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Dear Reader,

It has been a long and bumpy road here at *New South*. When I was asked to step back in as Editor in Chief last fall, I had no idea how bumpy it would continue to be. So, two-month-old baby in arms, I headed right into the middle of one great big bureaucratic nightmare. But, through all the struggles of university defunding, red tape, and one looming Submittable queue, I've gotten to read the amazing work people keep trusting us with, wear every hat in the game, cry over emails in the bath, and publish two really gorgeous issues. With this issue, I really, finally hang up my *New South* hat(s) and I couldn't be more proud of what this journal has accomplished in my seven (wow) years working with it.

Going forward, the way things run at *New South* will have some big changes: going digital, moving to live in Georgia State's English department, a brand-new team of editors. Though I'm leaving, I'm excited to see where *New South* goes from here and I hope you'll all stick around too. For now, here's one phenomenal issue featuring nearly forty phenomenal writers. I hope you love it.

Sincerely,

Anna Sandy Elrod

Editor in Chief

New South Journal

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ALLISON MOORE

**Prisca juvent alios; ego me nunc denique natum Gratulor.**

*Let others praise ancient times; I'm glad I was born in these. -Ovid*

I vomited in Rome steps from the Colosseum.  
I'd like to think I was sensitive  
to the historical deaths of wild elephants  
and tigers murdered for spectacle,  
gladiators hurling seams of blood, prisoners  
burned alive or decapitated at noon while hungry viewers  
enjoyed their tasty ancient lunches;  
but in fact I was ignorant, simply  
dehydrated. A smirking policeman  
encouraged me to swing my arms  
up and down, he was having fun with this  
American tourist gasping and heaving  
in the dust. The hospital where they hooked me  
to an overnight iv was free. And far away. My boyfriend  
tried to hitch us a ride with the ambulance  
back to city center the next morning. Needless  
to say, we were refused. I best remember  
fresh pesto in the restaurant, the Pantheon's  
aged brilliance, its oculus of contemporary  
daylight, marbled ruins everywhere of fora, temples, arches  
violent and all-powerful, what we now call  
civilized, what we now call Empire.

KATIE PRINCE

## more the sparkle than the darkness

*after Laura Kasischke*

look! every individual moment glinting like it's worth something. when I think of space it's more the sparkle than the darkness, these days. a serving tray with cloudy ice cubes melting. a light and then a click off. once I counted all the stars I could see in the sky and I came out to twenty-six. here I forfeit my last right to call myself a scientist, or poet, or shoe melting against a midsummer campfire. there is something funny about it—like listening to Bach as your car goes careening off the cliff face. or aims for the tunnel but finds it painted on. what is it you think about art, anyway? she—

just kept her thoughts to herself.

the gods I created still live and breathe in an ocean or on a dust mote somewhere. I reached into the nothing and came out with a fine black powder all over my hands, particles too small to fully clean off. or the fog of jade and shadow.

a trash heap of the glittering jewels that are my not-writing. the bullets to break your teeth on in the candy bowl. the longer you sit on something the more pristine it comes out—is that true? logic tells us so but what are we if not animals? a creature wishing for some unreasonable indulgence. some sharp fanged teeth, cracked by a gemstone and yelping in hurt surprise. I just exfoliated my skin and set forth a million gods. I just walked through the hole you left in the wall and came out a different, crueller, more charismatic beast.

## lachryphagy

here—a temptation, sun-drenched. I was tiptoeing across a silent meadow & you stood like a statue on the other side. you had the body of a spotted horse. all these tiny arctic flowers between us, weeping. & how they suddenly grew!—became a forest of blues, oranges, a sky like burning. & I lost, & you lost, & we neighing to each other amid flush of petal & storm. & sheep caught in branches, berries dotting their wool, bleating woefully. & a sonic boom of buzzing above, where hundreds of gigantic bees floated, feasting.

JULIE MARIE WADE

## Roshambo

*how you look at a series of incidentals  
and pull an invisible thread through them all.*  
—Arthur Sze

<b>Rock</b>	<b>Paper</b>	<b>Scissors</b>
<p>One day I realized I didn't know how to define even the simplest things. I could point and say, <i>Yes, that there, I know exactly what that is</i>—yet I couldn't explain exactly what it was.</p> <p>Take rock, for example: A solid collection of mineral grains that grow or become cemented together. That's not what I would have said. It took a book, a functional book, to provide me with a functional answer.</p> <p>It turns out I do not write functional books, though to be fair, I never thought I did.</p> <p>We're on a rock, right? <i>Third rock from the sun</i>, they say. Some they, some people who made it a thing to say, and the people who</p>	<p>The riddle of it: source and use, size and color. Ubiquitous still, despite the rise of screens.</p> <p>Put a <i>the</i> in front, and you have something delivered to a house, shaped like a scroll, oracle of happenings referred to as <i>stories</i>.</p> <p>There's something antiquated (eerie, nostalgic) about this scene, like a page torn from a storybook: The paper tossed onto a porch at daybreak by a boy riding past on his bike. A dog called Fido or Spot fetching it, bringing it inside to his <i>master</i>. A man reading at the breakfast table instead of regarding his family. A woman in a housedress and heels, scrambling eggs, setting out butter. A toaster that launches warm bread in the air.</p>	<p>When I think of them, my mind sails over the object they are and alights on the word standing in for them. Word as agent acting on behalf of. (Hasn't it always been so?)</p> <p>Word as ambassador for meaning. Scissors has no true rhyme. Scissors have no true rhyme. Which way is the right way to write this? I doubt myself every time.</p> <p>In English, there is no singular form for scissors. Paradoxically, if the speaker means one, the speaker must say "a pair."</p> <p>This is not unlike love, even as it is not love.</p>



later made the phrase into a sitcom. (Those people were Bonnie and Terry Turner, by the way.)  We live on a big spinning rock comprised of many smaller rocks. So they taught us in school. Rocks upon rocks upon rocks: <i>igneous</i> , <i>sedimentary</i> , <i>metamorphic</i> . Rock all the way down, then more rock at the bottom. <i>Rock</i> as metonym for <i>planet</i> , but also, when you think about it, metonym for <i>home</i> .	Journalism is one way to tell a story, but it isn't mine. I've tried. It's the matter of withholding the self from the story that troubles me, feels less <i>true</i> even when it is, indisputably, more <i>factual</i> .  Isn't every story papered over with our longings and our fears? How could we tell it otherwise?  Maybe I'm just suspicious of <i>mastery</i> at large.  Since we know now that no one is a master of anyone, how can anyone claim to be a master of anything?  <i>Not the address scribbled onto scrap paper</i> (Ángel García). Not even that.  We used to have a <i>paperboy</i> (one word, Spellcheck says) named Alan	In Latin, there is a phrase for the phenomenon— <i>plurale tantum</i> —meaning <i>plural only</i> . Three syllables, then two. Alluring phrase, attractive and enigmatic.  Plurale Tantum sounds like a sleuth or a spy, like a woman akin to Carmen Sandiego, that red hat tipped across her eyes.  Perhaps love is less like the scissors and more like the absent rhyme.  So often, love finds itself entire and apart.  <i>You see, it's a miracle I still love/rhyme, the coincidence of language and time.</i> (Omotara James)  For many years, I thought words would be my only love affair.
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furnace switched on, banded by hot air. Nothing about our suspension in space has ever seemed like a sturdy operation.  Still: Have I always wanted a moon rock? Yes.  Do I have any idea what a moon rock actually is? <i>Not really</i> .  Desire is so seldom functional I have to laugh.  The first Nancy Drew book I ever read was <i>The Moonstone Castle Mystery</i> . I chose it from all the titles in the series, all the books on the shelf, because of that pairing of <i>moon</i> and <i>stone</i> .  I wanted one. I couldn't say why.	us, and my mother knew his mother from a social club. They had the idea we should get to know each other better.  Around the same time, I had the idea to start a neighborhood newspaper—an <i>alternative weekly</i> , I said.  <i>Alternative to what?</i>  This was the question everyone asked, but my priority, it seems, has never been answers.  I imagined it would be <i>clean, neatly folded, [...] bagged, and tied with a ribbon</i> (Andrea Carter Brown), and I would deliver it myself.  Meanwhile, my parents were busy papering every room in our house,	If you Google “rhymes with scissors,” you’ll find a list of slants, plus one word— <i>cizars</i> —that won’t ring any bells. When you click, you’ll see the word defined: <i>an obsolete form of the modern “scissors.”</i>  Which brings us back to the one and the many in one, the <i>plurale tantum</i> of the hinged double-blade.  Not <i>tantrum</i> , as I first typed—though that word, too, isn’t far from love. It comes from the same place, <i>ibid</i> , a land of large emotion.  <i>And so before bed we took everything out/again—papers and pens and stamps and scissors</i> (Carrie Fountain). We keep forgetting all that we actually have.
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Is a <i>moon rock</i> the same as a <i>moon stone</i> ? No idea.	time.	Scissors, like rocks, like paper, are omnipresent these days. What home, what school, what styling salon doesn't keep more than a few pairs on hand? ( <i>Scissors</i> , plural already, then pluralized again.) What office or clinic or recreation center could now make do without them?
Spellcheck insists <i>moon rock</i> is two words and <i>moonstone</i> just one.	Turns out: <i>The earliest wallpapers of the 16th century were used to decorate the insides of cupboards and smaller rooms in merchants' houses rather than the grand houses of the aristocracy. By the beginning of the 20th century, wallpaper was being used everywhere, in hallways, kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms, and was popular in both the wealthiest and the poorest homes.</i>	Turns out: <i>The first scissors were used sometime around 3000-4000 years ago in Egypt. They were made with two bronze blades connected by a thin, curved, bronze strip.</i>
So much for symmetry.	If you asked her, in the late 20th century, my mother would have said, <i>Painted walls are passé.</i>	We assume there will always be scissors nearby: to cut along a dotted line, to open a bag when the <i>tear here</i> imperative fails, to sever the tag from a garment.
I hear a world of difference in the sounds of these words, their relative weights and beauties. But—functionally speaking—what's the difference between a <i>rock</i> and a <i>stone</i> ?	First, I wrote the newspaper by hand, in any number of Mead notebooks and on loose-leaf paper three-hole-punched and secured inside a three-ring binder. I enlisted	Once, when I was small, my mother instructed me to remove the tag
<i>I've thrown words like rocks and hit something in a room when I aimed/for a window</i> (Krysten Hill)		
<i>He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone</i> (John 8:7)		
Do they not seem interchangeable to you? <i>Thrown</i> and <i>cast</i> , <i>rock</i> and <i>stone</i> .		

Both capable of damage, each harboring a threat of harm.	friends to contribute pieces—op-eds, fashion advice, horoscopes—so the stories would not be exclusively mine.	from a swimsuit she had bought for me at Sears. I still remember the shimmering pink fabric, the small black dots, the tie around the neck more ribbon than strap.
So I Googled. I am a product of my time, a woman of my age: <i>Rocks are hard materials found on the earth's crust. Rocks can be found above ground as well as below ground. Stones are non-metallic minerals. A stone is formed from rock after it has been trimmed or dressed or polished into tiny pieces.</i>	Later, I went to a neighbor's house to type the paper on her desktop computer. She played music I had never heard before: Sinead O'Connor, Counting Crows. I grew attuned to an echo of myself inside their songs.	I loved that swimsuit so much I could already feel my body inside it.
It seems stones are smaller than rocks, derived from rocks. Related to, but not the same, as rocks.	<i>All I want to do is just sit here/and write it all down and rest for a while</i> (Sinead O'Connor)	But when I reached for the ubiquitous scissors, the orange-handled scissors, I blundered. Instead of holding the price tag far from the size tag, I pressed these together and snipped at the slender strip of plastic between them. The tip of one blade pierced the fabric, and a hole (aperture, wound) widened across the smooth iridescence.
Stone children, rock parents?	Over the years, my parents suggested many pastimes, such as making paper cranes or making paper dolls. I never pursued these activities, which may have seemed, in retrospect, a kind of renunciation.	I wore the swimsuit anyway. My mother noticed the visible round of my flesh, just as I knew she would.
<i>The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer.</i> (Psalm 18:2)		
God as Rock. God as the Ultimate		

Parent. Was Heaven just another rock in space—a rock—holy, golden, evanescent orb? (I learned nothing from the <i>Bible</i> if not the merit of adjectives.) As a child, shiny and smooth, I studied my parents with a geologist's fortitude. Things between us were often <i>rocky</i> , a relationship some might describe as <i>on the rocks</i> . Metaphors can be functional, too. Sometimes <i>rocks</i> means <i>ice</i> . But we were the opposite of ice on our rocks—we were molten with misunderstanding. If I mean <i>rocky</i> , will <i>stony</i> suffice? It doesn't sound quite right. Difficult, yes, but in a different way. Rocky is	Alan Kent delivered the newspaper twice a day: once before school and once after school. He wore a cloth poncho with huge pockets in the front and back. They held rows of newspaper scrolls, which he would toss toward our porches as he pedaled past. I kept a diary during these years, which always made my mother nervous. "It's for my mystery club," I told her—but it wasn't. We found <i>The West Seattle Herald</i> in hedges and hydrangea bushes. We found <i>The Seattle Times</i> in flowerbeds and soaked from the sprinklers on the front lawn. When we traveled, someone had to come and collect the papers for us. If	"How does everything you touch always turn to _____?" The word she seethed was the opposite of gold.  <i>Toward the scissored edges of hours</i> (Franny Choi), that's where I leaned. Time has corners, the same as any room. Turns out: The scissors with the orange handles have a name, a history related to, but not the same as, all the other kinds. This is not unlike love, even as it is not love. Turns out: <i>In 1967, the plastics industry was exploding. The material was finding its way into many household objects, and Finnish designer Olof Bäckström was working on creating plastic tabletops</i>
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leaning into hardship, while stony is pulling away. Think of it this way: People go <i>rock-climbing</i> , not <i>stone-climbing</i> . (I don't, but some people do.) I think the implication here is that rocks make for a challenging climb, but not an insurmountable one. You can find a place of purchase on a rock, then pull yourself up using your core. On stones, you would just slip off, wouldn't you? No textured surface to grab hold of, no cache in which to steady your hand, your foot. In other words, it is futile work to try to climb stones. Rocks you can climb, though you might die trying.	they didn't, it was a dead giveaway no one was home. I called my newspaper <i>The Fauntleroy Gazette</i> . You could subscribe for the standard rate of one dollar a month or the discounted rate of 10 dollars a year. Meanwhile, my parents spent hours on weekends and holidays wielding tubs of glue into their hallways, kitchens (there was a second one downstairs), bathrooms, and bedrooms, then stretching and sticking new floral patterns onto the walls. Turns out: Wallpaper actually began in ancient China, first because the Chinese invented paper, and secondly because they glued rice paper onto their walls as early as 200 B.C.E.	<i>and other home goods at Fiskars. He had some orange plastic left over from making orange juicers, which became the de facto material for his prototype scissors. He took a pair of typical heavy metal shears, combined it with the light durable plastic, and designed a handle actually curved to fit the user's hands—a first. Today these are known as Fiskars scissors.</i> 1967, in North America, was known as the Summer of Love. My parents married in August—at a Lutheran church in the suburbs of Seattle. In their wedding photographs, everything is beige or white except the roses in the women's pert bouquets. These were the quietest pink, the least obtrusive pink, a rose has ever been. All that summer <i>flower children</i> were
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<p><i>Stone</i> as a verb means to injure, with intent to punish and finally to kill.</p> <p><i>Rock</i> as a verb means the opposite: to move gently from side to side, with intent to comfort and finally to calm.</p> <p>So much for symmetry.</p> <p>Turns out: Historians do not agree on the origins of the lullaby, “Rock-a-Bye Baby.”</p> <p>Turns out: Antonyms are no less related than synonyms. If anything, their dynamic proves even more fervid.</p> <p>No one would willingly climb into a <i>storing</i> chair. But a <i>rocking</i> chair—now you’re talking.</p> <p>A white wicker rocker in my childhood room, above which hung a</p>	<p>History, it seems to me, is mostly a story of credit and blame, taken by and assigned to the wrong people. I am especially suspicious of the <i>whole story</i>, which I suppose is why I like to write on strips of paper that can later be cut and spliced together.</p> <p>Or on notecards, wide and unlined. Especially those. Any color.</p> <p>In the summers, Alan Kent earned extra money by mowing neighbors’ lawns as well as delivering their papers. When he saw us, the neighborhood girls, running past a yard where he was working, he always smiled and waved.</p> <p>Once, when she had her camera with her, Joy stopped and snapped his picture.</p>	<p>descending on San Francisco, seeking folk music, hallucinogens, and something called <i>free love</i>.</p> <p>Younger-Me: Where did you go on your honeymoon, Mom?</p> <p>Mother: San Francisco. Your father rented a convertible, and we drove together all the way down the Coast.</p> <p>Younger-Me: So, you must have gone to Haight-Ashbury then?</p> <p>Father: Don’t be ridiculous! Why in the world would we ever go there?</p> <p>I revisit their wedding photos, a little crestfallen now. I notice how tidy and buttoned-up the men look, with their trim, scalp-hugging haircuts, their sideburns narrow and long. I notice how quaffed the women appear,</p>
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<p>Turns out: <i>It is illegal to own or possess any lunar material brought back from the Apollo program, including those samples given as gifts.</i></p> <p>So what are you supposed to do with your moon rocks, you beneficiaries of the sky? Throw them out? (Cast them out?) Bury the evidence? More rocks upon rocks upon rocks.</p> <p>Turns out: “<i>Moon rocks</i>” is another slang term for <i>Molly</i> or <i>Ecstasy</i>, derived from MDMA rock crystals crushed into powder.</p> <p>Turns out: <i>Moon rocks</i> are nugs of cannabis flower dipped in extracts and rolled in kief. They resemble a lunar landscape and promise an “out of this world” high.</p> <p>I was a D.A.R.E. kid, not so much</p>	<p>These were also the days of slipping rolls of film (110 mm and later 35 mm) into envelopes at Bartell Drugs, tearing the perforated lip from the sleeve to prove the film was yours, then waiting 5-7 days for a pre-recorded call that proclaimed your pictures ready for pickup.</p> <p>How could anything possibly take so long?</p> <p>Sometimes I came home, and the walls had been stripped, a smidge of old paper dangling like loose skin.</p> <p>Most of the thick, to-be-discarded paper formed a spiral mound, tangling with my feet on the floor.</p> <p><i>while crossing the river of shorn paper, I forget my name (Natalie Scenters-Zapico)</i></p>	<p>their up-dos netted or pinned with a bow—a field day of aerosol spray. No flowers in anyone’s hair.</p> <p>Younger-Me: How long have you had these scissors, Mom?</p> <p>They seemed to have always been with us, the bright orange scissors beneath the bright yellow phone in a corner of the florid kitchen. I spent years there, studying for school, years there studying my mother.</p> <p>This wasn’t Time-Out. This was Time-In, time watching her wear the linoleum thin with her pacing, phone cord wrapped around her shoulder, cutting coupons and box-tops while she spoke, piercing food packages with the two blades yoked, splitting scrap paper into smaller and smaller scraps.</p>
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<p>a daring kid. Even now, I shop for drugs like coffee, lentils, almond butter. At checkout, I present my medical marijuana card.</p> <p><i>Moonstone</i>, I remember now, is a gem. An alternate name is <i>hecatolite</i>—but who’s going to call it that?</p> <p>I don’t remember if gems had anything to do with the mystery at Moonstone Castle, but I do remember, with jewel-like clarity, the three girl-sleuths who solved the case— Nancy, Bess, and George.</p> <p>Sometimes, as an alternative to <i>Julie</i>, my friends would call me <i>Jewels</i>. Maybe they knew about moonstones. I like to imagine they did.</p>	<p>Once I came home, and my mother was holding my diary in one hand, a tuft of toilet paper in the other. (We must have run out of Kleenex.) The diary didn’t have a key, you see, and her finger held her place inside it. Breathing hard, panting in fact, she kept dabbing at her eyes. “I thought it would read like a story,” she said, before she sent me to burn the offending pages over the bathroom sink.</p> <p>When the picture was developed, printed on the glossy 4 x 6 paper that seemed a decadence to us then, we could consider together how handsome Alan Kent really was.</p> <p>I couldn’t deny his handsomeness—I didn’t want to deny it at all—but I wasn’t compelled to gaze at his</p>	<p>In that kingdom, the scissors were her scepter and her sword.</p> <p>Mother: My mother gave them to me. (<i>after a pause</i>) They were a wedding present.</p> <p>Child-Me: She gave you scissors for your wedding? Isn’t that a little—?</p> <p>Mother: My mother was very practical.</p> <p>Father: No comment.</p> <p>Turns out: Saying “no comment” is not the same as not making one.</p> <p>Mother: (<i>after a pause</i>) Think what you want, but look how long they’ve lasted!</p>
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<p>Once, in the parking lot after school, some girls from class passed me a bright pink Pixy Stix. I tipped my head back, poured it all down, but instead of the tart candy powder I expected to taste, the straw was filled with rocks.</p> <p>Sputtering, choking, spitting them out, it did not occur to me to call the fragments <i>stones</i>.</p> <p>Once, at summer camp, the counselors announced we were all going “to climb the famous Schurman Rock.”</p> <p>Turns out: <i>Schurman Rock</i> was constructed between 1938 and 1939 by the <i>Works Progress Administration</i> and is believed to be the first human-made climbing structure in the United States.</p>	<p>picture as long my friends did. Swooning seemed false, overkill, though I did it anyway—partly out of longing, partly out of fear. Later, Joy gave me a copy of the picture since she had ordered a double set. <i>Sunday morning paper dated 1992</i> [...]<i> Daylight fading come and waste another year</i> (Counting Crows)</p> <p>For years, the picture of Alan Kent lived between the last page and closing cover of my diary, <i>like a falling paper flower</i> (Tarfia Faizullah), wrinkle-withered, alone.</p> <p>I don’t know how my mother decided when it was time to change a room, to scrape the paper from the walls and start anew.</p> <p>My newspaper lasted five years. At one time, I had as many as 50 sub-</p>	<p>In 10 years, I was going to meet a woman just up the road from here, and in a fit of passion I wasn’t ready to claim (perhaps a <i>tantrum</i> really), I would fold a sheet of thick construction paper, then cut toward the middle seam on a curve, unfolding in the end a bright red valentine.</p> <p><i>Non-nonchalance</i> I have always possessed.</p> <p>But what was safe to write in the center of that childish heart? Surely not her name, and surely not mine.</p> <p><i>Did purchase, / did pressure, did put the safety on the scissors.</i> (Jessica Rae Bergamino)</p> <p>We never had a safety on ours.</p> <p>This is not unlike love, even as it is</p>
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<p>Turns out: Even in a helmet and a harness, I'm not equipped to climb a rock. Such a thing is neither functional nor desirable for me.</p> <p>“Go ahead, go ahead,” I kept waving them on, all the campers so eager to clamber, so eager to rappel. They let you go up and down again, dangling from the ropes, posing for a picture. They said, “Everyone has to do it.”</p> <p>I said, “In case you're wondering, I also won't be jumping off a bridge.”</p> <p>I dug my heels in then. I stayed grounded. Later, when I got home, I was grounded again.</p> <p>“Where's your team spirit?” my father tossed up his hands. “Don't you even care about fitting in with</p>	<p>scribers.</p> <p>Unlike Alan Kent, I walked each issue of <i>The Fauntleroy Gazette</i> to the subscriber's door, rang their bell, handed it to the person in person. If no one was home, I left the paper in their mailbox or rolled inside the handle of their door.</p> <p>I wouldn't have said <i>I'm a chemical emulsion/ that burns light onto paper</i> (Michael McGriff), but I wasn't not that during those years.</p> <p>Mostly, I struggled with chemistry in all the ways the word can mean. Even when I was failing, I hoped some phantom extra credit would save me.</p> <p>In its simplest, scientific sense, an <i>emulsion is a combination of two or more liquids that do not mix well</i></p>	<p>not love.</p> <p>Instead, I catalogued the parts of a single pair of scissors: <i>finger ring, thumb ring, shaft, pivot screw, inner blade, blade, ride line, point or tip, spine, outer blade, insert rings, stopper, half-moon, logo, finger rest or finger tang.</i></p> <p>It became a code, intricate—erotic even—as I read the words aloud.</p> <p>When you live long enough without a name, you will answer to a euphemism.</p> <p>Later, I bought a small orange heart with a magnetized back at the gift shop, wrote “Fiskars!” in the center with a Sharpie, stuck it to my fridge.</p> <p><i>Fiskars</i>, in lieu of love, or standing in for love once I had found it. <i>Fiskars</i>,</p>
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<p>the other kids?”</p> <p><i>Let's talk about the peony held down by the weight of the rock</i> (Lois P. Jones)</p> <p>OK, let's! I cannot claim any of the peony's splendor, despite my wide, flushed face—but I do know a thing or two about the rock.</p> <p>Sometimes it's a paperweight, and it's perfect. Keeps you and your poems from fluttering away. But sometimes it's the anchor when you're reaching for a buoy, the hard, immovable thing that draws you down deep, that leads you, eventually, to drown.</p> <p>I grew up beside a rocky beach. Or <i>the beach</i>, as I called it then, not knowing that beaches came in other kinds.</p>	<p><i>together, like water and oil.</i></p> <p><i>Emulsion</i> is an interesting word, but more interesting is the word <i>immiscible</i>, which may be used to describe ingredients that do not mix at all.</p> <p>In a notebook, on a notecard, somewhere I wrote: <i>This Immiscible Life</i>—title for something?</p> <p>The mystery club was going strong during those years. We even had a birthday party when our club turned two, with crepe paper and cupcakes and confetti made from a hole punch. (We knew we had to work with what we had.)</p> <p>I told my friends I was going to major in sleuthing in college, but Kristin, our resident skeptic, said,</p>	<p>at the heart of the heart.</p> <p>My mother did not only rule the kitchen. She also ruled the sewing room and the front yard-backyard-wrap-around garden.</p> <p>Spellcheck insists <i>front yard</i> is two words and <i>backyard</i> just one.</p> <p>So much for symmetry.</p> <p>What these places had in common was a need for scissors. What my mother had in common with these places was a cutting edge.</p> <p><i>I felt the cold/weight in my hand/ as I approached/ softness with shears</i> (Shelley Wong). My mother was no champion of softness during my softest years.</p>
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<p>To walk along the beach was to amble (stagger, wobble) over rocks and sometimes to bend down and choose a flat one, a smooth one, the <i>stoniest</i> available one, to skip. If it didn't skip, it landed with a huge <i>kerplunk!</i>, then rippled out in all directions.</p>	<p>“I don't think they let you do that. I think it's the kind of thing you can only learn on the job.”</p> <p>Together we kept open files on all our neighbors, little notes about their comings and goings—even about nice Linda Breuer who let me type the newspaper there.</p>	<p>In the kitchen, she cut our hair with her grooming scissors, her thinning shears. In the sewing room, she altered our clothes with her sewing scissors, her pinking shears. In the garden, she trimmed our hedges with her pruning shears, reinforced our borders with her loppers and her edgers and that word I loved most—<i>averruncator</i>—a long blade made for cutting back the zealous trees.</p>
<p>This was satisfying, too.</p> <p><i>Exposed rock and the low tide/ and an unease outstripping psychology</i> (Maureen N. McLane)</p> <p>I walked along that beach with my father, his sister, his mother—with the Wades who loved the water, like their name. Truth be told, they were rather indifferent toward the rocks, and I was fearful, if they knew my secrets, they would turn rather</p>	<p>Maybe, over time, I confused the purpose of my diary with surveillance. Maybe, over time, I confused the life I was living in my parents' house—for it kept changing, seeming less and less my own—with a stakeout. No day-old doughnuts, no thermos of lukewarm Sanka, but watching, with a keen eye, and recording all the time.</p> <p><i>then a curtain opens. a woman reclining shines huge/ in absolute</i></p>	<p>In 20 years, I was going to marry a woman just up the road from here. In February, in the back room of Le Chat Noir overlooking Bellingham Bay. Snow on the ground, and snow in the air. A Fiskars winter, with only chosen family—no parents—there.</p> <p>We carried flowers from the market, tied with a sash. <i>Nosegays</i>, I must have called them, and so we laughed.</p>

