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CUTBANK

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C O N T E N T S

KIM MAGOWAN | *Fiction*

1 Shoelaces

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG | *Poetry*

11 Awakened

PEYTON PRATER STARK | *Nonfiction*

12 A Virtual Reality Itinerary According to the Harrison-
Wheeler Equation of State for Cold, Dead Matter

MARK NEELY | *Poetry*

22 Morning Panorama

LAURA PRICE STEELE | *Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction*

Selected by Joe Wilkins

23 This Life of (Y)ours

ERIN RUSSELL | *Winner: Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry*

Selected by Alicia Mountain

39 YYZ to AMS

ARYA SAMUELSON | *Winner: Montana Prize in Nonfiction*

Selected by Cheryl Strayed

41 Sanctum

J.M. COOPER | *Visual Art*

63 Anaconda Washoe Theatre

64 Deer Lodge Prison Theatre

ROBERT R. THURMAN | *Visual Art*

65 Coercion

66 Jesus Christ CEO

SARAH KOENIG | *Poetry*

67 Smoker's Lounge

BRETT PURYEAR | *Fiction*

68 Old Soul Dog

CHRISTOPHER MUNDE | *Poetry*

74 Fortean Gods

JULIE POOLE | *Nonfiction*

77 No Sweat

BRIAN BEATTY | *Poetry*

90 Pioneer Spirit

KIM MAGOWAN

SHOELACES

BECCA ALWAYS MISPLACED things, most annoyingly (Robert's word; Becca's word would be "ironically") her reading glasses. Or perhaps Robert would choose "amusingly," since it was objectively amusing to watch Becca careen about their house, crying, "Glasses, where are my reading glasses?" As if calling them by name would make them materialize. As if they were a sentient creature.

He'd watch her zoom about, patting various surfaces, and try to decide whether she more resembled the Tasmanian Devil (the frantic whirling) or Mr. Magoo (the blind ineptitude), then consider the absurdity of determining which Looney Tunes cartoon character his wife most embodied. Finally, Becca would say, "Robert, help me find my reading glasses."

Please, if she only said please, he had often thought—that word would make him so much more civil. "Why do you need my help?" he'd say instead, and Becca would respond, "Because Robert, I can't fucking see."

Today, it was her new shoelaces for her favorite red boots. The arena in which the shoelaces could have vanished was small, because they were not in their house in Berkeley, but rather on vacation in Paris, having first dropped

off their daughter Lily at college in Scotland. They were in a café on Rue du Bac. Robert looked at the surface of the table: the only object upon it was a pair of kitchen shears, which Becca had borrowed from the waiter to clip off the tag from her most recent purchase, a gray sweater which she bought earlier that day. This sweater had such a loose web, it looked like it was made by magical spiders. It was an extravagantly expensive sweater, definitely a special occasion sweater. They'd first seen it yesterday, in a shop on Rue Saint-Honoré. Robert had planned to return there today and buy it for a twentieth anniversary present. Robert had it all worked out: in the morning he'd say he was off to get pastries, he'd zoom back to the shop, he'd claim he got lost when he returned to their hotel an hour later after first stashing the sweater with the concierge, Becca would roll her eyes at his crappy sense of direction, and then, two months later, *voilà!*, he'd produce the sweater.

But Becca had woken up this morning, looked at him brightly, and said, "I just can't stop thinking about that sweater." Off they had trudged, across the Seine and then Tuileries, so she could buy it.

Really, it was frustration at being deprived of doing a kind, loving deed that had put Robert in such a grumpy mood.

"I can't believe we're in Paris, and all we're doing is shopping," he'd grumbled while the sweater was getting rung up. Becca had looked at him in surprise and said, "Shopping is classically what people do in Paris! Haven't you ever read any Edith Wharton?"

This was the nature of his marriage, Robert sometimes thought, to

dispute who had the best grip on reality.

Now, the shoelaces.

Becca had bought them at this same overpriced, elegant store. It was the kind of store that looked like a tiny museum, where the value of its merchandise was conveyed by how little of it was on exhibition. This cobweb sweater, for instance, occupied its own shelf. The red shoelaces were displayed on a small table, along with a gold pair and a blue pair. They were all perfectly arranged, a nest of immature snakes. Becca had picked them up delightedly: “These will be perfect with my red boots!”

Seventeen euros was what the shoelaces cost. Becca had not even blinked when the salesgirl rang up her credit card. Nor had she once asked Robert whether he thought four hundred euros was too extravagant for a sweater, which made him doubt his fantasy, the prior night, of how thrilled Becca would be at his intended anniversary present. He’d gone to sleep imagining her expression, the way she would look first at the sweater, lifting it gently and almost dazedly out of its box, and then at him: grateful joy for being understood so perfectly by her beloved. He’d even pictured (this had been his last image before falling asleep) Becca straddling him, wearing only the sweater, her nipples visible through the web.

But then, this morning, her blithe announcement, “I can’t stop thinking about the sweater!” On the trudge back to the store, Robert lagged a cranky two paces behind, Becca too focused on their destination to notice. Not his image of leisurely walking through Paris, deliberately getting lost, holding hands, their joined arms swinging.

“Where’d I put the shoelaces?” Becca said again.

“Maybe they fell out of the bag?”

“No, they were there when I took out the sweater,” said Becca, and so it began—the Mr. Magoo patting of the table top, the Tasmanian Devil whirling about, though confined for the time being to a frenzied neck rotation.

It was another thing that Robert found both annoying and amusing about his wife: she didn’t seem to mind looking silly, even ridiculous, in public. Here she was in Paris, wearing a brand new, absurdly expensive sweater which she had put on as soon as she had clipped its tag, but her feet were in nothing but socks. She had taken off her boots (in a café! In full view of snobby Parisians!), pulled out their old, frayed, but perfectly adequate laces, and asked the waiter to dispose of them—actually handed him the old shoelaces, which the waiter took with a grimace, as though they were a wad of chewed gum. The only thing remotely satisfying about this exchange was that the waiter’s prior impression of Becca had seemed far too positive. Sure, her French was excellent: she knew the word for scissors. Sure, his wife, even at forty-six, was extremely pretty. But sometimes Robert found being married to a woman strangers admired exhausting, and perhaps this is why he didn’t unilaterally mind (though he did to some degree mind) the actions Becca performed that also made her ridiculous, for instance this removal of boots in public.

Now Robert looked underneath the table. Curled at the base of its iron stem, he saw the shoelaces. Again they reminded him of a baby snake—

something poisonous. Weren't bright colors intended to communicate danger?

He bent down, grabbed the shoelaces.

"Here they are."

If Becca had smiled. If she had conveyed, in any trivial way, her gratitude that Robert had found the overpriced shoelaces, in the same dependable way he found (over and over again) her reading glasses. But Becca instead stretched out an imperious hand, as if Robert were the waiter, as if this were some play-in-reverse of that scene five minutes ago where she had handed the waiter the old shoelaces. Except imperfectly reversed, because when she handed over the old shoelaces, Becca had accompanied that cavalier gesture (which made the waiter grimace) with her signature dazzling smile (which made the waiter soften and smile back after all—Becca's smile was a force difficult to resist).

"Give them to me," she said.

"I wish you'd say 'Please,'" Robert said.

Becca stared back. Again, a smile would have made all the difference. A smile would have lightened the whole situation, shown that Becca could laugh at her Tasmanian Devil-slash-Mr. Magoo self. It would have clarified that Robert was merely teasing.

No smile, however.

To cue that smile (if she could sprinkle it so lavishly on waiters, why not her husband of nearly twenty years, taking her on a romantic trip after they dropped off their only child at college?), Robert said, "I'd even accept

a *'s'il vous plait.'*”

Now that was objectively a funny thing to say! Funny and even charming! But still, no smile. Instead, a flush began to extend from the collar of Becca's brand-new sweater up her neck in a way that Robert knew well. His wife resembled a thermometer; her rage literally climbed.

“Give me,” said Becca, “the fucking shoelaces.”

If the kitchen shears were not right in front of him. But there they were. Robert placed his hand upon them.

“Say ‘please.’”

“Stop being an idiot,” said Becca.

If she had used another insult, like “jerk,” one that was more contextually accurate. But “idiot”—they had a fraught history with that word. Robert had given injunctions: “Never call me an idiot again.” It had to do with the way Becca wielded her intellectual superiority (knowledge of Edith Wharton, say, or proficiency in French).

Twenty years ago she had gone so far as to rewrite Robert's wedding vows (they had written their own vows, and she'd found his lying on his desk) to make them what she called “prettier.” Becca had been confused by Robert's anger. “I kept all your content!” she said. “I just made them more eloquent!” One could argue (and indeed Robert had argued, and had pulled out both a dictionary and a thesaurus to support his claim) that Becca's revision of Robert promising to love her all their lives to “adore” her all their lives was, in fact, a material content change. (“Love,” Robert had insisted, pointing to the dictionary, implied equality; “adore” implied submission,

was akin to “worship”). This argument, mere hours before their wedding, when Robert had first seen Becca’s penciled notes on his heartfelt vows, had them both in tears and had almost derailed the wedding altogether.

Now Robert picked up the scissors and cut the shoelaces in half. He had not really intended to do so—simply to threaten the action—but the French shears were surprisingly strong and sharp, and snapped through the shoelaces in one bite.

Becca’s mouth dropped open, once again making her resemble some cartoon character. Because wasn’t that what cartoons did, to convey shock or dismay? It was an objectively funny visual, which is why Robert, rather than apologizing at this juncture, laughed. Which made Becca’s mouth close, and then close even more, become such a small, thin, set line that it seemed as if her mouth were zipping itself shut forevermore.

They looked at each other. Becca’s blue eyes filled with tears.

If she had said, “I can’t believe you did that,” or something that communicated a grief that accompanied the tears, Robert would have apologized. He was already feeling a wave of contrition, flooding up him like Becca’s rage-flush up her neck.

Instead, Becca said, “That’s it.”

Robert raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Becca repeated, “That’s fucking it. This is over.”

“We’re splitting up?” Robert said. She looked back at him, unflinchingly, not nodding, exactly—it was as if no extraneous motion could now be spared—but not denying it.

“Over shoelaces?” Robert added.

His question sat between them, unspooling its ramifications. In some ways this had been the battle of the last five years—who was shaping their narrative. Robert felt, for the first second since the decisive and foolhardy action of severing the shoelaces, a return to a position of power. Becca would indeed look foolish, if he told their relatives, their friends, “She left me because I cut up her shoelaces.”

“Because you’re immature and petty and violent,” Becca said. When he once again inquiringly raised his eyebrows (Robert knew Becca hated that gesture, knew moreover that her hatred of it was perfectly justified), she said, “Yes, violent! You think I’m exaggerating?” She leaned forward. She’d been leaning away from him, as if he were too disgusting to be near, but now she positioned herself so as to fire at close range. “Well, what do you think cutting shoelaces in front of me with a pair of fucking kitchen shears is meant to express? What would Dr. Tyler say about that?”

Dr. Tyler had been their couples’ therapist; Dr. Tyler saw no relevant difference between punching Becca in the face and punching the wall three feet away from her, which made Robert furious and Becca smug and vindicated. Of course the difference was relevant! In twenty years of marriage, Robert had never laid a hand on Becca, despite having cause. Punching the wall had only injured himself (bruised his hand), yet Becca and Dr. Tyler had both called it abusive. If punching a wall was the same as punching Becca, Robert had maintained, then her so-called “emotional” affair was the same as a physical affair.

“You’re really proposing that I was threatening you?” Robert said. “With these?” He held up the kitchen shears, and Becca dramatically recoiled as if he had held up an assault rifle.

