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COVER

1/8: I Am Afraid by Stella Nall

C O N T E N T S

STELLA NALL | *Cover Artist's Statement*

1 1/8: I Am Afraid

KRISTINE LANGLEY MAHLER | *Nonfiction*

3 Childe Roland and I to the Library Came

HALLIE BEARD | *Poetry*

18 Toward a state of undress

ONA GRITZ | *Nonfiction*

19 What Happens

BENJAMIN GUCCIARDI | *Poetry*

22 I Ask My Sister's Ghost How Her Days Are Now

J. A. BERNSTEIN | *Nonfiction*

24 In the Lake, Before Dark

K.C. MEAD-BREWER | *Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction*

Selected by Andrew Sean Greer

36 The Hidden People

ENRIQUE BARRIOS | *Visual Art*

67 Number 19

68 Artist's Statement

69 Anam

STELLA NALL | *Visual Art*

70 Untitled Digital Self-Portrait

71 Two Heads Are Better Than One

- 72 Safe (Abundance)
73 First Descendant: Sterile Hybridity (with Artist's
Statement)

KATHLEEN MADRID | *Winner: Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry*
Selected by Heather Cahoon

- 76 Kin—

ROBERT REBEIN | *Winner: Montana Prize in Nonfiction*
Selected by Chris La Tray

- 85 Welcome to the Hotel Sabra

FATIMA ESPIRITU | *Poetry*

- 103 Half Light
105 Waivers and Maps

MAUREEN TRAVERSE | *Fiction*

- 107 Johnny, Be Good

HARI ALLURI | *Poetry*

- 133 It Is Relentless, This Way Crossroads Keep on Forming

GREGORY ARIAIL | *Nonfiction*

- 136 Mountains I'll Never Reach

HAYDIL HENRIQUEZ | *Poetry*

- 142 the mirage of being

STELLA NALL

1/8: I AM AFRAID

COVER ARTIST'S STATEMENT

1/8: I AM AFRAID is a self-portrait which discusses the painful and confusing feelings that I am often confronted with as a mixed-race indigenous woman. 1/8 is what is recorded as my blood quantum for Apsáalooke. It is the fraction that means that I am considered a First Descendant rather than an enrolled member of the Crow Tribe, and it is a fraction which many of our people are afraid of because it is symbolic of the final tie to any officially recognized claims to Crow identity.

The white line which cuts through the print is symbolic of my recorded blood quantum. It is fractionated into eight sections and one of them is beaded because that is the amount of my blood that is seen as Crow. The beads were gifted to me by my mother, and I depicted myself reaching through the beaded section to symbolize my efforts to maintain connection with the parts of myself and my community that feel integral to my cultural identity.

I chose to use the elk's teeth as a symbol of Apsáalooke connection because they are historically important to our people and are important in my life. They adorn traditional regalia of Crow women and also bring me

comfort because they are familiar and remind me of some of the happiest memories of my childhood: wearing the Elk's tooth dress made for me by my mother, visiting my family and dancing at Powwows. I included the badger because I am trying to learn Apsáalooke, and it is the first animal name that I learned in the language (awachia).

A lot of my recent work deals with the blood quantum because there are a lot of misconceptions surrounding it, and I am trying to draw attention to the issue and educate people about it. As a First Descendant, I am not allowed to vote on enrollment methods or any tribal issues. I feel that the best way I can share my voice regarding these matters is through my art. I am trying to educate my tribe and anyone else who isn't aware of it about the racist origins and the misconceptions about indigeneity that are enforced and perpetuated through the blood quantum. Many tribes across the U.S. have switched back to traditional enrollment methods, and I am hoping that someday my tribe will too.

KRISTINE LANGLEY MAHLER

CHILDE ROLAND AND I TO THE LIBRARY CAME

I'VE BEEN WATCHING Tears For Fears music videos for months now, tossing up observations into a slag heap, trusting I'll know when I've hit something solid. My house sounds like a New Wave club; I directed my hair stylist to chop my chin-length bob into a quiff like Roland Orzabal's in the "Pale Shelter" video and five years later, I still have it. I'm dyeing it brown, now, instead of red. The binding agents of success are supposed to be the lessons learned by failure, but the walls keep collapsing. I'm tunneling toward a conclusion I can't see.

-X-

THE FIRST SHOT is a warning—SILENCE—as the "Head Over Heels" music video begins, panning down to reveal the study tables of a library. I've been here so many times that I don't even register the location-based reminder. I hear Roland Orzabal commanding the librarian to stay silent, to listen to what he has to say. Roland lumbers toward the counter, weighed down by two armloads of books. I can't tell if he struggled to open the library's door. Maybe he's been sleeping in the stacks, acquiring a book a day, saving them all to lay out before the librarian as visual evidence he's been here all along.

-X-

I USED TO GATHER Goya soda bottles from a downtown deli where a boy worked, displaying them like trophies on my dresser top. One for the time I pretended to be distractedly digging in my purse because I was too nervous to make conversation as he rung me up. One for the extra beat after my transaction when he suggested I read *A Clockwork Orange*. One for the time I returned to tell him I'd finished the book, but his father was working and I felt obligated to buy something so it didn't seem like I was just looking for his son.