<p>indifferent toward me.</p> <p>At home, my mother was busy tending her garden, blossoms and fronds, heavy pots and hanging baskets and some wilder growth she called <i>groundcover</i>. Truth be told, she was rather indifferent toward the sea and had always been somewhat <i>on the fence</i> about me.</p>	<p><i>tableau. linen, white. skyline, paper. gender, [...] perfectly still, daring life to blink.</i> (Wo Chan)</p> <p>My mother said Alan Kent was going pre-med in college. Of course my mother also said I was going pre-med in college.</p> <p>So much for what mothers say.</p>	<p>Grammarians call the use of a noun as a verb <i>denominalization</i>. But how is the name lost (<i>denominalized</i>) when the same word is being and doing? Like the double blade of a <i>deft entendre</i>, isn't the word <i>doubly</i> nominalized?</p> <p>This might be a case for Nancy Drew, a better case for Carmen Sandiego.</p>
<p>Our fence grew taller every year. It was literal but also a metaphor. Soon, I could no longer see over, even on my toes, but by all accounts, the latticework was a masterpiece. She painted the fence burnt orange.</p> <p>Beyond the foliage and the fencing in, my mother also loved to tend her rocks. She called it a <i>rockery</i>, so I called it a <i>rockery</i>, not to be confused with a <i>rookery</i> for birds—though</p>	<p>In the diary, which I eventually renamed my <i>journal</i>—it sounded more casual that way—I considered how my mother and I might be <i>immiscible</i>, too: <i>Why is she always tearing up the house that way? Why is nothing ever good enough for her? Why am I never good enough?</i></p> <p>As a child, before I started the mystery club, one cantankerous neighbor called my parents to report</p>	<p>Once: <i>See how she scissors across the pool!</i> (I loved the sound of the words in succession as much as the body slicing the water.)</p> <p>Coach Gary was quick to correct me: <i>It might be better to say scissor-kicks.</i></p> <p>Now: <i>Oh. Was my lesbianism already showing?</i></p> <p>That first swell of shame as I shivered</p>

many came to observe.	he had seen me trespassing in his yard. “This isn’t the first time either! If she were a dog, I’d tell you to put her on a leash.”	beside the wall—that first, denominationalized fear.
My mother bought her rocks in heavy bags from a hardware store. She and my father loaded them into the trunk of the car, then loaded them into a wheelbarrow (it was not red, though often glazed with rainwater) and dumped them into a mound. With a shovel, they spread them around. With a rake, they smoothed them.	The joke was on him, though, since my parents had walked me on a leash all through my earliest years. Perhaps he had even seen them through his picture window: the man and woman walking their daughter to Grandmother’s house, a red tether extended (stretching, coiling) between their bodies and hers.	If you Google “scissors as verb,” Merriam-Webster and associates prefer to stay close to the noun: <i>to cut or clip in the manner of scissors, to excise from a text.</i>
The rocks were bright and white like well-cleaned teeth. They sparkled in sunlight. When the moon was full, they glistened like snow.	Once, rifling through the papers on my desk, searching for something she couldn’t name, my mother found it—the glossy 4 x 6 photograph, Alan Kent standing tall in the sun, his gloved hands gripping the push mower like a long flower stem. Black hair, pink cheeks, affable grin.	Yes, I have been scissored before—cut out of the picture, or otherwise re-captioned: <i>friend from college, good friend, close friend, roommate, housemate</i> , (after a pause), <i>well, they go back a long way.</i>
We called them <i>rocks</i> , but they were only really <i>rock-like</i> . Not formed in the earth at all. Today the more upscale retailers call these <i>faux</i> , not <i>fake</i> , as though it makes a difference.		Her father on the phone: <i>Tell the ER doctors you’re someone she knows, that she’s far from home, that she doesn’t have any family up there.</i>
		Turns out: <i>Tuff Cuts is the brand name of the scissors that paramedics</i>

<i>The lonely monster of desire [...] made it something small/ that we wanted to toss rocks at</i> (Michael Torres)	When she handed it back to me, my mother, too, was grinning: “Here. You wouldn’t want to lose your little contraband.”	<i>use to cut away articles of clothing from injured parties in swift, clean strips.</i> These are also known as <i>trauma shears.</i>
Once, when I was small, I wandered through the flower garden to the rockery. I took a fake rock in my hand, appraised its heft. To me, it was as real as the rocks by the sea.	Senior year, my parents tore the upstairs kitchen apart. We took our meals in the basement after that. A home improvement <i>katabasis</i> . (I’m not sure we ever resurfaced.)	When I was small, I dreamed arrival at adulthood would feel like crossing a finish line, with a great festival (perhaps a <i>jamboree</i> ) unfolding on the other side. I would break the ribbon with my body, as I had done once before on the track.
Then, I stood on a wrought iron chair, painted white to match the rocks and to add a certain ambience to the outer reaches of the yard.	and found the kitchen shrouded—appliances covered with sheets, thick tarps discouraging access, rerouting everyone to the basement door.	In the stands, people were cheering. My limbs seemed to reach farther as they rallied for me, lending their voices in my favor.
Peering over the fence, down the long embankment that stretched below, I saw a woman in a window, glasses on her face and tethered to a string, washing dishes at her kitchen sink. I threw the rock toward her, not	Of course I pushed through, prone to trespass as I was. Dust everywhere, tiles high-piled, and the walls—shredded like wrapping paper on Christmas Eve.	In another version of the dream, I stood tall and clean, already grown, smiling like a bride as a stranger handed me a humungous pair of scissors. ( <i>Ceremonial scissors</i> , I’ve since learned they’re called.) When I



to harm, only to invite her looking—perhaps to let her know she had been seen.	Senior year, as I prepared my newspaper’s final issue, I also started a novel. Fiction wasn’t the right form for my story either, but it was closer than journalism had been—a shroud I could later cast off.	snipped the ribbon, I said or heard, “Welcome to the grand opening of your future!”
The rock dropped onto her lawn unnoticed. I threw another and another until a bright white rock ricocheted off the bright red brick of her home—and then she noticed. She looked up and saw me looking, but her expression was not one of recognition at all.	<i>An edge, an excuse on a small scrap of paper, the woods in my mouth</i> (Rindon Johnson)	This is not unlike love, though it is not love.
Rather: outrage, indignation. She looked up my mother in the phone book.	I try to use stone paper now, whenever possible. All my composition books are decomposition books. Paper, like everything else, once seemed so plentiful, not unlike time.	Lower in the list of definitions, the online dictionary offers: <i>to move with a movement resembling scissors.</i>
“What would possess you to do such a thing?” My mother found me hiding, dragged me by the arm. Inside, upstairs, into my room. “Sit here and think about what you’ve done.”	<i>The Fauntleroy Gazette</i> , sad to say, did not have a digital subscription option. I am trying to be mindful of deforestation. I am trying to	(Hmmm.) Could you use it in a sentence please? “ <i>I grabbed the pole and scissored my legs around it, executing a perfect Hollywood spin.</i> ” (Guffaw.)  I have been scissored, yes, as in <i>cut out</i> , as in <i>cut off</i> —but I have also <i>scissored</i> , as in the active verb, the act of collaboration.
		Around this usage lurks a silence so

I’m still sitting there, on the edge of my childhood bed. I’m still rocking a little, too, but not feeling worthy of the chair. My parents have forgotten that they never returned, not to punish me and not to set me free.	remember that even tacility comes at a price. (How I want to touch it, though—the paper, the page. How I love French flaps and deckled edges. Even the sounds of those words.)	large it threatens to drown out all sounds.
<i>the obligation of breaking: of rock &amp; whelm</i> (Natalie Diaz)	Perhaps, I think now, papering those walls was my parents’ way of writing their story. <i>Re-papering</i> those walls their way of revising.	When I press, the Internet suggests my experience might not be <i>a thing</i> , or might only be a <i>real</i> thing, or might only be a <i>pornographic</i> thing.
In time, they’ll change the room, change the locks on the house, even change the rocks in their backyard. My mother mails a letter to Florida: <i>Dad and I have replaced all the rocks, every last one of them. We’re vaxxed, and we have our masks, and we just decided, enough is enough! We hauled 600 pounds of new rocks onto the property, and these are the finest quality. So clean and fresh-looking! I was sick to death of staring at the old</i>	I finished my novel in six months. 1400 hand-scripted pages. I called it <i>Something Lacking, Something Gained</i> . In this way, it was hardly fiction at all.	The Internet refers me to <i>tribadism</i> , as if I have made the Internet uncomfortable with my asking, as if I am making scissors into something they are not, or should not, be.
	Then, the kitchen was finished, with zinnias, dahlias, and nasturtiums beaming back from the walls. New table and chairs. A gleaming island. Fresh curtains and valance to frame the water and garden views.	Go ahead—euphemize me! For so long, I’ve been merely nominal at best.
		Once, Angie and I were driving a long distance together, from one Coast to the other, from the temperates toward the subtropics. That’s when I heard the lyrics. “Wait!

<p>ones.</p> <p>“But isn’t that kind of the thing with rocks?” my wife says, peering at the hand-scripted page. “That they’re old? That’s they’re made from heat and time?”</p> <p>I believe I’ve established that I don’t know how to explain things, even when I know what they mean. “She knows we’ll never see them, you see? Or that <i>I’ll</i> never see them. She doesn’t even want to think about you.”</p> <p><i>We live in the hotel beyond estrangement.</i> (Susan McCabe) Far in the future, Angie and me, happy in a place, in a life, that doesn’t resemble a place or life they know.</p> <p>Sometimes, I think it is made of</p>	<p>When I came home from college, I expected to eat breakfast there, but my mother shooed me away with her Swiffer. “This kitchen is presentational now.”</p> <p>I did not go pre-med, but I did go on to earn two Master’s degrees. I winced at the title, my missing mastery, then went on again in pursuit of further papers.</p> <p>Every year beneath my stocking, since it was too big to fit inside, a tale block of printer paper wrapped in several iterations of the crèche.</p> <p>Perhaps this was the best they could do, this gesture of tacit acknowledgment.</p> <p>I am trying to go paperless, but I still send them postcards.</p>	<p>Go back! Turn it up!” I cried.</p> <p><i>But Zeus said “No, You better let me use my lightning like scissors./Like I cut the legs off the whales./Dinosaurs into lizards.”</i></p> <p>“That’s it!” My face warm with validation. “My favorite slant of all—scissors and lizards.”</p> <p>The song, it pleased me to learn, was called “The Origin of Love.”</p> <p>Of course I still think of my mother. I’ve always <i>imagined her/pouring over a private abundance/ of patterned scissors for the jaggedness of a lily’s leaf, then the sturdy/kitchen shears for a pile of rose petals.</i> (Noah Baldino) She was a schoolteacher after all, which Spellcheck insists is only one word. How often I helped</p>
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<p>glass. Always, I think it is made of stone.</p>	<p><i>Something written on a piece of paper after an astonishing event. That paper found a long time later.</i> (Mark Irwin)</p> <p>This may be the best I can do.</p>	<p>her prepare for Arts &amp; Crafts.</p> <p>If I had to choose between being excised or erased—which Angie assures me I don’t—I’d choose excision every time. I’d want you to see the cut place (aperture, wound). I’d want you to look hard at that visible round. I’d want you to remember what is missing.</p> <p>It’s January in Florida, and our orchid has three new blooms.</p> <p>If I were to paint a picture of my mother now, I would call it “Still Life: Woman with Fiskars.” I would approach the canvas softly. To finish, I would put a flower in her hair.</p>
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CLARA BUSH VADALA

## Lethal

Today I learn the tide  
Is not a vacuum,

Instead, it is more  
Like a circulatory system

The nurse shark  
The man has killed

Does not die right away.  
Instead, salt mingling

With her warm blood,  
The ocean keeps her

Alive while he cuts  
Off her dorsal fin,

Hands it to his son,  
Wife and daughter

Looking on with glee  
And a can of Keystone

Spills into the surf.  
Still, he does not know

How to kill her  
Without her knowing

Every slice and jab,  
Still, she moves

As he stuffs her nose  
In sand, her blood

In her, then out of her,  
In, then out, the water

Rising and falling,  
Low tide coming in,

Soon he will have to move  
Further out, if he wants to

Drown the fish.

CAMILLE CARTER

## Now That It's Over

I pawn your mother's china, breaking  
the current of your voice

like a death knell over my bent  
knee. Once I ate the apple of

your beauty. My eyes rolled back.  
I blinked both lids. I jerrybuilt

a face for you. Everything  
was fake— for the first time,

then again. The wedding gift  
from your boss: a priceless vase,

kindled from lachrymose  
clay. I knew to burn was

to survive. You wept hot  
iron roses to petrify your

porcelain face. Objects turned  
to artifacts, relics of a time I

didn't believe was mine. I knew to  
burn was to survive. Purging the

apple's core, I spit out all  
the seeds. I post your bike

on Craigslist. It's gone  
within the hour. It's me,

blackhearted salesman. In

lieu of apples, I gather

eggshells from our shared  
apartment. Best-love

in ivory pieces, sharp  
smithereens. I cradle

in dark palms your final  
relic. The ruins of Pompeii.

LILY SOMESON

## Denial

He's not dead, he's sleeping.  
My father on a hospital bed —

my Tennessee mountains through a window  
weighted with snow, the stag in the field

laying on his back. I sleep eight hundred  
miles away. The eyes are so peaceful

while closed, quiet. Irish moss locs  
on a pillow. His face

my face, just older. If I had known  
he was lifting, had cared to see

the sterile box of room, his body  
still as the dammed creek

that held my own silence —  
I could have dressed him

in white sheets. I could have.  
But I never called him that month, not once —

he would never die, I never  
considered it an option. My sister broke the news

through heaves, gripping his receiver  
in Texas. The worst excuse

I can come up with is that  
I was young. *Is there anything you'd like*

*to tell him before he* ? Trees shocked  
by winter, spindly branches making

a prison cell of the sky. My own hands  
are cumbersome, not quick enough. After the stroke,

he said a few words. *Lightening. Metal.*  
*Evergreen. Daughter.*

SAMUEL PICCONE

## Are You Sleeping

when I let the last of the formula leak  
down the nipple of my thumb

so you'll latch and pretend  
the closeness of milkfat?

I'd like to think you won't recognize  
the coo hanging on my breath is an amulet

of gin once belonged to your grandfather.  
Here are the lullabies I'm trying

not to sing: a mother is a remedy made  
of white alder and fenugreek

in brackish water, nothing grows  
inside a father long enough to know

his love is learned and trying its best,  
a mother is a kind of prayer

and every dawn a father somewhere shakes  
night's ether from a prayer bell.

What can I tell you—  
inheritance is little more than metaphor

with a pretty story. A nursery is what feeds us  
black milk in the deepest part of the night

until we learn to call it darkness.  
In the morning, we forget

it's a man who makes the wrens churr,  
*begone begone begone.*

LANDEN RASZICK

## On Opening

When I hit my mother in the face with a door (there was a reason; I didn't want to take a shower) I don't remember if there was blood, but something cracked open the forehead of my propagation, and bleeding forth: a future of bad phone calls, confusion, rolling around on bathroom floors in the grip of social dependence. The door opened to a dark garden. I don't know if she had orchids hanging out there yet, but there weren't vegetables. There was no birdfeeder with cardinals and painted buntings. There were raccoons. There was rainforest humidity. When she was rolling in the grass, on the black earth, I was stunned at my power to harm the source of all life and love. While I was punching myself in the side of the head, she entered the room and hugged me. I'm still in that room.

ANDREA BIANCHI

## Second Story

My train window is turning past a Mexican restaurant receding down below, BURRITO spelled out in its window in a bold, all-capital font, like the title of an old, enticing story, and then the train goes pushing swaying clacking on, on its relentless timetable, like the ticking of time and life itself, but I am rushing back a thousand miles, a thousand lives ago, to the night you and I took the rush-hour elevated train, the pulsing plastic seats pressing our thighs and hands and lips closer and closer together, you with your tie loosened, or maybe it was removed, after the strangle of the long workday in one of your new, post-law-school suits, me in my lowly brown secretary dress, exposing too much neck, too much cleavage for my cubicle, but not for you, for the evening we had been drafting planning dashing toward together now, into the pink promise of the fall dusk, into the future when nothing could go wrong, when I would meet your friends this night for the first time, until in a second glance you noticed the long sentences of the city streets had turned illegible, flashing backward in the window the wrong way, and then we were spinning out onto the platform and dancing to the tolling gonging warning Doors Closing, squeezing smothering, but we were escaping tumbling nuzzling into the back of a taxicab, where your big body stretched over mine to search the wide horizon of the window for the siren of a coffee shop, a restroom and cigarette stop, our journey turning into a tall tale, a modern Odyssey, only it had been corrected, and this time Penelope was adventuring by her lover's side, was laughing, snapping photographs of your long legs tucked into the too-small café chair, then at last following your erect back up the narrow stairs to your friend's second-story apartment in some unknown neighborhood, the straight city blocks all dizzy from our detours and diversions, like pages flipping fanning past in a flimsy paperback, and then music and alcohol were spinning their old seductive yarns, the records rotating and your friend incanting Listen Listen and my wine glass tipping and your eyes shining and your other friend reclining, with his splinted, injured leg, his grimace lifted into a smile, until we all wanted more more, filling the car waiting down below with our heat, our

hunger, our case of bring-your-own Mexican lager clinking in anticipation beneath our feet, our bodies crushing bumping in the back with happiness, a whole world, a whole novel, inside here, no need to turn outward toward the windows flickering with the just-lit lamps of unfamiliar streets, until the twilight lit up suddenly with a hundred crisscrossing bulbs strung above the shouting laughing jostling pumping patio of what must have been a Mexican restaurant, where we planned for a patio spot, and while we waited, I remember I followed you up to the restaurant's secret second story, a sort of lounge it seemed, perhaps a rest stop or vestibule for the restrooms, or was it a portal into another story, the hallways like hidden passageways tilting toward multilevel rooms, alcoves, corners, like an old house in a thrilling mystery tale, each new twist and turn throbbing, whirring with possibility, hot and close and alive and bright, wild women talking, their tongues twirling with wide red smiles, with cleavage daring, as the music beat beat beneath groups carousing, lagers lifting sloshing, young men shouting, everyone telling their own singular, spectacular story, too many to hear in just one night, but we would have ten thousand more nights, would we not, and so we stepped out again into the dark coolness, to the metal bench set apart, off by the curb, where your friend was resting extending his leg, sighing at his shattered muscle or ligament or bone, much like his fractured career he recounted then, once writing and filing stories as a foreign correspondent from far-off lands, now stationed at some field office where he no longer wrote, but instead selected which already-written stories to send out on the newswire, and when I responded that he determined, that he made the news, the omniscient author of all the stories of the world, his smile, his worth expanded as grand and limitless as the starry night, as the whole black-velvet universe, stretching over us later at the table, crowded with the tall lagers, their lips wedged open with the crescents of the limes, the empty glass castoffs clattering to the patio below the burritos, or was it empanadas, salsa or guacamole, plain rice only on my plain white plate, afraid of the flavors, until you urged from your own overflowing plate the plantains I had never tried, the black beans I had thought I hated, their velvet softness a salty savory surprise across my tongue, my mouth opening, like my previously circumspect life, in wonder now with you, beginning a

new choose-your-own-adventure story, except you were the one choosing writing the adventure tale, and I was reading reading, turning each page the way the car turned back to your friend's second-floor apartment and the records turned over again beneath the needle and you turned to me, away from the ever-turning conversation, and signaled a cigarette, a tryst at the bottom of the stairs, where you took the poison into your mouth and I took you into my mine, down on my knees, down so dangerous beneath the so-close second-story melody and laughter, you laughing, shaking against my lips, my lips laughing, slipping against you, before your fingers reached for your zipper with Enough for Now Later Later like a cliffhanger, the promise fickle flitting as quick as the zip across your face as you flicked away the butt, and I followed your legs back up to the unit, to a smoky separate room, where marijuana gurgled up through the water of a bong and then swirled in turn into you and your two friends, into your lungs and blood and tongues, slurring now your long-ago legends when as friends, or roommates maybe, you shared college escapades, prequels that foreshadowed the future narratives I hoped to write with you, when, as you announced now to your friends beside you on the couch across from me, we would be roommates soon in the sunny second-story apartment we had just leased, waiting for the keys, waiting for the future as large and smooth as this big brown leather chair now holding my body, holding my brown dress, in the center of this big spinning night of possibilities, this perfect night a kind of start to the next, the second chapter of our lives, which spun on into the 1:00- or 2:00-a.m. blackness in the back of the taxicab, where you rested your head against my neck, or maybe my cleavage, while you laughed and cried without any tears, your eyes so red so dry so bright with painful high happiness, as the cab went pushing swaying on into the city's blinking twinkling streets, on to your dark second-story apartment, on into the dark far-off future that I did not or maybe I did know was rushing back at me, was coming two three months later, coming down like your fingers closing about the bones of my neck, almost suffocating, as if shutting a hardcover, the air whooshing out from the pages, on that future Sunday morning on our sunlit bed in our new home, when your hand was slapping just beneath my eye, and I was reaching up my hand with a caress, calling out your name, trying to

comprehend, trying to find the you I knew in your own eyes, gone vacant, far away into some other reality, some other ugly plot, where your fist was gripping tugging yanking my hair backward as my hand was grasping for the doorknob and my fingers were slipping from the doorframe Door Closing squeezing muffling and my voice was shouting for help out into the stairwell, where at last somehow my feet, unfollowed by yours, were escaping running tripping spinning down, down from our once perfect second story, which ever since I have been looking for, this time to try to get it right, typing combinations of Mexican Restaurant BYOB Burrito Two Floors Second Story into the vast newswire of the Internet, trying to select and send a different ending out on the newswire of my life, but maybe I have remembered the wrong neighborhood or the wrong cuisine, or perhaps the patio seats have been stacked the bulbs unstrung the windows shuttered, or what if there was never any second floor, only a flat ground level that I mistook for elevation, and I will be forever peering out the windows of the elevated trains, searching for that second story.