“They are a weapon!” Becca said. “Didn’t you see—oh, man, don’t you remember, that Hitchcock movie, Grace Kelly was in it, she was wearing all those gorgeous clothes—”

“*Rear Window?*”

“No, no, the one where her husband hires that guy to kill her and she stabs him with a pair of shears. *Dial M for Murder.*”

Robert will remember this as a potential turning point in his marriage, a time when disaster reared its head, bared its fangs, and then slithered away. They had come that close. He had 95% believed, two minutes before, that Becca and he were finally done, that he would storm away from his wife in her stocking feet and red boots with no laces and go back to their hotel, to which Becca would return later only to pack. He could picture the whole thing: calling Lily, telling their daughter “We’ve been having trouble for years,” that they had only stayed together because of her. He would finally (justifiably?) be freed to tell their daughter about her mother’s damaging “emotional” affair five years ago, and how he had tried to forgive her, but now Lily was off to college, and there was no more reason (or did he mean excuse?) to keep up the charade.

No more reason, that is, other than the fact he still loved annoying, forgetful, unappreciative Becca with all of his grudge-holding heart. When it came time to say his vows twenty years ago, at the decisive moment,

Robert had used “adore” after all. Becca had smiled dazzlingly and squeezed his hand.

“Oh yes,” Robert said. “Now I remember the shears. But Grace Kelly’s clothes were better in *Rear Window*.”

“True. Though that’s a high bar.” Becca’s lips puffed out to their normal size and shape, her mouth remaking itself.

“I’m sorry about the shoelaces. I’ll replace them,” he said, and Becca looked ruefully at her boots.

“How am I supposed to walk? I gave my shoelaces to the waiter.”

“The hot waiter who couldn’t stop looking at you,” said Robert, and Becca laughed. Robert began unlacing his own shoes. “Here, take my laces for now, they’ll hold up for the time being. You go to the Musée D’Orsay, it’s right down the block, I’ll run back to the insanely expensive shoelace store, and I’ll meet you at that rhinoceros statue in front of the D’Orsay in an hour and a half.”

“You can walk without shoelaces? And you can find the store?”

“Trust me,” said Robert, now done lacing Becca’s boots—his shoelaces only went up the first four holes but would do for now. Becca wedged her feet in them and stood up. They exchanged another look—wary, relieved. Becca didn’t kiss him, but she patted his head and said, “Okay, rhino at three.”

Robert wiggled his strange, untethered feet. He watched his wife walk gingerly, temporarily, away from him.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

AWAKENED

A logging truck's Jake brake
wakes me from far away.
Trees grow so slowly they
may live a million days
or more and never wake
a man whose place they may
one day quietly take.

A VIRTUAL REALITY ITINERARY ACCORDING TO THE HARRISON- WHEELER EQUATION OF STATE FOR COLD, DEAD MATTER

4×10^{-8} cm (normal)

Before I put on my virtual reality goggles, subtitle script on my iPhone tells me that in this space I am going to enter, there are aliens invading my home and I am one of two adorable bunnies responsible for saving the planet. This is fine by me. And yet, when the scene opens, I am staring at the Earth, a long way off. I look around me, a 360° view of the Earth in the distance, and the stars in the distance, as I imagine it really appears from some far-off angle in space. A light flashes from the planet ahead, the planet I know, blue and bright. A spaceship zooms toward me. Up until this moment, I am alone in a space that looks in every way like real space. This spaceship, however, looks a bit less *Planet Earth* and a bit more *Wall-E*. It comes up close and from within, some comically unfrightening extraterrestrial stares at me, matching

me curiosity for computer-generated curiosity. Then it flies away

2×10^{-8} cm (compressed x 2)

In the book *Black Holes and Time Warps*, astrophysicist and 2017 Nobel laureate Kip Thorne describes how scientists in the 1990s thought it might look and feel to fall into a black hole. On Thorne's graph depicting the Harrison-Wheeler equation, plotted against density (grams per cubic centimeter), is matter's resistance to compression. In other words: how a body of matter changes under immense pressure. In this case, a body of iron. A lump, cold and dead. At first, as iron is compressed, the electrons gather tightly around their nuclei—a sort of congregation of claustrophobic motion—like flies increasingly frantic around a bite of meat in the sun. Then, as compression increases, the electrons begin to ignore the nuclei altogether. They make what is known as degeneracy motion, likewise producing degeneracy pressure. An erratic, wave-like protestation of space. Thus, Kip Thorne writes, *the matter has now become the kind of stuff of which white dwarfs are made.*

I don't know who I am in a virtual space, other than a spectator. If I am a bunny, why am I so far out? If I have yet to become one, when will it happen, and how much will it hurt?

1×10^{-9} cm (oblivious to the nuclei)

The third-proudest moment of my life was the day I won a drawing contest in my Black Holes class. It was my first semester of college, and I enrolled in Professor Andrew Hamilton's course at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The class marketed itself to non-science majors, which meant that in addition to solving basic problems of speed and light refraction, in addition to leveling-up our physics understanding from a high school algebra foundation to a rudimentary (and still, like, way-hard) calculus base, we got to watch sci-fi movies with black holes in them and debate their accuracy.

The contest was to assess who could best draw what one might see while traveling close to the speed of light. Though this possibility is undoubtedly more complex than I understood it then (even more so than I understand it now), I drew my scene based on the following principles: moving at this speed, my visual world consolidates into a circular window in front of me. At the center of this image, all that I am moving toward appears blue—light waves shortened. All from which I am moving away, everything around the outer edge of my circle-vision, appears red-shifted—light waves elongated. At this speed, everything becomes distorted, bending toward the center.

In a powerful (though possibly low-budget) 3-minute and 56-second

film,’ Carl Sagan describes all of this, as well as the unsettling issue of relative time. As one travels near the speed of light, time slows down. So, Sagan explains, one might leave on her space-time journey, travel for only a few minutes, then come home to find that all her family and friends have died. In the film, a boy leaves his Italian home on a super-speed Italian motorcycle, then returns to find his parents dead, only his brother alive, waiting for him on a park bench, an old man in a sweater and a hat.

1×10^{-10} cm (behaving all relativistic)

I started seriously thinking about black holes at the same time that I started writing poetry. This synchronicity is poetic, perhaps, but also, perhaps it's not. This was also the time that I started drinking coffee, and cooking my own dinners, and working at a bakery that sold cookies until 3 a.m. This was the first time I went on a date with a boy in college, who I met in Black Holes class. And the first time I met a different boy, who I would later marry, who also took the Black Holes class, but with a different professor. All of us eating dorm cereal and drinking unlimited chocolate milk and riding our bikes thinking about the same thing: what is a black hole and what would happen if you fell into one?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CIs3jOnfiM>

How it would feel to fall into one is speculative, since 1) presumably, no one ever has and 2) anyone who has or does would/will be unable to communicate their experience to us, should they survive at all. How it would *look* to fall into a black hole depends, like most things, on perspective. It depends on who you ask.

It's like this: You, the one falling into the hole, stretch into a long, slim thing. Assuming, of course, your continued ability to see despite the speed and the pressure and the terror of it. Around you, a sort of turning of space like time looping back to itself. A snake eating its tail. You see and feel your body stretch and if you survive this immense and elongating pain, you see a tumbling settle into a singular bright light.

But it's also like this: You, the one watching a person fall into the hole, see only a blink of light as the person falling crosses over the event horizon, the boundary of a black hole beyond which there is no coming back. Bodies go in and do not come out. Yet, because, in our universe, matter is neither created nor destroyed, the information of a body can't simply disappear. There has to be evidence that the body is gone. Thus, as you watch a person fall into the hole, you see a flash of light: a body exploding on the boundary of the unknown.

A body crossing over a boundary feels no particular jolt, but rather, an immense and excruciating stretch. And yet that same body is seen to

explode in an instant, to explode upon crossing some line, some clearly defined point. The body is seen to be gone.

1×10^{-11} cm (converting protons to neutrons)

I am not a great artist when it comes to colored pencil on paper. Really, I won the contest because out of the 300-some students that were assigned the homework, I completed it and somehow managed to find four or five different colored pencils to use, which I somehow managed to keep within the lines of my simple drawing. Of all the scenes I could have imagined, the one I chose was a street scene, a New York City street scene, maybe, with tall, rectangular buildings of different primary colors warping easily, uniformly toward the center. I drew windows on the buildings, glass that bent, and flowers and grass on the ground. For this, I won the contest. I collected my extra credit—a few percent added to my overall grade—and marveled at what I now, as a teacher, understand to be not an unusual lack of general effort toward homework.

In addition to judging drawing contests, Professor Andrew Hamilton is the creator of the Black Hole Flight Simulator, a computer-generated visualization of what one might see when traveling through black holes of various qualities. Visit the simulator's website and you will find a small video clip of, in Hamilton's words, "a general relativistic

visualization of a supercomputed magneto-hydrodynamic simulation of a disk and jet around a black hole.” It looks a bit like the visualizer function of iTunes, the thing my friends and I marveled at when we got our first laptops and they started smoking weed and I kept busy coloring in the lines of warped space-time cityscapes. Color streaks across the screen, circling a field of supposed black space. Various shades of browns and whites, like steam streaming off a boiling pot of broth. That is to say, it’s much brighter than I imagined it might look.

My efforts to verbally describe black hole flight simulations tend to induce a similar reaction in loved ones as describing dreams or complaining about grading papers (kindhearted patience belying disinterest). When I show my husband this video, he tells me that I should reconsider bringing it into my graduate poetry workshop because people will think I do a lot of drugs.

A bit more investigating of Hamilton’s online presence might lead to his compiled list of media involving black holes.” Apparently, he continues to offer up to two percent extra credit for students who refer movies and books to him though, he reminds us, they have to be about black holes specifically. They can’t just be about time travel like *Back to the Future*. When I took the course, we watched the 1997 film, *Contact*.

² <http://jila.colorado.edu/~ajsh/insidebh/intro.html>

³ http://casa.colorado.edu/~ajsh/astr2030_09/bhmovies.html

Based on the book by Carl Sagan, *Contact* follows Dr. Ellie Arroway, played by Jodie Foster, as she searches for evidence of alien life. Arroway discovers a sequence of prime numbers apparently sent from the Vega star system, twenty-six light-years away. She also has a relationship with a Christian philosopher, played by Matthew McConaughey. According to Hamilton, director Robert Zemeckis consulted Kip Thorne on the science of the worm hole, but couldn't wait long enough for a scientific rendering, and instead went for something "artistic and dramatic." The film does, Professor Hamilton concedes, offer a "momentary glimpse of an exquisite galaxy."

6×10^{-13} cm (paired neutrons and degeneracy pressure)

The VR goggles came in the mail and they don't work very well. The cardboard frame itches my face. The part that touches my forehead gets noticeably greasier each time I use them, and they came with a magnet that looks like a washer, and I don't know what it's for. But when I hold them to my face, I can see things like I'm there.

I tell people that I am interested in the poetics of black holes. Or the poetics of space-time relativity. Maybe this sounds smart, like I can talk about poetry but also about math. Or maybe this sounds like pseudo-science, some dangerous elision of aesthetics and astronomy with little regard for fact.

My fascination is nothing new. In a series of correspondences,⁴ writers Amy Catanzano and Andrew Joron debate connections between contemporary poetry and physics—specifically poetry and quantum mechanics/string theory. Joron names the feeling I get both from physics and from poetry “wonder.” He writes, “wonder is the one, primary affect that conjoins science and art.” Joron and Catanzano agree that poetry, like quantum mechanics, has the capacity to, as Joron explains, “destroy—or do what amounts to the same thing: radically renovate—the universe.” According to the theory of quantum mechanics, the world at the micro level does not look anything like the world at the macro level, but rather functions on uncertainty. Amy Catanzano describes quantum mechanics as the “physical expression of alienation,” a move within science from an explanatory (and therefore, she argues, “less alienating”) description of the natural world to a disrupted, uncertain understanding of physical phenomena. This, she argues, is like poetry’s capacity to “say the unsayable.”