-X-

REPETITION SHOWS EFFORT, and a presence so consistent that surely you must be recognizable by the time you show up with the fruits of your weeks, all that work obvious, to collect. Maybe Roland's stack of books is meant to awe the librarian; maybe it's meant to look pathetic, like *see how many times I came here and you never saw me*. Maybe she did, maybe that explains her eye-roll. Roland can barely hold the books in his arms, but he didn't shove them in a backpack. He didn't take two trips. He carried them all in one grand gesture.

-X-

I CAN WATCH Roland approach all day, that instant before failure, that hope like twenty-four millstones.

-X-

ROLAND HAS A fluffy brown mullet and a too-big brown trenchcoat—his sleeve seams hang halfway down his arms instead of being neatly right-an-

gled atop his shoulders. Or maybe his shoulders are just slumped. His awkwardness is so endearing I can hardly stand it, I'm uncomfortably drawn to a decades-old version of a boy whose plodding gait is nothing like the sylph-quick men who have traditionally attracted me. But if I strip off his hair, update his clothes, and remove the burden, he has the right large, sleepy eyes, the right soft bottom lip. Roland looks like my husband. Roland's been constructed to appear as a boy who can't get a girl, but he doesn't need to get a girl—he'd been married for three years when this video was filmed. Roland's courting process happened when he was a child; he met his wife when he was 13 and married her when he was 21.

-X-

AT 13 I couldn't look a boy in the eye. At 21 I told my future husband we either moved in together or we'd break up.

-X-

SHE DOESN'T EVEN look up at him as this huge pile of books is dropped with what must have been a thud, must have reverberated. The librarian's mind is elsewhere. It's not until Roland confesses *I wanted to be with you alone and talk about the weather* that she makes eye contact, like she can't believe he's coming at her with this nerdy line—who wants to talk about the weather, that trope of nothing-conversation? But it's that precise clause that moves me, silences me: the past tense is already present in the first phrase of the song. He want-ed because now, he has.

-X-

THERE WAS A boy who used to mumble at me in algebra II, tossing spit

wads at my neck, poking at my elbow until I'd turn around and then he'd look away, or look back blankly at me, *What?* I began a series of unvoiced communicative acts: arranging my body in positions of feigned disaffect, languorously tilting my head while pretending to ignore him—that's how I sought to retain his interest, convinced that any attention was proof I could be desirable. After months of half-hearted harassment, he finally said my actual name, leaning against his locker, no one else in the hall but his friend. I walked up and said, like a challenge, "Is there something you wanted?" but he averted his eyes; he had become something I wanted.

-X-

CURT SMITH GETS up from his table and leaves, like he's embarrassed by Roland's lack of finesse.

-X-

ROLAND SINGS *but traditions I can trace against the child in your face won't escape my attention*. I fixate on Roland and how he finally sustains eye contact with the librarian when he says *won't escape my attention*.

-X-

THERE IS NOTHING redeeming about his love object. She never smiles at him, never encourages him; she is constantly underwhelmed by his performance. She isn't overtly pretty, her thin hair in a severe chin-bob and stick-straight bangs. She's the antithesis of the sexy librarian—no come-ons, no cleavage, no softening. She is bored behind the counter, bored by Roland, annoyed by his presence. And that's the appeal, after all, isn't it? She will not be easily won. She's washed out in top-buttoned white, a December blonde, icy and snowy.

-X-

AS A GIRLTEEN, all I ever wanted was to be locked up tight, keyhole-turned like the harp in “Mickey and the Beanstalk,” something precious and guarded and protected. Something coveted so badly that a boy would risk anything to get me for himself. It was attractive, being wanted so much that if I couldn’t be convinced, I would have to surrender to the strength of someone else’s need. I saw evidence everywhere that capitulation was the role of a girl: Persephone accepting her six months in the underworld, Belle returning to the Beast after he released her. I dreamed someone would bend me to his will. Captivity narratives lodged in my subconscious desires, but since no one tried to capture me, they defined my approach, instead, to the ones I wanted to love me.

-X-

ROLAND AWKWARDLY RESTACKS the books while accusing the librarian of being standoffish—*you keep your distance with a system of touch and gentle persuasion*—and it’s the persuasion he wants to believe in, that she cares enough to hold him back gently, his eyes flickering up and down—now? Now?—unable to meet the librarian’s dull gaze because he’s lost in admiration, so overcome by the strength it takes to confess, to ask himself *could I need you this much?* like a middle-schooler with a crush, approaching with the tactics of a boy, not a man.

-X-

BUT I ALWAYS heard the line as “You keep your distance *and resist my touch* and gentle persuasion.” It’s a misconception assisted by the video—Ro-

land claiming that he'd been the one trying to touch the librarian—but I heard the effort, saw the reaching hand, felt the silken manipulation. I never gave up the sort of control I fantasized about losing; sometimes I cringed when my husband tried to turn my face to kiss my lips when I only wanted to offer my cheek, and he respected my non-verbals. But I wanted to be convinced.

-X-

EITHER WAY THE librarian sighs, frustrated at how he is misinterpreting her disinterest.

-X-

ROLAND PROCLAIMS, *Oh, you're wasting my time*, like she had done anything to encourage it, and follows up, *you're just wasting time*—and there it is, belief overcoming what seemed impossible by declaring it inevitable: you will succumb to me. The librarian watches Roland, a little concerned, as he leaves, but Roland's back is to the librarian. His heavy, gawky walk away from the counter as the chorus begins belies the weight of the books which caused his awkward steps at the beginning of the video. Something happens—something happened—and he doesn't know how he ends up head over heels—and then there's the rephrase: "*I never find out* till I'm head over heels."