## Arabian Nights, #2

*Like Eyes that looked on Wastes —  
Incredulous of Ought*

-Emily Dickinson, from 458

Maggie roams the belly — stove to dry sink,  
flour barrel to salted fish hung by hook in the pantry.

I drop little words of love into slots. Pull my chair  
into dinner's envelope taut to table set — code speak

hunger. Moon captured by upper pane, my head  
drops notches to hold her rising — she floods the glass.

Little gods armed with oughts, I betray. Unravel  
my white linen robe, naked by kerosene, wicking.

My journey rows down the hall, wall-braced  
each dipped oar. I drown on father's ziggurat of stairs.

A hound howls passed midnight. I tack next life,  
unhurt the bearded pronoun *she*, curry my wooly chin.

## Life Of A Secret

*Big my Secret but it's 'bandaged' —  
It will never get away  
Till the Day its Weary Keeper  
Leads it through the Grave to thee.*

-Emily Dickinson, from 1737

Some nights,  
I unwrap  
the bandage.  
This is when  
my legs dream you  
missionary — ventral  
to ventral. Maybe  
I drop  
the secret  
into a cup, stir  
the forbidden  
sip  
behind  
my closed door. Some-  
times I play dead,  
unwrap the bandage,  
stand at the grave  
and wait for your fawn  
to lay her spots  
on the road, fold  
like a piece  
of paper, hush —  
her tiny hooves  
shiny black, tap  
her cloven path  
to Eve's door  
and at the exit  
where wounds herd,  
Eden  
will shoot us  
our star.

CASSANDRA WHITAKER

seven wolves prop up the moon

and spring after each other  
gifted from the moon  
like flesh is lifted from flesh  
a cradle a cradle  
pollen gifted and gifted  
cast like cones  
farther  
seven wolves

rushing, leaping, springing  
desire a lark in a morning tree  
there is always  
desire  
opening

i have a body  
i have a body  
the body of laughter  
into a body

on the hill they gather like a rhyme

as quick as lime light  
which is lifted from the day  
as night becomes what it chases  
dreams  
by the tree  
each further  
than the last  
children of want, wanting

from want  
hunger, tomorrow, tomorrow,  
tomorrow  
chasing hunger  
a moon

her name is happy  
their name is happy  
a flame to breathe a name  
i have at last

## To Fill My Emptiness

To fill my emptiness/I stole from the mouth/of the wolf/and took the happiness of the moon/to sate my hunger/to desire//what all spirits desire/a body to embody and rise out of emptiness,/my hunger/to escape my body, a mouth/as open as the moon/to flesh and flesh and consume like a wolf//devouring a wolf/and doubling the desire/for the moon/and doubling the emptiness/and doubling the mouth, /hunger's//hunger:/all I know of my body passed from a wolf,/the importance of a mouth/to enflesh desire,/to diminish emptiness/by borrowing happiness from the moon//in doses. Happiness borrowed from the moon/diminishes hunger,/restless emptiness/of more more more wolf/and what the wolf desires;/a mouth//devouring a mouth/in service to the moon/and a body's desire/to fill emptiness./A wolf,/a hunger's//hunger, the wolf's emptiness shining like a moon in me.

## Seattle Nocturne

Not these, the floating lights of Pioneer Square, or the doorman who demanded to see my key before letting me pass through the threshold or walk on the leather floors, yes, leather. Not this, the room, sparse, antique, broken bedframe and down comforter, and a light which burnt itself out each night. Not the walk downtown, with men punctuating each street like rhetorical questions, begging for coins. Not me, who had no coins to give them. Never the coins in my purse: dull, ringed green, crusted with neglect. I haven't used money to buy goodness in a long time. Who knows if I even remember how. Not the water, which I didn't walk along, although it was only ever a block from me and never beyond wishing. Sure, there was something beautiful in the way rain hit the streets, the hills: fog rolling over Mt. Rainier like slow-moving applause, an audience who doesn't understand their role in the spectacle. It wasn't that I was in your city without you, although I'm sure that had some part to play in why I was watching every window for your reflection, the flip of your hem. I walked down Cherry Street. I saw faint, dead stars in the trees; each winked at me. And it was so beautiful I thought, yes, surely I have died, and surely, you have too. It is easier, in fact, to pretend you have died. Here is your coffin. Here, my fistful of dirt.

## The Thing That Never Gets Closer

Not to say it wasn't possible, that something was there. She hadn't noticed anything when she'd gone out a few days ago; then the surface stretched out white and empty as a bank of stiff clouds, same as ever. But now, touched by the muted tattoo of constellations above, she was certain she could make out the spindly shape of some dark figure through the window.

The first time she spotted it her breath caught in her throat, scudding like a dead motor, and she ducked down as if afraid of being spotted in return. A night from childhood came back to her, sneaking down to get orange juice from the fridge, looking out towards the backyard to see a muffled white figure caught in the window. Staring back at her. Or so it seemed. Then she noticed it too was holding a juice carton and realized her mistake. Now she peeked once, spine tensed, body poised for a flight it couldn't take, then again, longer, nostrils fogging the glass. Whatever it was, it didn't seem to be moving. She'd leave it til tomorrow. She didn't want to put all her gear on again.

But when she went out the next day there was nothing there. Just the rocks and the wind howling above. Far as the eye could see.

\*

Bridey Rudolph had never considered herself an explorer, or at least had never voluntarily used the word to describe herself. But even when she was young, living out in the desert, she liked wide spaces. How everything and nothing was available to you there, the ground reaching out like an offering it could easily snatch back. How easy it was to misplace yourself, to be found only when you allowed it. These were not lands that could be known, only interpreted.

Or at least that's what she told Marco Laszlo, he of the singsongy name that sounded like what children call out to each other in the pool and the multimillion-dollar tech company of nebulous

purpose, when she responded to the posting on the university bulletin board. He was looking for someone who wouldn't mind being alone for long periods of time, who could work in solitude. The research station would be the first of its kind, Marco boasted. Though the Chinese had beaten us to landing a spacecraft on the far side of the moon, his company won the race to build there. A team of American astronauts completed the facilities ten months before. Now he needed someone to occupy them. She had the wrong kind of PhD for the work but he seemed willing to overlook that.

"As long as we've got a suit that fits, we'll make sure you get all the training you need," he assured her.

It was a matter of territory, and pride, of course. Marco had many investors, including governmental ones, to mollify. Speed was important, as was discretion. They were worried that the land, if that's what it could be called, was a resource soon to become scarce by someone else's hand. It would be her responsibility to collect water samples and map out potential sites for mining in the hopes that such excavated material could eventually be turned into rocket fuel. She would just have to learn how to operate the drill. The rest could be gotten used to, and that was easy enough. She'd been hungry, she'd been full, and both felt mostly the same to her. What she wanted now was someone to trust her enough to leave her alone.

She was put through a battery of tests. Simulated rocket launches and capsule landings. Swirled about in a centrifuge like mouthwash in someone's cheeks. Blew into a tube to demonstrate her lung capacity, the little red ball inside hovering with her effort, goading her to hold on just a bit longer. "Wouldn't it be easier to send a robot? Or a chimp?" she joked once. "But you have something those don't," Marco said, his face a pane of glass with an empty room behind it. "What's that?" she asked. "A memory" was his reply.

A site was chosen for the simulation, where she would stay for an indefinite period of time. A month, maybe six. It was a deliberate omission. She wasn't told where she was going either but that was fine with Bridey. There was nobody that she wanted to know anyway. That too was an asset in Marco's eyes. "It's good not to miss things," he said. "It means you'll be devoted." But she didn't think that was quite the right word for what she was either.

\*

Bridey slept eight hours or maybe only three, it was hard to

tell. Even though the air outside was breathable, she still had to go through the protocol of suiting up before she left the base. It was an hour-long affair; one of the more arduous parts of her first few weeks was remembering to use the bathroom before she started. Each layer was made up of layers. The spacesuit alone had three separate pieces: one for the torso and arms, one for the legs and feet, and one for the helmet and visor. Underneath that was the liquid cooling and ventilation garment, a tight-fitting bodysuit with tubes woven through so she wouldn't overheat during her walks. On her back she wore a compact device known as the Primary Life Support Subsystem, which pumped oxygen in and carbon dioxide out, and provided electricity for the suit. It also included small thruster jets she could use to return to the station if she strayed too far. By the end she was nestled in a matryoshka of gadgetry.

Even though there was nothing to sample, she was still expected to go out daily and drill into the soil, collect and freeze any groundwater she found in vials, report "findings," and improvise "solutions." The sun here had teeth. At first she'd been disappointed when they removed the blindfold after the long drive, how much the place they'd chosen looked like home. A desert crater, the sky above the sort of endless robin's-egg blue that only seemed enviable to those who'd never been thirsty. But she'd begun to think of her familiarity with such an atmosphere as an asset. It allowed her to believe another universe would be no different. As she made her way from the compound Bridey could see her own track marks from the days before, guidance from a past life. She liked when the land crunched beneath her. She imagined herself monstrous. It was the only way to keep moving forward, to convince herself that every muscle humming in harmony was an ordinary way to live.

She hiked until the top of the base poked up like a squamous-cell from the landscape before turning back around, satisfied that whatever she had seen before was gone. But when she looked out her window after dinner it was there again, its crude form etched against the inescapable darkness, opening toward her like a hand.

\*

Whenever Bridey couldn't sleep as a child her stepfather would tell her about Chang'e. She was a goddess of Chinese mythology, which was confusing to Bridey since her stepfather had never professed much interest in other cultures. The sound of foreign

languages chafed at him like hemorrhoids. He claimed to have picked the story up during his time in the Marines, which was an excuse he gave often for something he didn't want to explain further. Her mother only pushed on this once or twice before discovering it wasn't worth the trouble it got her in. "Let him have his secrets," she'd say, winking at Bridey with her good eye. "She don't know the half of it, do she," he whispered to Bridey, his breath hot on her ear.

A long time ago, he began, sweeping his arm across the room like a magician hiding a trick behind his cape, ten suns rose in the sky together over a distant land. This was very bad for the people living there, scorching the earth and destroying their crops. The rivers dried up. They were starving and desperate. One day an archer named Houyi appeared. He was a man of great skill and promised to save them by shooting nine of the suns down. As a reward he was given an elixir of immortality. But he didn't drink it right away, because he didn't want to live forever without his beautiful wife, Chang'e. There was only enough for one of them, you see. So he left it in her safekeeping and went out to hunt. But while he was gone, his apprentice Fengmeng broke into the house intending to steal the vial. Chang'e refused to hand it over; he threatened to beat her, rape her, kill her. Instead she drank the elixir before he could do any of those things, granting her eternal life but dooming her to spend it alone. She didn't wish to force her husband to watch her remain youthful while he grew old and frail. Chang'e flew to the heavens and landed on the moon, where she could keep a close watch on her husband. It's believed she has been there at least four thousand years.

Isn't that wonderful, her stepfather had said, how no one is ever gone? We can always be close by, even when we can't see each other.

But that wasn't what she liked about the story.

For her first few weeks on the base Bridey would wake up in a sweat, the skeletal red numbers of her digital clock the only light not lying to her, the deafening sound of nothing swallowing her like a mouth, and for a moment she would think she was back home, cowering in the shed where her stepfather stashed his dirty magazines. Her mother's dresses on the clothesline, holding hands like a paper doll chain. The sound of him pacing outside, deliberate as a heartbeat, biding time. The knowledge of where she was vibrating between them. She thought of Chang'e at those times, how our worst

moments could also be the most clarifying, how solitude could be a blessing if it was chosen wisely, how little difference there could be between a cardboard box and a distant star when you needed somewhere to escape, and only then could she fall back to sleep.

\*

Marco called on Thursday, as expected. When she woke that morning Bridey noticed with some shock that her kitchen sink was filled with a week's worth of dirty dishes. Cups with silty-coffee bottoms. Plates with crusted food like daubs of paint. She had always been diligent about cleaning up before, careful to impose an order early on. It was too easy in loneliness to accept clutter as company. To forget oneself. There were good and bad habits even in seclusion. Perhaps then most of all. Better to keep the corners swept in anticipation, even if she was the only one ever coming or going. How could she have allowed this to happen? She would have to be more vigilant with herself.

This included personal hygiene. Though there were mirrors strategically placed throughout the base it had been ages since she'd bothered to look in one and the sight of her tiny image flickering like candlelight in the bottom right corner of the video monitor turned her stomach. Pale to the point of translucence, she'd lost weight too, which only deepened the sleepless clusters under her eyes. Marco was sure to comment on it but there was nothing she could do now. The call line was already beginning to ping.

"Ahoy," he said as the screen blossomed to life. The office surrounding him had the same unadorned and sterile quality as the rooms in the space station. All that white on the walls. At first she'd thought this was deliberate, to provide her with a sense of continuity; the rooms here were also uniformly pale, building and branching from one another with Minotaurian confusion. Prints of wildflowers hung haphazardly along the halls as if in afterthought. A last second attempt at cheeriness. They weren't her taste but in some ways that comforted her. A place with only things she'd chosen in it wouldn't feel quite like a home. But no, he was just another one of these men who confuse simpleness with efficiency.

"Everything all right?" Marco asked, leaning closer to the monitor, his eyes narrowing with something like concern.

"Seems to be," she said back, fire threading through her throat. They were the first words she'd spoken aloud in almost two

weeks. Most of her communication with the company was done by email, as she preferred. She had been terse with Marco in the first weeks, resented his insistence on these check-ins, but now as he self-consciously adjusted his seat, made Zen rake movements through his hair, she realized that she was happy to see him. Almost desperately so. She was not the figment of some thing's imagination. If he was real then she was real.

"So what do you have for me?" he asked before launching into something completely unrelated, chattering away about some article he had read in a magazine. "It was about a bunch of these identical twins, see, that had been separated at birth. These scientists brought them together for a study and found..." He trailed off, turning towards something that was happening off-screen, the underwater murmurs of a distant argument.

His voice had been irritating Bridey like an itch at the center of her back but its sudden absence was even more distressing.

"Found what?" she said.

"What?" he repeated. "Oh, right. That even though these twins had never seen or met each other before they had the same weird habits. Like one pair both suffered migraines. Another both married women named Karen. Another both flushed toilets before using them. Stuff like that. No good explanation. It's interesting, right?"

"Sure," she said, her hand worrying her collar, which felt too tight. The lights fritzed overhead, like they were blinking at her. She'd considered telling Marco about what she'd seen outside but the more he went on the more she suspected it wasn't something he'd want to hear. He wanted solvable problems, data structures, matters that could be dispatched with a 3D printer. He did not want hallucinations, ghost stories, a head case. He wouldn't hesitate to pull her from the project if he thought she might compromise anything and she couldn't risk that now. Not over this. Not over something she couldn't even name yet.

"It's like that old story, you know?" he was saying. "About seeing your double?"

"Doppelgänger," she said.

"Right, Doppelgänger. How's that all go again?"

She cleared her throat. "It's a harbinger of doom," she said. "If you see your double, you die."

Marco leaned back, the chair squeaking beneath him, looking upward at nothing in particular, and chuckled. "Germans, man," he said, shaking his head.

They sat in silence a moment, him with a finger placed thoughtfully against his pursed lips, her image below muddied and billowing, like a curtain that could be mistaken for a hovering wraith.

"You sure you're all right out there?" he asked.

Bridey nodded, feeling herself grow even smaller under his gaze.

"It's okay to admit it, if you're not. You know, the people you replaced, the two of them. Every time I called they were bickering about something. I think that in some ways can be worse. Anyway, Gale should be out again in a few days with some supplies. You'll hear him before you see him."

She smiled, shrugged, wished him and the rest of his staff well. But once the monitor shut down and the screen faded out his words suddenly crystallized in her mind, sharp and sprawling, each barbed edge catching her in a new way. He'd told her when she interviewed that nobody else had lived on the base before.

\*

Bridey had been an only child, and like many other only children, she often dreamed that there was someone else out in the world who was just like her. Unlike many other only children, however, she did not want to meet this other being just like her. She was content in placing all her hopes and fears in this imaginary twin, trusting that she knew what she'd been through because she'd also been through it, that she held the same darkness inside her and that sometimes it frightened her too.

Eventually, of course, she made actual friends. Her best one had been a puffy little girl named Collie. Like the dog? Bridey had said when they first met. No, like me, she'd said. Bridey used to go to her house to watch her father's videos in the basement. He taped paid subscription wrestling matches, but he had dirty movies too, the transfers so poor the sex acts turned into saw-the-lady-in-half tricks.

Their favorite thing to do was play a game called That's Bad But Not As Bad As. It was a game of one-up-man-ship. One girl would start, saying one bad thing they could think of that they'd done or thought about doing. Then the other would say, that's bad but not as bad as, and then try to top it with something worse.

I replaced all my parents' vodka with water once, Bridey

began.

That's bad, Collie replied, but not as bad as pouring ipecac into the coffee in the teacher's lounge.

That's bad, but not as bad as feeding your neighbor's dog rat poison.

Usually they didn't get through more than four or five rounds before dissolving into giggles. Occasionally, though, the game made Bridey impatient, sour, careless.

That's bad, but not as bad as wishing your stepfather was dead, Bridey said once.

Collie paused before answering, her face scrunched like an accordion.

That's –

That's bad, Bridey interrupted. But not as bad as killing him yourself.

They played the game after that, but it was never quite the same.

\*

The moon was laughing at her. She could sense derision in the way it seemed to lean away as if to shield her from its conversation. Comments passed behind hands. Eyes that slid toward but never looked at her. It was all there in that endless taunting sky. *You'll never be up here with us*, it laughed. *You'll never make it. You're not strong enough.*

When she went out for collecting now it was quickly. Lately her samples seemed impassive, unremarkable. As if they too did not think her worth their while. As if it too was tired of this simulation. The company had given her carte blanche as far as surveying went; as long as she kept the maps and records clear she could hike out wherever she wanted. Sometimes it took her hours with the drill, sometimes minutes. Once back at the base she'd label each water sample with a Sharpie and store them in the freezing unit, where they would wait until Marco and his team were ready to begin "Phase Two." Bridey had not been made privy to what this might involve, or when it might happen. But she'd begun to suspect she was surveying in circles, unable to tell with certainty which pockmark had been made by her hand or a more ancient force. There were no signs of research by the people Marco mentioned anywhere on the compound either, as far as she could tell.

She couldn't remember the last time she slept through the night. In the bathroom mirror, circles hung slack-jawed beneath her eyes as if they didn't quite believe what they saw. She kept forgetting where she'd put things: toothpaste, a pair of scissors, a lit candle. Sometimes she'd even forget where she was, coming to in a place she didn't recognize right away. Trash piled up in the corners of rooms, shifting about like dunes.

And all the time the thing, whatever it was, waited for her, revealing itself calmly in the darkness while she jittered about behind the window. Its curling tendrils stretching seductively as if to entrance her into the night.

And yet she couldn't say she was unhappy, pacing back and forth across her kitchen, biting her fingernails down to nubs. This is what she'd wanted, after all. A loneliness that was profound, in her control. As close to her as bone. She could not imagine sharing it with anyone else. But the wind whistled differently now. *Not yours*, it whispered, *not yours*. The thing out there had bent it to its shape.

\*

Her stepfather left out an important part of Chang'e's story: she was not on the moon alone. She had an animal companion there, a large white rabbit known as Yutu. Bridey only learned about this herself years later, while completing her dissertation. In the midst of researching American sanctions during the Cold War she stumbled upon a Xeroxed copy of a cable to NASA from the Union of Persian Storytellers, sent shortly before the Apollo 11 rocket was set to launch in 1969. It claimed the mission would rob its members of their livelihood, as the world would no longer have to dream about what such places looked like, and what might walk there. As the astronauts made their flight as scheduled, Mission Control advised them to look out for Chang'e and her rabbit. They called her the "bunny girl."

Bridey hadn't heard from her stepfather for close to a decade at that point. Her mother had told her that he was dead, but who knew for sure. She might have just meant dead to them. The last time Bridey saw him was when she was an undergrad. He'd shown up on campus uninvited. He didn't try to come near her; he knew she wouldn't allow it. But even from a distance she could tell it was him, lingering at the edge of the quad, shuffling about with his hands in his pockets, his hair balding in weird patches like a Rorschach blot.

From where she stood it looked like two dogs fighting. He'd lost his job at the plant a couple months before, or so her mother said, but she had no pity for him. He was still there when she got out of her class, and later when she went to the mess hall for dinner. She didn't dare look out her dorm room window that night, certain she'd see him in the same spot, the lights dotting the great lawn casting him in a cadaverous glow. By morning he'd disappeared but still, she regretted every day that she hadn't approached him, screamed at him to leave, laughed in his pathetic face. She hadn't wanted to draw that kind of attention to herself, intent in her belief that it was better to keep some things hidden. She didn't feel that way anymore, but of course it was easy to now that he was gone.

Sometimes she dreamed about what it would be like to see Chang'e on the moon. If it would be a comforting vision, or a threatening one. If Chang'e would turn towards her and have a face she recognized. If she would be a harbinger of good fortune or doom. If there was any difference at this point anyway.