Physics offers me another way to think about the limits and extensions of the poem. I am interested in the degeneracy motion of language, it’s incapacity to hold some solid state. The inevitability of pressure buildup, the inevitability of breakage. How long can language hold itself under pressure, and what happens when it breaks?

⁴ Published online, as “Magical Correspondences” in six parts, by *Jacket 2*.

3×10^{-13} cm (a repulsive nuclear force enhances the pressure)

Using crappy VR goggles is not very similar to falling into a black hole and writing a poem is also not very similar to falling into a black hole. As far as I know, my body is at no greater risk of falling into a black hole than any other body, but I want to—feel compelled to—think of my body's place in time and space. How do I move from a body creating a replica (artist), to a body observing a replica (virtual body—inert), to a bunny fighting for the Earth from space (virtual body—active), to a self? What is the time/color shift? When do I enter a new space entirely? In what way have I become not the least virtual of two bunnies, but some actual, non-virtual thing?

And what about the gone body? The body that explodes, a bright flash in the distance. The event horizon is that barrier of spacetime beyond which there is no possible escape—not of matter, not of sound, not of light. At which point, if we are watching this happen, the body leaves a mark in its wake. A flash on the horizon. Evidence of its own goneness.

I don't want to watch from the distance. I want to stay with the gone body. The body that is also, at this instant, an intimate self, a self disappearing, red shifted, but looking forward onto its own.

MARK NEELY

MORNING PANORAMA

On the whole
I prefer it to be clear
but the river draws
me most on sullen days
when the gray sky
turns its surface
silver and birches
bend down to the water
as if to drink
I miss my father

LAURA PRICE STEELE

THIS LIFE OF (Y)OURS

I'VE NEVER SEEN anyone fight like my grandparents fought. They were relentless. Every time we went over to their house, we found them mid-battle. Something had already gone sour for the day. My grandmother had burned the coffee or thrown out the sports section of the newspaper. My grandfather had left the kitchen window open all night.

They lived in a brick house on the south side of Denver. The house itself was set too far back on the lot—it didn't line up with the other homes on the block, stuck out like a crooked tooth. The front yard had patchy grass that was never all the way alive, but never all the way dead either.

My parents dropped us off on Sundays and we stayed until dinnertime. My grandmother had a chest of worn-out toys that she'd picked up from a secondhand store. We didn't play with them, but we made a show of pulling them out because if we didn't she would do so herself, narrating the story behind each one, why she'd bought it and for how much. She wielded guilt like a weapon.

Sometimes we played outside, but only in the back yard because my grandmother had seen black men walking in the neighborhood before. She

said if we were out front they would ask us to hold something and we might be stupid enough to do it.

We called them Nana V and Pa Gene, and they weren't afraid to fight in front of us. In fact, they seemed to enjoy having an audience. Nana V screamed. She had a shrill voice, big lungs, and a talent for mapping out how each of Pa's failures linked to his past and future failures and spread out like a spider web around them both.

Pa's talent was his humor. He made fun of her voice, of her hair, of the uselessness of her criticisms. And we, all three of us, took his side. Pa Gene was charming. He had a big grin, gray eyes, and a head shaped like a basketball. While Nana V was private about her body—she wore a wig to cover her thinning hair, and stockings over her thick, veiny legs—Pa invited us to laugh along with him at the absurdity of his aging. He popped his dentures out in front of us, let us poke at his gnarled and numb feet, and sometimes when Nana V got going on one of her rants, Pa took out his hearing aids and laid them on the table.

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MY OLDEST BROTHER Pete didn't like going to our grandparents' house. I think he preferred the tepid love our parents had for each other over the verbal brawling of Nana and Pa. Every Sunday began with Pete crying because he didn't want to go. He cried quietly over breakfast and we kept a washcloth in the freezer so that he could lay it over his face during the car

ride. For Pete, the only thing worse than spending the day at their house was to have Nana and Pa know that he'd been crying over it again. When we pulled into their driveway, Pete had us check his face to make sure it was back to normal and we always lied to him and told him that it was.

The fighting didn't get to me like it got to Pete. There was something romantic about the way my grandparents fought, as if only two people who loved each other could stand to hate each other that much. I preferred the furious love of Nana and Pa to the transactional conversations of my own parents. It was often a relief to be in their household, though sometimes Nana V screamed so loud we couldn't hear the TV.

Once when we were over, she broke all ten of the dinner plates. We'd never seen anything like it. Until then they'd only ever yelled at each other. I'd had the thought before that maybe after we left, the space closed between them. Though I could never imagine either one of them throwing a punch exactly, I could picture Nana smacking Pa with a serving spoon or Pa shouldering Nana out of his way.

I remember it was raining. That house smelled rotten when it rained, like the water had bled into somewhere soft and dry. Nana V was doing dishes; she never seemed to be finished with the domestic tasks that kept her from sitting down to watch TV with us. Already, she had yelled twice for Pa to turn it down. "You're going to blow out their eardrums," she said. She liked to put us in the middle of things.

"I'm not going to blow out their eardrums," Pa said, laughing. He said the word *eardrums* as if it wasn't a real word, as if she'd made it up.

The fight might have stopped there, but Pa grinned and turned the volume even higher. Pete put his hands over his ears. I could feel the little hairs inside my ear canals. The flesh in my head turned brittle.

“I said turn down the goddamn TV,” Nan screamed. She came out of the kitchen. Pa made a show of adjusting his hearing aids. I looked at Dave, my younger brother and he was laughing, laughing just like Pa. I laughed too. Nana looked ridiculous—elbows-deep in rubber gloves, her hair like a misshapen helmet. She had a body like a troll and one lazy eye.

Nan held the plate over her head as if she meant to hurl it at Pa’s head, but of course this just made him laugh harder.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Throw it.” He knew how much she loved those dishes.

Nan stared at him. I could see her doing some kind of math in her head. It occurred to me then that I did not know Nan very well, that I had no idea what she was capable of.

Eventually we stopped going to Nana and Pa’s on Sundays. I remember it differently than Dave does. He thinks we stopped going because Nan broke the dishes in front of us. He thinks Mom wouldn’t stand for it after that. But I’m sure it wasn’t for another year or two. Not until Mom and Dad separated.

It would be an easy puzzle to solve with three of us. We could ask Pete. But in 1985 he rolled his car on the stretch of highway between Evergreen and Morrison. They got him out. Wrenched the door open. Cut the seatbelt. They said he was even sitting up and talking in the ambulance. But they lost

him on the way to the hospital. Internal bleeding.

My mother called me at work to tell me. I had a part-time job in the office of a furniture company down on Broadway. I wasn't the one to pick up the phone. I was in the showroom with someone from property management who'd come out to look at a discoloration of the ceiling—a bloom of caramel color that had started as the size of a fist and spread. Now it looked like an enormous mask.

"Looks like a face," the man said to me.

"Huh," I said as if it hadn't occurred to me. As if I hadn't been looking at the ceiling for weeks and seeing the petals of the eyes and the thick sneer of lips.

"There's the eyes," he said, pointing.

That's when the office manager came out and got me. "Beth, you have a call," she said. I felt a bed of needles under my stomach, not because I believed anything was wrong, I just knew it looked bad to be taking personal calls at work.

The office smelled like stale ink and cork. I went to the desk I usually used, which was a sort of half desk in the corner, and I picked up the receiver.

"Beth," my mom said, and I knew how bad it was from the steadiness of her tone. Stress had a way of stripping the humanity out of her voice.

"Yes," I said.

"It's your brother," she said. And before she said his name, I knew it was Pete.

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AT THE FUNERAL, Mom and Dad brokered some truce which allowed them to comfort each other. I hated seeing them like that—weakening to the nostalgia so much that they let their hands touch. Dave didn't mind, but I spent the afternoon seething.

We agreed to eat lunch together at Pete's favorite sandwich shop, where you could fish out your own pickle from a giant barrel. I was the only one who thought the idea of eating the sandwich Pete would have eaten was no way to honor him, and I said so.

"Don't be difficult," my dad said. It was one of the catchphrases he'd used my whole life and it had that strobing effect of dropping me completely into the experience of being a little kid.

I pushed away from the table to go get a pickle. The smell of the barrel was sharp and I expected the brine to be cold to the touch, but instead it was like bathwater that had sat too long. I could feel the pickles bobbing against my knuckles. I reached as deep as I could, wetting my arm up to the elbow. When I finally wrapped my hand around something, it felt like plucking a live thing from the ocean, like grabbing the sort of creature that was not quite a plant and not quite an animal, but something in between. When I returned to the table, no one would look at me.

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NAN AND PA were already gone by the time Pete died. Pa went slowly—heart disease in ‘78. Nan didn’t last a whole lot longer. Her kidneys failed and she was gone before the decade turned. Both of them had gotten old enough that their deaths seemed acutely inevitable. But once it finally happened there was that pang of disbelief from the way life shears off at the end.

After Nan died I thought it would be a long time before we buried any more family. I’d done the back-and-forth math of wondering whether Mom or Dad would go first. But that seemed decades away.

Pete dying was like the jolt when a dream breaks open and bleeds into the morning—the way for a few minutes an impossible thing can fold itself in with the everyday. Pete was dead, and my brain kept twisting and twisting around the thought, as if it would eventually reveal itself to be as unreal as it sounded. Everywhere I went took on the eerie gloss of being both somewhere I’d been before and wholly unfamiliar to me. I’d never known a world without Pete in it and with him gone the world became unknown to me.

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MORE THAN ONCE I’ve thought that if Pete hadn’t died I never would have married Locke. Perhaps I am affording life too much symmetry. But it’s hard to imagine I would have developed the habit of wandering the grocery store aisles late at night if not for the whip of insomnia I suffered all summer after the funeral.

Something about the crisp florescence brought me in. I felt like a moth, like something primal thrumming in my body propelled me through the automatic doors. I walked up and down the aisles, soothed by the clean, bright colors of the cereal boxes, the white bulbs of marshmallows, the milk sweating behind a thick window of glass. This unending supply of packaged food seemed to be the opposite of death.

Locke worked overnight stocking the shelves. I didn't notice him really; I was so focused on the food itself. Every time I went I bought something I hadn't eaten before. A puck can of potted meat, fish sauce, whole star anise. At home I filled the cabinet above the refrigerator. When I moved out of that apartment I double bagged the collection and told myself to take it to the food bank, but instead I just tossed it all into the dumpster.

Eventually Locke spoke to me. I'd seen him by then always curled over a box of canned food or pushing an empty cart back through the double doors near the deli. He had sturdy limbs and close-cropped hair. He told me much later that he spent weeks working up the nerve to talk to me. Our first conversation was in the baking section. I was considering the neat little boxes of gelatin and pectin. At the end of the aisle I saw Locke nearly hustle by. I felt his gaze rake over me and then I saw him turn so abruptly he gave his body a cartoonish whip.

He smiled as he approached, but there was something manic in his eyes. One hand he held up in a stiff wave, a sort of *wait for me* gesture. In the other hand he held a jar of something blood-red.

"How about these?" he said when he got close enough. He held out the

jar. It looked like it was filled with organs. The label said *Pickled Beets*.

"For what?" I said. I could see little ticks of sweat along his hairline.

"For your collection," he said.

