him if I remembered anything.

Now, I wonder if I should've mentioned the music.

November 25

The cops were back in the diner today, soggier and muddier than the day before. The sheriffs and highway patrolmen joined them, compasses and flashlights strewn across tables. The coffee-stained, big-name newspapers each man held in front of him said TOWN FEARS FOR MISSING CHILD, FOUR in big block letters, a clipping which I've attached. The dingy jukebox was shut off, unplugged by someone in order to better hear the restaurant chatter.

I found it hard to breathe in there, delivering pots upon pots of coffee with a pleasant but somber smile. My heart sat rigid in my chest, dreadfully used to the anxiety of a missing family member. Peggy and I know fear. Now Gail does, too.

She doesn't deserve it. And, I mean, neither did Peggy or I, but at least we had each other after Dad went missing. Gail's alone now, and instead of rallying around her the town's decided to gossip and camp outside her house. I called her last night after Peggy turned in. Gail answered the phone immediately.

"Hammond?" She was breathless, her voice a bit hoarse.

"No, it's me, Val. Calling to check on you."

"You're so sweet," Gail said. She was quiet for a moment. "This sort of thing happening must be so hard for you and your sister."

"Oh," I said lamely, "yeah. I guess." As I scrambled for something to say, I recalled what someone had said to me, after Dad had died. "Do you want a casserole?"

"You're so sweet," Gail said again, "but I don't think I could eat."

I knew the feeling.

Remembering our conversation brought on the urge for a cigarette. So, as I always did when the tension got to be too much, I stepped outside for a quick smoke. Instead of going out back like usual, I posted up out front. A group of volunteer searchers huddled together, breathing in each other's smoke and whispering details about the case. They said awful things. I was glad Gail decided to stay at home until her son was found.

"You know he's already dead. This is a recovery mission!"

"Frozen to death, probably."

"Or eaten—the bears are fattening up for winter, you know?"

"What if it was ol' Grundy?" That got everyone to shut up and lean closer together.

"He's just a jackass, he wouldn't kill a kid. Especially not Gail's—she'd never make him another pie again!"

"Sweet Baby Jesus could wander onto his property and Grundy'd take out his shotgun. Like he'd look twice to see if it were a kid."

"It wouldn't hurt to at least look. His cabin is farther south, and we've only been searching the western woods."

The naysayer sighed and glanced at the sky. "I'll bring it up with the chief, but I don't expect we'll check in that direction for another couple of days."

Stubbing out my cigarette, I decided that maybe I should pay the clearing near Mr. Grundy's cabin a visit that evening. I thought it wouldn't hurt to look.



THE FRANKLIN COUNTY FONT, NOVEMBER 25

TOWN FEARS FOR MISSING CHILD, FOUR

The search for four-year-old Durham resident Bobby Allen has ramped up since his disappearance, first reported three days ago, the morning of November 22nd. Local authorities have begun utilizing additional resources on the county and state levels.

Gail Allen, the child's mother, refused to speak with *The Franklin County Font*. Ms. Allen, born and raised in Durham, is a single mother.

Durham, a small township of less than six thousand people, has gained notoriety in Franklin County, Massachusetts over the last decade after a series of disappearances. The most recent missing person, music teacher Roger Gage, 42, disappeared last December. His body was discovered in a clearing close to local resident L. Grundy— (*Full story Page 3*)



VALERIE GAGE'S DIARY

November 26

This is how my nightmares always go:

The last night Dad breathes, there's a new moon. All the light in the world is artificial. The neon glow of bar signs lights up the asphalt he puts behind him. It's slick with black ice.

Eventually he stops and turns off the car. Our station wagon never had a working heater anyway. Dad leans into the steering wheel but doesn't get out. Somewhere, a lone cricket sings. The headlights shut off. The woods are thick and dark in front of him. It's like that scene in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, where the princess runs through monstrous trees with faces that tear at her dress as she shrieks in terror. The trees tonight look like that. I think he considers running and screaming, but decides he's maybe too grown for that.

He never pays attention. He never hears the jazzy swing of a piano from somewhere in front of him.

The trees smile in his direction.

Dad gets out of the car, instincts screaming, telling him not to. The leaves underfoot break and crunch, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs the police will use to find his body.

I relive these dreams as I walk through the woods a few hundred yards from the marked trail. I swing my flashlight back and forth, looking for something I'm hoping I won't find. The ground underneath me is frozen. My breath is warm, a bright vapor that's coming out too quickly. There's something about the trees tonight, I think. They hunch closer, ushering me forward. And it's not snowing, but it could be. The sky is holding its breath. My overcoat is back in the car.

I arrive in what I initially think is record time, but looking at my watch it seems hours have passed. I'm cold enough for that to be the case. This was a bad idea, I realize, dread rising, as I step into the clearing. In my mind's eye I see yellowed, tangled police tape and a lump that used to be my dad lying covered in plastic on dead leaves.

I am not alone. A small body sprawls in front of me. A corpse. I think it's Gail's son—no, I know it's her son. I couldn't remember his name. I hated that. What monster doesn't remember a dead kid's name?

He looked nothing like Dad. Now, he looks everything like Dad.

The boy is lying in front of a jukebox. The jukebox's a glittering chrome with tubes of neon crimson decorating the outside edges. It reminds me of the simpering trees as it hums oppressively.

Through the finger-smudged glass the needle endlessly flips through pages and pages of songs. I wander closer, like a moth to a lantern. The red glow is the only light in the clearing. Stepping over the cold body of Gail's son, I peer into the jukebox. I try tapping on the glass, enraptured. My finger slips through thin air, though I could've sworn I heard a faint clink of contact.

In the pounding silence there are no owls, no bone-chilling wind, no falling snow, no search party shouting in the distance, no leaves brushing against each other. Just me and an alluring jukebox and a hush that fills the space between my ears with an anxious throbbing pressure.

I wanted to hear a song so desperately. Any song. One of Dad's songs. There was nothing I desired more in the world, not even Dad back. I didn't want to think about how he disappeared, his body ending up where I stood. I just wanted a single song, a gift from this jukebox.

I grabbed a quarter from my pocket, one that sat chilled in between my fingers, and pushed it into the coin slot. From far away, the bold zing of an electric guitar scared a crow and I jumped, jostling the corpse under me. I screamed as loud and as feral as I could.

I sprinted all the way back to the road, my lungs tearing themselves to pieces in the cold. When I finally slammed into the station wagon, now a freezing hunk of metal, my fingers were blue and my voice gone.



LETTER, VALERIE GAGE TO MARGARET GAGE, CONTINUED.

There's this song playing in every moment of my day. You've heard me humming it at night. The words cut a rug on the tip of my tongue—I can never remember them. I'm starting to love it. Now, the diner's jukebox tunes grate against my ears, simple and uninspired. I need to hear that song again, Peggy. The desire consumes me.

I don't even think about Dad anymore. ~~No. I think about him all the time.~~

I've bought you next year's Christmas presents already, since I'll be gone in the clearing. I'll tuck these pages inside, so you at least know why I missed the holidays.

Your sister,

Val



Faceless by Edward Lee.

Losing

It was not a good time in life.

Lydia, my eldest friend, came to visit during such a time of splitting grief that I went to pieces, certain she would reenter life, only to leave it again. She was full of airy double-talk—when I went to retrieve her from an afternoon flight, I imagined her overhead in the breathless air, floating, flitting. A songbird.

We'd met in hospital, in rooms pulling me away from life.

"You belong here," she'd bleat sweetly, as though calming a child.

I remembered little of that time, except that I'd felt certain of things I couldn't remember. All that happened between *then* and *now*, I was unsure I'd experienced any of it. My mind folded quietly; I lost arithmetic, opinions, the names of things, entire days. I'd wake amid conversation, blankly. The mistake I was making, Lydia said, was taking life personally.

I'd become accustomed to losing and believed I could do nothing else.

I watched documentaries. I watched the weather. I watched the news. I lay awake at night watching crippling loss, utter catastrophe, the pain of others: I believed there was nothing else. The curse of images filled my home. I watched old westerns. I knew the theme songs to *Rawhide* and *Wagon Train* and *Kung Fu*.

I dreaded I might live.

The day they found her, in a ditch, I *knew* it was done. Her. Half-floating in trash, a reckoning for what was calamitous and ruined. I was lost to hysterics. I crumpled on the lawn, making half-human avowals if they brought her back. My then-husband stood on the outside, shocked, useless, wishing all this on someone else.

All that she was, all that she meant.

Hidden under a sheet.

My daughter had become a grief bomb exploding in my chest.

I want to close the doors of life.

Lydia told me, "This does not belong to you. You can change."

But those were details.

Wishing them different was wishing for the life of someone else.

When they found her, they kept me away. They wouldn't let me touch her. My pretty girl.

Recurring Dream

In my dream I hurry, always hurry, but never fast enough. Always late and always worried, I have forgotten something, missed a meeting, let someone down.

Everything seems to move in straight lines, but never to arrive. Everything holds to a bland and meaningless lucidity, like an instruction manual for the wrong appliance. A rushing torrent of sounds and voices drowns all thought. I feel oppressed, at fault, degraded somehow, but even emotion atrophies into a dull sense of discontent.