-X-

THE SMALLEST GESTURE toward attentiveness made me fall for a boy. Something slight, like asking me to partner for a quiz because we sat beside each other, or reading a poem to a group in a dark lounge but meeting my eyes

during a specific line, or waiting for me after class because we were walking to the same dorm—me to my room, him to his girlfriend's. It didn't matter. I craved acknowledgment, and I did not realize, ever, that I had fallen in love with an idea more than a person, until it was too late and I was deep in the hole.

-X-

I FIND A *Vice* article from four years ago, mocking the cheesiness of the music video but also calling the video “absurd brilliance,” the author musing that people must have felt emotions more deeply in the ‘80s. This isn't new territory; how could it be? There's a pop-up video of “Head Over Heels,” but I can't find an upload on YouTube. I remember one of the pop-ups made a reference to germs from animals when Curt kissed the monkey on the lips. I think that when the cartoon clovers swept across the screen, there was a pop-up about how four-leaf clovers are a symbol of luck. I feel like I'm inventing the pop-ups at this point. But I swear there was a pop-up about domestic violence when Roland pointed the gun at the librarian.

-X-

ROLAND FOLLOWS FATE, squinting at the card in his hand, ready to look up the answer. He knows his approach failed—*I made a fire and watching it burn, thought of your future*—because he believes he will succeed, despite his first encounter going down in flames. When the librarian pulls out a book to reshelv it, Roland is there, waiting behind the stacks, face popping through the opening like a creep, like someone determined. With one foot in the past, Roland knows failure never dissipates—it builds, it compounds,

it forces action. He glides away like a man on cloud nine, ascending to be near his angel as an orchestra plucks their strings. Roland asks himself, *Have you no ambition?*

Here's the part most lyrics pages on the internet don't include—Roland mutters, quietly, *What's the matter with*—and cuts himself off to begin the next verse. In the 1985 *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve* performance of “Head Over Heels,” Roland grits his teeth when asking the question. But after watching tens of versions of this song, I can tell when Roland's vocals are live. He grits his teeth when he's lip-synching to keep pace with the pre-recorded album version.

Because in nearly every live performance of “Head Over Heels” I can find on YouTube—a 1990 performance, a 2014 performance, a 2016 iHeart '80s performance, and a 1983 live version—before the song was even released on a record—Roland stretches out the phrasing of *have you no ambition*, removing the incomplete question. I think Roland invented “What's the matter with—” strictly for the music video; he never wants to sing it live.

So I stay in that moment when Roland steps outside the song, briefly, to address his persona in the video. I don't believe Roland intends the line to wrap into asking what's the matter with his mother, or his brother, or their hopes for him—he's too good of a songwriter to write something so provocative and then leave it on the table. I think he's asking *what's the matter with*

the librarian? Or I think he's asking *what's the matter with me?*

Either way, after uttering the question fragment, Roland turns his eyes to the camera in the music video, surprised at himself, surprised at what he revealed.

-X-

I WATCH THE original music video over and over on YouTube, posting about it on social media, rambling about the video in an interview for a literary journal. I can't stop. I'd screened all the Tears For Fears music videos five years ago to find one with a clip of the perfect New Wave quiff, my dream boy's haircut—Roland's—but I wasn't attracted to him at the time. I wanted to become him. I took his haircut for my own because I was tired of all of the attributes I desired existing only in others.

What if I could become the thing I wanted? If I could attract myself like the boys I'd wished had been attracted to me, I thought some sort of finality could be achieved, some sort of ouroboric fulfillment.

-X-

ROLAND'S PERSISTENCE IS asphyxiating. A man in a gas mask watches as Roland makes his final approach to the librarian. Curt layers his lyrics around Roland's verse, sublingual, humming a necessary catalyst: *Nothing ever changes when you're acting your age. Nothing gets done when you feel like a baby.* Roland is a man-child and nothing will happen as long as he shyly requests the librarian's attention. He has to demand it. He's 24—this feels

important—in this video, Roland Orzabal is 24.

-X-

DIDN'T I NESTLE myself into an early marriage? Didn't I snap the latch myself? I wanted the trap, and I created it, and then I told myself that someone had caught me, and I was grateful. I was 24 when I married my husband; my mother had been 21; her mother had been 19. I married the second boy who'd kissed me and everyone treated me like a baby but I thought of my future (*What's the matter with—*).

-X-

THE LIBRARIAN HAS waited for Roland. She flinches when he pulls out a small handgun and shoots at her, only to discover the gun is fake and it's asking her to BANG, with a question mark I don't notice until Video Rewatch #20-something. Roland's "joke" spins the whole video away from me, spins Roland and my fascination with his awkward crush by the shoulders, directing me toward a truth I innately understand: I don't need Roland stating *it's hard to be a man when there's a gun in your hand*, because it's not hard to be a man with a gun in your hand. It's hard to be a woman facing a spurned man with a gun in his hand.

-X-

MAYBE WHAT I received was a gift, angels-watching-over-me, repelling boys who would have damaged me deeper than just my pride. One was suspended for crack cocaine in his locker. One fucked an unpopular girl after school for weeks—we're not going out—until a popular girl asked him out. One had a friend with a gun; I saw it.