I felt the twin rush of flattery and overexposure. "Thanks," I said, taking the jar from him; the glass was still warm from his hand.

"I'm Locke," he said.

"Beth," I said.

"Beth," he repeated as if he was storing the word in some specific part of his brain. Then he gave me a grimacing smile, turned away, and trotted back the way he'd come. Years later he explained that he understood my coming in for odd items so late at night as my way of signaling to him that I was interested. "I knew you weren't cooking that stuff, and I knew you came in so late because you wanted me to see you," he said. I never bothered to correct him.

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LOCKE AND I met during the coupling phase of life when everyone around us seemed to be pairing up. And so there was an ease to the way our relationship unfurled, as if we were paddling with the current. Though we were both charmed by the strange delights of having a partner, each of us understood the setup to have certain limitations. We were together, but we were still two distinct people. Never did we have the sort of emotional or intellectual melding that I think some people experience. But I didn't want

for it. This separateness seemed better somehow, more stable for the long run.

We dated for a few months before we slept together. We waited until his parents were away; they'd gone back east for a wedding, somewhere like Vermont or Rhode Island. Locke had to work late, but I agreed to meet him at his place after his shift.

The house didn't smell bad, but the scent of it was always catching in my nose, reminding me that I was not at home. I'd been in Locke's room before, but now there was something different about the space, like the furniture had been cut apart and glued back together. We kissed on the bed. I liked his tongue, the sensation of something alive in my mouth.

"I love you," he said. I hated him for saying it now, when his voice was thick with hunger and I couldn't tell whether he meant it.

We pulled our shirts off, our pants, we pressed our bodies together. What I liked about sex was the surrender of it, not to him, but to some animal self. I could feel the whole of my body: the layers of muscle and bone, the stutter of my blood, and the electricity of my pumping heart. But as much as I lost myself in the process, Locke stayed firmly himself. Even as he pushed inside me, the worry in his brow did not go away.

As we lay in the after, I felt the tunneling of returning to myself, of remembering my hair, my fat, the splotch of my birthmark. That's when I knew I loved Locke—when, as if he sensed my sudden discomfort, he curled around me and held me until I fell asleep.

WE MARRIED AT the courthouse. Me in a blue dress and Locke in a gray jacket. Neither of us wanted a traditional wedding; it seemed a simple way to skirt around the baggage of marriage. We did not articulate what exactly we were afraid of, but I could tell we both felt some ugly version of ourselves lurking. It was like we thought we could outsmart those selves by wearing blue, by exchanging vows in the small office of a judge, by calling the wedding anything but what it was.

After the courthouse, our parents took us out for lunch and I remember the tone of the day being one of hearty satisfaction. We'd checked off one of life's biggest to-do items and all four parents seemed happily relieved.

It carried us a long way, the satisfaction. After the wedding we rented an apartment near Capitol Hill, piecing together a collection of other people's cast-off furniture. I made spaghetti most nights and we ate barefoot on the sunken couch. We found that creating a shared life was like scooping up a baby bird that had fallen from its nest. Together we had to care for this wild, fragile thing. Our movements became careful—each one measured against the risk of accidentally snuffing out what we were meant to protect.

We found the spaces in each other to fill. I bought a jar to keep his favorite tea. He installed a hook in the bathtub for my loofa. I put a frame around the picture of his parents he kept loose in his dresser. He left an ice scraper in the back seat of my car. Together we picked out a set of dishes at the second-hand store.

I loved finding the evidence of how snugly Locke and I fit together. Our toothbrushes housed in the same mug, our shoes set side by side at the door, our laundry twisted into one heap. If ever I doubted what held us together, I just had to look around.

In those early years we talked sometimes about having a child; we were sure it would just happen for us. Back then there was a lightheartedness to the way we spoke—like we were two kids in on a secret plan together. We conjured up a baby who had my boxy feet and Locke's strong chin, my dark eyes and his knobby ears. But soon there was a hollowness to those conversations. As time passed we began to feel like kids who'd grown too old to believe in the magic of our secret plan, like we had both realized that having a baby required certain logistical adult considerations and neither of us could bring ourselves to say so. It felt like a game of chicken; neither of us wanted to be the one to call out our mutual naivete. When I finally did, it was like pressing a needle into the skin of a balloon. Suddenly this thing Locke and I had been holding between us lost its shape.

Locke was not interested in a medical investigation. He refused to talk about doctors, about research of any kind. In fact, the more I pushed him to take it seriously, the less inclined he seemed to want a child at all. It was as though the whole idea had been spoiled for him. As we edged toward our mid-thirties, he began to cite things such as overpopulation and the possibility of genetic disease. Now whenever the subject of children came up, the conversation soured.

"When we have a baby, I'm going to want a dishwasher," I said one

night as we washed the dishes. I scrubbed and rinsed, Locke dried.

I could feel a sudden tautness in the room. Behind me, Locke dropped silverware into its drawer.

“We could put it right here,” I said, tapping the cabinet next to the sink with my wet hand. I hoped this pivot might keep us out of a fight.

“You’re obsessed,” he said. Another piece of silverware dropped.

“I just hate doing the dishes,” I said. It was an offering, an escape hatch if he wanted it.

“I mean what is this desire to procreate?” he said. I’d never heard him use that phrase before.

“If you don’t want kids,” I said. “I just want to know.”

He let out a breath, and there was an answer in it, an admission. I didn’t say anything; I dropped one hand into the sink water and peeled the bits of food out of the drain. Already I could feel myself folding my desire for a child over and over in my mind, working it until it came apart. In some ways it didn’t feel much like a sacrifice—giving up a thing I was only half-sure I wanted for the sake of something I had in hand. But I can’t inhabit myself from those years with any authenticity. My new self edges into the memories and consumes every scene.

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LOCKE LEFT ME on a Wednesday. He packed his half of the matching luggage set his parents had bought us for our fifth anniversary. We’d been

together for sixteen years by then, but as soon as he said he was leaving I could feel all that time compress into one thin layer, like a coin I could roll between my fingers.

Outside the snow pushed up to the doorstep—neither one of us had bothered to sweep it away. I remember being surprised, watching him split apart the collection of things that held us together. I didn't cry, but I tried to grab his arm as he stood by the door. Already he'd told me there was someone else.

"Where are you going?" I asked. It was a stupid question, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Stop it," he said.

"This is our life," I said. My throat felt raw.

Locke looked around the room. Already his hand was on the doorknob. Then he looked into my face and he laughed. It was a snarling sort of laugh, and I understood instantly that in all the years we'd spent together he had never quite taken me seriously.

The fury came fast and hot. My whole body curled around the bead of anger. I stepped forward. I could feel that my face had rearranged itself—a new crease splitting my brow, a tightness at the edge of my lips. Already I knew the changes would be permanent. Locke pulled open the door. He looked as if for the first time he saw me as someone with bones and teeth.

I pushed toward him. I didn't have a plan, but I wanted to touch him. I wanted him to feel the heat of my skin.

"I'm sorry," he said. His breath smelled too sweet.

I reached toward him, not knowing exactly what I planned to do. But my hand grabbed onto his hair. The patch right above his left ear. I latched on. Between my fingers I could feel the tug of his scalp, the panicked wriggle of something caught.

“Beth,” he said, knocking my arm with his elbow. I tightened my grip, steeled myself for a fight. Already his body had become foreign. I’d never struggled against him like this, never felt his heft as something that might crush me.

“Beth,” Locke said again. “Let go.” He tried to duck away from me, but I held fast, squeezing my fist so tight my knuckles felt like they might un-notch. He knocked me into the doorframe and twisted. I felt the scalp give way, and I nearly fell back as the hair came loose at the roots.

“Jesus,” Locke said as we came apart.

I didn’t say anything. I stood on the porch with the clump of his hair in my fist. I could feel my feet planted firmly beneath me, but I could also feel myself sucked backwards in time, the anger arcing like a spark between two bare wires, between me and Nan. There she was with the plate in the air. Her hand had trembled as if she was split in half whether she could actually go through with it. The skin of her arm hung heavy off the bone. I remember being spooked by the bare evidence of her age.

At the time I’d been stunned watching the first plate tip out of Nana’s hands and drop to the floor, the burst of shards exploding, the sing of the ceramic splitting apart. After that first plate, Nana V pulled the whole stack from the cabinet. One by one she pitched them at the floor. We watched

her, her eyes wet, her lips raw. She looked devastated but determined—as if she couldn't help but recount each time she'd picked up one of those plates without dropping it. For so long she'd kept them unbroken. And yet there was an inevitability to her motions as if this was the exact thing she'd been saving them for.

She'd seemed like such a batty old woman then, but standing in front of Locke as he backed down the steps I could feel the depth of her bitterness as if it was my own. Men did not have to take us seriously—even the men who claimed to love us. It was like finding a rotten wound that had been on my body all along.

Locke stepped back into the snow. He touched the freshly bald spot with the tips of his fingers, winced. "I'm going," he said. He backed all the way across the snow, didn't turn away from me until he hit the edge of the driveway. Then he shoved the suitcase in his car and slammed the door. I looked down at the hair in my fist still dotted red at the ends with his blood.

I don't remember anything changing much after Nana V shattered all those dishes. She must have been the one to sweep them up. Pa Gene never would have bothered. If it were up to him, those broken pieces would have stayed there until they turned to dust. But whenever I walked in the pass-through between the kitchen and the living room, I looked down to see the scars in the hardwood, little nicks that I could feel in the bare soles of my feet. I think my brothers stepped over those marks. Pa Gene too. But even back then I liked to feel underfoot the evidence of a woman destroying the very things she was meant to cherish.

ERIN RUSSELL

YYZ TO AMS

String my column straight up to San Francisco
The matrix will is a body of zeros broken by ones
The city's a cat's nest of cap-gun trade
Smashed against an Elvis impersonator shitting in front of tens of fans
The FBI aren't in the business of scratching out your myth
Hands up, high five, dirty curled claws bared
Your cuticles are showing
Building your form on every new city like fingernails through wax—
A Sapphic graft (think you're clever)
A palimpsest of city grids, aeration vents and metro fines: SI charting stretch
marks, nerve ablation, breast reduction surgery
in a very young boy
Your silk screen of Obama in drag
Only serious cash we ever had—
Your kindness is just a line
You think you love animals
You think you are animals
My response is to become every code running across every grid over the tops of
your pointed earl of wokeness reveille
Run open mic nights I'll run theory and poems until the city is sweating with
words and hot and heavy you and nobody will sleep
Put the academic back in the cage and wriggle your electronic ears till they itch
I am song itself

You don't wanna do no postdoc that's fine doc
I'm pan everything (I know you've got a checklist hidden there in your belly)
but got no time for cats who are myths of themselves,
Serve mimosas at 4am, I'll take your libation
No time for human and nonhuman animals alike who deal mimesis
A form is fine. Your cat is curled up next to my body, you are curled up tight
Got no time for mythologies of Bast
I wanted Bast herself
Say what I do isn't sex—
Recuperative response, an absent gaze, these referents
And doc is standing there with her needle
The rat's spine is in for it this time
You think you are animals
Ablating each nerve-ended line
String my column up in Amsterdam
The city doesn't care whether you think nothing's happening here
Berlin doesn't have near as many cats
Put the thesis back in the theory
And tell me how free my body can be

ARYA SAMUELSON

SANCTUM

GIRL-BODY

WE SIT. We stand. We sit. We stand.

The synagogue trembles with darkness and fire.

I am five years old. My butt is sore and I'm bored. I dig my hands underneath my dress and trace fingers along my flesh where my underwear band presses marks. Reading the language of my body, though I don't realize it.