A sense of having dreamed this all before disturbs me, and I try to wake up. I drink coffee. I take a snack of something sugary, salty, chemically startling. But sounds, lights, and clocks tick slowly like a toothache, and if I cannot wake, I must find a deeper unconsciousness instead. Alcohol and loud music help, or sometimes something stronger.

In my dream I have missed a memo, sent the wrong email or lost an irreplaceable piece of paper. My boss informs me, civilly enough, that this must not happen again, but I know that it will. A recurring dream will always return. And it does.



I awoke, once, to a late summer morning with almost two weeks' holiday ahead of me. My other half planned outings and long walks, and I followed, content to feel my senses returning. I could talk and listen and enjoy the time. I cooked slowly, ate leisurely, and tasted wine without needing to take it in the quick, numbing gulps that bring on a weekend but also speed its departure.

I read books; I laughed or cried. I stepped outdoors early in the morning or I watched the stars. *If only I could stay awake*, I told myself.



The dream recurs, as a bad dream will, ordered and disordered by scrolling screens and sheaves of printed paper. I have sat here before, and will again. I have something to say, something that will break the dream open or at least change its scene, if only I could remember it. Something about looking through a matrix of times and walls. I try to speak.

But every voice around me calls, and I find myself outnumbered all to one, humiliated, scratching at the walls of illusion, looking for seams to unpick or weaknesses to fracture.

THIN

Life would be so much easier if I were thin. And I don't mean just lose a few pounds thin. I mean like marathon runner thin, runway model thin, hips poking through your pants thin. Skinny people always look like they breeze through life, their slender figures moving effortlessly through the atmosphere. Gravity doesn't work as hard since their bodies are unburdened by all the extra weight. They practically float over the earth.

What would it even feel like to have all that extra energy, the energy I waste just being? To know what it's like to be comfortable in clothes—any clothes, even the baggy ones. And I don't just mean physically comfortable. I mean being able to wear them like I belong in them. Like they're decoration instead of camouflage.

What would it be like to have less of me to hate?

Even if I could lose the weight, I'd still be too heavy because I am, as my mother used to tell me constantly, "big-boned," so what would be the point? It would never be enough. I could lose the fat, I could lose the muscle, but I'd never be able to starve my bones. They'd have to be hollowed out. Like a bird's.

Wherever I go, I feel like I'm taking up too much space. Like a clumsy old Cabbage Patch Doll trying to squeeze into a Barbie's Dream House. And I'm not even obese fat. I'd say I'm thick, zaftig, doughy, you know, all those adjectives people use to try and make you feel better about it. I've also been told that I'm tall, so I carry it well. Really? That's supposed to make me feel better? Maybe if I was a man it would be different.

Sometimes I see old pictures of myself, from back when I had a nice body, when I was so much thinner. I remember that person. I remember her very well, and how she used to feel. She felt fat and insecure. It's hard to look at those images now without wondering why on earth I didn't know how good I had it back then. I wasted all that time and energy worrying about my appearance when I should have realized it was the best I'd ever look. What if ten years from now I'm even fatter? Will I look at pictures of me today and think the same thing?

When I'm feeling particularly bad, I'll lie on the floor, on my back, so that gravity pulls all my fat into my abdominal cavity. If I inhale and stretch just the right way, my stomach almost feels flat enough to pretend that I'm thin. For that moment I can lie there, imagining all the things I could do and be. But only for that moment.

If I could trade looks for thinness, I would definitely do it. I'm not bad in the face, kinda pretty, I guess, but I'd still give it up in a heartbeat to be thin. I see women all the time who aren't pretty at all, but because they have these tiny little bodies, they get all the attention. It's like because they're so active they have stuff to talk about, they have things that make them interesting to other people. Any negative feelings thin people encounter probably evaporate with all the calories they burn. I, however, have fear, shame, and rage embedded into every single cell in my body, wallowing there, refusing to vacate. Multiplying.

I know what you're thinking. If it bothers me so much, why not just lose the weight? Why not eat less and exercise more, take up a hobby, join a support group. Or, as a last resort, learn to

love myself the way I am. But it's not that easy. I see the way people look at me, especially in restaurants, like I have no right being there. Like I'm some hideous, unwanted reminder of what they could be. It makes me hate eating, and resentful that I even have to, so then every bite turns into this giant inner debate, sending me into a spiral of self-loathing.

Maybe what I'm really afraid of is that if I get thin, I'll still hate myself. And then what'll I do? Surrender to the ultimate weightlessness? Maybe being fat is saving my life. It's deluding me that *it* is the reason I don't feel comfortable in the world. It's giving me something to focus on, something outside, so I don't have to think about how polluted I feel inside. Like it's a big doughy barrier that keeps me from remembering all the times I've been hurt, all the times I've felt not good enough.

Like the thing that's protecting me is the same thing that's destroying me.

Maybe when I get on the scale this time it will be different, even though I know it won't be. It never is. Weighing myself is always a disappointment, yet I can't stop. Why do I even care? Seeing that number will never give me the answer I'm looking for. It will never tell me what I want to see: that I've completely disappeared.

Despair courses through me. I didn't think it was possible to feel any more hopeless than I already do, but I was wrong. I remove all my clothes in a desperate attempt to change the number, but it does not. 101.

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is key it's essential for anyone who wants to last in this line of work ladies said Prof. Gardner last night, ending class early, and now with crispy curled leaves crunching under her hiking boots, Amanda thinks these words again while her eyes scan the forest trail for unearthed roots to hook a toe on

last thing she needs another injury left knee never right after that game against Oneonta senior year dirty fucking tackle that bitch not even aiming for the ball and for what they didn't even win nine-year ache hurts every day even on soft ground like this

trail a muddy ribbon unfurling between the trees under the quilted mat of leaves already dead before they hit the ground their brittle bodies dried stiff bled crimson spotted with crumbly brown spots the decay the worst is what she sees when she looks at the world these days death and disintegration everywhere even her boots the ones Joe had bought her for her twenty-ninth last year *for all that hiking you want to do* cheap boots from a cheap guy fake leather starting to crack while he's off with his new wife or girlfriend or whatever the fuck

that woman is to him by now Amanda can't remember the one in the picture his latest profile picture the two of them grinning in front of a house a colonial of some kind her hair stubbornly perfect despite the rainy day under iron skies French or Dutch or German was the house one of those but who knows she can't remember which

just another thing she used to care about that's nothing to her now those real estate days career number two or maybe it was three *she's beautiful* Amanda had said staring at the woman's face inside the glowing screen inside the cropped picture some lost night when she should have been trying to sleep a dream she can remember would be nice

an easy night's sleep some time away from her life yes nice some time would be nice been a while since she cared enough to check Joe's Facebook probably the summer at least back before she started up with her new classes for her new career number five this one is her new career in nursing for her new life of selflessness helping others instead of herself but

of course it's all bullshit just code for more searching desperate to feel alive desperate to feel happy to feel love for something again standing before the full length mirror in her bedroom with her nurse scrubs on the lie a living thing *if I can't even be honest with myself then what can I* said out loud but didn't know how to end the sentence Joe's Facebook definitely a while since she checked but who cares that stuff is for people who have the *life* part of the work-life balance

essential for anyone who wants to last probably meant for everyone but Amanda knew who Prof. Gardner was talking to when she said it staring hard at Amanda Prof. Gardner's eyes speaking in silence *this is the important stuff so pay attention all that anatomy chemistry skeletal structure can wait but this is what you really need to know* her eyes saying it just like that staring right at Amanda in the back of the class the old woman's voice rusty and dull her eyes even worse just black beads at a distance her eyes telling Amanda the truth she already knew *you're not going to last* a froggy voice lined with gravel or hard crumbs of stale bread like Amanda always used to say to her mom when she was sick with a sore throat *it feels like hard crumbs got stuck*

or when she was too afraid to go to school too afraid to see those nasty bitches who were supposed to be her friends she would say it then too because why do they do that not just girls but all people so much goddamn talking but no one telling the truth everything so distorted so many lies can't tell anymore what's real and what's not who's lying and who's not what's the right thing to do with so many people suffering and she does want to help but

yes, this is what she came out here to do, sort all this out for good, so many years of unhappiness a life of it just everything so empty all the juice squeezed out of everything she ever loved but yes, that's right, at one point there were things she loved, she can remember it now as she takes the right path of the trail forking around a knotty oak or maybe a maple red maple sugar maple who cares she can't tell without any leaves on the bare branches and looking up hot yellow light flashes between wooden fingers

but yes a time when she did love something that did happen she's sure of it yes a good place to start because from there maybe she can trace a line to where she is now that's one thing that's true there was a time when she did love some things a few people all those stupid pages in her middle school diary *I love Karl S.!!!!* the asterisk-like stars she used to draw around the words her younger self believing that those things made her love even more special but to love something is special yes it was special that