\*

It had been two weeks, probably, since Marco's last call when Bridey opened up the freezing unit and found that her samples had melted. Little dirty pools dribbled out onto the floor, turning the tips of her socks gray. At first she merely stood there, her mind as blank and suggestible as a sheet of paper. Then, slowly, irritation began to stitch its way through her until she was a bright whirring pattern of rage. She slammed the door, the empty vials clattering audibly inside, and the energy of the action clanged within her, thrust her forward with something close to glee.

The power source was attached to a generator outside. Bridey threw her coat on, not bothering with all the other layers, and tugged a hat down over her ears before opening the door. A battering ram of wind met her, nearly knocking her backward, but she steadied herself against the wall of the base, feeling her way along to the big green box at the rear, her breathing shallow, her face burning. The sun was already low in the west. Nothing, as usual, could be seen for miles.

She collapsed against the generator, which hummed to her like a mother to a child, her hand grasping at the coils of electric cords nestled together like snakes. She tugged each one, giving a little sigh of relief when they remained taut. I have done nothing

wrong, she repeated to herself. I have done nothing wrong. Until, quite suddenly, she pulled one loose. Its end frayed, as if it had been chewed. Or severed.

Again she sat dumbfounded, thoughts hurling across her mind like tumbleweeds in the wind. And then she began to laugh, a stutter deep in her belly that built to a rumble, erupting toward the ceiling. Her teeth bared as if she could tear into it. Her whole body shuddered; she was epileptic with amusement. And the generator laughed right back at her. It was roaring in her ears.

\*

When Bridey turned on the monitor that evening and clicked on the live chat icon Marco popped up as "available." She stared at the blinking cursor in the text box for several minutes, her fingertips shivering over the keyboard, taking deep breaths at counts of five before she began to type.

You lied to me, she wrote then deleted then wrote again and sent.

A small gray bubble appeared, indicating he was composing a response. Set against the vast whiteness of the rest of the screen it was almost comical. She gave an experimental laugh, the sound skittering down the empty hallways like a child's toy into a sewer drain, never to be found again.

What's this about, Bridey?

He was evading her. This meant there were several possible lies she might be referring to.

Did Gale come yet? he asked.

You said I was the first, she typed frenzily. When I first met with you. You said nobody had been here before. So who are the others?

The bubble appeared again then swiftly vanished. She tried to imagine Marco sitting in that tiny office, trying to calculate what to say. If those co-workers were still there bickering over the coffee maker. Or maybe he was alone, pulling an all-nighter to meet some deadline only he cared about. She had no idea what time it was. If they were in different zones, different days, different years. Or maybe he was always alone, the company one big ruse. She'd never actually met anyone else who worked there, after all.

I didn't tell you about the others before because it's not important. It has no bearing on the work you're doing.



What happened to them?  
Again the bubble appeared and vanished, the last gasps of  
someone drowning.  
They failed and now they're gone, he wrote.  
Then before she could respond: Don't do anything stupid,  
Rudolph.  
And then: I can do the same to you.  
Ha ha ha, she typed. The sound of the return key when she  
sent it was louder than a scream.

\*

Darkness crept into the compound. It seemed to be planning  
to stay awhile, stretching out comfortably over every surface. She  
stood at the kitchen sink, dabbing absently with a hot towel at the  
tears lacing her cheeks. She kept the lights off but the  
thing was with her, as always. It stood with defiance and yet it  
also seemed to be waiting to see what she would do. For now she  
remained still, watching from the window as the stars cast spells  
over it, the glass rattling in the pane. She had already turned off all  
the machines in the base, flipped all the switches. It was easy in a  
way that should have been alarming. But that didn't matter now. She  
wasn't here. She might as well never have been here.

She was getting too hot. Her face was flushed, her fingers  
scorching. First she pulled off the sweater. Then peeled off the pants.  
The ventilating bodysuit, drooping from her like an abandoned  
shadow. The socks. She tried to wiggle her toes but she couldn't feel  
them. Still her skin felt heavy on her, clutching at her, nagging like a  
child. She tried to shrug it off but it hung on tight, it wouldn't leave  
her alone.

When she opened the door she didn't feel the cold. At least  
not right away. Instead she felt the hardness of the surface beneath  
her feet, its surety, guiding her on. Her hair whipped about wildly,  
stinging like hornets. She glanced once behind her but the inside of  
the base looked darker than the sky that surrounded it. Besides, what  
reason was there to go back? She had never been there to begin with.  
She could feel the thing out there watching her, considering her, the  
articulation of its shape against the sky, and straightened up. Then  
she stepped forward to meet it.

ANTHONY AGUERO

## Bed Bugs

Terry has jasmine perfume on her neck.  
She dips a bag of tea in cold water

and breathes her soft, oven-breath  
onto the small and still lake

of a hand-me-down cup. Jasmine  
bleeds as a cut dipped in Gin

bloods the whole drink intimate  
and undone. Her breath is perfumed

with liquor, tobacco and a drowned  
flame — she is ready to dance.

Dancing is another way to scent  
the body: say ocean, say tree:

someone forgets they are also touching  
the earth. Terry leaves the baby

and I alone with all the bed bugs.

The drugs kept in a middle drawer.

KIYOKO REIDY

## Self Portrait With Francis In My Ear

*after Francis Bacon*

Self-portrait with ice cubes, with October's  
first nip, with swollen hips and bone  
spurs making forest of a spine. Self-

portrait with dead rabbit in the pool's  
filter, with the same water spurted  
from cinched lips, with the animal

necropolis just beyond the fence. Self-portrait  
with injured eye. Self-portrait with Francis  
tugging at my wrists like a puppet master's

wraith, with my own eye round and dark  
as a plum, with his many hands at my chin,  
a bouquet of asters. Self-portrait in the Wake

of My Life. Self-portrait with fighting  
dogs, with debts I savor like fur or good  
butter, with the golden oysters ringing

the oaks, little mute lanterns. Self-portrait  
with *the people dying around me* with  
cheeks whirlpooling as though the face

were being pulled down some grim drain  
with *I've had nobody else to paint but myself*  
with grief's penumbra a bleak halo with the terrible  
things I've named in my sweetest voice.

PATRICK WILCOX

## That One Summer My Best Friend Came Out to His Parents and They Convinced the Catholic Church to Perform an Exorcism

The ritual begins with God's authority. The priest  
lays down the ground rules. When he addresses  
the demon that is my best friend's body, the demon must  
respond, tell the priest its name, and – when commanded

to leave the body that is my best friend's demon – the demon  
must obey. There is no choice. My best friend  
was 11 years old the first time he considered  
suicide. Not that he wanted to perform the ritual,

but that he had a choice. He could break the bathroom mirror,  
pick up a shard, and run its point the length  
of his body. The priest asks, but the demon does not give  
its name. Instead, the demon takes my best friend's throat

and sends the priest language beyond choice. Each day

is a ritual he can no longer perform. This is not

his body. This is not his name. Please stop

asking. He can't possess it, so he can't give it to you.

SARA MOORE WAGNER

## Even Her Hair Was A Mask

Annie Oakley emerged from a crushed  
train, from her little carpeted room

in the rear car of the Buffalo Bill's  
Wild West Show Grand American Tour

to chaos and slaughter, carnage of show  
animals, horses and mules split at the ribs,

wood and bone cracked open like walnuts—  
Of course, she was fine but limping

through the ruins of that great fable of the Wild  
West, first myth of America laid to waste and smoking.

Annie Oakley, barefoot and in her house dress  
plodded through wreckage, charred wood showing

age and lines of each cut timber. It was a lie,  
though, that her hair turned white overnight,

no rupture was so transformative.  
It was always platinum, poured from her

head at birth white spider silk,  
was like cornsilk, her mother said,

was like clouds, said her sisters, like milk,  
said her husband, hands in her hair whiter

than her teeth and the whites  
of her eyes. It was unnaturally clean,

the powder residue from her first gunshot  
darkened it, blood darkened it, those hands

and sooty fingertips raked through it as any tool  
rakes through the land. When Annie Oakle showed up

with a fistful of bodies—squirrels, quail, fat rabbits  
to sell to feed her mother, her hair was dark,

knotted as brambles, curled round  
like greenbrier vines, prickly and unkempt,

her hair was a thicket she left long  
on her back to say this is what I am now,

brunette and wild and covered complete,  
every little strand.

Like America, I am not  
who you think I am.

## Despite My Best Intentions, I Don't Kill Myself

It's the summer before seventh grade, and my father is sleeping in my oldest sister's abandoned bedroom. She's pregnant and off with some boy whose name I can't remember.

I think about dying a lot. I think about pills and knives and guns. I think about crooked necks, and the fresh bloom of a bruise. I think about Hell and the pastor at church camp screaming we should all be willing to *burn* for Christ.

I don't tell my mother. I know she doesn't have the time.

\*

I live across the street from Captain Joe Byrd's Cemetery—the largest prison cemetery in the United States. Of course, I didn't know that when I moved into the apartment. At 22, I'm a writer in the loosest sense of the word. I'm taking my first graduate workshop with a professor who told us on the first day of class that he wished young writers would wait a few years before pursuing their MFA.

*They haven't lived long enough to really have something to say.*

He isn't wrong.

It's Wednesday, and I'm watching the prisoners dig new graves in the cemetery. There are never any funerals, only bodies. An undergrad working the apartment's front desk told me once that there's nothing to worry about. *They only let the best behaved out like this.*

\*

For six months after my parents separate, I insist on going wherever my mother goes. I tell her, *If you die, I want to die too.*

When the divorce is finalized, I dream of nuns. We have picnics together. Some time after the finger sandwiches but before dessert, a nun tells me my mother is dead. *Dead as dead can be.*

\*

When I decide to try therapy again, I tell myself this is the last time.

We meet on zoom every week, and my therapist asks me bullshit questions like, *You know you're not an extension of your mother, right?*

She tells me I talk about trauma like I'm reading off a grocery list.

*Thank you.*

\*

When I graduate from high school, my father mails me a Dave Ramsey DVD on financial planning. It's 2015. I don't have a DVD player.

My mother is angry that I'm not angry. She wants me to demand more from him. I don't know how to tell her I'm tired of her bitterness on my tongue.

I tell her I hope we die together, but what I really mean is—*Can't you see I'm trying?*

\*

When I finally tell my mother I want to die, it's cold. I'm laying next to her, right where my father used to sleep. She is quiet. I think she's asleep.

*We all think like that sometimes, baby.*

\*

When the nuns arrive, they ask me why I haven't picnicked in years.

Even as I look at them, I know they're not real in the way that I am real.

We picnic nonetheless. I'm grown now, but everything else is the same—the finger sandwiches, the dessert, my mother. She isn't dead, I know this, but the nuns try to convince me otherwise.

If Christ does come back to Earth, I will find my father. I will tell him that I never believed in the bible. I will tell him I hope I disappointed him just as much as he disappointed me. I will tell him there is a tidal wave of graves filled with unclaimed bodies.

MONTANA AGTE-STUDIER

## fluoride is a neurotoxin

red grapes picked and popping  
against teeth taught to kiss  
the air, now what's popping  
from my ear 'neath my hair  
singeing and crackling  
*Did you burn it on purpose?*  
lit butter is snapping  
snap peas, stir fry fare  
now back to my hair  
*Yes I burnt it on purpose*  
not so my knee  
blister popping and raw  
*Pop rocks are for lovers*  
why did we all say that?  
far gone is that lover,  
sour grape haunts my jaw

BETH OAST WILLIAMS  
**Carved Art Birds**

It's just me in the house now,  
no hint of your breathing  
but the silence is as loud  
as traffic in Manhattan.  
You must hate me for placing  
your remains on the mantle  
surrounded by carved  
marsh birds. How you'd chase  
egrets from our backyard,  
barking like you were a cabbie  
in a hurry and they were  
stalled-out cars.

**Philanthropy For The End Times**

An independent bookstore  
is opening on the corner  
of Main and Plume,  
so it's true the world is not ending.  
But again last night  
you reached out to me  
deep in my REM sleep. This time  
you weren't just waving.  
I was running over river  
stones, as if with you beside me  
there would be no more  
slipping. This morning  
I received a tax letter  
thanking me for yet another  
donation in your name.  
I can't stop this pathetic  
philanthropy. First  
a memorial to the Virginia Zoo,  
then church, now some random  
kids' camp. I imagine six year olds  
spending July in the woods  
of Vermont, a lake  
clean enough to swim in.  
That's how it began, you know,  
before the stars fell around  
my feet like broken glass.  
We were sailing...and then  
wind ripped the sky to pieces.

ERIN PINKHAM

## In This Reality Momma Knows I Am Bisexual

In mornings, I wake as a double headed doe,  
stumble hoof-foot in the attic, fumble

to fold my quilts on my twin bed and when I wash  
my face in a basin, I shift from cat,

to crow, to horse – horn ripped wound  
from my head. Mama makes coffee and watches

my skin sink into colors while I sip – blushing  
wine, pale lipped frozen together pink

and a fleshy gum dyed in blueberry bramble blue.  
She calls me her runt, her mut, her four-eyed

bababoom. Before the school bus, she  
rings me out in the sink into a copper aquarium

fieldtrip penny — pressed earlobe.  
She engraves a penguin on my back, a dolphin

on my belly. She claps at my tap dance  
and no longer prays for me on the front porch.

## My Mother Has Always Been Afraid Of Water

She said it started  
in the summer at the Y,  
with the neighborhood boys  
who pulled her under.

One held her  
down,  
by the top of her  
head, and one grasped  
her kicking legs. There,

in between fading  
flashes of inner tubes  
and red bikini  
polka dots, she could see

her uncle holding  
her aunt's head under  
the kitchen sink,

her sister laying  
in the shower, a man  
leaving the door cracked  
behind him

and nail polish spilling  
onto the floor.

JEANINE WALKER

## Wedding

In the reception hall, we turn toward the big screen. A waiter dressed in black, masked, puts down a small dish of finely chopped and marinated tomatoes. "What's this?" someone asks. I say, "amuse bouche." Sufficient: none of us knows what it means. First it's the groom, which we guess from the house music that plays. He dances down, then stops and bows to his family, her family. The amuse bouche is taken away, replaced with some kind of shrimp drenched in sauce. People ask each other questions. I stumble over the simple ones, ace the hard ones: my way. "Is this question difficult?" the woman across from me asks. "No," I tell her, "it's easy." But I can't answer well. In front of us now is the salad, two pieces of white lettuce, a chopped tomato, citrus dressing. When the bride comes on the screen, we stop scarfing our food and clap. We gaze lovingly at the woman we don't know, who is about to become a wife. "So pretty," someone says. "So young." Another guest says the groom is thirty-six, the bride not far behind. "I'm always scared when I meet a foreigner," my dining mate says. She means me. I tell her I understand. Now it's the fish course, something like lobster, meat buried deep within its shell. I think of the crab I ate yesterday, how the right way was to put the whole thing in, crunch, crush, then spit. No one else seems to be doing it. "How do I eat this?" I ask her. She laughs but gives no answer. She doesn't know either. I pick at the lobster with my fork. The bride and groom face each other. He's holding in his grin. She can't stop smiling. They join hands.

Now it's the main, a steak, half cooked rare, half well-done. With each course the waiter asks, "Are you finished?" and takes it away before we answer no. Someone orders beer, orders soju. It appears before I turn around. The soju is high quality. We pour, we toast, we drink. Now the vows have been said. Someone's sister is singing on their stage, her voice high and pitchy. Not for talent but for love. People watch for a moment, look down, smile, then raise a glass. We talk about becoming friends, I and the woman whose questions go unanswered. We share photos from our phones. We laugh. We get a bit drunk. We drink more. When it's over we all walk out together, ignore the groom when he emerges from behind a surprise door, then go our separate ways. I never got her name, my new friend. I met the bride for a moment and a half. I bowed. I ate dessert in a flash.



## The Stowaway

### Rev. Luttrell

I had another wedding to officiate later that evening in the city. This one was way out at a refurbished barn. It seemed like that summer everybody was getting married in a refurbished barn. It wasn't pleasant—all the driving—which I had to do in the church van, which is in need of a tune-up. The organist and I were debating whether I should take the new turnpike back to the city when the stowaway fell out of the sky and crashed through the roof of the barn.

### The Organist

The interstate is free. The turnpike charges five dollars. I am opposed to this. I pay my taxes. Only a fool would pay to drive on a road. I was about to tell the Reverend this. But I had only gotten to *fool*. "You would be a fool," I said. I do not remember much after that.

### Rev. Luttrell

The groom was an officer with the local police. The bride, a dispatcher. They were both very young. Neither of them were religious. When I asked if they'd like a particular passage to be read, the young couple shrugged. "Something about love," they told me.

### The Organist

They had a dancing routine type of thing planned. For YouTube. This is what the kids want nowadays. A wedding is not enough. I am sixty-eight. I am of the old school. I can play you a pretty song. Make the thing memorable. A wedding is about love, is it not? Intimacy? Now the kids want to be famous, also. They come to me and they say, "Can you play x, y, z by some pop-singer such as what's her name?" I ask them for the sheet music. They look at me. What is sheet music? They play the song for me on their phones. "Can you do this song?" They ask for miracles.

### Father of the Bride

Have you heard of Wedding Venue Liability Insurance?

### Rev. Luttrell

Officially, if I am asked about an honorarium I am to politely decline and to suggest a \$100 donation be given to the church. But the organist was telling me the turnpike cost five bucks. I didn't have any cash.

### Father of the Bride

Wedding Venue Liability Insurance is a subset of Special Events Insurance. It covers damages incurred to a venue by drunk attendees, stolen linens, fire damage caused by toppled tiki-torches. It covers damages done to a DJ's equipment by an aunt or uncle who gets ahead of their feet on the dance floor. It covers lightning strikes inveigled by maypoles and limousine drivers reversing into stacks of folding chairs. It does not cover the sizeable hole left in the roof of a refurbished barn by a stowaway falling from a height of 32,575 feet.

### Sister in-law to the Bride

I really don't like weddings and I don't like attention; I hate that everybody shows up to a wedding and is immediately judging every decision the party has made: who is wearing what and in which color schemes, and what the centerpieces are or are not; what's on the menu; what song selections have been made, what vows are being presented, how much this costs or that costs. It's enough to drive somebody to taking an extraordinary amount of Xanax. Every time I go to a wedding, I'm glad Kurt and I eloped. And every time I hear the price tag on these little endeavors I think about Kurt and I standing in the county courthouse. And I smile.

### Father of the Bride

Have you heard of subrogation?

### The Organist

I am warming up. I am Googling this song. It is called "One Dance" and it is by Drake and it features Wizkid and Kyla. Do you know it? They want me to play this. Okay. I have a Hammond SK1. It is a very nice instrument. It can do many things. It cannot perform miracles.

### **Sister in-law to the Bride**

Having said all of that, it would've been nice to have been asked to be a bridesmaid.

### **Rev. Luttrell**

Everybody was seated. The organist was warming up. The bride was late, which is quite common. As an officiant, you learn pretty early that a lot of things go awry at weddings. In this case, however, the bride was *really* late. I kept folding back the sleeve to my cassock and checking my watch. The other wedding, the evening wedding, was being held at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. I knew the groom's father quite well. He'd run for office and I'd promised him I'd serve as his clergy were he to win, which he didn't. Nevertheless, it was going to be a lovely affair. I couldn't be late. A bride can be late, not the officiant. I checked my watch. I must've muttered something. "I guess I'll take the turnpike." Or, "The turnpike it is." That's when the organist said, "The turnpike costs five dollars." And I said, "Does it? Well, there's always traffic on the interstate." And he said, "Do not be a fool." And then the stowaway fell out of the sky and crashed through the roof of the barn.

### **Sister in-law to the Bride**

Before the stowaway fell out of the sky and crashed through the roof of the barn, Angie, the bride, my sister in-law, was out in a pasture taking photographs. She's into the whole rustic thing, which I don't get. I mean, it's cute for now. Kind of like the mason jars she had as centerpieces and the refurbished barn and having all of the groomsmen wear cowboy boots. It's very *in*. But what about ten years from now? Twenty? Thirty? You should always go classic. You should have your wedding at a nice, big, beautiful church. Like St. Martin-in-the-Fields. If Kurt and I hadn't eloped, I'd have chosen St. Martin-in-the-Fields. It's gorgeous. It's *timeless*. Maybe that isn't popular on Instagram—which is a big deal to Angie—but you need to start thinking about posterity, even at a young age. One day you will be dead and your wedding photographs will be at your funeral and you don't want mourners chuckling at the choices you made. The point I'm meaning to make is that Angie shouldn't have been out in that pasture of bluebonnets. A good bridesmaid would have known better.

### **The Photographer**

I'll be honest: this was my first wedding. No. That isn't honest enough. This was my first shoot.

### **Best Man**

Doug's job was to find a photographer. That was his only job. Angie did all the rest of the planning and all Doug had to do was go along with her to look at shit. I guess at some point he was looking at the MLB app instead of at napkins or something and Angie got all pissed and Doug was a little bitch and said he was excited about the wedding it was just he didn't *feel a part of it*. So she put him in charge of photography. She said, "Now, Doug, you must understand: photography is perhaps the most important part of a wedding blah blah." Doug procrastinated—shocking!—and then he panicked. Fortunately, I stepped up to the plate. "Bro, I got this," I told him. "You remember my sister's hot friend Carla? The beautician? Well, it just so happens she's trying to start a new career as a photographer. I bet she'd do your wedding for free." Which turned out to be true. By then Angie was so preoccupied with the DJ fiasco that she didn't even bother to look into Carla's background.

### **Sister in-law to the Bride**

The original DJ, DJ Headcracker, ODeed a week before the wedding. So they had to get this old German guy. Really weird.

### **Best Man**

Carla was so nervous. I told her to relax. How hard is it to take a few pictures?

### **The Photographer**

Before the shoot, I locked myself in the bathroom of the refurbished barn and threw up. I cried. I was angry at myself for getting in over my head. Finally I looked in the mirror and said, "Carla, you have 600 Instagram followers. You have talent. You can do this." I went out and found the bride and her bridesmaids and I said, "Let's get some shots out in the bluebonnet pasture." They loved the idea.

### **Rev. Luttrell**

Before the stowaway fell out of the sky and crashed through the roof

of the barn, the attendees shifted in their folding chairs and looked down the aisle toward the barn doors and then back to me as if I knew the answer to the question: *Where is the bride?* The processional had already occurred. Grandma in a wheelchair, ushered by a loving grandson. Parents and the groom, myself, the wedding party and a flower girl. The organist struggled through his set. The groom began to sweat. He looked at me. I tried to comfort him. I glanced at my watch. I muttered, “The turnpike it is.” The organist whispered, “Only a fool would take the turnpike.” The bride did not appear. The best man said something—I didn’t hear what—and it broke the tension. Everybody laughed. The groom laughed. I grinned as though I knew what had been said: a joke between men. And yet there still was no bride.

### **The Photographer**

I said let’s go take some photographs in the bluebonnet pasture, and we did just that. I had no idea the bride was allergic to bees.

### **Sister in-law to the Bride**

A proper bridesmaid is dependable, levelheaded, adept at arbitration. You don’t complain; you listen. You plan. You have cash on hand at all times. You contact the wedding staff every day, even when you get the feeling the wedding staff is sort of tired of hearing from you. You slap away minor problems so that the bride never hears of them. You make sure she can come to you with her concerns. You can never ever be surprised about anything. You should expect the absolute worst. Don’t overlook even the tiniest of detail. Anaphylaxis is not a tiny detail.

### **Best Man**

It was funny as shit. She ballooned up like crazy.

### **Father of the Bride**

Epinephrine autoinjectors are no longer covered by most health insurance plans.

### **The Photographer**

At first I just thought she was making a funny face, like for an outtake. I laughed and said, “No, but let’s do a serious one now.”