Everyone is singing now—the songs sound like grape juice, go down smooth, yet a darkness. Some man is standing at the front, pointing at an enormous scroll. We stand. The book is too heavy in my hands, want to fling my arms loose. My father points his finger to strange markings, flips my pages. A few weeks ago, he taught me to read *Go Dog Go*.

Sit down, stand up, sit down, stand up.

I don't want to stand when I am told to stand. I don't want to sit down. My

thighs press against the seat, resisting. My dad, or maybe my stepmother, grabs my hand and hoists me to standing on both feet. Something electric pinches my spine. I don't want to do anything they tell me I have to do. I don't want to keep moving and leaving and losing. I go back and forth between my mom's house, my dad's house, my mom's house, my dad's house. There is no home. I want to go—to my mother, to her body, to her voice like milk, but my dad and stepmom tell me not to trust her. Nobody can be trusted. Nobody can be loved all the way. My hand burns. I can't be loved all the way. I wriggle my hand free and sink back down. Close my eyes and grip the edges of my seat.

TABLE

WITH MY DAD and stepmother, we celebrate Shabbat with glowing candlesticks, scarlet tablecloths, white flowers that drape open like lips. My stepmother, Marnie, hovers over the stovetop and I run to her, breathe into her apron—the garlic, onions, her French perfume. She shoos me away with her wrist, tells me to set the table.

At their table, there is a right place for the fork, knife, and spoon—though I usually forget what it is. Sometimes I place the silverware inside the wine glasses, or I bury the knives inside the napkins, which I hide inside the flower vase. When Marnie discovers what I've done, laughter cracks on her tongue, but her eyes glint hard as she places the silverware back where it is supposed to go.

The blessings tumble from my mouth as I strike a match and lean each candle into the flame. My dad taught me to memorize the blessings and I only remember the words when I say them really fast—a blur of sounds like seashells and coughing.

The lights dance on the yellow walls, casting a flickering circle of shadows around us. My father finishes his meal in minutes, yawns throughout the rest of dinner. Marnie eats deliberately, fawning over every bite, tells us a story about how this recipe came from a 97-year-old Jewish woman from

the Poland. Marnie was raised Catholic, but knows these things because she works for the *New York Times*. And I smile and laugh and eat everything on my plate. Beneath the table, I cradle little rocks in the shape of my mother. If I say aloud that I miss my mother, my stepmother will erupt into tears, push the table away, leaving me and my father blinking at each other. I cause explosions. Or I swallow the tiny rocks.

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EVERY OTHER FRIDAY, I am at my mom's house, where Friday nights are like any other night. We never sit at the table. We balance the plates in our laps. There is Chinese food in bed. There are stained white sheets.

My mother is still finishing medical school, studying to be a psychiatrist, and she tells me stories of the foster children and veterans who are her patients. There is a boy my age, seven years old, who tried to burn down his family's house. *I wish I could adopt him*, she says. My stomach twists; I want all her love for myself. Two is safety, two is hand in hand, two is how love makes sense to me.

Talking with my mother is like a warm pool; we swim around each other. We flip through TV channels and I tell her everything I remember about my day, about the new girl I like, the girl I hate, my terrible teacher. She tells me how nervous she is about taking the medical boards and we scheme

revenge against her asshole supervisor.

She doesn't need to know about my other life. When I come back one weekend from my dad's house with a new pixie haircut, my mom's eyes glimmer dark, distant. Now secrets flit around my brain like fireflies. I don't tell her that Marnie and I papier-mâché mermaids, glued translucent stones onto tails, painted their bodies emerald. It's getting easier to tuck secrets into the folds of my belly and just keep smiling.

ATONEMENT

IT IS YOM KIPPUR, the day of atonement, the holiest day of the year. The only day my mom's family goes to synagogue. It is also a school holiday and the girls in my class are eating pizza and hosting *Gilmore Girls* marathons. We just moved to this town a couple of months ago and I don't know these girls yet. I am nine years old—an age when every giggle exchanged, every whim of a free afternoon, fastens a tighter knot on friendship; when every absence means standing outside the joke, head tilted as if to laugh along.

I don't want to go to temple. I don't want to do anything I don't want to do. I throw all of my clothes onto the floor and scream, "It's so unfair!" Inside the car, I sob and punch the windows until my mother turns the car around. Which I knew she would. "How am I supposed to repent when you are being such a brat?" Her eyes flash at me and gone is her softness and then she falls into silence like a hot white fire. *I'm sorry*, I sing as a silly melody and I stroke her arm. *We can go back if you really, really want to*. She pries her arm away. I scream that I'm sorry. I need her forgiveness like I need her hand, like I need her voice reassuring me that everything will be okay. I dig into my thighs with my nails, rip out tufts of hair. Still she will not look at me, and that's how I know she is untouchable.

Defeated, I curl myself against the window and count telephone poles. Without her, I don't have anyone. But I don't say this. I learn about regret.

Dumb soft tongue. There is nothing I can say that will not hurt. My throat stings in its hollow cave. I scrape my gums with my nails.

LES MISERABLES

I AM TEN years old and staying with my dad and Marnie for the summer in their country house, three hours away from my mother. One morning I accidentally X out Marnie's computer browser and her diary flashes on the screen in the form of a Microsoft Word document. I didn't go searching. It was left "open."

Maybe if I hadn't seen my name first thing, I wouldn't have kept reading.

Everyone's a character, the ugliest version of themselves. My dad, my mom, her friends, her brothers. But I'm the star. Her words sear into my brain like coals. My fingers flame as I scroll down and down and down. When I think it's over, it's not. There's always the day before and the day before and the day before. I have known Marnie my whole life. Her diary is hundreds of pages, infinitude of words. I don't know where my body is, except it is burning.

I am supposed to stay at my dad and stepmother's house four more weeks.

Warm milk midnights I tiptoe past doors that breathe, down creaking stairs into the kitchen where the landline phone is stationed. I am not allowed to call my mother. I call my mother. Her voice is soft with sleep, but she shakes it off like a horse shaking out its mane. "I can't sleep," I tell her. "Can

you warm some milk?" she asks. The pot is simmering, I say. *Sigh*. Hers, mine. I have made her promise not to come pick me up.

Driving in the car, my dad says, "I've noticed you listen to *Les Miserables* a lot." "Yeah," I say. "So?" "So, I'm worried about you." He sounds like Worried Dad from a TV sitcom. His voice squeaks when he says *you*. "I'm fine," I say. "Do you miss your mom?" he asks. I put on my headphones. "One Day More," the cast of *Les Miz* declares. I want them to win the war more than I want anything else, even though of course they won't. My dad says something, then says it louder, but I don't hear him. Parks the car and I bolt. Through the door, over the dogs, up the stairs, past their bedroom, into mine with the rosebud sheets, onto my bed. I listen to my favorite, "On my Own." *Now I'm all alone again*. Plugged ears, closed eyes, just the music and me. No, just the music.

JOKE

AT OUR WEEKLY Monday dinners at the local diner, my dad and I scream at each other across the table. *I never want to see Marnie again.* We rattle the booth. *You hurt her just as much as she hurt you,* he yells. The manager asks us to lower our voices, so we just eat our soups in silence.

A couple of months later, I spend an entire Friday in the guidance counselor's office. I call my dad five times. *There is no way in hell that I am driving with you,* and I slam down the phone. My father shows up at school anyway, wrests me from the counselor's office, and suddenly I am in the car. I claw at the windows, beat them with my fists. The doors are locked. My father's friend is strapped into the passenger seat, his curly hair peeking through the gap in the seat rest, facing straight ahead. Saying nothing at all. We are parked outside the high school just as students are stampeding out the front entrance, and we must have been there for a while, because one of them has called the police. An officer knocks at the window. We emerge from the car and the officer asks me, "Is this your father?" When I say yes, he lets us both go. My dad and I amble down the street and he makes a joke about the whole thing. Then he turns to me and asks, "Will you still come upstate with me?" That isn't the joke.

DOORS

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD, my father lives on a kibbutz, eats pomegranates. He dropped out of college after five days of orientation and moved from suburban New York to Israel. It is 1969 and men over eighteen years old are drafted for the war every day, but his secular suburban life feels so far away—the seven frozen meals on rotation, the house where nobody makes a sound. He is immersed in a world of new tongues. In Israel, he kisses girls and debates politics in Hebrew and writes fiery articles calling for Palestinian liberation. In this foreign land, he discovers a belonging that transcends geography. When he returns to the United States, he co-creates a Holocaust studies department at his college and works as an editor for Jewish literature and biblical theory for the next twenty years.

I can't picture my father without his dark full-faced beard. Ideally, he is scribbling at his desk, surrounded by bookshelves. It's not religion he loves; it's ideas. I still picture him this way, even though he shaved his beard when I was five years old because Marnie preferred him smooth. In my baby photos, his teeth gleam through his grizzly beard as he cradles me.

He wanted me to believe Judaism was an open door, welcoming me. He read me Bible stories, offered me Shabbat. He wanted me to feel like I could find family anywhere in the world. But he had opened the door to my stepmother. He had shut the door to my mother. I spat out the

little knowledge I had learned and dropped out of Hebrew school after six months. I plucked the stories from my skin. I shut my own doors. I claimed that nothing about Judaism attracted or appealed to me. The hinges rusted over. Doors became walls.

SPLIT / NATURALLY

WHEN PEOPLE SEE me with my mother for the first time, they gush that I look just like her and it's true that we both have dark, curly hair; we both smile into the same side of our face. We emphasize with the same adamant hand gestures. But my mom rolls her eyes. "You should see her with her father." What she means is that I have my father's soft double chins, his skin that turns golden in summer and green in winter, and the same terrible temper. She laughs and there is an edge only I detect.

In her laughter, I hear: "This child is not mine." Her unsaid words cave my chest. I want to belong only to her. The only one who loves me. I hear her say, "I cannot save her." I've inherited his face, his gifts, his impatience, his anger. I am not fully hers and she is not fully mine; she is splitting us apart. The public-me smiles and rolls her eyes back. "She always says that," I sneer, like a typical teenager. She is splitting me apart.

• • •

It's WINTER BREAK, junior year of college. I come to Western Massachusetts armed with sweaters, long underwear, and mantras. Cheek pressed against the icy window, I have spent the entire five-hour bus ride rehearsing my sincere, easy smile, breathing into the space across my shoulder blades, convincing myself this visit will be different. I haven't seen my dad in a year

and a half.

When I get off the bus, he comes walking towards me, arms outstretched. “Hold on,” I say, “Let me get my bags first.” He hovers next to me while the driver passes me my bag and I grab for the handle, lift it up. “Now can I get my hug?” he asks. “Um, sure,” I say and put the bag back down. He presses me against his dark coat, my chin jutting into his chest, his keys jabbing at my belly. These are the only moments we ever touch. I remember my mantra and I relax into it, let my hands soften against the wool of his coat.

His grip around me loosens. “Let me look at you,” he says, and there are his eyes peering at me. My throat flames and I turn my head away. Am I supposed to stand there while he just *looks* at me? Does he want me to smile, pose, twirl? I’m certain other fathers don’t make such a big deal out of looking at their daughters. They look at them, just like they talk to them. Naturally. What is he looking at? What is he looking for?

“Let’s just go to your car. It’s really cold,” I say. We trudge through the parking lot, a thick silence between us. I glance over at him. He’s heavier than the last time and his face is pricked from his razor. Tiny hardened red spots on his cheek. I don’t want him to look at me, but I don’t want to look at him either.