cold sparkling numbing syrup that used to drip down over her stomach each time she talked to those boys she loved Karl S.!!!!Tom C.!!!!Will N.!!!!Jesse D.!!!! all of them she did she loved them so easy it was so simple it happened just like that like getting hit out of nowhere lightning is what they always say it's like one day she was just herself and then it hit her and she finally saw him Karl S. Jesse D. whoever else so many too many to remember and now none all that electricity gone but back then out of nowhere it would happen so sudden his incredible specialness suddenly visible in a way no one else could see only her she could see it and oh how deep it went all the way down to the marrow in her toes she could feel it all those feelings inside her yes it was real and this memory is

just a tiny sliver of what it felt like remembering it in her head thinking it back into the present, and now coming to a place where a hard rectangle of sun cuts through the naked canopy and stamps a sharp square of light on the trail and

seeing this, she stops and looks at the little bits of dust or dirt floating in the shaft of light, her eyes starting to burn tears, coming from somewhere, a small bright feeling inside, and she is suddenly so joyfully happy to be alive but the second she thinks this her awareness of the feeling makes it fake and blinking from the collecting tears it's gone already just that quick: one blink two it's gone, buried so far that it's like it was never even there and

walking on she steps through the light into the gray shadow of the lack left over and the absence in her chest is so wide and deep and empty that she doesn't even want to do this anymore *why even try* why even be here in the woods by herself why does this always happen it never works nothing ever works why does she feel this way why can't she feel anymore no love for anything why can't she just be happy like everyone else her classmates all these girls so happy always smiling laughing all the time making jokes but she can't everything is empty her words her smiles she feels it on her face her lips a wax mask the acting always sitting alone in the last row back of the classroom *always have an escape route* why couldn't she just ask them last night *do you want*

to go for a hike tomorrow but yes that's right she didn't ask because she didn't want them to come more acting more trying she didn't and did and didn't but still does and doesn't and does doesn't make sense never did can't explain it to Linda if she doesn't understand it herself too much thinking too much acting she gets so tired pretending that everything is okay not hollow there has to be a reason why does this always happen to her everything squeezed dry when did the juice leak out can't remember when or how it happened but it's gone and dried up her insides hollow she feels the lack like

all those days she passed in bed, more yellow light through the window, another shining square on the floor, her bed so cold body heavy legs tingling with ache, it was her sister who had come that time, Linda's shadow darkening the small space under the door talking through wood, the closed door, Linda knowing to not even ask if she could open it

maybe you should talk to someone

I have

a therapist, I mean someone like that

I have one I used to but it didn't help

maybe try a different one, it can take some time to find the right one

I have Amanda said knowing it was a lie but also the truth already the next question she knew what her sister would ask before the words came out anger scudding up her throat because no one fucking understands empty when something is empty and nothing can fill it back up yet they keep trying these people always trying

why not

a therapist can't live your life for you and now turning around and walking through the shaft of light again the trail the woods Amanda starts the walk back to her car parked in the lot of that warehouse lumber or shipping the warehouse across the street from the entrance to the woods just another car what do they care at least some people know how to not care to not try at least in that she's not alone so much trying too much five careers never knew when to stop and now

trudging back to the car, a chilly breeze in her face, brittle leaves rustling like paper, the smell of the trees in her nose sharp and peppery like cracked cinnamon sticks, this light, the quiet, the peace, yes it's pretty very beautiful but what can she do with it can't take it home can't absorb it inside can't do anything with it have to leave it here the lack

just a normal thing now and still the same an hour later when she climbs into her car in the warehouse lot key slides into ignition engine growls a cool sigh from deep in her lungs *yes I did try I did* for five careers she did and back in here she almost feels normal again normal but a little lighter than before another thing gone but who cares less weight to carry less gravity less pull *God knows I tried* the last words she spoke before pulling out of the lot and turning left instead of right right leading home left to somewhere else doesn't matter where somewhere away from here *essential for anyone who wants to last ladies* Prof. Gardner had said *for anyone who wants to last* yes the old woman had been right saw it from the start knew Amanda wouldn't last but yes she had tried at least she had tried



One Too Many by Fabrice Poussin.

The Off Season

We knew what to do with Geoff soon as the dark earthen patches appeared on his arms. We had been living in the house for too long, with its leaky roof and rotted gutters and mud-splattered windows. Inside, it was a barren place with only a few chairs, each wet to the touch, and a stark black dining room table, its underside mapped with illegible graffiti. A house with walls that sweated and exhaled. A house with peeling wallpaper that exposed older, mold-dabbled sheets.

And there were the birds, too, that visited us at night, pressing their damp wings to our cheeks as we slept and leaving inky stains under our eyes.

I was the one to tell Geoff he should meet the others in the garden. But not until night. And not until the rain started.

It had been a long, silvery September. One hour would be hot, a steaming blaze of summer. We would try to sprawl out among the backyard weeds that grew from the spongy soil and dream with the sun's light pressing against our eyelids.

But the next hour would be a breeze blowing in from October, and the leaves would instantly dry and curl on the branches over our heads, and they'd drift down over our bodies as we remained there in the grass, our faces and limbs exposed to the gathering clouds with their varied metallic hues.

None of us had cleaned our hands for weeks. This was always true in the off season, and it was especially true that year. Our fingernails were sharp and etched with dried mud. In the garden at night, we would admire them, holding our hands up to one of the gas lamps that stood at the four corners of the garden. Hector started naming every finger on his hand after well-known acrobats and occultists. I didn't go that far. But I did have daydreams where I imagined my hands had lived in the woods on their own, and would scurry back into those woods once I was no longer around.

Samantha, I should mention, had been worried about Geoff since the start of the off season. She thought he was moving too far away from us. He was living in our house, but not living in the house with us. He'd sit in his bathrobe watching videos on his laptop. The lights would be off. The windows were covered with postcards his parents and cousins and ex-lovers had sent him from some beach hundreds of miles away.

When Samantha stepped into the room, he would slam the laptop closed, but she sometimes glimpsed images of chefs cutting up mushrooms with fast, stained knives.

If she asked him what he had been watching, he would hold up his hand, which already had a blue tint, and open his mouth, as if he were about to take a delicious bite. Then he would laugh, and she would laugh, and it would be all right for another few hours.

"This place is filled with tasty morsels," Samantha would tell me, before we opened our umbrellas and ventured into the garden. Our mouths and necks would already be covered with soil, but not nearly as covered as when we would come back inside.

The birds, of course, were new that September. Hector had brought them. He had worked at a bird sanctuary on the coast that summer, and when he returned home they had followed him. At night, he was the one to let them into the house, and we admired him for it. Some would have left them on the other side of the window, or would have told them to fly away. Some would have closed the curtain on them. But Hector said they were his friends. And they would one day be ours, as well.

So they flew through the corridors, their wet wings brushing against the damp wallpaper. They built enormous nests in our garden and in the broken corners of some of our rooms. They were like ravens mixed with bluebirds and they smelled like rotting roses, exuding a heady musk. As we listened to them fly about, we imagined the vast cathedral of bones that must inhabit such creatures as these. We imagined walking inside of them, their hearts glowing with a wondrous orange light. A harvest moon gorged on bird blood.

If there was one thing Geoff seemed to still take pleasure in during those shiny September hours, it was the birds. He would open his arms to them, and they would poke around in the patches of earth along his forearms and armpits, drawing out thick, earthy blood. He would laugh, and they would seem to laugh too, in their raspy cawing way. From his laptop would stream techno music that never failed to remind me of certain Berlin night clubs in my youth, basements where the graffiti waited in the darkness of the walls and the mannequins surrounding the dance floors were wholly unpainted except for their eyes, which stared into the light-pulsated smoke with unmoored hunger.

We weren't what others might call summer people.

But even here, in this house among the weeds, we received postcards. Spattered with rain or bat shit or bird shit, but we got them. From cousin and uncles and sad friends who claimed they missed us and always from another beach, always informing us of the warm weather they were enjoying and how the sun felt on their legs as they drank smoothies in an umbrella's shade. The pictures on the cards would show sand and water drawn in pastel colors, or maybe a strip of white beach dotted with hundreds of lithe swimmers running toward the waves.

We covered our windows with them, blocking out the sunlight.

One night, as we sat around eating lamb chops and roasted potatoes, Samantha said, "How come people never think about the billions of years they didn't exist? Don't you think it should bother people more, not existing for those billions of years? I know it does me."

Hector was upstairs with his birds, and Geoff was above him, in the attic, his arms turning to soil, but we were here, Samantha and I and one or two of the others, at the dining room table strewn with twigs and dewy leaves. I said, "Maybe it's too much to think about."

"Well, that's silly," she replied, taking another lamb chop from the platter. "All the more reason to ponder it then."

The next morning, I received a postcard from a cousin whose name I did not recognize. This was more and more the case, to be honest. The names addressed to me were names that could have been addressed to anyone.

My cousin, who claimed she was currently traveling through Greece, told me I should consider visiting her. She wrote she remembered how I had liked statues as a boy, especially statues with vividly painted eyes, and that Greece was filled with such statutes. You could spend afternoons gazing at them, pretending to fall in love.

I gave the postcard to Samantha, who smelled it and opened her mouth and bit off a corner. After she chewed and spat out the wad of postcard, she handed the remains to Hector.