-X-

THE LIBRARIAN REACHES out and touches Roland for the first and only time, tweaking his nose, naughty little boy.

-X-

I CARRY A notebook with me for three days and dictate into my phone, enduring the vomit period when observations regurgitate and come out of their own will, unbidden. I prefer the assembly period, when I can take all these parts and lay them on the table, see what I'm missing, what I'm putting together.

I say I wanted to be desired and sought, but I floundered when a boy asked me to meet him for a movie, flustered at the attention, bungling an acquaintanceship because he wasn't the one I wanted to ask me. I say I wanted to be caught when I was a girl, but constraint terrified me as I grew toward understanding the repercussions of attachment. I say I wanted to be convinced, but I was a girl so eager to please and muffle her missteps that if a boy hadn't persuaded me and had his way anyway, I never would have told anyone.

-X-

ROLAND SINGS, *Oh, I feel so*— and cuts himself off again. He cannot admit what.

-X-

I LEAN OVER my keyboard for the tenth time, or the twentieth time—I can't tell any more—mouthing the lyrics back to Roland, *something happens and*

I'm head over heels, focusing on his face like a lover. It's all so familiar as I furrow my brow like Roland, the intensity of longing mirrored on my face for all the decades "Head Over Heels" has been on the radio, long before I saw the video, long before I saw Roland. Now I can't hear this song without picturing Roland's ecstatic emoting. I watch the concerts on YouTube to see if he is ever that rapturous again while performing these lines, and he's not. I can scrub those concerts out, and I do, because what I want is Childe Roland at the library, on his Browningian quest to wrestle futility and fantasy.

-X-

THE VIDEO SEGUES into a recording studio sequence. Roland has lost his awkwardness—or at least has gained confidence—belting out *and this is my four-leaf clover*. His luck, his success, his victory. Roland is so euphoric, so happy he can't stop grinning as he sings *I'm on the line, one open mind*—because he has put it all out there, Roland just needs one open mind; the librarian?—and as he repeats *this is my four-leaf clover* Roland can't help himself, throwing his hand up and moving the song's verse into the la-la-las. But what *is* Roland's four-leaf clover? The shift out of the library is precipitous—unexpected—and it's like I'm being told *don't forget, this is just a band. Just a band making a music video*. Maybe Roland's four-leaf clover is that he's the 24-year-old frontman of Tears For Fucking Fears.

-X-

WHAT DID I want at 24? A husband. What did I have at 24? A husband. What do I have to revise? One of my longest-held grudges and frustrations about my youth was that I was denied the teen romances I dreamed toward.

Does that matter when I locked up the end game?

-X-

THE BAND IS celebratory, everyone is smiling as they chant, like his back-up singers, agreeing, *la-la-la-la-la*, and then Roland says *in my mind's eye*. Did he dream it all up, his library woo session, preparing to win the librarian over with a gun if she didn't fall for him? Roland sings *one little boy, one little man* and it's not what happened in the past, it's how Roland sees himself, opening his mouth wide and throwing his hands in the air again as he says, *Funny how*, and it's the last time we see Roland sing. A brownish glaze falls on the next scene, a flash-forward sequence as, disembodied, Roland's voice echoes *time flies*. Roland's in a cardigan at a desk in a library, frowning slightly as the subdued librarian—is she his wife? His maid? It doesn't matter; he's got her—brings him a cup of tea. They have zero physical contact, Roland and his prize, and he barely looks up as she sets the cup on the desk. The librarian looks out the window, placing her hand on the back of his chair, how did I get here?

-X-

IS THIS ABOUT my hunger to watch a boy try and fail? Of course he doesn't—that is the crux of the video—he succeeds in the end. Roland's frustration results in smug success, the acquisition process and the actual object forgotten, because the point was proving dominance. Or is that final scene a boy's fantasy of success, a wish that was actually unfulfilled, to see the unattainable laid low and knuckling under, meekly bringing a cup of tea, trying not to distract?

-X-

AT THE END of the 1985 *Dick Clark* performance as he sings, “Funny how time flies,” Roland’s wedding ring gleams on his finger, his final proof. In performances during the 2000s, Roland lets the last line hang out there, unvoiced, ending the song *Funny how...* because it is evident: he has aged, we have aged, time has flown.

-X-

I FREEZE-SCREEN THE joy, the pure happiness on Roland’s face in the penultimate scene of the video—before his blank conquest of the librarian, after his nervous awkwardness—because his unbridled ecstasy is what’s kept me coming back. His certainty that he has found his four-leaf clover: confession achieves an outcome, one way or another.

I’ve spent months embodying Roland because it was my role. I spent my youth longing for something I didn’t have—pursuit. I was sure I’d never be the librarian, the trophy, the treasure. But if I grow out this quiff, it will turn into a mullet before it reaches chin-length. If I dye it red again, this phase will pass, five years of fixation, with no reminder but a handful of selfies and some version of “Head Over Heels” as the first recommended suggestion in my YouTube profile.