NORMAL

THERE IS ONLY one photograph—a polaroid—of my dad, mom, and me all together. I am one month old and balancing on my dad's lap. They are both smiling hard—him through his full-faced beard his next wife wouldn't let him keep; her through lips stained dark red, a color more provocative than any she wore again. Their knees are touching. And me in the middle of it all, triple-chinned, face drooping to one side. An infant not knowing this would never again be normal.

ROSH HASHANAH

IT HAS ALWAYS made sense in my body that Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is an autumn holiday. September brings the sharpening edges of night, the bite of cool in the air, the leaves so colorful it's like they are celebrating. I feel the light slipping away and I want to cling to it. How personal, how intimate these changes feel. The wind stirs and I shiver with longing for warmth, safety. I want to come home.

On the rare occasions I attend synagogue as an adult, I go on Rosh Hashanah. The time of apples and honey and shofars and new beginnings. The only joyful Jewish holiday I know about.

But every year when the rabbi instructs us to stand, my body clenches at this order from an authority I have no reason to trust. Though everybody in the room has risen, nothing inside of me wants to join them. Or maybe, no part of me knows how. I drag the others down, a rock in their current. When I start to sing what some might call a prayer, I can only hear my own voice—the others have blended into something weak and distant. The unity is broken, if there was ever the illusion it existed, and it is so familiar, this below place, this separating myself from others with my body. The weight of their shadows hovering; I stiffen my back against them. I wish I could rise weightless and join the stream of melody. I want to be like water, but I was born a stupid rock. When the rabbi says to sit down, and the others

come back to my level, come back to me, pride drips down my back. Next time they stand I promise myself I'll have the courage, but when given the chance, I remain a boulder. I'll try again next year, I vow. Without moving, I melt deeper into the seat. I become molten.

SYNAGOGICAL CHANTS, PRAGUE, 1960*

HE FEELS FOR his grief like a rope, like vines of ivy. He digs into himself and tears it from its roots, hoists it upwards through his stomach, ribcage, chest, threads it through his throat. It seems impossible that he knows where he is going, except that when he arrives, his voice is the force of sun colliding against earth and it knocks me backwards, splits my chest open. He howls in the shape of God.

I don't know where these sounds live inside my body. His music wrests all that is hidden, buried in the dark of us. His throat a tunnel between inner and outer. *Revelation*. My throat is where the world closes.

When his voice surges, I hear the history of a people who have always longed for home. I hear the depth of grief, a black glittering tar where we lose ourselves, which is why we do not touch it. We fear we will never emerge. But he plunges into grief and thrusts it into the light—a fountain. Head falls backward, black of the throat to the sky.

I am writing my way to an open throat. A body unafraid of its own transformation. One day, I will feel my wildness and I will not break.

*Inspired by recording performed by Cantor Shalom Katz

CALIFORNIA

THIS ROSH HASHANA, far from family, I try again. The GPS barks directions as I navigate the most circuitous route imaginable between Oakland and Berkeley. I ascend and descend mountains, passing manicured hilltop enclaves, golf courses, and vistas that remind me of Grecian cliffs. My first time driving in five years, my hands wobble on the wheel and the cars on the freeway parallel to me whip past faster than I can even form words.

One month ago, I moved from New York City to California to begin graduate school. I have no friends or family here. I rely on my GPS to guide me to the grocery store, the gas station. I wake up in the mornings and lie in bed, waiting for my body to rise into shapes and carry the day along.

It doesn't feel like autumn. The leaves are still perky-green. The sun is somehow both warming and cold—like a lover's hand on your shoulder, when you can feel their thoughts are elsewhere. The light is silvery, instead of golden, and immaculate in a way I don't have language for.

I come to temple this year because I seek family. Because I am searching for the friendships that will bring this foreign place into focus. Because I want to believe belonging transcends geography, transcends the family I've been born into. Because it is a new year and I have a new life.

There are two simultaneous services held in the same building and I choose to attend the wilder one: a radical reform congregation advertising poetry and interfaith music and singing. Because it's California, the service is outdoors and held underneath a white tent in the backyard. I am early, which I had not planned to be, so I lean against a tree and survey the space. There is a playground and children are running all around, screeching their shofars. A picnic table displaying organic grape juice and biodegradable cups. I go back-and-forth between texting and resolving to be present. I don't know where to look, so I pull my phone back out. Why did I come here alone? The still-green leaves twinkle in the wind and people are greeting and embracing each other and I keep brushing my hair behind my ear. Everyone is part of a family. Keep leaning against the tree.

I accidentally catch eyes with a woman in her sixties, who, as it turns out, is visiting from New York City. Hearing this is such a relief my lungs expand like wings. "I'm from New York, too!" I exclaim, fingertips tingling. Her eyes slant narrow. "Oh," she says. I ask her which neighborhood, and she says SoHo, which suggests to me that she is very wealthy. We stand silently and I remember how difficult it can be to talk to New Yorkers about New York, how the city offers only the illusion of inhabiting a world in common. We shift from foot to foot. I keep touching my chin, tracing my hand along my collarbone.

The rabbi begins the service with: "Who knows how to say 'happy new year'?

in Hebrew?" She waits too many seconds, eyes bulging. "*Sha-na to-vah.*" She sounds out the syllables with space in-between like we are children, and something inside me splits, like crossed eyes refusing to focus. The cantor strums a guitar and she smiles blissfully, as if she is breathing in chocolate. But her voice is so weak it is inaudible, drowned by the sludge of voices that disagree on pitch. I grip the underbellies of my thighs. I surrender to the gray chaos, until I can't even hear myself, I can't feel my own edges, and this is what scares me.

Don't leave, don't leave, don't leave. I scrape at my legs, I push down my thighs. *Don't leave, don't leave, don't*—and then I am heel-toeing my way to the end of the aisle, scurrying past the back rows of congregants. I don't even realize I've left until I'm no longer where I was. Until my face looms in the bathroom mirror. Eyes hot and vacant and shiny and too angry to cry. I bite the flesh of my hands and I watch myself do it.

When I push the bathroom door open, the hallway floods with singing from the other congregation—white waves of music like their robes. There is a center and it pierces through me. I am jolted into stillness.

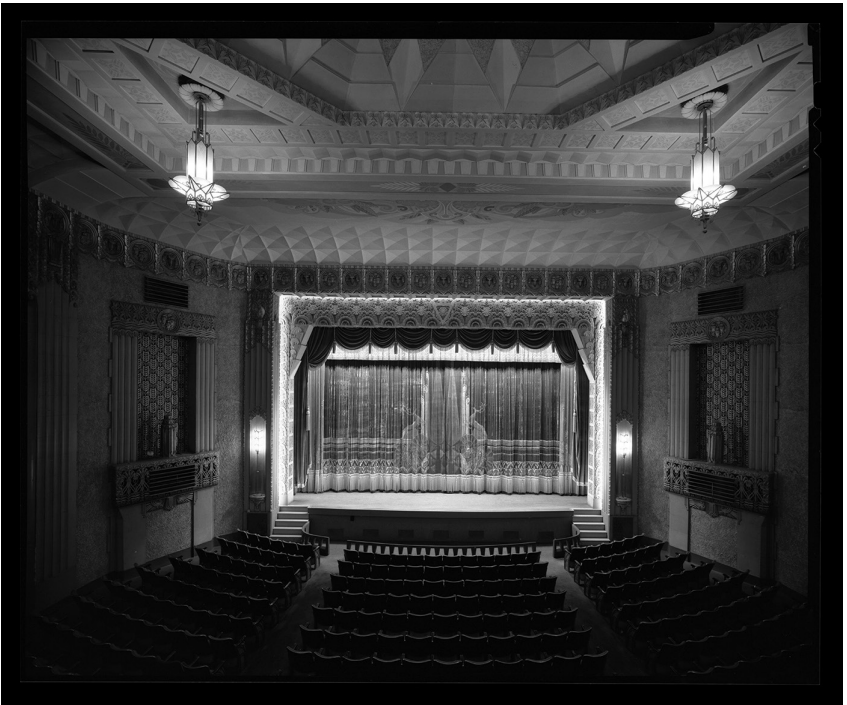
Their music washes my thoughts away. I stand for a long time, until I finally sit in one of the chairs set up on the patio, where nobody else can see me, where I can leave when I want to.

There is a leader to the music and she is far away and I can be far away and still hear how she is the leader. My shoulders release like waterfalls. The music is so beautiful and so simple. I do not know the words, but I can make those sounds. I open my throat as I listen to the others; the melody finds and travels its way through me. Singing breaks me open.

I walk to the back of the synagogue and sit in the very last row, joining the other voices. And when the rabbi says to rise, I rise like a leaf in the wind, and when the rabbi says to sit, it is like a sigh, and when we all sigh, it is like landing on earth after flying over it. Our wings rest. I sing and I let myself be carried. I let myself be held. Bodies in synchronicity and I am one of them. Are they my family? No, they are strangers, and I let them show me the way.

J.M. COOPER

ANACONDA WASHOE THEATRE



J.M. COOPER

DEER LODGE PRISON THEATRE



ROBERT R. THURMAN

COERCION



ROBERT R. THURMAN

JESUS CHRIST CEO



SARAH KOENIG

SMOKER'S LOUNGE

I locked my bike outside the smoker's lounge
and walked away just for a minute

they told me I wasn't getting enough exercise
so I checked into a spa with my girlfriend

my hair curled into tight ringlets
I wore shirtwaist dresses

when I returned I was 15 pounds lighter
but my bike was gone

someone had taken great pains to detach it
from its chain or it just decided

to slink off and look for someone
who understood it better at that point

I'm not sure—all I know is
that now I look for it everywhere

BRETT PURYEAR

OLD SOUL DOG

NEW DOG SOARED slung-bellied over the split-rail fence and beat hell out of the wind, and dove off the dock with a dead rabbit in his or her—no, quick! Study the undercarriage, *his*—mouth, this occurring while we gassed up that old trashed jet ski borrowed from Mr. Hurley. Iridescent gasoline on the water spread into a birthmark shape and forked around the hull. New Dog swam into the color-changing splatter like some special heavenly dog and ejected the dead rabbit out its mouth. Good dog.

Fetch that bunny out the water, Carp told me.

My friend Carp got the nickname from his mom ‘cause he was the gruesomest baby she’d ever seen, come out of her own inner chamber, but never did get better looking; a red birthmark splashed Carp’s back sized like all of Eurasia, but his mom couldn’t admit the mark had been fired upon his flesh via blood of her own—Nothing ugly came from my blood! she’d cry. That’s his shit-ass daddy!—because she’d been a pageant girl in McMinn County and once even dated the great handsome quarterback Rory Brock in high school. She hurled out this historical detail at every social event at some point so as to let everybody and their sisters and babies know she’d once been a debutante. What happened?

Okay. I fetched up this dead rabbit from the water. We finished gassing the jet ski and idled over to the dock and Carp heaved up and got ahold of a bright blue stringer and his pocketknife, the one with his dad's initials etched into the steel in the Olde English style. Carp hook-mouthed the rabbit and plunged the knifepoint into its jowl, carving fish gills. Black blood pooled thick-paint-like over its scratchy brown coat. He stuck the bright blue stringer through the rabbit's mouth and yanked it through a bloodied gill and clinched it to the U-bolt off the back of the jet ski.

We went for a ride out on the slough towing the rabbit like a little bitty bunny tuber.

Old Dogs beheld us at bank's edge yipping and snapping their jaws forever young, yet their fresh accomplice New Dog the Rabbit Hunter was not a convert to their happy bemused little reckonings.

You see I know a lot of words, but I'm still stupid.