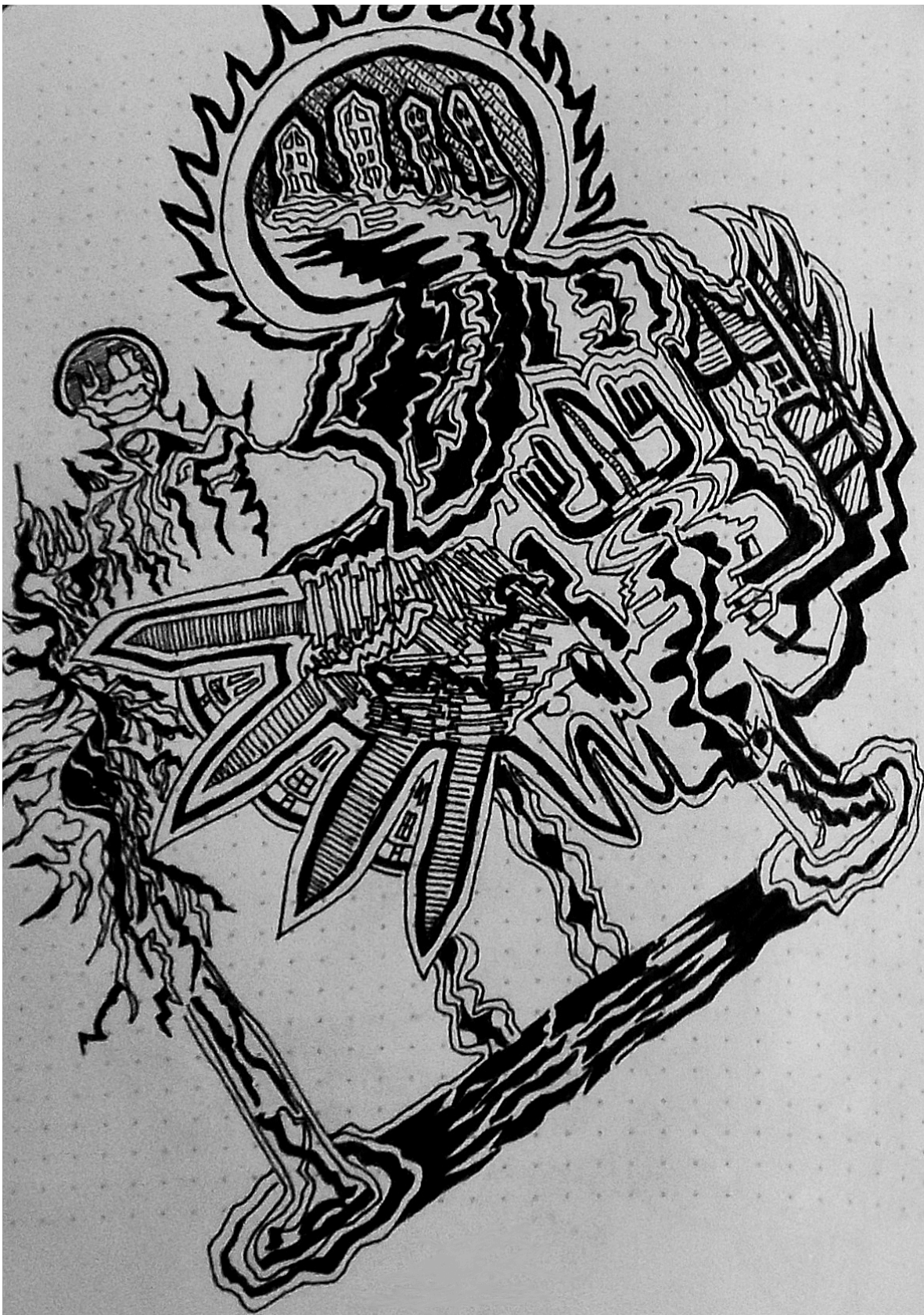
Hector smiled, folded the postcard in half, and placed it in the pocket of his red corduroy jacket. He left the house through the back door and soon the scent of burning coals drifted through the windows.

The birds grew larger and their wings grew damper.

And Geoff lost one arm, and then the other. Both had turned entirely into soil, and the soil dried despite the humidity in the house, and the fingers and wrists and forearms crumbled away into dust. His sides were next, the skin no longer smooth to the touch but feeling like a patch of ground from which every blade of grass had been uprooted.

At night I would remove a few postcards from my window in order to see into the garden. The three of them would be in there, Samantha, Hector, and Geoff, with their robes untied and Geoff on his back and the other two flanking him and licking his sides so that the earthy flesh dampened and covered their mouths and chins.

Under their skins I saw, or imagined I saw, the shadows of birds shifting, and I thought that the creatures must be dreaming of us as we dreamt of them.



dream journal tumescence by Russ Daum.

Ritual

He felt like a muse of god or, more precisely, *the* muse of Him. Goaded into the familiar depths of his brown body, he went numb in the summer months. If someone paid attention to him or asked the right questions, he'd tell them that he was drowning, that phenomena moved too fast and the sky got larger and larger each day. Maybe he'd say his heart was a stone given brief flight through a stranger's kitchen window.

Each word heard was a knife going into a corpse. He walked with his eyes admiring the concrete, the façade of solid ground. Everything he found—bags of crack, syringes, and spoons scorched from burning—he carried with him just under the surface of his skin.

He left his scent in various houses around Detroit, yet his lack of ease could be gathered from his eyes, the timbre of his voice. He found himself at war with his fourteen-year-old body; it sprouted in unexpected places, in perpetual rebellion. His walk was artless. His mood always on the threshold of suffocation. Soon a handful of quarters would take the short trip from his church-going aunt's piggy bank to his pocket to the drug dealer around the corner.

He imagined his mother and father young: before his mother's abusive relationship with his older sister's father, before they lived on the brink of homelessness, and the moment of passion that led to his formation. He regarded their anxious faces under the dim light of his imagination, their eyes wet with inexperience. It is hard to fathom the world going about its business before he got here. His arrival came with no pomp or cheer.

The homes he passed, two-storied with sharp roofs, were filled with multi-ethnic families. It was the one thing he liked about where he lived. He passed the house of a friend who he played video games and ate shish kabobs with. Then he remembered that was years ago; he didn't even know if he lived there anymore.

The streets were tight; sparse trees stretched next to parked cars. Dogs barked in the distance and paced behind fences. He passed the flat he used to live in, a place where he nursed pigeon eggs and bonded with the white kids across the alley. Suddenly, the years were out of reach, slipping just out of grasp. He crossed a vacant lot into another and reached his destination. The transaction was short: he got what he wanted.

It became clear in the humid, suffocating light that each person he passed, no matter how sensitive, would not give a thought to assist him out of his plight. He imagined them as ghosts, stuck in the prison of their bodies, between his world and theirs. His bloodline was like a thread, knotted and without end.

He decided to head toward his high school to walk his friend Daniella home. He was not the only one courting her and he knew it. The other suitors were taller, more popular, and did not come from broken homes. He didn't understand why she requested his company. He wanted something to happen between them but didn't know what it entailed.

He crossed the train tracks, passed the Coney Island and the auto factory, and tramped through the residential neighborhood until he approached his school. He watched his peers get into their cars, zigzagged through crowds, and waited in his usual spot: near the main entrance,

against a brick wall. Her familiar voice, jovial yet calm, pierced through the internal noise. Her fair skin had gotten a tan over the summer, and her curly black hair was in a ponytail. As she approached, he felt the familiar yet startling speed of his heart.

They headed to her house. He tried to break the mounting silence with his voice, which quivered out of his lungs into the ether. Daniella's was sure, her cadence rose and fell upon his ears. They rarely spoke about anything pertinent to their feelings. They cracked jokes, mostly about the uncaring world. His mind was fertile with images about how their bodies might interact. He recoiled from the nuances of his imagination. His heart leapt in his chest.

They passed a homeless woman standing in the shade of a dollar store. She pleaded with them in a tone and manner that was hard to ignore. He returned to her and relinquished some spare change. Daniella glanced at him with a quizzical expression. There was much he wanted to say, but somehow, their environment impeded him.

Transient impulses guided his speech. She asked him about his day; his words were blithe and vague as they came out of his angst-ridden face. The trajectory of his mind and body made him lose focus.

Her home stood at a dead end, next to a fence which sheltered train tracks. The train horn, which woke him up most mornings, provided him with a strange glint of emotional stability. They climbed the stairs to her room. She threw her bookbag on the bed.

They sat down and she asked him to smell her nose. Eventually, they began kissing.

Somewhere in the dormant heart of the city, a city that claimed what remained of their willpower, were their mothers and fathers. They were once in their places, looking for connection, armed with only rudimentary emotions and inexperience.

In his mind, he was nursing lies to tell her. It frightened him that she was beginning to know the real him. His habitual dishonesty kept everyone at arm's length. His biggest fear, the fear with the most refined edges, was that his parents would find out who he really was. He didn't want to face *why* he skipped school, stole whenever the opportunity presented itself, betrayed the trust they gave him, and why he was in the process of entering the only person who took an interest in him. It was his first time.

The vague shape of his body mingled with hers. His body's implicit memory was often too exact for him to process. It recalled the sound of firearms interrupting his sleep, nearly drowning in middle school and, now, the warmth of Daniella's thread-like breath upon his neck. As always, it was hard to find stable ground.