I think about that cup of tea, untouched, a presence signifying a transaction had been made. I think about that pile of books, the unwieldy weight of longing barely contained within two arms, dropped on the counter with

one unmistakable gesture. *I am here.*

HALLIE BEARD

TOWARD A STATE OF UNDRRESS

Fodder falls ledgeward and boils on the water where frogs
trawl for sludge and drag their throats on the ground *Go ahead*
and take your lunch I tell them and watch them pull their juuls
from under the shade of my car

while cicadas gossip on the dock
and wait for clouds I sit and blot my brow Swat
the little whores for halogen light hogging my porch as the one-legged
screen door models her tights

I nurse the unearned cat on the drive
A wasp half-plugged in my arm I'm no nurse I sleep
I sleep all day and curse the stunted gnats on the border of *Please*
and *Oh may you ma'am* I curse the bananas in the sink
all the chicken fat and fish tines in the unlined can I suffer
for wisteria in the summer light *No I don't* I burn
and leave a bag of spit behind a lamppost I gag on eggs
and do a little dance for a downturned penny My Givenchy
wails in the cabinet when I saint the rayon and jersey
on a bum hook

Nothing can fix this hung down limb windular and limpen
Broken in the lack thereof *Hey* I devour the state
of sweat I swelter

I disinfect desire and send it swimming

ONA GRITZ

WHAT HAPPENS

I'M WATCHING CARTOONS when I piece together from snatches of anxious phrases that someone in the upstairs half of our two-family house has died. "We had a little accident," my mother says when I slip into the kitchen to ask about it. She's rinsing a sponge as she says it. I keep asking questions, but she sends me back to the TV.

My thighs stick to the vinyl couch and make suction sounds. The Frito Bandito sings *Ay, ay, ay ay* from under his hat. I think maybe it's Lisa's mother who died so I try to imagine being upstairs without her. I see myself at their kitchen table where Lisa pours us glasses of milk and sets out a plate of Oreos as though she's the grownup now.

That night, Lisa's mother cries, "My baby, my baby," in our vestibule, surrounded by all the mothers on the block. My sister Andra tells me what happened. Afraid the ice cream truck would leave, Lisa rushed into the street to catch it. I keep thinking the ice cream man ran her over, but it was someone in a passing car.

"I saw her," Andra says. "I saw her in the street and she was all blue."

She cries into my shoulder, wetting my hair. Usually she holds me.

Usually, if we talk before bed, she makes me sneak to her side of the room.

But tonight, I'm the big sister, wrapping my skinny arms around eleven-year-old Andra's shoulders, letting her stay in my bed.

"We were this close," she says, holding up two crossed fingers. She means she and Lisa, though, at seven, Lisa was way closer in age to five-year-old me.

Finals week, my first semester of college, I sit at a scarred table revising a paper in the top floor study room that stays open hours later than the rest of the library. Sometime past midnight, a lanky guy in a black top hat saunters in.

"Y'all hear?" he asks. "John Lennon's been shot."

I look up, startled. "He's okay, right?"

The guy turns, grinning. "They say he's dead."

"That can't be." I skim the room for assurance. When no one responds, I throw my books into my backpack and shrug on my coat. Behind me, the jovial bearer of devastating news sings, "Happiness is a Warm Gun."

Stumbling through the cold, I tell myself it's a mistake. The guy heard wrong or made it up. When I reach the dorms, my roommates Maria and Nancy are waiting outside. Neither usually stays up this late.

"We figured you'd be sad," Maria says, hugging me.

John can't be dead, I think. *His new song's called "Starting Over."*

Jim, a guy I know slightly, throws an arm around me too. "Come," he says and steers me toward his room.

Vaguely, I wonder if he'll make a pass at me, but Jim just sits me on his bed and puts the stereo on. We listen to "Imagine," "Julia," "Instant Karma," and marvel over the line in "Beautiful Boy," *Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans*. I recall how, for years after Lisa's accident, I'd wake early and think, *I made it to six...to seven...to eight*.

"If John can die, anyone can," I tell Jim.

"I don't think about it much," I confess a year later in the small, spare office of the campus therapist.

Her face stays impassive despite what I've just said. Months earlier, my pregnant sister Andra, her husband, and my eleven-month-old nephew were murdered, but that fact rarely crosses my mind.

"I took it harder when John Lennon was killed," I tell the therapist so she'll understand the gaping hole I have in place of a heart.

"That's what celebrities are for," she says and lets me change the subject. For the rest of my time we discuss an argument with my roommate, a guy I flirted with in the bookstore, a class I plan to drop.

What I don't say is that I've begun taking baths so hot my pulse feels like it could burst through my skin. Or that, every morning, I stare into my closet and think, *Who cares what I wear when anyone can die?* Nor do I describe how, since I learned what happened, I feel Andra come to lie beside me while I sleep. "We were this close," she whispers, and shows me her crossed fingers—one for her, of course, and, this time, one for me.

BENJAMIN GUCCIARDI

I ASK MY SISTER'S GHOST HOW HER DAYS ARE NOW

Do you remember those picture books, *she replies*,
where the illustrator removes the outer wall

of a jumbo jet to show children where luggage goes,
how the pilots' levers connect to wings?

Where diagrams reveal the way smoke escapes
through stacks in a sugar factory,

the four hundred yellow-tipped
missiles a warship's hull can hold?

And how on most pages
you could find a bathroom in the schema,

and a nail-sized man with blue pants around his ankles
reading the paper while quietly shitting?

I feel just like that man now.
Doing my business, everyone oblivious

to my presence, and if by chance they see me,
they chuckle, as if my lone role is to make light

of the pain on the pilot's face,
the underpaid laborers threshing cane,

the marines playing ping-pong
as the turrets open

and we rain down hellfire on the next village
where the word for *beauty*

sounds just like the word for *camel*, and the phrase
I borrowed sometimes means *I burned*.