My folks thought me either the brains of the family or a complete 'numb nuts,' or at least sometimes that's what my Dad called me. I'd become the celebrity of the school spelling bee; they didn't know where it came from. But I didn't put any value on that and thought maybe they ought to concern themselves with matters of higher significance and just I'd turn out however I'd turn out. Right now I just wanted to haul out a large-scale-rodent deathcart in miniature across the green summer sparkle of Tennessee water.

• • •

NEW DOG WAS not a convert because he was sad for how we'd treated the rabbit post-mortem. By god he'd killed it, yet he *respected* it. You could tell by the way he just lay there looking sullen and droop-lipped. He was not as lowbrow as these old dancing dogs who had never learned, in all their expansive, compacted dog years, how to self-reflect and doglike catch the scent of and hunt down and tear apart cruelty and meanness, an Old Soul Dog much further advanced than they.

• • •

MISS TRAYLOR AND her little daughters, who lived on the corner of the slough, stood by the bank, looking very upset. Miss Traylor was a ghoul, like most people, sunup to sundown just dead drunk off invented petty concerns.

We'd got back from our procession on the beat-looking jet ski and Miss Traylor was yelling at Dad with her arms flying around.

Instead of untying the stringer Carp just drew his knife out and cut it loose. The rabbit floated away with this bright blue string coming out its mouth. Drifting away like he'd wanted to tell us something, to tell us something in sheer bright blue, but it never turned into the bright blue bubble where you'd read his words like you did in the Sunday funnies.

Truth be told we had made the little Traylor girls cry. Dad called Carp's Mom over and told her to take care of Carp and then Dad took me up to the porch where he kept a thick sheath of palm leaves in the corner for

decoration, like a beach house thing. He yanked my trunks down and lifted the palm leaves and rocketed my rear with a red wrath that never stopped and never stopped—

Numb nuts numb nuts numb nuts.

Afterwards he and my mother sat at the kitchen table pouring spiked iced tea from a pitcher.

• • •

I WAS SO angry with New Dog. Everything was his fault. I had to find him and let him know he'd ruined my day, bringing this dead large-scale-rodent into my life. That's right: I didn't see it as a pretty little bunny but like some glorified donkey-eared rat come out of a sewer somewhere to hurl a wrench in my existence.

I came upon the new dog like hot hell with my little watersock: You little stinking ass face-fuck-dick! I'll kill you! I got him in the face with it. He was nothing but a mutt, ugly as Carp, though lean-boned and crisp under the summer sun's heaven. Again, I watersocked him in the face. But New Dog leapt and double-paw shoved me and I collapsed all over the hot grass. He bit my titty. I'd changed my opinion of him. I preferred Old Dogs with their slack-jawed lack of world-care and principles.

We had, Carp and me, given the old dogs names. There was Scab Ass, and Ribbit—'cause he had a frog face—and Mr. Crow, a tar-black dog who had earned our respect 'cause he'd lick your hands and face with a breath

that didn't make you feel dipped in vomit. Then there was the mega-old dog Gurgle, who made awful sounds with his throat while he snuffled at the grass.

Old Dogs joined that night for the cookout with Carp and his mom and me and Dad and Mom and Mr. Hurley and his grandson Christopher—a big old boy with sawdust-colored hair and eyes set far apart like Ribbit's—who, earlier that day, had hooked into this giant turtle with his rig, a chicken liver tied to a yellow milk jug. Mom fried crappie and big chunks of turtle meat. She made hush puppies and what she called twice-fried French fries. She made cocktail sauce so heavy with horseradish it was bright orange as her daylilies.

Can Carp stay over? I kept saying.

Dad said, No you can't cause you been acting like a little shit-ass numb nuts, but Mom told him we didn't know any better and then they got into some kind of a serious talking match but Mom won because he's a fool with words and she's where I got mine.

Carp's mom had had too many and talked about all the experiences of her youth and how *advanced* she had become at such an early stage and how you couldn't take that from anybody.

I dipped a great wad of turtle meat into the pale orange cocktail sauce with the smell so strong it opened up your whole face like some big wind got in there making you clean again.

• • •

MY REAR-END STILL stung a little from the stack of palm leaves, but Carp and me had the bedroom window flown open. Outside was icy black. New Dog skittered darkly somewhere in the tall trees.

I listened for the crackling feet of creatures. I peered out into the fanged night.

Carp, my friend, fell into some serious snoring, like his dreams were boiling inside his head.

I could hear the heat of my father laying with my mother in the other room.

I heard a snuffling. I shoved my face out the window. New Dog, below—he spun and he danced like he'd come to give me some kind of reckoning to keep, to fling inside me like a sword.

He skittered away on the black ground. To harry the trees, to fly the split-rail fence. I cried out to him: Come here, boy. Come, friend.

New Dog, he just kept on dancing and dancing and dancing with the blue spirits of rabbits. I watched. It doesn't really matter if it's real or not, that's the secret.

I opened my mouth so as to cry forth every ounce of air in my body toward New Dog and the Dancing Ghost Rabbit.

Suddenly the breath inside me came and cut out my tongue.

CHRISTOPHER MUNDE

FORTEAN GODS

EUPHORIA MYTH

The hurricane traded our ospreys, our
Dock strays, our angels and gods to the depths,
As it siphoned the saltwater creatures out into
Our lakes, and then flushed all the lake bottom
Lurkers on shore.

The first one that I claimed for myself

Bore a face I recalled from a Renaissance map,
And the next from an illumination whose teeth
Shaped the Latinate phrase *as the spirit stood*
In great confusion, while some, like the angler fish,
Were all mouth,

So my icebox was stacked

like a guillotine basket and riddled with cold little suns;
That rank universe stuttered like children amid the Bud Lights.
Meanwhile, outside the port's jurisdiction, the men
Who had been here since dawn cleaned a fish
With the eyes of a dog,

With the face of a man, with

The least garbage meat that I had ever seen,
And then, when they were done, the three stapled
The hide up to dry. When our eyes met, they all
Seemed to know precisely what I wanted to say:
Any deconstruction will be wasted on us,
At this shore,

On this day, and the creature's head slumped on its stalk.
One man called his catch *Nessie*, and used a paintscraper
To sliver its slime from his soles, while another
Assigned *Ogopogo* to slithering acres of tail that resolved
(He presumed, in a head)
Somewhere deep in the lake.

Here, amid such abundance and incomprehensible novelty,
Who would be bothered to risk diving in just to take
Inventory of all that we'd lost? There, below,
In the inverted waters, where valkyries
Shat at the sky:

 Their half-memorized faces so ordinary

That they'd probably rinse off like marker, leach
Into the water and lace the new denizens' breath.
So that's why the ice box and the tackle, the gutting and drying,
My clipping of angler's stalks for their lights and the way
That each burst like an exclamation
 (*Ogopogo!*) when pulverized under my teeth.

CONVICTION MYTH

So, once it's lured into or out from hell,
The lobster's chipped to bisque before the crowd
Who all mistake the tomalley for heart,

The crowd no older than my students, who
Maneuvered my attention to the news
That one had been lured from or into hell.

His face returns in the wet halo of
The garnish caviar, the green excess
Of tomalley. Mistaken for a heart,

His flowline peers' staccato processing
Warped fish slime on his forearms into welts,
And whether they were lured to or from hell,

Salt water sponges filled the mermaids' mouths.
My student laid a sheet across each one's
Midsection, took the tomalley and heart.

Each jettisoned her eggs onto his shoes;
He slogs through jail in delicacies draped,
But weathers the commute between two hells,
As tomalley is taken for a heart.

JULIE POOLE

NO SWEAT

Get ready for your cha chas

—Richard Simmons

SWEATING: ATTEMPT 1

“TRY IT, JULIE-GIRL,” said the nurse with waist-length dreads. Maintaining a steady clap, she gestured her chin towards the common room where *Sweatin’ to the Oldies* was playing on a flat screen at a volume a bit too brash for 9:00 in the morning. I walked up to the TV and stood a few inches away, entranced like a toddler. Richard Simmons danced to the front of the circular stage, high-stepping and clapping in time with the rhythm of the bass guitar and drums. Dancers of all ages, races, and body types mimicked his movements behind him. “Party time! It’s party time! C’mon, Kim. C’mon, Erin,” he said. The live band had revved up fully and the soul singer launched into a rendition of “Gimme Some Lovin’.” “Warm up that body. Gimme a clap,” he said. “Shake it out.”

As if possessed, I started to march my feet and incorporate some funky chicken arms. Just as I was starting feel warm, I heard the nurse in the background laugh a little. “That’s it,” she said. Worried that her feel-better

activity was a plot to humiliate me, I sunk into a nearby chair and continued to do what I excelled at: sobbing.

Another staff member had nicknamed me “Julia Roberts.” Perhaps he thought that I was fishing for an Academy Award in waterworks, but the truth is, I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t stop the liquid from pouring out of my eyes and nose; it seemed like I’d been crying for days; it was worse than having the hiccups. My ribs hurt. My eyes looked like they’d been swallowed by my eye sockets. I was just as annoyed as the patient who moved seats after listening to me honk snot into a sad-looking tissue. With all the tear purging, I was desperately thirsty, but since I was convinced that the available pitchers had been laced with iodine, I refused to drink the water. Tears dripping onto my collarbone, I watched as Richard lead his troupe in another move for the upper arms, “guitar.” Everyone stomped one foot and strummed an invisible electric like a rock star, only a far less dexterous one. “Gimme Some Lovin’,” Richard sang off tune. A smile spread across my face. I loved his hair, his mesquite-colored tan, his outfit: a low-cut basketball jersey, white tennis shoes with matching scrunched-up tube socks, and his shorts, especially his shorts. They were striped like a piece of hard candy. Candy shorts. “I’m so glad you made it,” he said into the camera. I thought maybe he was referring to the mental hospital I was currently in. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but like millions of other Americans over the past three-plus decades, I latched onto Richards Simmons as my savior, my guardian angel, right then and there.

NIGHT SWEATS

MY ROOMMATE GLORIA sat on the end of her bed, resting her forearms on her knees, like a women's basketball coach. She slid her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose, pointing two fingers eye-ward, indicating that she wanted my full focus. "Watch out for the night staff," she said, nodding in the direction of the hallway, where a man with a clipboard had just breezed past, his keys jingling hip-side.

"Rapists and criminals," she warned.

She knew this because she worked for the CIA and was running an undercover investigation.

"You speak Spanish?"

"Sí," I lied.

"Good. We'll take turns sleeping. *Buenas noche, mi amor.*"

Still wearing her sunglasses, she disappeared completely under her blankets and rolled onto her side, facing away from me. Gloria never roused from her slumber to relieve me from my shift. Instead, I stayed vigilant, alert, listening to my heart pound its red angry fists on my eardrums like it wanted to burst out of my chest and limp across the floor.

Soon, I understood why Gloria slept cocooned. Every few hours, a night staff would walk in and shine a flashlight on me, then pass over Gloria's sleeping lump. "Bed checks," they were called, meant to verify that you weren't dead. Although I imagined something much more sinister, that they wanted to confirm you *were* so that an all-night necrophilia fest could ensue.

Rather quickly, I learned to distinguish between the various light-shiners. One guy was built like a husky unfit bouncer at an underage club. He was a dick. He wore a swishy-sounding tracksuit and seemed to relish playing cop. This was evident by the way he raised the light over his right shoulder to aim the beam into my eyes like a blinding stream of piss. All I could do was blink, let the brightness punish me until the shadowy face behind the light's wide lasso had had enough. I sat up in bed listening to Gloria snore and to the other insomniacs shuffle down the hall in their hospital-issued flip-flops. A different light-shiner entered our room past midnight, a short skinny guy. He was more thoughtful, keeping a good distance while he pointed the flashlight at the foot of my bed and traveled it up slowly till the beam reached my body, sitting atop my neatly tucked bedcovers in lotus pose. I grinned and waved, looking as if my head might do a 180-degree turn, while a disembodied voice said, "Still not sleepy, motherfucker."