Angie didn’t respond. She turned purple so fast. Her eyes began to swell up and close.

### **The Organist**

When I was a boy, I attended a football match with my father. This was in Chemnitz, which had recently been renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt. It was a cold day but we enjoyed watching the football. Suddenly. A man in the stands with a gun. Or so we were told. The claim went like a fire in wheat. *A man has a gun, a man has a gun.* Soon, running. Climbing over each other. Stampeding. People were crushed. I was perhaps six years old. My father tried to look calm. But I could see in his eyes the terror. “Do not be afraid,” he said to me. He hoisted me onto his shoulders. “Take the boy,” he shouted up to a stranger in the terraces. “Take him, take him, take him.” Somebody grabbed me beneath the arms. I flew instantly, up. When I looked down I could not find my father. He would be okay. I did not know it then. I took the train back to Rostock. Alone. I recall the day very much. It has never left me—that feeling. I got it again at the wedding.

### **Rev. Luttrell**

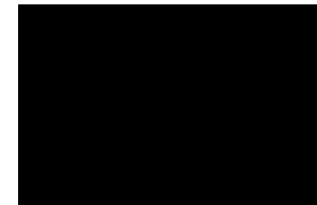
You could tell something had gone wrong. The murmuring changed.

### **Sister in-law to the Bride**

The Maid of Honor, Julee, came running into the refurbished barn. “Does anybody know CPR?” she shouted. I knew CPR. I didn’t say anything for a while.

### **The Photographer**

Photograph number one-hundred-and-seventy-eight. It shows Angie in full anaphylactic shock: face purple, eyes swelling shut, lips pinched together, a horrible grimace. I’ve never shown it to anybody until now. Here. Take a look. See?



### **Father of the Bride**

Final Expense Insurance is another subset of Special Events Insurance.

### **Rev. Luttrell**

The Maid of Honor burst through the doors of the refurbished barn. She screamed: “Does anybody know CPR?” The crowd shrieked. Chairs toppled. People, older men mostly, stood as though standing were an act of strength in itself. I checked my watch. I smiled at the groom. I muttered something about the drive back to the city. The organist said, “Do not take the turnpike. Only a fool—” And that is precisely when the stowaway fell out of the sky and crashed through the roof of the barn.

### **Best Man**

The sound was crazy-loud. You’d expect a lot of guts and blood and shit. But there was none of that. I guess the guy was frozen. He came in through the roof like a cannonball—all tucked in on himself and round. I thought it was a cannonball. Months later, after the media quit coming around and after Doug and Angie returned first from therapy and then from their honeymoon, which had been postponed, I told Doug: “Dude, your wedding was the motherfucking bomb!” I meant it as a joke. Some of the other guys on the force laughed. Doug didn’t laugh. He’s lost his sense of humor.

### **The Photographer**

I really hate to say this. The stowaway saved my skin. The bee problem was quickly forgotten.

### **Rev. Luttrell**

In retrospect, I think we all learned something. About humility, about grace. We learned to curtail expectations of what happiness is and what it looks like. I think we all learned to let go of our pride and to think about the larger scheme of things. And I think the bride, Angie, was happy the stowaway fell out of the sky and through the roof of the barn. It assuaged her fears that the wedding would become known as the one in which the bride nearly died from a bee sting. It helped with the embarrassment.

### **Sister in-law to the Bride**

If that’s what anybody learned, they learned the wrong goddamn lesson.

### **The Organist**

I followed the story of the stowaway in the newspapers, but they were not satisfying. Only a few sentences. As they do. As you expect. When the Federal Aviation Administration published its report, I found myself somewhat satisfied. Their report asserted that the stowaway had died as a result of hypoxia and hypothermia long before his body dislodged from its place inside the wheel-well of an Airbus 319—a flight which had departed Tegucigalpa’s Toncontín International at 1:25pm en route to Chicago-O’Hare—and fell from a height of 32,575 feet. I know this is only part of it. It is not the whole story. Though the stowaway’s body had frozen, wrapped around itself like a gastropod’s shell. Though his brain and body had entered a state of torpor. I know he was fully aware of his circumstances. When his body slipped closer to the chasm of the landing gear door, he could feel the warmth from the sun on his face and see, yes, far beneath him, those amber waves of grain.

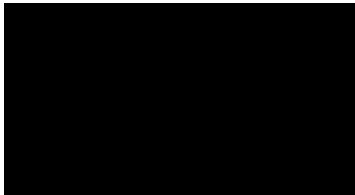
My apartment is nice but not so good with light. In Rostock our apartment was small but had good light. I could read all day. Outside was the Warnow before it drained into the sea and I could read all day in the light. Here, I need lamps. I read first the newspapers and then the FAA report by the lamps. Then I went to the computer, to look for more. He was a joke to some. To others, a horror. I am shocked, so many people on the internet said.

What shock? When people are surprised by these things, I ask them to remember Olga Segler. Nobody remembers Olga Segler. But I do. She was eighty-years-old. She lived in Berlin, in a flat on the third floor of 34 Bernauerstrasse, a short walk from her daughter and grandchildren. She was a widow. A pensioner. Her only joy in this world was to make the walk to see her family and to prepare supper for them. And then, one summer morning, she awoke to find the front door to her building bricked-up. The communists immured 34 Bernauerstrasse because the sidewalk outside was in the West. She could still wave to her daughter. The grandchildren would stand

on the sidewalk outside, and Olga threw them candies. This, she thought, was better than nothing.

For two years she lived like this. And then men with guns came. They were going to evict everybody from the building. Folks began to jump from their windows. Olga watched them go down, a short drop, into the safety nets of West German firefighters. Her daughter pleaded. But Olga would not jump. She wanted to stay near her husband's gravesite. She had already purchased the plot next to him.

Two days passed. The men with guns went flat by flat. Those who stayed were moved inland, to towns and neighborhoods they did not know. Finally, finally, Olga decided to jump. She wore her favorite jewelry beneath a black dress and black hose and her finest black shoes. She could take nothing she could not wear. There is a picture of her, just before.



The fall. You see? It is so short. Freedom lay so nearby. Just release your fingers from the windowsill. Let natural order do the rest. This is what Olga Segler did. She had the courage to let go. The jump was successful. Yet days later, the poor woman died from a heart attack. She had nothing left.

So what shock was there to be had in this barn? The shock itself was the shock to me. No more.

\*

I try to stay active. Most mornings I go for a jog. They are making new jog trails down by the river. The river is nothing much. It is brown and murky and sometimes trash floats by. Beer cans and diapers. Pieces of people's lives. Sometimes a nest of twigs and branches and plastic bags—they float on by, faster than I jog.

I go in the mornings because the city tells us not to go out at

night. There is a wild dog problem. A homeless man was ripped apart by these dogs, down by the river's edge. A child's face has been torn off.

I talk about these things with Kristen. She is a young woman I see jogging from time to time. Very beautiful, very young. She is married. She is an accountant. Her health is quite rude. She views me as an old man. I suppose I am.

"Good morning!" she'll shout, stopping her run to stretch and to talk. She has her phone on her arm and those headphones without wires.

"Did you hear about the dogs?" I ask.

She nods, solemnly.

"It's a terrible thing."

"Oh, don't I know it."

But I can tell she does not understand. She does not live here, near the river. Not in a place where a child's face can be torn off. Those are things she only sees on the news.

\*

What about Katuan Safaie? The woman from Iran who zipped herself inside a suitcase to come to Los Angeles and be with her husband? The suitcase was never picked up. It revolved on the luggage carousel for hours.

\*

Even if the river is nothing much, I feel the need to be near it.

My father worked the docks in Rostock. He was built very strong. Had dark, thick hair all over his body. He hated the communists. He would not speak of them except when drunk.

As I say. We lived in an apartment near the Warnow where the light was good and I could read all day; and my mother was a good mother and she cooked and looked over me; and my father worked very hard down on the docks and came home at night stinking of the river and of cigarettes and of sweat and was always happy to see his family. Though even as a youngster I could see in him something distant, some pull toward a different life.

We took the train to Chemnitz, to the football match at Dr. Kurt-Fischer-Stadion, when I was ten years old. It was the first time I'd left Rostock. I held my father's hand on the train. At the stadium, we stood on wooden planks. I lessened my grip. I listened to the crowds chant and sing. I took in the smell of warm beer and peanuts and, later, just before kickoff, the change in weather as clouds came in and a light rain began to fall.

My father was not himself. He was a happy man that day. He spoke to strangers. He trusted people. When the sides took to the pitch he pointed out Uwe Schlünz, a nineteen-year-old from Rostock. "He is the future," my father said, beaming. I watched Schlünz. I never took my eyes off of him. The future. I wanted to know what it looked like.

Before halftime my father's face turned. His eyes were not on the pitch but rather on some chaos, some abnormality, in the crowd behind the goalkeeper. It spread, as I've said. I could see it, could sense it. The panic came on like a wave. First visually and then in the bones. The man next to us said to my father, "Somebody's brought a gun." And though he hugged me, later, at our apartment (my father caught a later train), he was never the same man. I fear he would never walk through our door. He did, and he didn't.

\*

What about the inmate at the big American prison who wanted to be free so he stitched himself inside a sofa?

\*

What about Jonah? He is asked to go to Nineva. Instead he goes to Tarshish. At no point does it say: *And God was shocked by this.*

\*

At nights here, near the river, you can hear the shotgun blasts. The mayor allows this. He allows men to shoot wild dogs. These men are not cops. They are not animal control or game wardens. They are just men, most of them from suburbs. They arrive in their trucks

and their headlights beam down onto the river and, later, the blasts. Though I wake early to jog, the sanitation department has always arrived before I have. The trails are wet and gleaming and clean.

One morning, I asked Kristen if she would join me for coffee. She obliged. We went to someplace nearby, someplace very cool where the kids all have weird haircuts. She talked and then I talked. She looked at me the way these brides and grooms do when they come to me with their phones and ask if I can play this-or-that. They are wanting miracles and believing they know what love is—that love is miracles—and when I explain to them that a Hammond SK1 is a very fine instrument but that it cannot perform miracles...they look at me the way Kristen did at the coffeehouse. A look that says it's too bad I don't know what I'm talking about. Miracles, they want to say, happen all around us, all around them, every single day. And the future is miracles and love. They do not need Uwe Schlünz to know this. They know it.

I'll tell you about a miracle. What about this:

The football match must have been in September. By Christmastime my father had gone nearly mute and nearly catatonic. He lost his job. He would not speak. To me. To my mother. She assured me everything was okay. But in Rostock our apartment was small. I could hear things.

When he spoke it was at night. He thought I was asleep. He argued with my mother. He said people were listening. They watched him. They followed him to work. They followed him home. They took photographs of him. Cameras in hats, in fake mustaches, in an arm cast. Mother told him to be reasonable. "We are not political people," I heard her say many times.

"I must've said something, sometime."

I was telling Kristen this. I tried to explain the Stasi. She put her phone away and listened in a new way.

The football match was in September, I told her. By Christmastime my father no longer spoke. He disappeared soon after the New Year.

"What happened?" she asked.

I shrugged. "He disappeared. I woke up one morning and he was gone. Mother said he went to work. He did not come home for supper that night. Or the next. By the time the ground thawed I quit

asking.”

“That’s so sad.”

I nodded.

“You still don’t know?”

“What is there to know? Many people disappeared.”

Before we left, Kristen asked, “How is that a story about miracles?”

“He was an unhappy man, afraid of the world. And then he disappeared.”

\*

When Arthur Schreiber landed in Spain, people applauded. They asked for autographs. He is known as the first airplane stowaway. Pictures from the newspaper—they show a smiling young man, healthy, women here and there.

But what about this man from Tegucigalpa? The newspapers did not print his name. They did not photograph him, thank god. They took quotes from the bride and groom. We are shocked, they said. Later, a daytime talk show host had them on television. They cried. Then the host said she had good news for them: she was going to pay for a whole new wedding. Everybody cried. Then they danced.

\*

I do not like to lie. I lied to Kristen. About my father and what I know.

Sometime back, the government opened the Stasi files. Anybody could look through them. This was a big deal. People wanted to see what the government had said about them, about their families. There were seventy-miles of files. I flew to Berlin to look for myself. I had my father’s name and date of birth. By then, most people had seen what they needed to see. The place where the miles of files were, it was empty. So was my search. Nothing. Not a photograph. Not a note.

That night at the hotel I considered this. The logical way out would have been through the docks. Easy for a man working there. Load a tanker and then load yourself. Hide amongst the boxcars.

Wait for the rocky beaches of England. Or the amber waves of grain. This was logical. But when I dreamt that night I saw him floating on a zeppelin. Standing atop its enormous belly. Arms raised. Dark hair turned white by the sun—so close to the sun. He smiled at me. “*Freiheit ist das Risiko wert,*” he said. And then he dissolved into ten-thousand shards of glass.

\*

For a number of months, Kristen no longer jogged. I waited for her. I tried new times: perhaps she is avoiding me? Nothing.

I stopped researching the stowaway. I looked for Kristen’s name. I had horrible images, both dreaming and awake. Kristen surrounded by dogs. Kristen screaming before they went for her throat. Kristen’s face, torn apart, torn away.

These were living nightmares.

I waited for the television news. I looked up her name on the internet. Missing woman. Mauled woman.

I saw nothing until, one day, I saw her. She was at the coffeeshop with friends. I did not interrupt. I saw, though, that she was pregnant.

Her miracles will continue into the future. She is certain of it. She does not have to ask for miracles. They are around her, every day, and the future will continue to offer them to her, one after the other, so many she cannot know what to do with them—whole rooms in her heart filled with miracles and with love. Because she is in the American heartland, where miracles grow. And it is worth it to be here, to do what you must, at any cost, to find your way here.

My father would be eighty-nine today. I would want to see him. I would ask him if it was worth it. “Was it worth it, Papa?” Because I am not so sure. I don’t know. I don’t know.

CHELSEA KRIEG

## Marriage Counseling Without Teeth

My grandmother used to say dreaming your teeth fell out means you shouldn't have said that. A southern lady should bite her tongue, keep quiet. But the heron has a dagger-

mouth, the hawk's beak, hooked. A bee-eater's, precise enough to tweeze a bee and loose its stinger.

I am so tired of not saying.

Without teeth, birds catch, rip open. And this is what it means to survive—sharp, swift, honest. After years of silence,

I want to scream and hiss like a barn owl under the full moon. I want to be a nightjar, and fly open-mouthed into the dark.

## When My Therapist Asks If I'm Happy

This morning, I pulled a ghost  
out of my mouth. Felt the weight  
of its absence in my gut. For years,  
I have kept its body-mist  
clenched between the walls of my  
esophagus, held my breath close  
like a wound. Hungry. No.

Let me start again.

Today, I pulled the crooked machine  
out of my throat, loosened the steel myth  
wound around my teeth,  
spit out private radio transistors,  
overheard *go aheads* and *mayday*,  
*maydays*. And without all this  
metal, I can swallow again. So I'll eat  
now at the table I set for myself. Fill  
myself until I am satisfied, until  
I swell and float, my body—  
its own life-raft. And what did all  
this devouring teach me?

I know the price of holding on,  
of letting go—clouds opening  
their angry bellies in August  
when it's too late to run.



FELICIA ZAMORA

## The Bird

I leave Kleenexes around the house. A *pandemic thing*, my partner tells me & reminds me of Kleenex-the-brand versus *tissues* as the overarching item. Moments such as these—I give bow & prayer to whoever invented the gesture of the middle finger. *The Bird*, for all you ornithologists. I retract my hands in fold in remembering the Greeks used the middle finger in representation of male genitalia, how Aristophanes' character's finger moves from gesture to crotch in a rhythm only a play titled *The Clouds* in 419 BC gets away with. Then the false 1415 Battle of Agincourt claim, that French soldiers cut off middle & index fingers of captured archers, so the British arrow slinging ceased. All the ways men compare a cock—longbowmen, the lot. Snopes debunked the Agincourt mutilations claim along with the phrase “pluck yew” evolving to “fuck you” which feels clever, even in the falsehood. I begin to wonder about all this myth & origin of story. I want to go back to my Kleenex parade & yet giving my partner The Bird & considering origins feels more pertinent than ever. Consider all the testosterone in our stories. How story sutures in some cultures, cleaves in others. I want to know the study of hands, a da Vinci-esk attention to the middle finger, my middle finger; place where palmistry & chiology meet to read the feminine history of my tallest finger. A fashion blog tells me, my middle fingers harbor significance of balance, law, and justice. I raise my Birds high into the air. I consider how any symmetrical person might come up with that conclusion. How do we undo phallic embodiments of cock & balls of the finger to knuckles & find women's power here? Romans named the gesture *digitus impudicus*—shameless and indecent; I consider all ways society, the nation, the world, label my vagina, my XX chromosomes as offensive. In the *Epigrammata*, Latin poet Martial's character extends *the indecent one* to three doctors, First Century AD *suck it*—which again, brings in the phallic, sexually explicit & ownership of the gesture by men. Male squirrel

monkeys gesture with their penis, Tacitus wrote that German tribes gave The Bird to advancing Roman soldiers, or so says the historian at University of Illinois who writes on the rhetoric of insults, & in all the litany of myth, not one speaks of women. My mind floods with a severing between me & what I thought I knew about my relationship to The Bird. I hold my right hand in my left fingers, rub my middle finger with thumb, pause gently at the callus, *writer's bump*, I whisper to myself. How skin creates a barrier of dead skin cells to protect the underlying skin; what develops in repeated friction, repeated tensions. Crayons to markers to pencils to pens...my middle finger & I in a love story crossing time & my body's development. My middle finger understands pressures & speaks for when flesh must—I hold my middle finger out, homage to my writing journey & tell the history of The Bird, *Go fuck yourself*.

JANE MORTON

## Refrain

*i.*

Midday the sky strains over us  
    continuous white  
as a sheet stretched  
    onto a mattress.  
It's almost safe,  
    almost sacred,  
something you could have  
    been born on.

We forget for a moment  
    we are in  
the most terrible place:  
    the light cruel, the animals  
all murdered, waiting  
    at the side of the road,  
the sun ravaging  
    the flies ravaging them.  
We spit every time  
    we pass another one.  
We don't belong here.  
    Tell me  
we don't belong here.

*ii.*

Midday the sky is threadbare  
fabric we huddle under, colorless  
light coming through in patches.  
I look at you to make the noise stop,  
to make the itching stop, to make  
me lie down. I need you watching me,  
your eyes a green wet fester I want

to push my fingers into, to feel  
the death underneath.

*iii.*

Midday the sky is hollow, broken  
    open, eggshell white and damp.  
I touch you like a wasp nest, like a needle  
    coming down again and again.  
I am blue ink, a gangrene  
    you can't shake off.  
Kick me:  
    I will come back.  
You know this.

Crown of thorns, crown of flies  
    circling your head.  
Hollow, your eyes  
    drink up all the light. Come  
lie down. Come  
    kiss the sweat off my neck.  
Kiss the sun away.  
    Make it night again.

## Drive

I let you talk  
the whole way out

a ragged logic  
unspooling

between us  
dark and thin as a vein

slowly emptying.  
I wanted to be

so quiet I wouldn't be there  
anymore, an hour away

from home and still speeding  
in the same direction.

The road stripped everything  
down to the basics, shadows

uncoiling and receding  
back into the dark, hands

flexing around the wheel,  
around each other.

When there was nothing left  
to say we parked

somewhere between towns  
where the insects

made a new kind of silence  
of their need, legs rubbing

and rubbing, hollow bodies over-  
filling with noise.

*There's no one  
out here, you said. No one*

*to see.* Your fingers in my mouth  
and my hair.

We thought this was all that mattered.  
All we needed.

Afterwards, I was so hungry  
I can remember the taste

of my own sweat on my wrist  
when I bit down, stinging myself

silent in the dome light. We drove back  
too fast before sunrise

refusing to let the scene become  
beautiful. The radio on

just to remind us how many  
other people are out there.

TERRY ANN THAXTON

## Portrait Of Myself As My Mother

Most of the time I walk on my own two feet, sometimes I walk on all fours like a bear just to carry the day. I'd say like a Momma Bear, but that is cliché. Let's say I become a Momma Bear and maybe a tree grows out of my back. The first branch grew when my son refused to be potty-trained and could not be accepted into childcare because of it. Another branch grew when he started reading books at age three, which I thought meant he was a genius, and so I was confused as other branches sprouted when he wouldn't dress himself for school because cloth, even soft cotton, on his body was, to him, pin pricks. The tree on my back grew bigger, more branches, but no leaves, no flowers blooming, no rolling hills. Instead of playing with other children, he drew monsters in the sand.

Years of misunderstanding.

Let's say in addition to walking on all fours, I have a heavy collar around my neck, my bear neck, but there is no leash attached to help pull me forward. Instead, gold chains hold abstractions to my back—my son's autism, his fetal position, his lost jobs, his inability to keep appointments, his hesitation to wash clothes before he needs them, his ferocious loyalty, the challenge to track how much toilet paper there is in the house, his love of animals. Sure there are flags hanging on some of the branches that say "You Go, Terry," hung there by friends and professionals who've wanted to assure me that I'm a good mother. But I'm not standing for that. I'm on all fours.

I keep little rooms on my back in case he needs to come home, each room quiet and made of clay—dark, cavernous so the sounds of the world don't kill him. There's a pillow waiting to be sewn, a waterfall unsure of its destination. I've watched him at tidal pools cradling hermit crabs, sea urchins. I've seen him inside caves made by rock and in a rain forest finding a lungless lizard, shouting, *This is what I came for.*

I bend over a tree branch, the sun desperate to set, the day not over, the moon barely visible in the day's sky. I'll hang on this continent waiting to see if my paws are still on its edge, hopeful.

AMANDA MARPLES

## The Sudden Flesh: An Ode To The Postpartum Body In All It's Involuntary Glory

Everyone is sleeping except me.

James is more than likely dreaming of the old days. The baby, I have no idea. That is the truth.

I am awake, and it hurts.

What is *it*, suddenly? This I think, is for further and extensive consideration.

For now I can smell myself, sharp-sour. It pulls my face into tight angles. Sharp-sour. Alien-animal. I need a shower.

I heave myself over in bed, inching my legs carefully out until feet meet carpet.

I'd like to wear my best perfume, the one that clouds around me when I am out clinking my glass, flicking my ash and laughing with glossy lips, sun glinting off my shades. I'd like my hand to reach for this or that without thinking twice. A palm to smoothe hair, say, or a finger to point for emphasis. A seamless glissando of thought and action.

I reach both hands around the back of my neck and imagine the base of great swan wings, just under the shelf of my shoulder blades ready to take me up and out. But travel of any kind has been very sternly not advised. The fantasy wings are impotent, if not severed. I almost sigh but think better of it. Being dramatic won't help.

I will do nothing more than get in the shower, and feed, and feed, and feed. No flying, and certainly no driving. Not for six weeks they said, an accident can result in ruptured stitches.

Six weeks.

Just another five weeks and three days and four hours, then.

I find myself in the bathroom with no memory of the short walk down the corridor.

I spy my best perfume in the bathroom cabinet.

I chew a finger, and think. A baby can be quite turned off the breast by artificial smells.

The perfume must remain behind glass.

Or, cordoned off.

Or, over the border.

I have to shower. And quickly, because a feeling has begun to build. A pressure and a tingling pull, deep inside my flesh. A drawling, incessant white noise.

I check the clock. It has been two hours. The baby will wake and cry and I don't want to respond because I'm tired and sore and bleeding (still!) but I *do* respond.

No. *Something* responds. It is not *me*.

*It* is not *me*.

What is *it*? Suddenly?

And how long has *it* been there? Forever?

All this time: sweating breathing shedding renewing beating growing.