He was gone before her mother returned home. Soon his body would lie on the sweltering concrete, his face illuminated by the alternating lights of patrol cars. Soon strangers would pore over the details of his life, especially his last moments. Soon his body would be dissected upon a sterile, stainless steel table. Briefly, he would be imbued with honor.

I.

Staring at the window, dreaming up the best excuse to turn around and leave, Michael stands on the sidewalk in front of his older brother's house. As he waits, a memory begins playing in his mind: he's in the living room of his childhood home, watching blood run down the stairs while someone begins to scream. The terror in its tone forces him forward, the noise growing through his brain, creating then sloughing off traces of itself, the sound seeming too quiet yet coming from every direction. His mouth begins to open, but then the wind blows around his beard, and he feels the world again in the present. It has been eight years since he last saw his brother David.

He tries to imagine a reason for the reunion. Someone died. Some aunt or uncle he can't even visualize anymore. It couldn't be about his sister, Elizabeth. Nothing bad could ever happen to her.

One of the streetlights is out on Queen Street, so he can barely make out the numbers on the house. This part of D.C., right near Trinidad and Kingman Park, has a lowly reputation. The house, a red brick, sits isolated, building toward nothing, covered by a fence so short any child could jump it. By the corner, two guys lean on a fence, their shadows clogging up the street.

The fence dips into a length of brick wide enough to walk on, and in the dark he sees a flash of orange rush along its base. As the color moves into the streetlight, it transforms into the shape of a cat with its eyes fixed on him. House cats are torturer-murderers but he doesn't blame them. The fault lies with the people who own them. Big cats in the wild can't afford to slaughter without purpose. They are not coddled with care and don't have tuna salad waiting at the den.

"They think you're cute," Michael says. He reaches out and touches the cat's side, a stupid move, but it doesn't bite him. "You can't be blamed," he whispers.

The cat meows. It occurs to Michael that maybe he is starting to lose it.

"Tell me, why would my brother contact me out of nowhere, demand I come here, and then just hang up like that?"

The cat jumps from the ledge, disappearing.

Michael moves into the shadow of the yard. Maybe David is looking at him through the peephole, seeing nothing but a psycho talking to himself. Across the street, a dog keeps barking, making his thoughts move back to the stairs and the blood.

He strolls up to the door and bangs on it a few times. The floorboards creak as someone undoes the latch, and the door opens a crack. David's eyes appear.

"Michael," David says. His voice sounds the same. "You're early."

"I am. Open up."

David steps back. Behind the glasses, his eyes look tired. The frames are tired too. He's rolled

in a green sweater that bulges against a gut he added at some point. Hair short as always, goatee around his mouth, lines in his face; he looks beaten.

"Well," David says, "come in."

Even with the extra bulk, Michael still outweighs David by fifty or sixty pounds, mostly because he is six or seven inches taller. The house smells of detergent. The entrance turns into a living room, empty except for a couch and textbooks on a shelf. As Michael squeezes through the doorway, he does not make eye contact with his brother. Michael walks to the bookshelf and runs his hands over a few covers. *Quorum Sensing: Methods and Protocols*. Below that: *Theoretical Geochemistry*. Their father used to favor David because he listened in church and could recite passages from Romans without mumbling.

"These are real thrillers," Michael says. "Get the pulse up. Still good at memorizing shit, huh? Tell me you don't live in this dump."

He almost asks about Elizabeth. She would be twelve now.

"I don't live here. It's a community home," David says. "But I wouldn't mind."

"Figures."

Soon they will begin yelling. Michael turns back to the books and continues touching them, nodding his head as he stares.

David sighs. "I know you're not even looking at those. You're trying too hard."

"Not all of us are geniuses. Some of us have to work harder."

Michael goes to the kitchen. Beside a tablecloth spotted with stains sits a pyramid of dishes.

"Well," Michael says, coughing to clear his throat. "What happened here?"

"We had thanksgiving."

"Who is we?"

"Me, some kids from the church nearby...and your little sister, Elizabeth. You remember her, right?"

Michael almost smiles. "I do remember. So, she's okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Pubescent, but otherwise okay. I thought about calling you. Lots of times. I kept putting it off because things came up," he says and pauses. When he speaks again, his voice is softer. "Stuff always comes up."

When Michael tries to recreate Elizabeth in his head, nothing arrives but a silhouette and some of the moments when he and David were most father-like with her. Michael notices a picture frame perched in between the window separating the kitchen and the living room, the figures in it staring out as if peering over the house. *Michael, David, Father, Mother*. They are by Lake Michigan, probably visiting some of their mother's relatives. In the photo, Michael has his arm slung over David's skinny shoulders.

"You keep family stuff here?" Michael nods toward the frame. "How come you didn't pick one with Elizabeth in it?"

"She is in it. Look here," David says and taps the side of the photo. A short, black scratch runs through their father's head and along to where his shirt ends. "That was her. She got into the old photos once when she was a kid. I had to tug it right out of her hand. Made her own mark, I suppose."

When David crosses his arms and leans against the wall, he smiles in a way that makes Michael see his younger face in his new one, and it suddenly feels as if their father could come strolling in, laughing as if they were being put through an extended reality TV show, falling into their old roles. Michael puts his hand against the counter, steadying himself. He won't let it show.

Michael focuses on the photo. The year of its creation doesn't come to him, and that he exists in the photo at all feels strange. His father's face reflects off the lake by the pier, and in the photo's overexposure, his smile seems to move across the water. He has not seen their faces clearly in years.

"What happened that night, Mike?" David suddenly asks.

"What are you talking about?"

Michael's grip tightens on the photo. David wants him to be off balance; Michael can see that now. Even before, after it happened, they never talked about the murders. "You didn't call me here to listen to me yap," Michael says, making sure his voice stays level. "What do you really want?"

"It's about Elizabeth. I'm still her guardian. This summer, I won't be able to take care of her. I have to go back to Iraq to help train some National Army guys—*let me finish before you start shaking your head*—it'll be about two and a half months, late June to August. She won't be in school—"

"I can't. Last time I saw her she was *this small*. Too long, way too long. She can't be the same. Why don't you get Aunt Clara to do it?"

"That's gonna be hard," David says, "considering she's dead. Suppose I could dig her up. Do you want to get the shovel or should I?"

"Then tell 'em you can't. Tell 'em you don't want to."

"I *do* want to."

"Gimme a break. You're gonna take *them* on too? What makes you think I would do anything like this?"

"Follow me," David says. He grabs his coat and goes outside. Michael follows, pausing for a moment to place the photo back.

"Where are we going?"

"To the church up the street. I got something to show you I think you're going to like."

"That doesn't sound creepy."

Michael follows behind a step or two, debating every second, but before he can decide to scam, a church sign appears in the distance, hanging over a red van beside a square building with a white cross jutting from its top. David fumbles with his keys for a moment and then opens

the church doors. He flips on a wall light. Six rows of pews clumped together lead to an opening in the front, complete with a podium and a whiteboard.

“Why do you work here, anyway?” Michael says, stepping inside, his voice echoing in the open space. “I mean, how could you believe this *bullshit*?”

“I take care of the kids,” David says. “I’m the basketball coach for a local team too. The court’s out back. I could still beat you.”

“You never beat me.” Michael rolls his eyes. “You’re too small.”

“You know Elizabeth missed you,” David says. “So did I. We still need you.”

Michael begins to step backward, but he stops. Need. A short word, but full. The army might need his brother to travel to a desert and sit in a tank sleeping in shade, shaking up dunes and shelling bodies until they were mush. The prison system might need Michael to make wooden chairs. An old woman might need him to reach the highest shelf in a supermarket. All needs—from dramatic to mundane. Who decides these demands are right? They disrupt his state, loosen his sense of his own body. The right thing—another phrase without meaning. Every time he does the right thing, the seconds afterward seem to act against him, bringing things back to level so that even when he convinces himself his acts were genuine, even when he manages to lose his anger for a minute, he eventually finds his rage again and swings it with joy.

Michael clears his throat. “I saw a cat back there, a big tabby.”

“A lot of strays around. When I was first in Iraq, I ended up in Saddam’s palace. The rangers told us to watch out for the lions! They were probably bullshitting, but still...rather chew shrapnel.”

“I’ll take the lion,” Michael says. “That’s how I want to die. Eaten, not by bullets, *eaten*. Anyway, wasn’t a stray. Someone loved it. Mom loved cats. I can’t take care of Liz, David. The answer’s no.”

David continues forward into the church as if he hasn’t heard.

“Yeah, I know she loved cats,” David says. “You did too, right?”

II.

The church has a clearing effect on David’s mind. The steeple might conjure the mood, airing out emotions through its roof, but the setting is a contextual cue, operating no differently than a song making him happy despite its sappiness. Irrationality explains his love of sacrament, and sacrament his love of irrationality. He knows his brother is not a good man, perhaps not fit for the job of caring for Elizabeth.

“You look fatter,” Michael says abruptly.

David laughs. “Thanks, bro.”

“Ever thought about reading some diet books?”

"You can't know everything."

"Tell me about it."

"It was always hard to teach you."