J. A. BERNSTEIN

IN THE LAKE, BEFORE DARK

I

“YOU KNOW HOW you shoot an Arab?” asks M., my platoonmate, on the way to our graduation ceremony. “You tell him, ‘*Wakef, walla ana batuchak!*’”—*Stop, or I’ll shoot.* He taps his forehead. “Then you give him two in the head, two more in the knees, and say, ‘*Wakef, walla ana batuchak!*’” Our bus is pulling up to the Nahal Memorial, a concrete behemoth near Pardes Hanna. “That way others hear the shots and think you warned him.” He smiles grimly. Other men rise from their seats.

We’ve been training for seven months in the Negev and are about to deploy to the Line. M., like me, is a foreign volunteer in the Israeli Army, another Jewish-American, and one of twelve in our brigade. He left CSU Chico last year for reasons that were never too clear. During our last furlough, about a month back, I visited his apartment in Tel Aviv, a dim, dusty, white nook, where he showed me a clip on his laptop. It was a video he’d recorded of his girlfriend, or someone, going down on him in his dorm. “She’s kind of a fatty,” he’d said. I wasn’t sure how to reply.

The stage is draped with green banners—the color of our brigade—and small Israeli flags, which stand motionless in the heat. Hundreds of families are spread along a lawn, which aprons the concrete stage. M., like me, hovers back a bit, not eyeing the crowd for any relatives—we have none in-country—our rifle stocks hugging our waists.

As the Brigadier proclaims us new “warriors” and everyone in our regiment shouts, I remain silent. The sun is baking my uniform and the patches of grass interspersed among the onlooking crowds. Then I catch sight of a child, who can’t be fourteen, gripping a video camera. This is 2004, when such things still exist. I can’t really make out her face, only her bangs and the droop of her arms and the lemon-colored sundress she’s wearing. She’s probably two hundred meters out, just within range, it occurs to me, bleakly, of the M4A1 on my waist. I watch her now, frozen, indifferent to the roars of the crowd, to the ticking of busses, to the grumble of planes through the sky.

II

IN THE NEWSPAPER one morning, fifteen years later, I read of an “emergency authorization,” just declared by the President, allowing the Raytheon Corporation “to team with the Saudis to build high-tech bomb parts in Saudi Arabia.” The sun bleeds through the blinds. My youngest stirs on my arm, disrupting my reading. “The move also includes support for Saudi F-15 warplanes, mortars, anti-tank missiles and .50-caliber rifles.”

“I have to pee,” says my daughter, scrambling out of the room.

At the breakfast table, while she eats, I crank out an email to Raytheon, then one to the President, imploring them to halt the arms sales, reminding them of the thousands who have died in Yemen, the million more reeling from cholera. And it occurs to me, as it often does in these moments, that I have no basis for writing; that I myself have fired a .50-caliber rifle supplied with American aid. I also know that these letters are fruitless, a bit of comedy, perhaps, for the interns assigned to reply.

My daughter’s spoon hits the floor: a discordant clanging, and not unlike the sound a .50-caliber makes when it shoots. I wait for the pulsing echo—that *oomph* that you hear—but the sound never comes.

“I want fork.”

III

AFTER THE GRADUATION ceremony in Pardes Hanna, I hitch a ride home with a platoonmate and two of his friends. All three are British by birth and enlisted, and all three smoke incessantly. The car’s quiet is a welcome reprieve.

Earlier we stopped at a McDonalds, where my platoonmate explained that his taller friend, Y., is a sniper in Gaza and about to complete his tour. He’s on leave for the weekend and has come to support his friend. He sits in the front passenger seat and keeps stroking his thin, yellow hair. He’s unusually pale. He’s barely spoken since we left, except when someone asked

him at our table, earlier, how many he'd "gotten down in Gaza." "Three," he'd explained, his bluish eyes veiny and rimmed. He inhaled a Gauloise, picked at his burger. "One was on a six-to-nine shift. Saw a guy coming out of a mosque, carrying a rifle. One shot in the head. It was quick." He recounted the other two, briefly, removing the seeds from his bun.

The air hangs heavily among us now driving, thick with Gauloises. Outside the traffic on 65 hums. I watch him stroking his hair, and I notice the pores on his nose, where tiny, white pimples have formed, and begin to wonder whether killing doesn't add to the stress, or in some way take it off. Then I begin to reflect on *got*, as in, *How many have you gotten?* and wonder why we've invented this phrase, and whether it doesn't in fact mean *possession*, as if, since you've taken another life, you've now come to own it, and everything that life would entail.

IV

2015

THE AIR ABOVE Trout Lake is strangely fluorescent. An amber sun glows in the west; we've arrived late. My daughter scurries up to the shore, dips her toes in it. A loon skitters up from the pines.

Behind us, my wife takes view of the parkland, our youngest clutched in her arms. We're in northern Wisconsin, Labor Day weekend, visiting a cousin of mine, and we've happened upon this wooded lake. We know we should be going soon; that we still have hours to drive, and clothes to set

out, and lunches to pack before dawn. And yet, the water beckons.

I tiptoe over the rocks, patting the surface. Ripples cascade all around. Dark islands mirror themselves in the glass, perhaps a thousand yards out. Black spruces move in the wind.