I don't like to think of it. I turn away from myself, to the tiles and the towels.

I turn on the shower. The cold steel of the temperature dial already running with condensation is a relief in the palm of my hand. The splash of the jets on the duck print curtain sounds familiar and clean. I stand with my eyes closed for a minute, listening.

Maybe ten.

I climb in on legs made of spun sugar. My knee trembles while I wait a second, testing; making sure I am strong enough to pull the other leg in. I've got it as hot as it will go. My other leg comes unstuck from the floor, my sole dragging along the bathroom rug, the one I bought when a trip to IKEA was in no way impossible. My leg and the associated foot joins the rest of me. I squeeze hospital-issue soap-free shower gel into my hand. Not rose or sandalwood or geranium or coconut. They are not safe or sensible with regard to the easily confused infant olfactory system.

There is something wet on my face, a few tones cooler than the shower. My eyes are manufacturing saltwater and I think it is because I am the one who is confused. I bend in increments of a millimetre to reach my lower legs, wobbling a little to the side. The duck print curtain sticks to me and I cry out, like a startled animal. Actually, do animals cry out when afraid? Rabbits? Or deer? Or am I thinking of birds?

*I* am the one who is confused.

I breathe in (like they told me to) but the tears still come, and I turn my face up into the jets. Steam billows and just over the rushing of the shower I can hear a blackbird singing his song outside. Always the same. Does he know? Droplets run down the walls, a thousand wet mirrors each containing a small wet me as I rub in the hospital gel, careful to avoid where the stitches will soon be removed. It is an angry red line.

An *under*-line. The rest of me is bold italics and this red underline is letting me know what a mistake I have made, what correction is needed. Pay attention!

What is *it*, suddenly? What is *me* and what is *it* and has it always been this way? Perhaps I was too busy being smugly myself, buying bread, bleaching my hair, texting a friend, and telling him *don't forget to turn off the dryer on your way out* to notice that I have always been split down the middle like this.

My flesh is numb around the stitched line where they pulled her from me, purple and bloody and screaming. My fingers tremble. Here is my body touching itself without feeling. It is like handling

raw chicken and I frown because, where do the nerves end and begin? Which part is feeling which? I assumed myself to be a continuous plane. An unconscious assumption.

I grit my teeth and it makes me think of a line from some poem, something about thrusting fists and ghosts and posts and a brain suspended in brine. I let the water run over me, taking away the slime of hospital not-soap. I step back, that feeling still making my teeth thrust against themselves like fists, like glaciers; my tongue pushed up in my palate, my mind on brains, posts, ghosts.

I think I hear the baby cry as I turn off the shower and step carefully out, feeling something tighten and pull, a grizzling, diffuse kind of pain. How? If the nerves are deadened, how? I shake my head and press the nubs of my shoulder bones against the wall over the towel rail, still ice-cold in the bathroom fog. The bases ache in tandem. Dull discs of dark non-pain. I both feel and don't feel, and I press harder, like a child testing a loose tooth. I don't know how I feel about that as I pull a towel, fluffy and scented with softener, which was done long before the risk of nipple confusion became a thing. I decide it doesn't count.

The baby is definitely crying downstairs; I hadn't dreamed it. I wonder if James has woken too, if *he* has pulled her into his chest like he is driven by a motor like I am; if *he* is straining to understand how that dot of life has come out of his body; if *he* is sensing an involuntary draining that he feels all along his jawline and down his spine.

Sometimes I dream she is crying even when I am wide awake. I blink and find myself at her basket looking down at her sleeping form. Little arms cast back in surrender, little head turned to the side, little blister on her top lip. I ask myself, *is she really asleep?* If my ears can lie, why can't my eyes?

I dry with small movements. Hesitant, like I'm building a tower of playing cards. My heart is beating fast and I never asked it to do that. I only asked my hands to be careful with the towel, in case the stitches unravel, and I fall apart right here in the bathroom.

Then here is something. A creeping warmth down my belly

and legs and I look and see pale white rivulets running from my breasts in lines like rivers or railways on a map splitting and joining; tributaries of milk flowing down over the hard bones of my ankles and dispersing its tendrils in the water that has gathered at my feet.

Wasted.

In places the watery milk is tinged pink, tainted with a second flow from within. I haven't had time to stem it, this Lochia that no-one mentioned until afterwards, the bleeding that would go on for weeks. Time and tide wait for no woman.

Lochia. Like a place in a brochure. *Oh, you're going to Lochia are you? I hear it's positively tropical in July.*

But this is the *Lochia Rubra*, also known as *Cruenta*. Like a Disney villain. Selfish and jealous, probably out to steal an innocent soul or a head of golden hair, or a beautiful crystalline voice. Pissed off because she never got an invite to the party. Here she comes, a dark and membranous gate crasher.

My eyes have since joined in; competition to produce fluid clearly irresistible. They sting against the salt which nettles the outer corners, dry and sore where I

cried and wiped and

cried and wiped and

cried and wiped yesterday.

And the day before and the day before that.

My poor tired body. That which is not me, it cannot be, I did not make this milk for this baby (not on purpose) I had nothing to do with it and will not take the credit but I will still blame myself for letting it run out of me useless on the tiles.

James calls my name, softly from downstairs but I still hear him. I answer, "Coming now," and wrap my towel tightly around and under my arms. My shoulders and knees twitch, an oceanic distance away and I tell them *not yet*. Not until I learn to tell waking cries from dream cries. Not until I figure out a way to close the crack in

me, opened without any thought.

Not until this unauthorised manufacture of  
saltwater, milk, blood  
stops.

AZA PACE

## Transformations

The stories are full of transformations. That girl is already part blue jay—feathers sprout from her temples, and she mimics you all day, she’s that ruthless. Over there, a woman is mostly possum. She polishes her thousand teeth in the tree over your door. And here is a woman half-way to pine tree, breathing in and in and in. She must be three stories high. She stills. Surely, she will pull the sky and the hard-packed earth together and the collision will slam through us all like *bam*: reality. No? I may have my stories confused, or they confuse themselves. In the stories, no one ever chooses to change. There is a curse or a prayer, there is a before and after, the chance escape. But often, in reality, the shift starts from the inside. Watch the middle moment—a flashing eye that says “Yes, feathers. Yes, watch me bite, watch me grow”—a choice, and then the knowing. Everything is always bending toward some new shape.

RAMSEY MATHEWS

## For Sale Third Day In LA March 18

Sex salt of bodies. Pacific salt. Salt  
of the earth. Lot's wife. Gomorrah.  
Los Angeles seduces you.  
Your Pentecostal Georgia mother prophesied  
brimstone & earthquakes as you board  
Greyhound she says -- *Take this three hundred  
stake your claim* -- among movie stars street  
gangs & whores. Fodor's Travel Guide points  
to scenic Hollywood Boulevard where tar  
& nicotine-stained pants drop from a homeless  
guy's waist. Where is the movie crew? Inside  
the head shop. The bead shop. The record store. No  
camera crew appears. No Director. No grip.  
The bum squats above Ray Bolger's signed star  
& shits once grunts again spies a cop & pulls up  
greasy cigarette jeans. Hare Krishnas dance & bang  
trash cans. Beverly Hills is a rich woman's wasteland  
where spindly palm trees leer at wannabe actors  
in convertibles & tourists in buses. Rodeo Drive  
drives your poverty mind crazy Saint Laurent  
Max Mara Louis Vuitton Giorgio Armani  
so you flee to the murder capital at Alvarado & Sixth  
because Fodor's says you shouldn't. Vendors  
in open stalls hawk T-shirts athletic socks sombreros  
& sesos tacos. Hookers stand ten paces  
from every corner in shadows of old low stucco  
or brick buildings. A spark of yellow or pink  
lures you like moth to hibiscus. Hookers with legs  
strong like wrestlers bodies like Olympic strippers  
& caramel skin like sticky circus candy. The one  
with red hair. You wanna be a movie star?  
Lean back. Watch the mirrors for cops.

## Long Beach Oblations

Like nesting terns waiting for sundown  
you & I watched the low ocean waves  
our bellies full of sex & lobster  
until the sea settled like a couch  
& you went home to him & I went home.  
I walked past the gay cafes  
past young men in denim  
draped out the doors & windows  
like cala lilies & caladiums drinking gin  
& I gazed at sailboats dancing among oil tankers  
moored to the horizon like a postcard  
& the ginger sun lingered longer than usual  
beneath the bridge & the terns bathed  
their feet & faces in the darkening salt sea.



MARK SMITH-SOTO

## The Call

My wife calls and I don't respond, even though I hear her voice clearly, reaching from the deck outside or from the kitchen, even though a part of me has put down my book and gone to her,

my whole body alert with the pleasure of answering the woman who knows my name. Instead, I sit holding on to my book with my eyes closed while my name repeats, slow beats in the air—

I am in exile then, I am completely, perfectly alone. Later we make a fire, for the first time in months we hold each other in love, our bodies almost sob in recognition, and pulling me close she says,

You know, I had a dream, it was this morning, yes—I dreamed I called you and you did not come.

MARK BESSEN

## Chicken Daddy

As I pinned a trembling, bloody mass of poultry under my knee and fumbled to thread the sewing needle pinched in my nitrile-gloved fingers, I regretted ever agreeing to raise chickens. If Brandon hadn't bullied me into becoming a chicken dad so young, I would have been reading the new Elena Ferrante novel in our inflatable hot tub beneath the bistro lights we'd strung from the cedar elms. Instead, I was watching a YouTube video of the "interrupted suture" technique and tweezing blood-caked feathers from a gaping wound on our least favorite chicken's back to prepare her for home surgery.

\*

When Brandon brought up backyard chicken-keeping about a month into our cohabitation, I told him, "I just don't want any more chores."

"It's not like you do that many now," he said.

I smirk-glared at him. "You know what I mean. They'd be more mouths to feed, more lives to take care of." Even as I spoke, I knew I sounded like a grouchy stepfather weighing the prospects of having another child. But I was barely holding it together as it was—I was overwhelmed with the new and unexpected responsibilities of home ownership, terrified by the speed and intensity with which my relationship with Brandon was progressing. I had plenty to panic about without the added pressure of introducing fowl siblings to my two cats.

"I could help gather the eggs," I said. "And sometimes feed them." But I didn't want more check lists growing like weeds in my compulsively maintained journal.

"I'll be the one in charge," he promised. "You can be as involved as you want, but I'll take on the regular cleaning and maintenance."

I didn't believe him. I thought he was just saying what I wanted to hear to get my sign-off, like I might. Left to my own devices, I required a good six to twelve months of anxious

consideration before committing to any substantive life change, much less working out logistics. I'd recently spent over a year weighing the benefits of a new stainless-steel trash can. But Brandon was the beneficiary of a great deal more pluck than I, and began research in earnest, covertly at first, and then less than subtly.

"How long do chickens even live?" I asked, spotting some pictures of poultry on his laptop over his shoulder. I was trying to suss out whether we were talking dog- or hamster-level commitment.

"Up to ten years," Brandon replied. "Usually five to eight. But they only lay eggs for a couple."

All I heard was the upper bound: a decade of responsibility. *Dog level.*

"What do you do with them when they stop laying?" I asked. What I wanted to ask was: Who gets the chickens in the event of a breakup? We'd need a poultry pre-nup.

"Some people eat them. Some keep them as pets," he said.

"So, pets," I said.

I wanted chickens in theory if not in practice. I did love a good backyard project. Brandon and I had recently installed a self-sustaining stock tank pond complete with lily pads and shimmering silver minnows, a retaining wall flower garden, and a rather extravagant vegetable plot with drip irrigation and staggered planting schedule. The birds would be a wonderful addition to our carefully curated brand as hipster-chic garden gays, another eccentricity to wear like a dramatic accessory in our blossoming pseudo-provincial lives.

But more than anything, getting chickens seemed like an attempt at nesting, taken a bit too literally. Which simultaneously explained Brandon's attraction and my resistance to the undertaking. Anything veering towards permanence elicited in me an akathitic desire to flee.

We talked through the pros—fresh eggs, being extremely cool—and the cons—responsibility, money, responsibility, cleaning up poop, responsibility.

"Well," Brandon said. "We might actually save money if we never have to buy eggs again."

I rolled my eyes. "Great," I said. "So, if my math is right, if each of them lays an egg every other day, and we sell them at the

farmers' market for five bucks a dozen, they'll pay for themselves in ..." I poked at my hand like a calculator. "Just under two hundred years."

Brandon ignored me.

"Plus, poop is a pro," he corrected. "Compost."

With that ironclad logic, I suppose, the scales were tipped. I conceded that, with Brandon at the helm of our poultry-figureheaded ship, I'd be on board. He—we—could get chickens.

\*

The first step in preparing for our future as chicken parents was to build the coop. We were, after all, Crafty Gays, and had no intent to shell out three to five grand for one of the pre-fab configurations online that had all the personality of a storage unit. I was still deeply apprehensive about the project, and perhaps assumed that all the manual labor involved in the construction would burn off some of Brandon's excitement for the birds, like most of my flighty passions when presented with the reality of hard work. But his heart was set.

Brandon wasn't like the gents I'd dated before. For one, he was six years older than me, a gap that, when we met at twenty-seven and thirty-three, felt vast. Our first date had been at a too-fancy little cocktail bar that Brandon chose; I would have been happier with a taco truck. My nails were painted my trademark lavender gray and chipped from gardening. His were chewed to the quick, and he had an indentation in his earlobe where a piercing had closed over, tantalizing mystery beneath the scar tissue.

We dated for a little over a year before we moved in together in the summer of 2019. I'd warmed to him slowly at first, then fell suddenly, startled one day to find him strolling through my vision of the future. Notably, that future did not include chickens. Even though Brandon and I both acknowledged that we wanted kids eventually, I wasn't willing to let his timeline accelerate my own. I worried the chickens were a gateway project to another type of bipedal poop monster.

To be fair, I can't put all of the blame for the chickens on Brandon. I blame the yard, too, which was certainly complicit. My

backyard in East Austin was densely canopied with cedar elms and hackberries that flitted with chickadees and cooed with doves. Walking the thirty-odd paces from front to back of the yard, the texture beneath my tie-dye Crocs transitioned from the crunch of dried foliage to the soggy squelch of sandy soil by the edge of a creek, where ferns uncurled their prehistoric leaves. The property's picturesque pastoralism almost insinuated a chicken coop onto itself even without Brandon's now-regular prodding.

Brandon found schematics online for something called The Garden Coop. After reviewing the plans and buying materials, we decided that he would work on constructing the frame while I dug the foundation, a task that sounded straightforward enough. But as I dug to level the ground, within yards of where the chickens would make their home, I made some concerning discoveries: a traffic cone, a boat engine, yards of mustard yellow shag carpet, somehow impervious to decay, enough sheet metal to build a bunker, and an honest-to-god, full-sized white toilet, inhabited by a large toad. Every time I cast my shovel into the soil I worried I might unearth a body.

When I finished three hours later, my efforts had produced what looked like a few bricks—remarkably level!—dug into the sloped ground. Meanwhile Brandon had completed the entire frame, a tangible thing with heft and mass, and moved on to sawing the shapes of dainty egg boxes into plywood. Aching and drenched in sweat, I told myself the foundation was obviously the most important part.

All said, the construction took about four weekends, during which Brandon would wake me up at noon with a cup of coffee and we'd eat some brunch and work on our bucolic extravaganza until the sun went down and the coop went up. The structure was tall enough that we could stand inside without stooping, and we painted it a terra cotta red with cornflower blue accents for the door and egg boxes. A wooden ladder led up from the run to the elevated, enclosed coop where the girls would roost.

"You guys are like, hella domestic," said a friend visiting from San Francisco.

When Brandon and I finished construction, we took one last look at the coop to admire our work before it was full of chicken shit.

"It's so cute," Brandon said.

And it was. Hella domestic, indeed.

I turned to him. "Shall we christen the coop?" I asked with a wink, putting on safety goggles over my glasses. The floor was strong enough to support my weight laying on my back, or a leg propped up on the chicken ladder. I leaned in to kiss him, then cracked a joke about cloacas that immediately killed the mood. Hand in hand we went back inside.

\*

As compensation for my refusal to engage with the practicalities of poultry-rearing, Brandon had, by this point, developed an encyclopedic knowledge of chicken care. Meanwhile, my research was limited to watching *The Beekman Boys*, a TLC-style docudrama about two New York gays who start their own farm upstate with the help of a weepy goat caretaker, and *The Biggest Little Farm*, during which I became ludicrously emotionally attached to the on-screen pig.

Inside our house, blissed out after completing the coop, I planted myself on my end of the couch and vaguely perused listicles of chicken breeds.

"I think we should get at least one yellow one," I said to Brandon. "The classic pastoral look." I gestured vaguely with my hand. "Do you like the Buff Orpingtons or the Gold Sex-Linkeds?"

Brandon was ambivalent about the yellow ones, much more drawn to the striking iridescent plumage of the Black Copper Marans.

We were choosing a palette of chickens like we were at the Behr counter at Home Depot, holding up swatches and squinting into the future. We had the egg colors to consider too, which ranged from a stark white to pale beige to seafoam green.

"There is one last thing we need to talk about," he said, serious now. "We have to be realistic that we might lose one. Most of the chicken blogs say it's common for one or two to die out of a flock of six to eight."

These seemed like remarkably bad odds to me, but we only planned to get four birds anyways, so, rounding down, we were in good shape.

"I know that," I said, and I did. But silently we both assumed we would be different. We would be the perfect gay dads with the one

hundred percent survival rate.

\*

Brandon and I pulled up to the gate of Blue Star Ranch in the mid-morning of a warm December day, giddy from anticipation and espresso. The ranch, recommended for the rare chicken varieties it offered, was a forty-minute drive from home, outside Austin city limits. Territory where a man with painted lavender nails might clench his fist to hide them away.

Upon arrival, we found the address to be less a *Brokeback Mountain*-y ranch and more a large lot with ramshackle buildings wrapped in chicken wire opposite a house. A stout grandmotherly woman stood by the gate and directed us into a gravel parking space.

“Mary Ann,” she said gruffly, extending a hand. “The Chicken Lady.”

Her body had taken approximately the posture of her namesake, slanting forward and walking with a jerky bob.

“Well,” said Mary Ann. “Let’s check out some girls!”

I smiled, then uncurled my fists and covertly poked Brandon in the butt.

We followed behind as Mary Ann hobbled into one of the huge, open-air enclosures. Chickens scurried away from us like schools of fish from an approaching shark. Smashed pumpkins buzzed with flies in the heat.

“Have you ever watched *America’s Got Talent*?” asked Mary Ann.

I nodded, perplexed, as did Brandon.

“I was on it,” she said, grinning. “Twice.” She paused for this to sink in. “Caught 22 birds in under a minute.”

I couldn’t quite understand what this meant in the context of the show. I clarified: “So you released a bunch of chickens on stage, and then caught them?”

Just then, Mary Ann reached for a three-foot-long net and, in a transformation that Brandon would later describe as something out of a Miyazaki film, this humble grandmother became a poultry-catching ninja. She swept the net along her side with the grace of a rhythmic gymnast performing her Olympic ribbon routine, and all of a sudden

she was petting a chicken in the crook of her elbow that wasn’t there a second ago.

I looked at Brandon, whose mouth was agape.

“Exactly that,” Mary Ann said. “It’s about anticipating where they’re going.”

She released the bird, which flapped clumsily to the ground.

Then, a moment later, Mary Ann keeled over, wincing.

“Blood clot,” she said, massaging her outer thigh roughly.

We offered to call someone, but she waved us off. I worried the chicken-catching exhibition had brought this on. From the familiar way she swiped the chair from a nearby nail, I could tell that she experienced this pain regularly, and I felt a twinge of despair imagining the amount of physical labor involved in her life, done through pain. I realized, self-conscious all of a sudden, that we were playing at the life she actually led.

After a few minutes, Mary Ann led us into the adjacent enclosure, which she said had most of the pullets, or prepubescent chickens, under a year old. When we saw one we liked, we pointed it out to Mary Ann, who swooped it up in her net with an athleticism that was unexpected and delightful every time.

Half an hour later, we had eight chickens in the holding cage—an adult Maran and seven pullets, each just larger than a dove. After careful consideration, we found two pullets whose colors were somewhat redundant. We settled for six birds, which, we agreed, was a suitable number, though the glint in Brandon’s eye made me think he had already anticipated we’d be coming home with more than the four we had initially planned on.

We pulled back out through the gate. The boxes cheeped intermittently, and we heard the scratching of our new flock’s pterodactyl nails on the cardboard. We looked at each other, and I leaned over to give Brandon a peck on the cheek. It felt like the beginning of something big.

On the way home, we drove through P. Terry’s. I got my go-to order, a veggie burger.

“Don’t you dare,” I told Brandon with a sideways glance. “Not with them in the car.”

He ordered a burger instead of his usual chicken sandwich.

\*

Brandon and I each grabbed a box from the car and carried the chickens down to the still-virgin coop. Within minutes of being liberated from her cardboard cage, the two-year-old Black Copper Maran established her spot at the top of the pecking order. I was peeved that Brandon had pushed for this geriatric bird when I'd been so excited to watch the pullets grow up, but I had to admit she was beautiful. Her black feathers shone with a coppery glow in the low afternoon light as she towered over the pullets like a cow among goats.

We had initially discussed naming our girls after a central coherent theme. As we watched them run around, we brainstormed: *Golden Girls* characters, *Land Before Time* dinos, assorted chicken dishes (Nugget, Drumstick, A La King). But Brandon and I worried that if we lost a central character it would result in too much heartache, and to my surprise Brandon was willing to go along with my organic approach to naming (which is to say, lacking cohesion or foresight).

Hence, Maranda the Maran.

Four of the five pullets took longer to earn their names and fall into position in the hierarchy, but the bottom rung went immediately to the silvery Easter Egger, who cowered in a crack between two bricks whenever Maranda came near. We named her Eagle for both her likeness to a raptor in profile, and the irony of her timidity. Though, in retrospect, we probably shouldn't have named her after a bird of prey.

Next up the hierarchy was Sussie the Speckled Sussex. Then Buffy the Buff Orpington. Diaper, the Sapphire Plymouth Barred, lazily named for her fluffy white butt. And last, coming in at number two in the pecking order, behind Maranda, was Wynona the Golden-Laced Wyandotte. Already we could tell she was equally sure of herself and wrong, like a toxic straight man stuffed into a chicken's body.

As the sun finally dipped behind the trees, the chickens began to get angsty and restless. They seemed to be preparing for bed, but couldn't figure out how to go up the chicken ladder from the ground into their lofted abode.

"I think we should lift them up," I said.

"They'll figure it out," Brandon said. "It's instinctual."

The girls continued to stand on the ground, heads tilted up like turkeys in the rain, attempting complex geometry and trigonometry to calculate the angle of launch. They kept trying and failing, jumping partway up the ramp and then stumbling down. The sky was getting darker, and I was worried they'd end up spending the night on the ground, spooked by the sounds of wildlife in our yard, tossing and turning until the sun came up.

"We have to help them," I said.

"They'll be fine!" Brandon urged.

"I can't just stand by and watch them struggle," I told him. I'd just show them this once, and then they'd get it tomorrow.

Twenty more minutes passed. Fine, maybe it was ten.

Then miraculously, having cracked the equation, Maranda flapped her way up onto the ramp and up through the hole in the floor. Within a minute the other girls followed Maranda's lead into the coop, where the pecking was pacified, like they'd agreed it was a safe space. The chickens arranged themselves in tiers on the roosting poles from top to bottom: Maranda, Wynona, Diaper, Buffy, Sussie, and Eagle.

I planted a wet smooch on Brandon's scruff.

"Nice work today, Chicken Daddy," I cheesed.

That night we were so anxious about our new girls settling in, we woke up every couple hours to shine flashlights into the coop and check on them.