Michael laces his hands behind his hand, pretending to yawn. "Or maybe I just didn't care. Ever think of that?"

"Then I'm guilty, too."

Despite the mutual anger, their banter holds traces of brotherhood, persisting over the years like shells of radio signals. Someone like Michael, David reasons, needs to be acted on as an object. There is too little time left in life to wait for serendipity's pity.

David leads his brother away from the pews, turning toward a door against the wall. Down a flight of stairs, David walks, hoping his brother will follow. He flips on a light in the basement and stands in front of the paintings lining the wall.

Studying them, Michael walks in front of the paintings. He pauses for a moment on the final portrait before he reaches out and touches its side.

"Is that me?"

"Yes," David says. "Elizabeth likes working down here."

Holding it close, squinting at its colors, Michael picks up the painting. It portrays a boy smiling, standing in front of a house with his thumbs looped into his jeans, his smile only on one side of his mouth. Elizabeth lacks skill with the brush and the colors are confused, but David knows that won't matter to Michael.

"This one's recent," David says. "I showed her some pictures of you. I think you're the same age as her in this painting. You're a little uglier, though."

Michael clears his throat and puts the painting down. "She some kind of prodigy?"

"I don't know. She likes painting."

"These are nice."

The rest of the paintings have varying subjects: a still life, some abstract colors, an old woman pushing a shopping cart.

Michael paces across the room, bending down to tie his shoe. He mumbles something David can't hear and then stands up again.

"...trying to manipulate me like this."

"Who's manipulating anyone?"

Michael picks up another painting and smiles a little.

David moves forward, closing the space between them. "Do you remember how Mom used to answer the phone? She always said *hello* in this deep voice, as if she were a kid pretending to be an adult."

"Yeah. I remember. I *do* remember that."

"Elizabeth answers the phone the same way, I swear. It's so strange," David says, and Michael's smile grows a little more. "Even years after Mom's been gone, even though she died when Elizabeth was still a baby." David takes his phone out of his back pocket. "I have to call her now and let her know where I am."

"Don't tell her I'm here."

David dials Elizabeth's number and switches the call to speaker.

She answers: "*Hello.*"

"Hey, I'm going to be late."

"*Alrighty,*" she says. "*I'm eating that frozen pizza then. Peace.*"

He looks at his brother after the call ends. Michael's face goes through an assortment of expressions, until he begins, perhaps subconsciously, to smile almost exactly as he did in Elizabeth's painting.

"Let's go back to the house," David says.

In the time it takes for him to push open the double doors to the parking lot, David reasons he has won. Michael will rejoin them. The street seems lighter to him as they walk together.

Michael no longer trails behind him. Instead, they walk side by side, passing through the alleyway dividing the church parking lot from the row houses along the street.

"*Faggots.*"

The voice comes from behind his shoulder. David looks back and sees two guys standing on the corner of Queen, oversized white t-shirts making their shadows loom. They snicker, staring at them walking in the street together.

David feels Michael begin to turn, but David grabs his arm.

"Let it go," David says.

Before he can lose the argument, David begins to drag his brother by the arm, an impossible task considering the difference in their size, and the guys at the corner laugh louder. For a moment David considers *accidentally* losing his grip on Michael's arm. He has seen Michael go to work with his fists before. But the night so far must have calmed him because Michael does not resist.

Soon they are back inside the house. Michael paces for a moment in the living room and then laughs. David laughs too, and when they finish laughing it gets quiet.

"Will you tell me now," David says, "what really happened that night?"

"What do you mean?"

"*You know* what I mean. With Dad and all. Look, I'll tell you something first, if it makes you feel better."

"What?"

"Anything you want to know."

David sits on the couch, and Michael goes toward the bookshelf, facing away. After a moment, he turns around.

"I can't," Michael says.

"Give me a chance, Mike. I gave you one."

"You already know, don't you?"

David stays quiet for a moment. "It's okay—"

"No, it *really* isn't," Michael says.

"Tell me."

Michael sits down on the couch then pops up again just as quickly. He walks to the window and then back to the kitchen before stopping in the center of the room.

III.

You were on some kind of nerd vacation, David. Of course I wasn't invited—not that I'm complaining. I think we went on one vacation together; do you remember? Somewhere in Nags Head. We went out to the beach every morning before our parents got up. But God, you didn't love the sea as much as you loved fossils and all that Jack Horner shit as a kid! I remember pictures of you digging up a stone with a toothbrush in the backyard.

So you were out of town and I was stuck at home. It wasn't really the suburbs, but our parents liked to pretend. I was with Mom, Dad, and Elizabeth, too.

Do you count a baby as a witness? Elizabeth was crying, her screams sounding like an ogre moaning in a cave. That's what I thought at the time. An ogre moaning inside its cavern, and I, the courtly knight, would have to vanquish the beast. Entering the cave, I would see that it was just a baby ogre, not at all like I'd imagined, and it was only crying because it was loved too much, hugged too often, like a spoiled cat. I was in the living room watching TV. And then I heard something coming from upstairs.

The staircase beside the kitchen led to the bedroom where Mom and Dad slept. We weren't allowed upstairs, so it always had a hidden vibe to me. If you stood outside in the street—

"You couldn't even tell there was another story," David says.

Right. I heard a noise that sounded like moaning. I thought for a second I was hearing them fuck. Elizabeth started crying again, and I wanted her to stop. I went into her room—your room too, remember?

I guess Mom thought you were a better parent than her. I went in there to make sure she wasn't turning blue, and when I got close, she started snoring again. Just me being there was enough to knock her out. I'd make a bad teacher. She was shivering, and I pulled her blanket up. It felt good. Like being a brother, but more than a brother too. Like when we used to play basketball as kids on the same team, and I would get you the ball so you could score. Not like a relationship with a friend or girlfriend.

But when she stopped crying, someone yelled from upstairs. I heard a bang and a thud.

Start crying please, I said to her. *Please, so I don't have to hear. I want to help you so I feel good again.* I went to get my coat, and I realized I couldn't just leave. Know why? Because you told me to watch Elizabeth. Right before you left.

I went back into the living room, staring up the stairs, listening to someone sobbing. This had happened before. That's what made me insane.

This feeling. There's a sense in the ear that helps with balance and knowing where you are in space. I was aware of it then. I could close my eyes and make it stronger, so I knew where everything in the room was. It was a feeling like anger, but it connected me to myself. I let it grow because I wanted to feel more and more, but I was also afraid of what it was and what it meant.

The door opened and Mom and Dad both appeared in the doorway. He had his hands around her throat.

He shook her so hard strands of her hair were whipping back and forth. A baby was killed a month ago in my apartment complex the same way. Her mother shook it because it was crying, and didn't it know better than to cry too loud?

It rattled me too. I needed to run upstairs and save her, but I stood still. I knew helplessness then, what it really was. Dad told me, during one of his religious binges, that once there was nothing but an empty earth, and then God's face moved over the water. Whosoever believed in him had to accept unpreventable things. The water was just there.

I watched Dad shake her. He kept saying something, and I couldn't quite hear it at first, but it sounded like: *no no no not that no*. Said all at once like a chant during a ritual. Maybe she told him she was going to leave him. Maybe she told him she wanted to get a new car. Who the fuck knows?

As he shook her, there was a fleshy sound and then teeth rattling. She put her hands up, so I knew it wasn't a daydream. She tried to dig her fingers into his eyes. It told me she was afraid. Truly. He had gone beyond normal rage—had broken the rules of *normal* abuse—and going for the eyes meant it was time for someone to lose.

I can't be sure, but she may have seen me. Or maybe her head jerking to the side confused me, and her look in my direction was too quick to catch me. When I see her sometimes in dreams, she never acts like I was there, but I always feel like I missed her words, a prayer she said to me on the stairs, a command I should have done for her.

She got one of her fingers into his eye. Dad stepped into her space and threw a punch to her side. It didn't look to me like there was much power behind it, but that wasn't the point. It made her drop her hands from his eyes to protect her chest and body, leaving her head and chin exposed. He swung an uppercut. The sound of it hitting her chin. Her head popped back like someone had pulled a string strapped to her head. Blood from her nose—she must have already been bleeding—dripped out over the wall. Then she fell over the banister.

I think Dad, maybe out of instinct, tried to grab for her at the last moment. But she fell anyway, and, because of the punch, she was already dazed and went over headfirst. She landed so her head went one way and her body the other, shattering her spine. Her body came to rest in front of me, her blood dripping down the stairs.

There were only a few drops of red on the wood, but lately, when I think of it, I see blood that can't be stopped or contained. I heard a scream then, quiet and low, almost apologizing for being so loud. But it kept building, and I don't remember if it was me or Dad or both of us.

Dad came down the stairs, taking them slowly, probably realizing what he'd done only a step at a time. I was staring at Mom, who I thought was still alive because her eyes were open. I ran to her and tried to get her to wake up. But she wasn't seeing me. She wasn't seeing anything anymore because she had tried to fight back, and that was no good at all. So she was dead.

Then Dad said something, and I looked up at him. I know this is the part you're interested in, what I've never told.

He said, "We have to fix this."

"So he didn't come after you right away?" David says.