I begin to wonder, as I will in such worlds, what stillness exists here, what calm.

V

THE NIGHT OF the graduation ceremony, I lie awake in my bed, still picturing Y.: his thin, yellow hair and veined eyes. I begin to wonder what I've done in coming here: who I will fight, where I'll go.

I turn to the woman beside me, a fellow "lone soldier," whom I will someday ask to be my wife.

"But this is what you wanted to do," she replies, when I tell her of the conflict I feel. "It's what you signed up for—"

"I know."

"You could still leave," she explains, not without a slight hesitance, as if she knows what my departing would mean.

Outside the air is still. A pink almond tree leans by our glass. We're on a kibbutz southwest of Jerusalem. I'm leaving tomorrow morning for Jenin.

VI

THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA *of Philosophy*, in the entry on “War,” explains that some scholars believe that “specific features of killing in war make it morally different from killing in ordinary life.” These include: “The scale of the conflict, widespread and egregious non-compliance with fundamental moral norms, the political interests at stake, the acute uncertainty, the existence of the law of armed conflict, or the fact that the parties to the conflict are organized groups.”

I wonder: does the Raytheon Corporation entail an “organized group?” Do the political interests of presidents, or powerful men, justify atrocities in Yemen? Does the scale of the conflict—what could be bigger than cholera?—circumscribe the act? Killing, I know, is hardly unique to that land. I begin to wonder who’s responsible: the coalition pilot, or whoever drops the built bombs? His commander in a bunker? Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the de facto Saudi ruler? The oil conglomerates and arms manufacturers who back him? The U.S. President, who does their bidding? The people who elect the President, or the financial stakeholders of the corporations that lobby him? Their lobbyists in Washington? The five justices of the Supreme Court who decided, however fatefully, that campaign contributions are “protected” free speech? Am I responsible? For all I know, my own pension invests heavily in Raytheon, or others of its ilk. Does it really matter if it’s Yemen, or Congolese diamonds? What are the “laws of armed conflict,” or these “fundamental moral norms” by which we claim to live?

VII

THE MORNING AFTER the graduation ceremony, at a depot where my company meets, M. recounts how he spent his off-day, unsealing his Marlboro Reds. Apparently he travelled to Jerusalem's Old City, "deep inside the Arab Quarter," as he explains, to find loose tobacco. There, he reached for his wallet and accidentally grabbed the double-magazine latched to his belt. "An entire crowd of Arabs stepped back," he explains, tapping his pack with his palm.

It's unclear if he's joking. A couple months back, he reportedly spent a night in a military prison for having broken into his kibbutz's closed bar. "Wasn't so bad," he'd explained at the time. "Like being in the army. Except the food is worse, and you're alone." A child of Ukrainian Jews, he's shorter than the rest of us—the foreign volunteers—with oily black hair and green eyes.

"We're gonna get the worst of it," he says to me later, boarding the bus to Jenin. He's also a designated marksman in the unit, having proven a reliable shot. "Gonna kill the most people," he says, leaning back. He picks at his gums as he talks.

VIII

IN GUR ARYEH, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the 16th-century mystic and fabled rabbi of Prague, comments on the biblical episode of Jacob and

Esau, particularly Genesis 32:8 (“Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed”). Citing Judah ben Rabbi Ilai, the 2nd-century sage, who asked, “Are not fear and distress identical?” Rabbi Loew explains that “the meaning” of the double-worded description—“afraid” and “distressed”—is that “Jacob was afraid lest he should be slain and distressed lest he should slay [others]” unjustly, in this case, Esau’s men.

In *The Ethics of War and Peace*, Michael Walzer, the Princeton philosopher, points out that there is very little written in the Jewish tradition, apart from these passages, to govern Jewish conduct in war or purvey a code of ethics. This is because, Walzer notes, until the creation of Israel, “there were no Jewish soldiers who needed to know what they could and could not do in battle.”

More recently, the Israeli Defense Forces has tried to enact such a code, which it terms “Purity of Arms.” Among other things, it maintains that the soldier “will maintain his humanity even in combat.” These rules, I believe, were once stressed to me in training, though in a language I could barely understand and amidst the yawns of other men. Yet I dwell on them now, fifteen year later: the meaning of “purity of arms”; the rules of what we can and can’t do; even the recognition, perhaps as far back as the late-biblical era, and certainly the 16th-century, that war induces guilt, latent fears.

IX

2019

WE'RE DRIVING ON I-59, my wife and I, doing sixty in the left lane. A huge thunderstorm's passed, and the sky appears bright, the road slick. We're about an hour south of our home in Mississippi, returning from the NASA base where my wife works, when a small, black thing slinks along the road. I almost jam on the brakes. We screech across the lane markings, and I regain traction, watching as a turtle inches forward, just beside our left tires.

"Ew." My wife recoils. "It's sad to see that."

In the rearview, semitrailer trucks loom. I know the thing doesn't stand a chance. I think about stopping, about backing up, even, and retrieving the shell with my hands. Would it bite me, I wonder. Would my wife think I was insane?

X

THE MOMENT WE emerge from the Jeep, rocks begin thwacking the pavement all around us. It isn't clear where they are coming from.

We're in the town of Beit Omar, northwest of Hebron, inside the Central West Bank. It's January 14, 2009, the height of the Gaza War, as the conflict has come to be called. I'm in the Reserves, having flown back from the States. A half-dozen Jeeps cover Road 3527, which bisects the village. The eight men in my unit fan out.