\*

Over the first few weeks, Brandon demonstrated a preternatural ability to calm the poultry, while I was embarrassingly nervous to pick up our tiny velociraptors. As I sat in the coop, the other pullets bobbing around me, I would ask Brandon to set little Sussie in my lap, where I'd give her a few good pats until she became restless, then let her flutter away, whispering, "Goodbye, tiny angel."

I was obstinate in my role as distant father vis-à-vis chores, but that didn't stop me from developing strong opinions on the chickens' psychological well-being.

"They should be free," I said to Brandon one weekend. I wanted them to have full run of the yard, to live a life in nature.

“They’re too small,” Brandon replied. Plus, he added, the yard wasn’t fenced on all sides, and every night filled with the sounds of raccoons, possums, and coyotes.

But I was adamant that they experience liberty. Sure, I was probably projecting some of the entrapment I felt—the house, the relationship, now the chickens—onto the birds. But I was also sure that Maranda’s paranoid squawking would alert the girls of danger in time to retreat to safety. So, for a change, I wasn’t that worried.

We decided on a policy of strict supervision.

So I watched closely as they tore through my vegetable garden and ravaged my raised beds.

“Girls, girls, girls!” I yelled. “Can you *please* leave my herb garden alone?” I waved my arms at them as they ignored me and ripped out my lemon thyme. Over the next few months, I’d try at least fifty types of plants until I found the few they refused to eat—sage and rosemary were the most resistant to pecking—which were also the best suited for poultry seasoning.

Brandon walked down from the patio where he’d been observing us and nudged the girls away with his foot. “Mark, you can’t treat them like your peers.” He smiled.

It took twenty minutes of herding, circling like sheep dogs, before Brandon and I wrangled the chickens back into the coop. We were a long way from Mary Ann’s level. Once inside, the girls started munching away at their pale, yellow feed, having already forgotten the day’s milestones.

\*

On the Saturday of the third weekend of our poultry parentage, a commotion out back woke me up with a start.

“It’s Eagle,” Brandon said as he ran into our bedroom. From the look on his face I could tell this was dire, and in my half-wakefulness, I assumed she was dead.

“A hawk got her,” Brandon said. “I found her down by the creek. She’s alive but ... we may need to ...”

I pulled on my gym shorts, slid into my Crocs, and sprinted outside. From the patio all I could see was a trembling silver-gray mass by the coop. Brandon was nearby, tending to the other girls. I

approached and knelt down next to Eagle, then carefully lifted her onto my lap. Her head flopped to one side, her neck clearly broken, and one side was bloody. She was still breathing, small, sad, whistling breaths.

As a kid my dad had always talked about the clarity of thought he had working in the ER. To a trauma physician, there was no room for second-guessing in that narrow space between life and death.

But an ER doc I am not. The blood pounding in my ears barely muffled my racing thoughts. And yet, while I was terrified, there was some small and upsetting part of me that wanted to know what it felt like. What it felt like to close that vital gap.

I looked up at Brandon. “I can do it.”

“You don’t have to,” Brandon said, as surprised by my offer as I was, but he nodded solemnly. It was clear this would hurt him. Not the physicality of it, but the guilt.

I didn’t know the most humane way to euthanize a chicken, and I didn’t want to ask Brandon. Should I lop off her head with garden shears? Drown her? Our friend who grew up on a poultry ranch in Alabama had once described how her grandma used to grab a chicken by the head and swing it around like a cowboy lasso to snap its neck. But there was no way I was ready for that level of theatricality. I grabbed her head in my palm and tried to bend it back to (fatally) break her neck. But I couldn’t get the bones to snap—she was too young, her bones too soft, and she just kept wriggling. Oh god, I was making her suffer. The only sure-fire option I could think of was to grab a rock. I pressed Eagle’s head against a brick with the rock until I felt her skull give way with a soft pop. Her body went slack, and I started to cry.

Brandon closed the rest of the flock into the coop, and we collapsed into each other. Later, we took turns digging by the creek until we had a hole 18 inches deep, deep enough that no raccoons or coyotes would be ambitious enough to unearth her.

“Should we say a few words?” I asked, leaning on the shovel.

“You were a good bird, Eagle,” Brandon began.

“You went before your time,” I added. “But we loved you.” I surprised myself by how much I meant it.

\*

A few weeks later, while I moseyed around the yard, I noticed Brandon wearing nitrile gloves and holding Wynona out at a distance.

“Do you want to see something gross?” he asked.

“No,” I said, walking towards him. “I mean, do I?”

“Probably not,” he said.

But the pull of grotesquery was strong.

He lifted some of the feathers on her neck. At first it looked like her skin was moving, until I realized that the undulation was actually hundreds of round invertebrate bodies, the same pink-gray of her skin, wriggling to escape the sunlight that now penetrated beneath her plumage. As he parted the fluffy feathers around her vent, a trail of mites descended into Wynona’s cloaca as if entering another dimension. I held back a retch and took a few large strides away as Brandon set Wynona down.

“Poultry lice,” he said.

“What are you going to do about it?” I asked, careful to maintain my distance, both literally and with my choice of pronouns.

“Well,” said Brandon, “*we* need to find a solution.”

Thus began a game of chicken ailment whack-a-mole. A game that I obstinately refused to play. I wanted to help, for Brandon, but I also very much did not want to help. This was different from the Eagle situation. *That* had been life and death. *This* was what I had been afraid of. This was chores. Nasty chores.

I stood my ground.

He sighed and snapped off his gloves, his skin pruny underneath.

For the next month, every Saturday, Brandon bathed each of the birds in diatomaceous earth, shaking her a bit so the white dust settled into her feathers. But the poultry lice were only the beginning of our—his—woes. Some weeks later, the girls became lethargic and started sneezing, spewing snot in a disconcertingly humanoid reflex.

“What if they’re not happy?” I asked Brandon.

“They’re chickens,” he said, rolling his eyes as he wiped at Wynona’s eyeball, which had developed a sort of glaze like it was contained within a snowglobe.

“But seriously, what if we’re just adding pain into the universe?” I pressed. Eagle, now this? “They’ve been here less than two months and they’re borderline catatonic with ennui.”

A \$350 vet visit diagnosed them not with depression but mycoplasma, and they were prescribed antibiotics. Brandon had been tireless in his efforts to vanquish our onslaught of horrors—I will spare you the saga of the worms—so I offered to help a little, though I resented the emotional obligation I felt. My job was to press the plunger on the strawberry-flavored antibiotics while Brandon pried open Wynona’s beak to receive the elixir.

After a few weeks, Wynona began to recover. But, even with treatment, Buffy got worse, and developed a hacking cough that hurt to hear. When she sputtered out her final wheeze and her body went stiff, I felt a wave of relief, then guilt. Two chickens down in three months.

A while back, one of our straight friends had offered, upsettingly and unprompted, to come over and kill a chicken for us. “If you need one of them taken care of, you have my number.” During this whole period of disease after disease, I wanted to take that murderous heterosexual up on it. To cull the entire flock, start fresh with a new batch at some point in the abstract future. This had been a mistake all along. Sure, there were moments of frivolity, when I loved them, when I loved seeing how Brandon loved them, but the lows were lower than the highs were high. I hadn’t even wanted these beasts in the first place, and now we were stuck with them. For a decade.

\*

Ah, March 2020—what a time to be barely alive! Sure, we were still reeling from our poultry fiascos, but what were two dead chickens and a pile of parasites when the world was collapsing in on itself? Over the course of a month, Brandon and I became ZINKs (zero income no kids) and the world beyond our backyard shut down. That spring, we did all we could do to stay sane, which mostly meant we—both of us—refocused our energies onto making a healthy flock.

The chickens had the best summer of their lives. They were blissfully oblivious to the world and thrilled to have their dads’ full attention. In the warm spring air, they stretched their wings and laid out on their sides like Floridian vacationers. They took dust baths, fluffing dirt into their feathers—covering themselves in dirt made them, paradoxically, cleaner—then sauntering away. Maranda

regained enough energy to molt, tiny pricks like the end of a quill poking out of her skin. Sussie caught a foot-long snake in the yard and slurped it down like a spaghetti noodle. Then the culmination of our labors: they started laying, each hen honking out a distinct anthem after depositing her egg in the nest box.

We walked among our flock like blissed out shepherds of yore, grateful for the distraction. As the pandemic raged on, chickens became very en vogue. Doomsday preppers and bored suburbanites alike started building their coops as both distraction and safety net. Brandon and I felt a sense of superiority to these pandemic chicken people—we'd been on the avant garde, before chickening was a mere survival tactic.

Despite the outside circumstances, despite the tumult of losing two girls, we were becoming stronger partners and more competent parents. We realized we had to care for the flock as a whole, not just the individual girls. Like how a relationship was its own organism to tend to, on top of the well-being of the parties involved.

By August, we had settled into a routine, and even had some job interviews lined up. Now that we'd lost Buffy and Eagle and were spending all our time with the girls, the coop felt too big.

"It's like we're empty nesters!" I said.

"You know it's incredibly annoying when you come around to an idea that I proposed in the first place months ago, right?" Brandon replied.

I did know, and he was right: It was time for a fresh start. We found a new breeder, and this go-round, we knew what to ask. "Have your birds been vaccinated for fowl pox?" Brandon asked. "Any mycoplasma outbreaks in the last year?" I added. We settled on four new girls, whom we continued to call "the babies" even when they'd overtaken the original flock in size. Our first batch had had their growth stunted by fighting off parasite after disease after parasite. The babies, on the other hand, thrived, proof that we'd gotten a few more things right this time.

The coop was at capacity with our new flock of eight, and so were our hearts—*dawww*.

So, of course, something was about to give.

\*

When I heard Brandon slam the door and scream, I sprang to my feet and ran out back, the memory of Eagle flashing before me. Outside, I saw him wielding a metal lawn chair as a battering ram, chasing two huge pitbulls off like he himself was rabid and defending the family from an onslaught of wolves. I'd have been turned on if not for the sheer panic.

The dogs had smashed through the fence we'd built, which lay horizontal. Feathers were everywhere. It looked like when Maranda had molted, only now tiny flecks of flesh clung to the ends of the feathers, and there were dark drops of blood in the dirt. Diaper had lost some feathers, and Maranda had a few small incisions and lacerations, but seemed largely intact. Sussie, thank god, was safe, that delicate little flower. But Wynona was nowhere within the enclosure.

I frantically ran around the yard until I found her cowering in a crevice of the retaining wall, trembling. I called Brandon over. She didn't resist as I picked her up, a bad sign for such an ornery bird. I carried her up to the patio so we could get a better look, and after setting her down, the grim scene came into focus. She had a ten-inch gash across her entire back, from wing to wing. The skin had pulled apart so that there was a six-inch space revealing the wet pink flesh of her back muscle to us. The main wound and a few other punctures were caked with feathers and debris. As I looked, the connection between the meat aisle at the grocery store and our beloved pets became all too clear—Wyandottes were dual-purpose, after all, raised for both eggs and meat.

Brandon and I were shaking right along with our girl. We called the vet, but they were closed.

"Should we call one of our straight friends to come kill her?" he asked.

"If we need to," I said. "But we're not there yet! She might be okay."

I looked down at her again, saw the cloudy white lumps of fat lining her muscle, and doubted what I was saying.

I didn't know how to assess the carnage on my own, so I called my dad, the ER doc, for a medical consult.



“You can put her down,” he said over FaceTime. “Or do nothing, and see if it heals. That’s a pretty big wound, but it looks like she’s intact under the skin.” He paused, and I could tell there was something more from how his eyes glimmered with an idea. “How ambitious are you feeling?”

“Pretty strongly not,” I said.

“Well, you could always try to sew her up,” he said, as casual as if she were a plush toy.

I groaned, thanked him, and hung up.

Brandon’s vote was to have someone kill her. We couldn’t just do nothing—I felt confident she’d die painfully of infection if we left the wound gaping. We both acknowledged that we were operating within an ethical gray area, and that no choice was a good one.

I called my dad back. “How might one go about this?” I asked. I still had little intention of doing it and figured his graphic description would dissuade me.

But he seemed hopeful, excited even. “You’ll want to start at the most-closed end. If the skin is too taut, it’ll be tough.” He instructed us to flush the wound with water as best we could to clear it out. “You’ll need to decide if you’re going to use a continuous or interrupted suture. What kind of equipment do you have?” he asked.

We had nitrile gloves from Brandon’s days prodding at Wynona’s oozing eye. We had a sewing kit, and I sterilized the needle over the stove.

Brandon remained unconvinced and thought it possibly cruel to try this at-home surgery. I didn’t push him. I thought Wynona would likely die either way, but I was too stubborn not to try to save her. We were making the decision together, accepting that even though our opinions differed, neither was wrong.

“I need to not help,” he said.

“I’m not sure I can do it without help,” I said. “Or anesthesia. I need someone to help hold her still. Could you do that much?”

He nodded a moment too late, his face turning puce.

“I’ll try to do it on my own,” I said.

I snapped on my gloves, pinned Wynona down with my knee and tried to hold the flap of skin with my left hand, the needle in my right. I inserted the needle, but it did not go in smoothly; I’d need more force. I wouldn’t be able to do this alone.

“I’m sorry, Mister. If we’re going to do this, I need you to

help.”

He walked over and snapped on nitrile gloves. He held her wings down so she wouldn’t rip open her wound further, and finally she stopped flapping. Brandon was trembling while I forced the sewing needle through Wynona’s skin, pulled the thread through, got the other side of the wound, laced the skin together, and tied it closed. A few times I accidentally probed her muscle and let out a yelp of my own, questioning whether this was crueler than just putting her down, but I reminded myself that she was an insufferable fighter. That she would want to survive.

After what felt like less than an hour but that turned out to be more than two, I’d closed the main wound with ten stitches, and stitched closed the three puncture wounds with a single loop each. I used the interrupted suture technique, per YouTube.

I called my dad back later to tell him that the surgery had gone well. Honestly, better than expected. She hadn’t gone into immediate shock and died, was what I meant.

“Nice work,” he said. “You’ll know more in a couple days. She might recover.”

My dad was proud, I was amped with what felt like the adrenaline of a battlefield medic, but Brandon lay crestfallen on the couch, emotionally drained. After we’d showered multiple times and changed, I spread myself over him like a weighted blanket and tucked my head in the crook of his shoulder. “Some squishing will probably help,” I said.

We weren’t letting ourselves feel any relief yet.

\*

In November 2020 I woke up to the noontime air billowing the philodendron in our bedroom window. “Oh, Bran Muffin!” I called out in a distinctly homosexual sing-song. He traipsed in holding my coffee, which had been cooling on the counter for the last two hours. “Today’s the day!” I said.

It had been just over a year since we broke ground for the coop, a fortnight since the surgery, and it was time to reintroduce Wynona to the flock. For the last two weeks, she had convalesced from her gruesome wounds in a dog crate in my office. During her stay, she’d flapped around in there and ripped open her stitches,

which had beaded with blood. She'd squawked through Zoom meetings for the new job I had recently started. Every few hours, Brandon and I had traded shifts misting her suture sites with a poultry antibiotic spray. And every day at sundown, we'd covered her cage with a towel so she could shut those beady little eyes and get some rest.

Now, together, Brandon and I finagled her from the crate into a box that I hefted down the steps and into the back yard.

"Good morning, girls!" I called out.

"Girls, girls, girls!" Brandon teased me. He dropped a squash on the ground in the coop, the last of the season from our fall garden.

The babies and the original girls had integrated by this point, and we opened the door to the coop so they could venture into the area of the yard we'd now enclosed with a freshly repaired fence. Sexy Marmalade, the most gregarious of the new girls, ran over to Brandon and dropped into the "fertilize-my-egg" stance: wings back, face down, floofy ass reaching towards the heavens. He was her rooster.

Wynona flapped right out of her box and into the coop, where she started munching away like nothing had happened. Brandon and I were both pretty shocked things had worked out so far. She'd been attacked by a hawk, she'd staved off mycoplasma and worms and poultry lice, and then she'd survived an attack by a lumbering pit bull. She'd been through ups and downs, recovered, pulled through, stronger even. Fine, maybe I'm projecting again, but she was cartoonishly indestructible. She was our love bird, that disgusting wench.

As Brandon changed the chickens' water and food, I went to open the egg box to collect the eggs. There was a blue one from Bunny, our new Easter Egger, a pale speckled one I now recognized as Sussie's, and Diaper's enormous monstrosity that must have subjected her to the chicken equivalent of fisting on a daily basis. We could now identify the girls by either their egg-laying song or the shape and texture of their eggs' shells, as telltale as their stupid little faces. And Brandon was right: we hadn't bought eggs all year, so we had saved a hundred bucks or so.

As we walked back inside, the eggs hammocked in my t-shirt, I turned to look back at the coop. It had only been a year, but somehow it felt like it had always been part of the yard, the flock

always an extension of ourselves. The chickens had become the prism through which we refracted our lives, and I had really come to love them, despite my initial resistance. Brandon had pushed me out of my comfort zone, and somehow I'd landed somewhere *more* comfortable? Obscene.

A week or so later, we had some friends and fellow queer chicken parents over for brunch. I made a frittata using two Diapers, two Marandas, a Sussie, two Marmalades, and three Bunnys. Brandon and I told them about our makeshift vet clinic.

"That checks out," one said. "Chickens are all drama."

"We've each had to kill one," added the other. A few months later, she would take a practicum on how to butcher poultry that I took to calling her "chicken murdering class."

When they were gone, Brandon started talking about coop enhancements. He was already thinking about ducks. And if he was there, I was with him. I guess he was my rooster, too.

I gazed out at the yard, where the weeds were growing too tall. Brandon asked me what I was thinking.

I reached for his hand. "How much work is a goat?"

ADAM CLAY

## Autumn In The Garden

As if a day only wants  
to swallow the one before,  
the morning allows a casual thought  
toward each impulse  
and grain of the past. I think  
of the barn painted some  
unworldly blue but can't quite  
recall its place in time. Growing  
old doesn't really feel  
like anything because  
our belongings  
remain ageless around us.  
That frame collecting  
dust will gleam dark brown  
tomorrow. The woodfloor  
won't buckle for a few  
hundred years. I always  
imagined the inside  
frame of that barn hung  
maybe with tobacco  
catching grief from the air  
cycling in and out. Probable  
each day's only  
making room for the next—  
one day there's a cat in the polluted  
creek where a crane should be.  
Every act of body and every act  
of mind feels like a prayer  
to the fruit of childhood  
we've forgotten how to taste.

MELANIE MERLE

## In The Womb

I dreamt each child, even the ones who never arrived.

I dreamt each one,

Even the ones who never cried out from the shock of it all.

I dreamt embryonic sea otters tumbling in a glass-womb-tube.

I put my hands, fingers spread wide, over the porthole window of my fleshy submarine. I smelled wet fur and rocked on the waves.

And I woke up knowing.

I dreamt a clutch of three eggs high in a tree.

One egg held an owl. One egg, a hawk. One held a falcon.

I put my ear close to each egg,

Listened for movement inside, hummed softly, thinking to swallow the eggs might protect them. I woke, knowing.

I dreamt flames, racing tigers, flowers a burst in bloom.

Each circle of petals turned to ash and blew away until only a glittering jewel remained. I saw her. She danced in the fire.

And I woke up, knowing.

CLARE HARMON

## Teaching At The University of Minnesota, November 2021

*After Brian Larken*

I know this campus to be brutalist.  
I've been told, too, it's riot-proof.

The signs of winter: 1. headache;  
2. impotent gusts to trouble

every green and golden leaf  
in its socket. Let's call it,

“infrastructure making  
its address to landscape.”

We'll call it, “landscape  
making its address to policy.”

Tonight, anyway, I'll share definitions  
of *Necropolitical* with my students.

A stomach ache, a chill,  
a pressure in my forehead—

the unseasonable penetrates  
like a symphony.

## Demands

*After Judith Butler*

What kind of world is this  
in which I stall in the problem of *near*?  
And, how long can I live like this?

The reservoir, the problem of spillover:  
there's not enough space, not nearly—  
the tall grasses, the pines, the waters

they're occupied always already  
by somebody else. I know there are  
shared conditions to liveability,

but, the wet markets, the lumber  
games, the quarry, the extractor,  
the habitat creep. I now know the air

as the passage for a virus and the lives  
that survive it. I know myself as a vector  
shedding parts in the direction of others,

as a malignancy making demands  
to know what kind of world this is  
in its lost ease of interlacing, of hands.  
How long can I live like this?

SUSAN HOLCOMB

## Symphony For Ina May

It is September. I have been pregnant since February. For seven months my body has been home to another body, two parts of a Russian nesting doll. I had expected the feeling of pregnancy to be one of fullness, my belly growing sumptuously round as if I had eaten a giant, delicious meal. But for this whole time I have been aware mainly of hollowness. The baby has a peculiar way of squirming around inside me, clarifying to my mind all the cavities where her limbs can move and kick and probe. I wonder: What is she thinking? Why is she doing that? But then I imagine unborn babies don't really think. They just *are*.

My friend the doula gives me Ina May Gaskin's *Guide to Childbirth*. In my thirtieth week, I begin to thumb through it. The book has a section called "Orgasmic Birth Experiences," which tells the stories of women who had orgasms while giving birth. *Being in labor felt like work*, one woman says of her orgasmic birth, *but passing the baby's entire body out of my womb was indescribably incredible*.

I text my friend the doula: *Orgasmic birth sounds like something that could only happen in the 1970s. Like the dream of socialist revolution or the earnest belief in the societal benefits of hemp-farming and vegetarianism.*

*Lol*, my friend the doula replies. *Aren't you a vegetarian?*

*Well yeah*, I write back. *But I don't think I'm going to change the world.*

\*

The hospital where I will give birth offers one-day labor intensives. Usually these classes are in person, but right now they are online. "The class is six hours long," I tell my partner.

He chokes on the water he's drinking. "That," he says, now coughing, "sounds exhausting."

He and I have lived together for five years. We had always talked about getting married, but we never got around to it. Every time we'd start to consider the subject, we'd grow overwhelmed by the weighty realities of marriage license appointments, flowers and

venues, the very idea of finding the right seat for his mom. I wonder now if there's a good reason marriage is viewed as a pre-requisite to childbirth. A wedding gets both parties in the habit of planning; it inures them to the rhythmic tedium of preparing-for-things, deciding-things, making-things-happen.

"But seriously," my partner says. "Can you even sit up for that long?"

The baby squirms her hand up my torso. Her tight fist protrudes below my ribs. I shift on the couch to relieve the pressure on my diaphragm. "It seems like we should get a sense of what we're in for."

My partner touches my stomach. The baby keeps her fist perfectly still, as if caught in a game of hide-and-seek. My partner strokes the little bump of her hand with his thumb. "Maybe we can find a video to watch on YouTube."

\*

My mother went to weekly Lamaze classes when she was pregnant with me. If orgasmic birth seems awfully 1970s, Lamaze seems oh-so-very '80s. My mother has described these classes to me ever since I was a little child, but I still find them hard to picture. No matter how much she tells me, the years before my mother was a mother come into my mind under an unreal haze. They have for me a tinny hollowness, a cowbell clanged against history's tightly-woven symphony. I imagine my own daughter will not be able to conceive of the decades from the 1990s through the 2010s. She will not be able to envision me as a child, as a college student, as a person, but only as her mother.

When my mother calls I mention the Zoom labor class. She tells me, once again, to look into Lamaze. "Do I need to teach you the breathing exercises?" she asks. "You breathe in for three, then out for five." She demonstrates; her breath comes fast, then slow.

I pull the phone away from my ear. It's not that what she says seems wrong to me, exactly. But it doesn't feel right, either.

"The breathing isn't just a tool to distract you," my mother says. "It activates your sympathetic nervous system. It has a physiological effect."

I put the phone back close to

me and tell her I'll figure something out.