I'm not sure how many days I was sleepless, but it was long enough to watch the night staff's teeth grow into fangs and my own face in the mirror morph into a lemur. The cycle was clear: Each night that I went without sleep, the more paranoid I became; and the more paranoid I became, the more impossible it was to sleep. I could picture cortisol, pulsing red, light up in my brainstem like inflammation in a muscle rub commercial.

Sometimes, I came close to caving. I made a visit to the night nurse's station, bent down to the mouse hole cut out of the bottom of the Plexiglas window, and spoke into it like a microphone.

"Hi!... I can't sleep!"

I sounded oddly enthusiastic, as if this was less of a problem and more of a revelation.

She asked me if I'd like to try something that would help me rest.

I bent back down again to deliver a louder-than-needed "Yes."

She put a pill in a little paper cup and placed it in the divot. "Ambien," she said. I looked at it, convinced that this sweet, five-foot-tall, ninety-pound nurse had just given me an assisted suicide pill. I left the paper cup and walked away, only to be back the next night with the same complaint.

"Hi!... I can't sleep!"

She smiled, told me that she could give me something to help me, and asked if I would like to take it this time. Again, I said "Yes," only to look at the pill, think about it, and walk away. To sleep, I decided, was to consent to death. I was certain that something bad would happen if I went under. I might be gang-raped by the flashlight guys. Gloria, who'd turned on me after I picked up her *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book and a picture of a baby fell out, might smother me with a pillow. My heart, unable to handle all the drugs coursing through my system, might forget its rhythm and slow down to one flat, final note.

SWEATIN' A BIT MORE

MORNING CRACKED OPEN like an egg, spreading its yolk across the common room's linoleum floor. The nightmare of night was gone and the day staff arrived. Breakfast was served, followed by a community meeting, then a

slew of groups and activities to establish a routine and prevent boredom. In between breakfast and the morning meeting, the nurse with waist-long dreads put on *Sweatin' to the Oldies* as a transition period to give cleaning staff time to wipe down the tables and on occasion disinfect a chair.

The nurse clapped and urged two spaced-out patients with nothing to do to get up and dance. At this point, I didn't need to be recruited. I wanted to sweat. I liked the "Gimme Some Lovin'" song, especially when the sax player came out on stage, wearing cool shades and a Hawaiian shirt, and raised his saxophone like an elephant trunk during the high note of his solo. My crying spree had ended and now I had a delirious case of the giggles. I made a new friend, Sami, who was game for some *STTO*. She wore two little buns on top of her head positioned like bear's ears and had managed to dress up her hospital scrubs by stepping into the neck-hole of a striped boat-neck tee and pulling it up over her hips, tying the arms in front like a belt. A shirtskirt-and-pants combo. Sometimes she added a pair of hot pink leggings around her neck that doubled as a loud but elegant scarf. She was fun. We laughed our asses off whenever Richard cued a raunchy move, like "bump and grind," which involved grabbing fistfuls of air and pumping our hips back and forth. "Cha-chas" were a riot, too, fun to say and do. And "knee-squeezes," which for some reason, I misheard as "bee-squeezes." My personal favorite was "cow bell," which, like "guitar" and "bongo," simply involved miming the action of playing said instrument. *Sweatin' to the Oldies* proved to be versatile entertainment. There was a scratch on the DVD, and when Richard froze, we froze, too. Sami seemed convinced that

she knew me. “Are you Jessica? Are you Kim? Judy?” I had no idea who or what she was talking about, but I agreed to each name, and this made her laugh. Later, I caught on that she had been asking me which dancer I was. Probably Judy.

SWEATIN’ IT BIG TIME

MY DOCTOR, I decided, was against me. One look at his belted khakis, and I had him pegged for a thirty-something new-doc-on-the-block so tethered to his DSM-5 that there was no point in convincing him to see past my ping-pongy eyes and heavy use of expletives.

“Why do you think you’re here?” He asked.

“On this planet? Or in this room?”

He wrote something down.

“I got a bad batch of meds and my brains shit out of my asshole.” This statement felt true.

He asked for the name of the medication and it slurred out of my mouth, as though purely mentioning the brand summoned one of its many side effects—cotton mouth.

“Can you tell me more about that?” he asked.

“Big Pharma mixed my shit in a bathtub—sold me their rat poison varietal. Generics, that shit will fuck your shit up till you wicked shit yourself!”

This was a theory that I felt held some weight; it had all the features of

a good whistle-blowing documentary. Corruption, greed, little people as fall guys. Although, to be accurate, my symptoms were more of the reverse: days on end of constipation and stabbing stomach pains.

“Listen,” he said. “You had what’s called a bipolar episode.”

“No,” I said. “I had what’s called a post-recession face punch. I’m not nuts, I’m broke.”

I wholeheartedly believed this theory, too. Put anyone in a pressure cooker of prolonged stress brought on by joblessness, living on food stamps and unemployment, and just sit back and wait for the moment when they start muttering to themselves. My unemployment checks had whizzed to a stop and each day that passed was one day closer to an eviction notice. My endocrine system had been on red alert for months.

“You have bipolar I,” he said.

“I’m in my mid-thirties. That’s a bit late for a bipolar diagnosis, dontcha think? It’s probably just really bad PMS.” I laughed. “PM double D; it’ll make a bitch crazy.”

He shook his head, not terribly amused, and sighed.

In the first week, it felt pretty good to have complete disregard for my psychiatrist’s medical degree. He was an idiot and I saw no point in putting any trust in him. It was only when I began to see a look of genuine concern on his face that I started to pity him a little. He was another well-intentioned burnout-in-the-making, and there was more at stake for the both of us. His job was to get me stable in three weeks, or I’d be moved to a state facility. State mental hospitals are no high school football game. Even in my hypo-

manic cloud, I knew that a minimum three-month stay at a state hospital, especially one with a reputation for being violent (patients *and* staff), would take months, years even, to recover from. And here's where maybe our goals aligned: Neither of us wanted to see me committed to state; in a way, it would have marked a failure on both ends. So I decided maybe it wouldn't hurt to play along a little and accept my diagnosis. All I wanted was to feel normal again. All he wanted was for me to keep taking my meds.

WORKIN' IT OUT

AT SOME POINT, it dawned on me. *Sweatin' to the Oldies* wasn't just a workout video: it was a religious experience, preparation for crossing over into the great unknown. Richard wasn't just teaching us to sweat off the pounds, but to sweat off sin. This theory was proven at the end of the video when—during my favorite part—each dancer busted a move unique to them, as their name and the pounds they'd shed flashed up on the screen inside of a gold star. The number represented how much their souls had been unburdened. Judy had lost 51 pounds off her soul. Jessica lost 72 pounds. A man named Elijah lost a whopping 300. They were all so smiley because they felt lighter physically and spiritually. No more baggage. Richard had freed them from their self-hatred and taught them to love their earthly bodies, which were, as the Bible said, created in God's image. Conveniently for me, I was filled with self-loathing, so when I started to break a sweat, I was shedding my body shame, my discomfort with my sexuality and with

intimacy, my loneliness, my depression, my mania.

Richard Simmons was an angel in disguise. He was the chosen one, whom God had put in charge of welcoming people into the afterlife. I pictured a gaudy golden arch, a disco ball rotating above; smoke-machine clouds, the sound of a marching band, cymbals crashing, timpani, noisemakers, steamers shooting overhead, crepe paper tails flying. Richard would be right there at the entrance, blowing fistfuls of glitter, clapping, jumping, shouting, “You can do it!” while people in short shorts streamed through the pearly gates into paradise. If heaven looked anything like the set of *Sweatin’ to the Oldies*, if it had a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, if Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild” played, and everyone got to pretend-rev their motorcycle engines while wearing hammer pants and side ponytails, then I would convert from agnostic to believer.

It’s WORKING!

BY WEEK THREE, I still couldn’t sleep at night, but I’d taken up catnapping during the day. Sleep made all the difference, and despite residual paranoia, I was getting better. I was also getting better at *STTO*. My rendition of “Rockin’ Robin” was energetic and alive, and my footwork was partially accurate. When Richard said, “You’re doing great,” I believed he was referring both to my moves and my treatment plan. Less self-conscious about the “sexiness” of the dances, I took the execution of my “bump and grinds” and “birds” (a showgirl move) seriously. Moving my hips in slow

semicircles, as if grinding on an invisible patron's lap at a strip club, was healing for me. Stretching my arm overhead with the grace of a ballerina made me feel like I had something to live for. I didn't care which hospital bystanders I might be giving boners to; it felt good to not hate myself.

Then, the day before I was to be released, something rather magical happened. Sami and I inadvertently started a full-fledged dance party. It started just the two of us. The cleaning crew was in the background mopping up a serious Cheerios spill. The common room chairs were in disarray, but we still had plenty of room to dance in front of the TV. We were particularly on point that morning. I looked down at Sami's feet and realized that, while I was the more flexible one, she knew the steps better than I did. Overall, our choreography was the best it'd had ever been. We were energized, committed. It's as if our bodies were sending out signals that said, *Get up out of that chair and live a little*. Katherine, a woman who flopped on the floor whenever she didn't want to do something, was the first to join. Then Bill, an older vet with tobacco stained fingers and white hair that stood on end. And Gloria, who whooped and ran her hands down the sides of her body with sexy abandon. James, the new guy, who knew his Bible verses by heart. Paul, the raver kid, who disregarded Richard's cues and rolled an invisible ball of energy back and forth through the current of his long, bendy arms. Even Alec, an elderly man in a wheelchair, joined, conveniently rolling up behind our jiggling asses. The nurse with waist-length dreads grabbed passing day staff by the arms to point out our performance. They smiled, and I wondered if I was somehow responsible

for this. It had been just me, sweating solo, for the first week. Then Sami joined regularly after my crying phase ended and I became fun. In my own weird way, maybe I was a leader of sorts, using my cha-chas to help other people get healthy, gain their freedom and independence again. I was exercise fish bait. No, it was Richard! Candy Shorts started it all, a small, but not insignificant, miracle.

STILL SWEATY

HAVING A MENTAL illness means that I have to closely monitor “my weird.” Any signs of insomnia, impulsive deadbolt checking, creative use of adjectives, or radical horniness, and I might just be headed for a rollercoaster high followed by a car crash. The easiest ways for me to regulate my moods are through meds and what Richard has been emphasizing for years: diet and exercise. Whenever I’m feeling the pushmi-pullyu forces of anxiety and depression trying to take host of my body, I remember my steps, both literal and figurative. I lock my bedroom door and draw the blinds. And instead of crawling under the covers, I strap on some ankle weights, unroll my yoga mat for some cushion, and dance to my own eclectic mix of Rihanna, Robyn, and ACDC in front of my floor-length mirror until sweat trickles down my back. It would be an exaggeration to say that Richard Simmons cured me of my mania; lithium, time and support from family and friends probably helped more. But what I learned from Richard remains deeply ingrained. Even if you’re just marching in place, you’re still getting somewhere. Every

step, every cha cha is a step towards healing, happiness, a deeper connection with self and others. I can't see what's happening in my brain—the synapses firing, the neurons, all those other doodads that I really know very little about, but I can listen to my inner Richard who says *Never give up, never stop reaching* and I can look down at my calves, say *damn, these puppies look good.*

BRIAN BEATTY

PIONEER SPIRIT

I wake behind
the wheel of a truck
hurtling along
a highway strewn

on both sides
with bones
bleached silver
white as the moon.

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