No. He didn't. I made that up later, that he came for me, that he tried to kill me too. But he didn't. He wanted my help.

"With what?"

We both stood over her body for a long time. He kept saying *we have to fix this*. He went to the garage. When he came back, he had a spare rug and a pack of garbage bags.

He asked me to help roll her up. He went under the sink and got a whole bin of cleaning supplies out. All the time he was talking to me, telling me he loved me, telling me our family is strong and we can survive this.

It took him a long time to find that rug, David. I was already calming down.

"You were still in shock."

No, I don't think so. I was still feeling that anger.

When he came back into the room with the cleaning supplies, I heard Elizabeth crying, and the sound was like opening a freezer door on an already cold day. I became alert, rational.

"It seems that way now, Michael, but that doesn't make it true."

Why are you acting like you know? You think you escaped but you didn't. It must be true because I started lying. I told Dad I understood. That he couldn't help it—it *was* an accident. I said, *Mom loved us and we loved her but it was an accident, Dad, and I can't lose you too*. He started crying *then*, not when she died. He loved himself enough to value the opinions of those who shared half his DNA.

He told me to go and get the bleach from the laundry room. I went there, got it, and circled back into the kitchen. I grabbed the only good knife we had.

If the police had looked closely later, they might have found some problems with my story. But they didn't. They just saw a wife beater and a dumb kid who happened to be his grown-up sperm.

I hid the knife behind my back. When I came back into the living room, he was kneeling beside Mom, trying to lift her onto the rug. I went behind him and put my arm around his shoulders. I felt him reach up and touch my hand as if to say: it's going to be okay, son. A real

bonding moment.

I slid my hand from around his shoulders to the top of his forehead, and with my other arm, brought the knife around to his jugular. I began to saw from one side of his neck to the other. I used too much pressure—that's what could have gotten me in trouble. The blood poured out over my hands and it was warm. He pitched backward for a second, then fell forward. I pushed down on his shoulder when he began to sit up, and he tried to say something. I didn't say anything to him, only watched as his expression went from surprise to sadness.

After it was over, I threw the knife on the ground, washed off my hands, and took the rug and garbage bags back. Then I called the police and went into Elizabeth's room to wait for them. She slept through the whole thing. When did you get the call?

"They came to me right before the Math Olympiad. I left early with one of my teachers."

I told the cops it was self-defense. After he killed Mom he came for me too, and I wrestled the knife out of his hands and slashed him with it. I think they knew I was lying.

"Maybe."

When did you know?

"Soon after. But we never talked about it. The next two years were just me and you trying to adjust. Do you feel better now?"

I don't know.

"Will you look after Elizabeth?"

IV.

They sit without speaking until Michael coughs.

"I need some time to think about it. You'll be in touch, right?"

"Sure," David says.

"One other thing," Michael says. "Why did you call me, really? Why not someone else?"

"I had this memory of a beach somewhere. I was on vacation. You weren't there but you should have been."

"You could have put me there," Michael says. "It was just a dream after all."

"It wouldn't have been real then. But I suppose it doesn't matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Just focus on improving yourself."

After a moment Michael smiles and says, "I still don't understand you."

Michael approaches the doorway and David rises to meet him. David touches Michael's upper arm for a brief second. Quickly and without looking back, Michael walks out of the house

and David closes the door. There's hardly a sound. Everything is fine. David is sure Michael will agree to the task, and the first step toward repair will be done.

He goes to the bookshelf and begins assembling two of the cardboard boxes lining the wall. He meant to pack up his remaining items much earlier. Focusing on the work, he begins loading books into the containers. He throws a book into the box, taping it up tightly, his face growing warm. He played chess with his father when they were young, and David always let him win. As he puts the books away, he sees himself lying, pretending to not know the moves his father was going to make. His hands are shaking, his face warm. He feels the first droplets of sweat forming on his brow.

David finishes taping the box, goes back into the kitchen. The clash in lighting makes it too dark to see outside. He looks down and sees his hands pressing against the kitchen table so hard his knuckles are turning white.

He decides to walk it off. It is a good strategy everywhere except the army. He puts on his coat and steps outside, met with a rush of coolness that doesn't fully reach him. The fence before him is shapeless in the dark. He called the city a month ago to report the streetlight outage. He pulls his phone out and dials Elizabeth's number. An orange shape appears in the yard then darts away. She doesn't answer.

As he stands on the sidewalk, he closes his eyes and sees an ocean somewhere near Nags Head. In the memory, there is no clear sense of time, only images that seem to come shimmering in like spume off the sea, flashing for a moment then breaking apart. The foam and his memory become solid only in the present. He sees another person, a shape on the water, waiting ahead as he paddles forward. Knowing the shape is an illusion doesn't make it disappear. From the center of the sea, he sees many other people like himself in every direction, each of them ready to take his place in the world should he decide not to return, and no matter how quickly he paddles, he will never reach them, and in every moment he will have to choose one or more of them to become—the one that went out too far, the one who never called his brother again. And he smiles because he knows the memory of the sea is another piece of content, a child's mark on a photograph, but not the picture itself.

He stands on the street, getting older, his gut beginning to hang over his jeans. He allows himself to feel a different emotion, and it brings with it a clear sense of space. He walks in the direction of the church. His footsteps sound up and down the empty section of row houses. Before long, he hears people ahead.

Two shapes come into view. At first, they are just white splotches against a black background, and then they take the shape of two men wearing oversized white t-shirts. One of them wears a red hat.

Striding ahead, David plunges his fists into his coat pockets to warm his hands, which have already grown icy in the thirty seconds of cold. Fifteen feet away, he stops. The youngest guy can't be over sixteen; the oldest is probably in his twenties. Both are skinny and staring at him. The glow from a nearby streetlight sends David's silhouette forward, violating them.

"What's up?" the younger one with the hat says. David can tell he is the one who called out before, though his voice lacks the loudness from earlier in the night.

David doesn't answer. He continues walking toward them.

“Hey, yo,” the older man says, louder than his friend.

David closes the last few feet separating them, each step bringing their faces into focus, each step making their faces more obscure. He does not want them to be people. Somewhere nearby, a dog barks.

He can stay. He can live in this sea before violence, preserved in its center as it pulses. Each time he finds its exit, it will dissolve like bacteria touched by a needle, only to shift away until it reconstitutes elsewhere, leaving and reclaiming him. As he steps forward to invite the two shapes to join him, the seconds feel strange. No air, no time, and the street has vanished.

Contributor Biographies

POETRY

PHILIP BERRY's poems have appeared in *Lucent Dreaming*, *Picaroon*, *Black Bough*, and *Easy Street*, among others. He also writes short fiction/flash and CNF. His work can be explored at philberrycreative.wordpress.com or @philaberry. He is a London-based doctor.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *The Virginia Normal*, *Credo Espoir*, and *Chiron Review*, among others.

HOLLY DAY's poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *The Tampa Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *In This Place, She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski's Porch Publishing), *Folios of Dried Flowers and Pressed Birds* (Cyberwit.net), *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), and *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing), while her newest nonfiction books are *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Tattoo FAQ*.

DANIEL DYKIEL is a writer and Computer Science student at New College of Florida. His work has been published in *Kingdoms in the Wild*, *Polyphony Lit*, *Blue Marble Review*, and more. He enjoys writing about ambiguity, the subconscious, and monstrosity. To keep up with Daniel's current projects, visit ddykiel.github.io.

JASON FISK is a husband to one, a father to three, and a teacher to many. He lives and writes in the suburbs of Chicago. His long list of employment before becoming a teacher includes working in a psychiatric unit, laboring in a cabinet factory, and mixing cement for a bricklayer. He was born in Ohio, raised in Minnesota, and has spent the last 25 years in the Chicago area. www.jasonfisk.com

MEGAN E. FREEMAN writes poetry and fiction, and her debut children's novel, *Lone Girl*, is forthcoming from Simon & Schuster/Aladdin. Her poetry collection, *Lessons on Sleeping Alone*, was published by Liquid Light Press. Megan's poetry has appeared in multiple anthologies and literary journals, and as commissions by the Los Angeles Master Chorale and Ars Nova Singers. Megan lives and writes near Boulder, Colorado. www.meganefreeman.com

KRISTIN GARTH is a Pushcart, Best of the Net, and Rhysling-nominated sonnet stalker. Her sonnets have stalked journals like *Glass*, *Yes*, *Five:2:One*, *Luna Luna*, and more. She is the author of

fourteen books of poetry including *Pink Plastic House* (Maverick Duck Press), *Candy Cigarette Womanchild Noir* (The Hedgehog Poetry Press), the forthcoming *Flutter: Southern Gothic Fever Dream* (TwistiT Press), *The Meadow* (APEP Publications), and *Shut Your Eyes, Succubi* (Maverick Duck). Follow her on Twitter @lolaandjolie and her website, kristingarh.com.

JANNA GRACE lives in a half-glass barn, and her work has most recently appeared in *Otoliths*, *The Opiate*, and *Ghost City Press*, among others. She has pieces forthcoming in *Wide Eyes Publishing* and *Nine Muses Poetry*, and she teaches writing at Rutgers University. Janna is the editor of *Lamplit Underground*, and her debut novel will be published through Quill Press in 2019.