\*

Ina May Gaskin says the mind is connected to the body. A laboring person does the work of birth physically, mentally, emotionally—all these vectors weave together in a complicated knot. Ina May tells the story of a laboring woman whose cervix closed up like a shrunken anemone the moment an unsympathetic doctor entered the room. Her body shut down as if under attack, her cervix never re-opened, she had to have a C-section. I think of my sister-in-law, who also had a C-section because her cervix wouldn't open. I wonder who was in the room with her then.

I text my friend the doula: *Why is it called a cesarean? Did Caesar's mother have one?*

*I'm not sure, she replies. I know it's a very ancient procedure.*

*I write: I can't believe they could do them so long ago.*

*Well... she writes back. People didn't survive them back then.*

*I send back a grimacing emoji.*

\*

Every Sunday I check an app on my phone that tells me which fruit most closely matches my baby in size. Every Tuesday I take a mirror selfie of my growing belly. At thirty-two weeks, I finally post a picture of myself on Instagram. Let me be clear: I look amazing. Most of my photos have come out hideous, but this one has just the right lighting, the perfect angle. I caption the photo: *Eight weeks to go and we're terrified.*

Most of my friends know about the pregnancy by now, but my more vocal acquaintances freak out in the comments. *OMG! Congratulations!* It is easy to keep secrets in 2021. My partner comments with fire emojis. My mother screenshots the post and saves it to her phone. My friend the doula writes, *So beautiful mama.* Beside all the comments, I put a little heart.

\*

Ina May Gaskin writes: *There is knowledge from the past that*

*was once common knowledge, that today has become rare and made extinct.* She says our technological world has distanced us from the primal instincts of our bodies, from the common sense that any farmer acquires simply by observing how their calves and sheep are born. For example, Ina May says, doctors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century knew that an unwelcome presence could stall labor, and they stayed out of their patients' bedrooms until birth was imminent. I picture women from the 1860s laboring in luxurious four poster beds, windows drawn with heavy velvet curtains, babies emerging soundlessly beneath Victorian crinolines.

The more I read, the more I find I can't wrap my head around the fact that every child is the result of a birth. To me birth seems like an impossible channel to cross, like dying and then coming back to life. My partner and I watch a movie in which a man who cheated death must attend a trial to determine whether he will be allowed to go on living. He is asked to choose a lawyer to represent him, anyone from among the ranks of the dead. I think: Who would I choose to represent me at my daughter's birth? My friend the doula? My mother? Ina May?

I tell my partner: "I think I'm going to sign up for that Zoom class."

\*

Ina May tells the story of a woman who gave birth in a public hospital in the 1960s. The details are from a horror movie. A room of screaming, laboring women. The doctors spoke no English or Spanish, only Chinese. The woman in the story was strapped down to her cot for fifteen hours. This element, the strapping, seems worse to me than all Ina May's tales of scalpels cutting the perineum and forceps wrapping around baby skulls and overly-hasty cesareans. I read the story of the strapped-down woman over and over. I think of the history these decades tell: the forced restraint of the '60s, the orgasmic birth of the '70s, '80s-era Lamaze. Horror to ecstasy, then finally commodification. I imagine the presence of the past pressing in upon me. As my body expands I am increasingly compressed: all history's laboring women crowd around me screaming, sighing, breathing in and out.

Ina May's next story describes a Flemish woman who gave birth in a field during World War I. A British doctor observed her at a distance—she had refused his anxious offers of help. The doctor watched her birth her baby joyously, easily, and swore the woman laughed as she set her newborn son on the ground. Reading this story, I can picture every vivid detail: the yellow-green grass of the field in late summer, the bloody baby squirming in the dirt, the doctor looking on, smoking his pipe. I imagine I have seen this woman giving birth myself. I imagine I might have actually been her once, laboring in that field a hundred years ago, setting my baby on the ground and laughing.

*Do you believe in reincarnation?* I text my friend the doula.

*Kind of, she replies. Sometimes when I attend a birth, I get a powerful feeling that this baby is someone I've already met.*

I think of souls that inhabit other bodies, the body a host, a hollow shell. My daughter rolls over in my stomach and I wonder who she might have been before.

\*

Thirty-four weeks: my daughter is a cantaloupe. I have secured a spot in the Zoom labor class, and the day has come to log on. There are eight women in the class with me, plus the instructor. My partner sits down next to me on the couch with a spiral notebook and a pen. *Since when, I think, is he so ready for instruction?* Fatherhood has domesticated him already.

The instructor says she will cover the three stages of labor. My partner makes a chart with three columns and writes down everything she says. I look at his notebook out of the corner of my eye. *It's my body, I think. I'm the one who needs to know, to prepare, to understand.* I resist the impulse to rip away the page he's writing on and tear it into quarters.

The instructor performs some demonstrations with a model of a pelvis and a baby doll. She shows how the baby would emerge in the standard position, or breech, or sunny-side up. She answers a round of questions from the group, then teaches us a breathing exercise. As the class drags into its fifth hour, I pick up my phone and scroll through Instagram. My search tab is full of pregnant

women with blonde hair extensions, posing with the multiple small children they've already birthed. I can't believe any of these women have actually gone through labor. I imagine they have plucked their children from a cabbage patch, caught them in midair beneath a passing stork. I'm certain none of these women have had an orgasmic birth. Some of them, I bet, have never even had an orgasm.

After so many hours of sitting, my Braxton-Hicks contractions start up. My stomach hardens uncomfortably. I tell my partner I'm going to the bedroom to lie down. Once I'm on my side, the contractions dissipate. I know this feeling well. It is my body doing practice moves for labor. At 34 weeks, this is normal.

\*

Except it isn't. An hour later, the contractions are still going, getting more intense. My partner calls the doctor's office. They tell us to go to the hospital. I text my mother and my friend the doula. *I'm sure it isn't real labor. But we're going to go ahead and go in.*

My mother calls, hysterical. My friend the doula writes: *Stay strong.*

\*

At the hospital I am already dilated six centimeters. I wish for an unsympathetic doctor to enter the room. My mind is connected to my body: if I can just think hard enough, maybe I can force my cervix closed. "This can't be happening," I tell the nurses. "It's early, too early."

"Breathe," they say. "We're just going to monitor you for now."

\*

We wait. The contractions keep on coming. I wish I'd finished reading Ina May. There must be a story she tells about preterm labor, some long-forgotten wisdom from the past I could now call upon. My partner is Googling. "They say most babies born at 34 weeks do just fine."

I start to cry. I can't get any words out. But I am thinking: *I'm not ready. I'm not ready.* I will my cervix to close. Where is an unsympathetic doctor when you need him?

\*

In the 1960s, they might have strapped me to the cot. I might be in a room with dozens of screaming women, wishing I spoke even one word of Chinese. But it is 2021, the year of easy secrets, and I am allowed to twist and turn and even walk around. This year, I am not even required to wear a mask.

\*

My doctor arrives. She is not unsympathetic. She says I'm doing great. My cervix stays open. Dilation reaches seven centimeters, eight...

\*

In the 1970s, I might be having an orgasmic birth. I would be lying on my back feeling the contractions not as pain but waves of pleasure. I imagine these two sensations must abut each other, the way sexual touch can be so welcome in some contexts and so revolting in others. If I were a different kind of woman, could I force my mind over the bridge from pain to pleasure? Is that what the Flemish woman was doing in the field, why she laughed?

\*

The nurses offer me the epidural. I take it. Forgive me, Ina May. My labor came too early; I didn't have time to finish the book.

\*

In the 1980s, I would have attended Lamaze classes. I would breathe in for three, then out for five. I might have met my own mother at that time, pregnant with me. We would practice how to

press our hands on one another's hips to relieve the pains of labor. We would talk about maternity clothes and Ronald Regan.

\*

*Push*, the doctor says, but I can't feel anything. I worry Ina May was right: the epidural has crippled me, robbed my body of its primal knowledge. But millions of people have done it this way, done it all kinds of ways. Every person who has ever walked the earth has somehow managed to be born.

A line from Shakespeare floats through my head: *No man of woman born shall harm Macbeth*. But that's so stupid: Macduff was born, just by C-section. Macduff's poor mother: her cervix wouldn't open. What awful person must have been in the room with her?

\*

I do the only breathing exercise I know, the one from the Zoom class. I visualize myself pushing and hope some movement results. Everyone is speaking to me, their voices an electric wall of sound. I hear my mother, my partner, my friend the doula, Ina May. I hear the women of the '60s screaming supine and the women of the '70s yawning ecstasy. I hear my mother in the '80s breathing in and out. I hear the blonde-haired Instagrammers crunching through the leaves of the cabbage patch and my sister-in-law and Caesar's mother and Macduff's mother all under the knife. But above this tightly-woven symphony, one sound rings out: the laughing of the Flemish woman in the field, laughing as she refuses the services of the nearby doctor, laughing as she gathers up her newborn baby from the dirt and tears through his umbilical cord with her teeth.

"Do you hear that?" I mumble to my partner.

He nods, weeping. Our daughter has started to cry.



KATHERINE GAFFNEY

## A Mark of Closure

*For My Uncle*

Pim, your name delivered  
the front of punctuation  
for your mother. At birth,  
  
three letters penned to serve  
immediately as a question  
mark, but harbored expectations  
  
of becoming a period—name  
so brief it wavers as close  
to an end-stop as they come.

Chosen during her pregnancy,  
which must have felt like an ellipsis,  
unending, the name worked too

as an apostrophe of possession  
for the brother she could not be  
certain she would ever see again.

Pim, resolute protector,  
perhaps your little body swaddled  
in the wooden crib

was a blushing amulet  
calling out to your uncle  
with each unbroken wail

for milk your mother  
couldn't produce. She must have thought  
you a human-shaped prayer as news

came of her brother recuperating  
with the Red Cross, found  
in a storm of scraps written in solitary

captivity that bursted from his coat  
and a briefcase gone  
from the scene, evidenced by lacerations

in his palms—marks  
that he tried to hold on. That dash just there  
seems closer, close

to the space your name  
takes on the page,  
one that declined to follow

its intended purpose—a mark  
of closure for a man's uncertainty,  
instead a cup waiting to be filled.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Montana Agte-Studier** is a writer, musician, sculptor, painter, photographer, and amateur arborist, living in Washington Heights, NYC. She holds a BFA in Jazz Flute Performance and a BA in Arts in Context with a focus on Literature and Music from The New School University. Her work is published in/forthcoming from *Epiphany*, *The Ocotillo Review*, and *The New Guard*. These days, Montana can be found at her window watching the hawks, falcons, and single engine planes swoop up and down the Hudson as a means of studying for her private pilot's license.

**Anthony Aguero** is a queer writer in Los Angeles, CA.

**Sara Batkie** completed an MFA in Fiction from New York University in 2010. Recent work can be found in *Crazyhorse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *CALYX*, among others. Batkie's stories have twice been cited as Notable Publications in the Best American Short Stories anthology series and awarded a 2017 Pushcart Prize. Batkie's collection *Better Times* won the 2017 Prairie Schooner Prize and was published by University of Nebraska Press in September 2018.

**Mark Bessen** is a queer writer living in Austin, Texas, originally from Southern California. Mark holds a B.A. in English from Stanford, and has work featured or forthcoming in *Epiphany*, *The Offing*, *Taco Bell Quarterly*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and elsewhere. Find him @MarkBessen for more unsolicited musings on chickens, gardening, and semicolons.

**Andrea Bianchi**'s essays have appeared in *Witness*, *The Rumpus*, *New Ohio Review*, *Epiphany*, *CutBank*, and elsewhere. One was also selected as a notable essay in *The Best American Essays 2021*. Bianchi lives in Chicago, and is a candidate in the Litowitz Creative Writing MFA+MA Program at Northwestern University.

**Kathryn Bratt-Pfotenbauer** is the author of the collection *Bad Animal* (Riot in Your Throat, 2023) and the chapbook *Small Geometries*

(Ethel, 2023.) The recipient of a Pushcart Prize, their work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Missouri Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Crazyhorse*, *Poet Lore*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and others. They attend Syracuse University's MFA program.

**Andrew Brininstool** is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Prose and a Finalist for the PEN / Writing for Justice Fellowship. His work has appeared or is forthcoming with *VICE*, *The Southern Review*, *The Millions*, *Best New American Voices*, and has received both the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award from *Mid-American Review* as well as the Editors' Prize from */nor*. He is currently at work on a nonfiction novel about the 1980 riot at the Penitentiary of New Mexico.

**Clara Bush Vadala** is a North Texas poet and veterinarian. Her poems have appeared in *SWWIM*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *3Elements Review*, and *Entropy*. They have also been featured at Texas Tech University's Sowell Conference and the Houston Poetry Festival. She has published one full-length book of poetry, *Prairie Smoke: Poems from the Grasslands* (Finishing Line Press, 2017). *Beast Invites Me In* is her second collection of poems from Finishing Line Press.

**Camille Carter** is a writer, poet, educator, and traveler. Her poems have appeared most recently in *The Hollins Critic*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Concho River Review*, and the *American Poetry Review*. She studies, teaches, and resides in Buffalo, New York, and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature.

**Adam Clay**'s latest book, *To Make Room for the Sea*, was published by Milkweed Editions in 2020. Clay edits *Mississippi Review* and directs the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi.

**Katherine Gaffney** completed her MFA at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is currently working on her PhD at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her work has previously appeared in *jubilat*, *Harpur Palate*, *Mississippi Review*, *Meridian*, and elsewhere. She has attended the Tin House Summer Writing Workshop, the SAFTA Residency, and the Sewanee Writers Conference as a scholar. Her first

chapbook, *Once Read as Ruin*, was published at Finishing Line Press. Her first full-length collection, *Fool in a Blue House*, won the Tampa Review Prize for Poetry and was published in 2023.

**Clare Harmon** is an artist, thinker, and educator. Clare's writing has recently appeared in *Barzakh*, *Poetry Northwest* and *Jacket2*. Clare is the author of *The Thingbody* (Instar Books, 2015) and the chapbook, *The Day I Quit Western Art Music* (Tammy, 2021). Clare holds a B.A. in Art History from the University of Minnesota, an M.F.A. from the University of New Orleans, and is currently a PhD student in Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota.

**Susan Holcomb** holds an MFA in writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts, and has been or will soon be published in the *Southern Indiana Review*, *The Boston Globe*, *Crab Creek Review*, and elsewhere.

**Chelsea Krieg** was born and raised in southeastern Virginia. Krieg received an MFA in poetry from North Carolina State University, and has work published in *Gulf Coast*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology Vol. IX: Virginia*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere. Krieg lives in Durham, NC and teaches writing at North Carolina State University, where Krieg is also Assistant Director of the MFA Program. Find more information at [www.chelseakrieg.com](http://www.chelseakrieg.com).

**Rosa Lane** is author of four poetry collections including *Called Back* forthcoming from Tupelo Press, selected from the 2022 Summer Open Reading Period; *Chouteau's Chalk*, winner, 2017 Georgia Poetry Prize; *Tiller North*, winner, 2014 Sixteen Rivers Poetry Manuscript Competition; and *Roots and Reckonings*, a chapbook partially funded by the Maine Arts Commission. Her work won the 2018 William Matthews Poetry Prize among other prizes and has appeared in the *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Cutthroat*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Nimrod*, *RHINO*, *Southampton Review*, and elsewhere.

**Amanda Marples** is an academic mentor living in Rotherham with her partner, two noisy children, two mice and a naughty dog.

**Ramsey Mathews** was born in rural Georgia where he worked in tobacco and played high school football until leaving for Georgia Tech. He wanted to be an astronaut, but college Calculus fractured that dream. While working in film and TV in Los Angeles, he did stand-in and stunt work for Patrick Swayze and Ron Perlman among others. He has an IMDB page. Ramsey earned an MFA in Poetry from Cal State University, Long Beach, and a PhD from Florida State University. He lives and writes in Georgia, and he loves black & white photography.

A member of the Chickasaw Nation, **Melanie Merle** grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After working for her tribe as a writer in the multimedia department, Melanie moved to Denver to teach for Lighthouse Writers Workshop in a community outreach program for women in recovery. Most recently, Melanie was chosen as a fellow by Indigenous Nations Poets. In 2022, she was awarded The James Welch Prize by *Poetry Northwest*. She is an associate editor for the literary and art journal, *Inverted Syntax*. Her poems, "DownRiver" and "Above Ground," are forthcoming in *Infinite Constellations: Speculating Us*, out of The University of Alabama Press, in 2023. Melanie is proud to carry on the artistic traditions of her family and to nurture them in her three children.

**Allison Moore** is an art writer and curator who recently earned an MFA in Poetry from Pacific University. She's the author of the book *Embodying Relation: Art Photography in Mali* (Duke University Press, 2020), as well as several articles, catalog essays and exhibition reviews. She has published one photo-poem at *The Ekphrastic Review*.

**Sara Moore Wagner** is the winner of the 2021 Cider Press Editor's Prize for her book *Swan Wife* (2022), and the 2020 Driftwood Press Manuscript Prize for *Hillbilly Madonna* (2022). She is also 2021 National Poetry Series Finalist, and the recipient of a 2019 Sustainable Arts Foundation award. Her poetry has appeared in many journals and anthologies including *Sixth Finch*, *Waxwing*, *Nimrod*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *The Cincinnati Review*, among others. Find her at [www.saramoorewagner.com](http://www.saramoorewagner.com)

**Jane Morton** is a queer poet from the South. They completed their

MFA at the University of Alabama, where they were Online Editor for *Black Warrior Review*. They teach English and creative writing at the University of Alabama, and they are a copy editor for *Muzzle*. Their poems are published or forthcoming in *Gulf Coast*, *West Branch*, *Boulevard*, *Ninth Letter*, *Passages North*, and *Poetry Northwest*, among other journals. You can find more at [jane-morton.com](http://jane-morton.com).

**Beth Oast Williams's** poetry has appeared in *West Texas Literary Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Glass Mountain*, *GASHER Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Fjords Review*, and *Rattle's Poets Respond*, among others. Her poems have been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Her first chapbook, *Riding Horses in the Harbor*, was published in 2020.

**Aza Pace's** poems appear or are forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, *New Ohio Review*, *Passages North*, *Mudlark*, *Bayou*, and elsewhere. She is the winner of two Academy of American Poets University Prizes and an Inprint Donald Barthelme Prize in Poetry. She holds an MFA in Poetry from the University of Houston and is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of North Texas.

**Samantha Padgett** graduated with an MFA from Sam Houston State University. Her work has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *New Ohio Review*, *New American Review*, and *American Literary Review*. She lives in Kyle, TX with her cat.

**Samuel Piccone** is the author of the chapbook *Pupa* (Anhinga Press, 2018). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications including *Sycamore Review*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Washington Square Review*, and *RHINO*. He received an MFA in poetry from North Carolina State University, serves on the poetry staff at *Raleigh Review*, and is a lecturer at Iowa State University.

**Erin Pinkham** is a queer poet from North Texas. Her work focuses on coming-of-age, girlhood, and queer issues inspired by life in the south on her family's tomato farm. Their poetry has been awarded the Walton Family Fellowship and the Lily Peter Fellowship. She is currently a second-year poetry MFA candidate at The University of

Arkansas, where she works as the Social Media Editor for *Arkansas International*. In addition to the topic of poetry, they will often be heard gushing about anime, spellcasting, her dog Willie, pink velvet fabric, and the Korean boyband, BTS.

**Katie Prince** is a poet and essayist. Her debut poetry book, *Tell This to the Universe*, was a finalist for the 2019 National Poetry Series and won the 2021 Pamet River Prize from YesYes Books. In the spring of 2017, she served as artist-in-residence at Klaustrid, in Iceland's Fljótsdalur valley, and in 2019, she received a GAP Award from Artist Trust to continue working on the project she began there. She holds an MFA in poetry from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. Her work has been published in *Electric Literature*, *New South*, *Fugue*, *the Adroit Journal*, and *Poetry Northwest*, among others.

**Landen Raszick** is a poet and musician from South Florida. He recently earned his MFA in poetry from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Smartish Pace*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Book of Matches*, and *The Rush*. He currently lives in Baltimore.

**Kiyoko Reidy** is a poet and nonfiction writer from East Tennessee, currently living in Nashville and working at a nonprofit that provides training and services to people impacted by the justice system. Reidy's writing can be found in *the Cincinnati Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and elsewhere.

**Mark Smith-Soto** has authored three prize-winning chapbooks and three full-length poetry collections, *Our Lives Are Rivers* (University Press of Florida, 2003), *Any Second Now* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co., 2006) and *Time Pieces* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co., 2015). His work has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Kenyon Review*, *Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, *The Sun* and many other publications and been nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize. In 2006 it was recognized with an NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing. His book of translations *Fever Season: Selected Poetry of Ana Istarú* (2010) and his lyrical memoir *Berkeley Prelude* (2013) were both published by Unicorn Press.

**Julie Marie Wade** is a member of the creative writing faculty at Florida International University in Miami. A winner of the Marie Alexander Poetry Series and the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Memoir, her collections of poetry and prose include *Wishbone: A Memoir in Fractures*, *Small Fires: Essays*, *Postage Due: Poems & Prose Poems*, *When I Was Straight*, *Same-Sexy Marriage: A Novella in Poems*, *Just an Ordinary Woman Breathing*, and *Skirted*. Her collaborative titles include *The Unrhymables: Collaborations in Prose*, written with Denise Duhamel, and *Telephone: Essays in Two Voices*, written with Brenda Miller. Wade makes her home in Dania Beach with her spouse Angie Griffin and their two cats. Her newest project is *Fugue: An Aural History*, out now from Diagram/New Michigan Press.

**Jeanine Walker** is the author of *The Two of Them Might Outlast Me* (2022). Recognized with grants from Artist Trust, Jack Straw Cultural Center, and Wonju, UNESCO City of Literature, she holds a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Houston and has published work in *Chattahoochee Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Ohio Review*, and elsewhere. Jeanine teaches for Hugo House and Kangwon National University in Chuncheon, Korea.

**Cassandra Whitaker** (she/they) is a trans writer, and a member of the National Book Critics Circle whose work has been published in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Beestung*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Foglifter*, *Conjunctions*, and other places.

**Patrick Wilcox** is from Independence, Missouri, a large suburb just outside Kansas City. He studied English and Creative writing at the University of Central Missouri where he also was an Assistant Editor for *Pleiades* and Editor-in-Chief of *Arcade*. He is a three-time recipient of the David Baker Award for Poetry, the 2020 honorable mention of Ninth Letter's Literary Award in Poetry, and grand-prize winner of The MacGuffin's Poet Hunt 26. His work has appeared in *Maudlin House*, *Quarter After Eight*, *West Trade Review*, and *Copper Nickel*, among others. He currently teaches English Language Arts at William Chrisman High School.

**Felicia Zamora** is the author of six books of poetry including

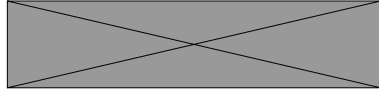
*I Always Carry My Bones*, winner of the 2020 Iowa Poetry Prize (University of Iowa Press, 2021), *Quotient* (forthcoming from Tinderbox Editions, 2022), *Body of Render*, Benjamin Saltman Award winner (Red Hen Press, 2020), and *Of Form & Gather*, Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize winner (University of Notre Dame Press). A CantoMundo and Ragdale Foundation fellow, she won the 2020 C.P. Cavafy Prize from Poetry International, the Wabash Prize for Poetry and the Tomáš Šalamun Prize. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *Academy of American Poets Poem-A-Day*, *AGNI*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Boston Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Guernica*, *Missouri Review Poem-of-the-Week*, *Orion*, *Poetry Magazine*, *The Nation*, and others. She is an assistant professor of poetry at the University of Cincinnati and associate poetry editor for the *Colorado Review*.

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