MARGARET KOGER is a school media specialist with a writing habit based in Boise, Idaho. Her poetry appears in numerous publications, most recently in *Collective Unrest*, *The Heartland Review*, *Inez*, *Voice of Eve*, *Headway*, *The Chaffey Review*, *Cleaning Up Glitter*, *Burning House*, and *Heart of Flesh*.

RICHARD LEDUE was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada. He currently lives in Norway House, Manitoba. His work has been published by the *Tower Poetry Society*, in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, the *Eunoia Review*, and *Mojave He[art] Review*.

A. MARTINE is a trilingual writer, musician, and artist of color who goes where the waves take her. She might have been a kraken in a past life. She's an assistant editor at *Reckoning Press* and a managing editor and podcast producer of *The Nasiona*. Her collection *AT SEA* was shortlisted for the 2019 *Kingdoms in the Wild Poetry Prize*. Some words found or forthcoming in: *Berfrois*, *The Rumpus*, *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, *South Broadway Ghost Society*, *RIC Journal*, *Gone Lawn*, *Crack the Spine*, *Ghost City Review*, *Rogue Agent*, *Boston Accent Lit*, *Porridge Magazine*, *Feminine Collective*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and *Figure 1*. @Maellstrom/www.maellstrom.com.

JOAN MCNERNEY's poetry has been included in numerous literary magazines such as *Seven Circle Press*, *Dinner with the Muse*, *Poet Warriors*, *Blueline*, and *Halcyon Days*. Four Bright Hills Press anthologies, several Poppy Road Review journals, and numerous Kind of a Hurricane Press publications have accepted her work. Her latest title, *The Muse in Miniature*, is available on Amazon, and she has four Best of the Net nominations.

ELIZABETH OCHSNER is a lifelong writer of half-finished stories. A recent graduate from George Mason University, she works as an instructional assistant while navigating the endless possibilities of her post-depression world. You can find her on Instagram @elizabethochsner.

EMMANUEL ODEKUNLE is a self-taught African Poet, a down-to-heart communicator, and an economist by university education, who writes from Ibadan, Oyo State. Emmanuel writes catchy

phrases and punch lines, and he is popular on Instagram and other social media platforms under the moniker: “*The Chronicler*,” who invents short form pieces (epigrams and erasures) that drive the blade into the flesh of his first-time readers and followers. He is the author of many chapbooks (with individual poems and excerpts) that are forthcoming in various magazines across the literary space. The sun, the moon, and the balance and imbalance within nature are what his poetry is derived from. Some of his chapbooks are available on self-publishing platforms such as OkadaBooks, Amazon Kindle, Booklify, and Wattpad.

SIMON PERCHIK is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The Gibson Poems* published by Cholla Needles Arts & Literary Library, 2019. For more information, including free e-books and his essay “Magic, Illusion and Other Realities,” please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com. You can view one of his interviews [on YouTube here](#).

PRADEEP SEN is from India, and after spending 22 years in the corporate sector as a professional manager he entered the domain of training and development as a consultant. During that time, he began to put his personal experiences into a journal without a clue as to where it was going to lead. His observations began to take shape as poems. Pradeep’s working life, which spans 42 years, included a changing landscape of India (and indeed the world) that made him feel that he has lived in two different worlds, the second more dystopian. Pradeep has 50 poems in his list and two works of prose fiction.

DORSÍA SMITH SILVA is a Full Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Her poetry has been published in several journals and magazines in the United States and the Caribbean, including *Apple Valley Review*, *New Reader Magazine*, *Portland Review*, *Rock & Sling*, *Heartwood Literary Review*, *Stoneboat*, *Misfit Magazine*, *Nassau Review*, *Shot Glass*, *Moko Magazine*, and *POUI: Cave Hill Journal of Creative Writing*. She is also the editor of *Latina/Chicana Mothering* and the co-editor of six books.

Hailing from LA, MELODY SOKOLOW is a 62-year-old Autistic writer of poems and prose and is a child at heart, as well as a mother of two beloved grown sons, also on the spectrum, both successfully working at their life’s passions. Currently living in the Pacific Northwest, she draws upon her rich memory and imagination and the complexity of the internal landscape that she adventures in, and you will feel this in her writing.

LIWA SUN is a Chinese poet. Her poems are forthcoming in *The Bare Life Review* and elsewhere. She lets poetry contaminate her memory, in which she rejoices. She lives in Philadelphia with a small couch and mountains of books.

YVONNE is first poetry editor of two pioneer feminist magazines, *Aphra* and *Ms.*, and has received several awards including NEAs for poetry (1974, 1984) and a Leeway (2003) for fiction (as

Yvonne Chism-Peace). Print publications featuring her poems include: *Home: An Anthology* (Flexible), *Bryant Literary Review*, *Pinyon*, *Nassau Review 2019*, *Bosque Press #8*, *Foreign Literary Journal #1*, *Quiet Diamonds 2019 & 2018* (Orchard Street), *161 One-Minute Monologues from Literature* (Smith and Kraus), *This Sporting Life* (Milkweed), *Bless Me, Father: Stories of Catholic Childhood* (Plume), *Catholic Girls* (Plume/Penguin), *Tangled Vines* (HBJ), *Celebrations: A New Anthology of Black American Poetry* (Follett), *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, and *We Become New* (Bantam). Excerpts from her verse memoir can be found online at *Not Very Quiet*, *Stonecrop Review*, *American Journal of Poetry*, *AMP*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Poets Reading the News*, *Rigorous*, *Headway Quarterly*, *Collateral*, *the WAIF Project*, Brain Mill Press's *Voices*, *Cahoodaloodaling*, and *Edify Fiction*. Yvonne is the author of an epic trilogy: *Iwilla Soil*, *Iwilla Scourge*, *Iwilla Rise* (Chameleon Productions).

FICTION

STEVE GERGLEY is a writer and runner based in Warwick, New York. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *A-Minor*, *After the Pause*, *Barren Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *Pithead Chapel*, and others. In addition to writing fiction, he has composed and recorded five albums of original music.

MIKE ITAYA lives in southern Alabama, where he works in a library. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Oracle Fine Arts Review*, *The Airgonaut*, *Bending Genres*, *decomP Magazine*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Belletrist Magazine*, and *Orson's Review*.

FIONA M. JONES is a spare-time writer living in Scotland. She is a regular contributor to *Folded Word*, and her short fiction has appeared in a number of online publications, notably *Silver Pen* and *Buckshot Magazine*. Her work is visible by @FiiJ20 on Facebook, Twitter, and Thinkerbeat.

TARA KUSTERMANN is an emerging writer living on Florida's Space Coast while she attends the University of Central Florida. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Star*Line*, *Liminality*, and *Dirty Girls Magazine*. Like any good millennial, she has too many plants and too many cats. Find her online @NoTaraHere on Twitter or at www.tarakustermann.com.

A.D. METCALFE is a member of the SCBWI, the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod, and sits on the Board of Directors for the Cape Cod Writers Center. In July of 2017, she won first place in *Gemini Magazine's* short story contest with a piece entitled "Epiphany on the E Train." The next summer a creative nonfiction piece was selected by *Dark Ink Magazine*. Her children's picture book, "Mousebound," was published under the pen name Leslie Ann George.

J.L. MOULTRIE is a native Detroiter, poet, and fiction writer who communicates his art through

the written word. He fell in love with literature after encountering Fyodor Dostoyevsky, James Baldwin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and many others. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Datura Literary Journal*, *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*, *Visitant*, *Backchannels*, *The Free Library of the Internet Void*, and elsewhere. He considers himself a literary abstract artist of modernity.

JAMES PATE's fiction has been published in the *Black Warrior Review*, *Action Yes*, *Berkley Fiction Review*, and *Superstition Review*, among other places. His story "Aunt Helena" is forthcoming in the *Midnight in the Witch's Kitchen* anthology (Alban Lake Publishing). His poetry collection, *The Fassbinder Diaries*, was published in 2013 by Civil Coping Mechanisms, and a collection of essays, *Flowers Among the Carrion*, was published in 2016 by Action Books. His occult noir novel *Speed of Life* (named after the David Bowie song) was published by Fahrenheit Press in 2017. He is currently working on a novel about a cult in New Orleans.

SEAN SAM is an editor of *Ligeia Magazine*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Salt Hill*, *ellipsis*, and *Potomac Review*. Find him online at www.seansam.com.

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART

RUSS DAUM often draws inside a daily atmosphere of chaos. His subconscious guides his hand in search of peace. He has previously contributed art to *Rhythm & Bones* and illustrated the "poetic operatic adult fairytale," *A Victorian Dollhousing Ceremony*. More about Russ can be found at scrawlsscratchesscribbles.home.blog and on Twitter @RussDaum.

EDWARD LEE's poetry, short stories, non-fiction, and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England, and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen*, and *Smiths Knoll*. He is currently working on two photography collections: *Lying Down With The Dead* and *There Is A Beauty In Broken Things*. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Lewis Milne, Orson Carroll, Blinded Architect, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at edwardmlee.wordpress.com.

FABRICE POUSSIN teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review* and *the San Pedro River Review*, as well as other publications.