Around us, steel shutters jangle and slam. There are shades being drawn.
Little eyes everywhere.

The opened doors of our Jeep provide us little cover, as rocks keep smacking all around.

Soon the stun grenades start up. Troopers pull pins and heave them forty meters—at nothing, it seems, but parked cars. The sound these things make is impossibly loud. I've forgotten to bring earplugs, and I can hear gentle whining. Gas grenades whoosh through the sky.

Our job, one presumes, is mainly to provide cover for an arrest being made in the town. Our Sergeant cups the handheld, kneeling on the pavement. A brick nearly severs his head.

I'm not really scared here as much as confused as to why I've come back to this war. I suppose a sense of duty or camaraderie compelled me, though to whom, or just what, I don't know.

The thick of the violence, I'm well aware, is in Gaza, a hundred clicks west. I can vaguely hear choppers, the rumble of tanks, though these are drowned out by the shots that bang at my side.

White streaks of tear gas howl through the air, clanking down hard on the road. The rock storm has not abated. Tiny legs flit through the clusters of trees and smoking sedans up ahead.

XI

TROUT LAKE, WISCONSIN, 2015

MY DAUGHTER AND I are both naked. My wife glances on from the shore, our youngest child asleep in her arms. The whole lake surrounds us, wide ovals fanning out from our heels. I hold my daughter's hand, stepping on muck and the tiny rocks etched in the clay, trying not to slide, feeling overwhelmed by the stillness and cool all around. My daughter begins giggling. "You're naked," she says.

"So are you," I reply, looking down.

Like two figures cast out from some land, we traipse through the water, half-mute, unafraid, a great sun bearing down on our heads.

XII

GAZA WAR, 2009

ABOUT A HUNDRED meters down, a slingshot snaps and vanishes under a hood. It's impossible to know how many are confronting us. Hundreds, it would seem. Maybe more.

Soon a fusillade of bullets rips out from our rifles—smoking rubber-coateds, which bang off of shutters and shatter the windows of cars. We've already set fire to a couple incidentally, one of which is steaming ahead.

To our left, above a valley, a hazy sun sets, silhouetting far buildings, a mosque.

It's unclear how long we'll be present, if anyone's getting hit with our shots. The rocks continue flinging. Behind me, a staff sergeant kneels and thumbs down the wheel of his Bic.

XIII

DELIVER ME, I *pray Thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and smite me, the mother with the children. And Thou saidst: I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.* GENESIS 32:12-13.

XIV

WE KNEEL BESIDE the edge of a building. The Sergeant hands me his rifle, which is equipped with rubber bullets, though I know, like him, that these things can blind, maim, or kill.

I hold the gun tightly, unsure exactly where I should point. During my regular service, several years back, I only faced a couple of encounters, neither of which, despite M.'s forewarning, resulted in anyone killed. Perhaps that's why I have come back here, I realize: a thirst for action, or blood. I don't know.

I take aim with the Reflex, its tiny reddish dot fixed on the mass of a crowd, what appears to be a shoulder, or some swath of flesh that's exposed. I can hear others yelling, the whooshing of bombs, stun grenades, probably. Flares. The sky has darkened softly, the buildings aglow. I keep picturing that stage where I stood. I feel a thousand eyes upon me, not least of all my own, and I can hear something, vaguely: my heart.

K.C. MEAD-BREWER

THE HIDDEN PEOPLE

- Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction -

THEY'RE ON A private driving tour of Iceland together, Mari and Skye. Girls' Trip. It's March, the island's off-season, so there's hardly anyone else on the road. Endless gales toss fresh snow everywhere; the world looks like a nickel-scratched lotto ticket. Logi, their guide, drives a white ATV with wheels so big they have to use a stepladder to climb in and out. Today they're exploring the Snæfellsnes peninsula. They're going to see black *and* golden sand beaches. Fields of windblown horses. Puffins. They're going to see *puffins*.

They're not going to see puffins. Not in March.

"I swear to shit, Mari, if you sigh like that one more time, I'm gonna have Logi pull over and kick you out." Skye's threat is undermined somewhat when she leans in for another cheek-to-cheek selfie.

Photo-smile fading, Mari glances at the back of Logi's balding head. His English is strong, but he seems to have trouble following all their backseat conversation, especially if they keep their voices low. "That wasn't a sigh," she says, "it was a wistful...moan."

"A Wistful Moan is a dreampop band name, not an actual thing." Skye

squints at the GPS on Logi's mounted iPad, trying to keep track of where they are on the tour's red outline. Skye loves driving and isn't used to being a passenger, fidgeting and restless next to Mari, the constant passenger.

Mari's pretty good with sleepy residential streets, but highway driving? Night driving? Foreign country driving? She's never been in a car wreck—knock on wood; probably already jinxed it—but she's terrified of them anyway. The idea of everything suddenly

AND THEN WHAT? What are you supposed to do after that, with all that blood and glass in your hair and maybe someone slumped dead in the seat beside you? What if you killed someone? What if you choked on your own slammed-out teeth?

Skye's never been in a car wreck, either. Or, not a *wreck* wreck. Some fender-benders and once a tangle with a concrete pillar in a parking garage. Skye isn't afraid, though. She's been through some things and she doesn't believe in being afraid anymore. A state of mind that, Mari's sure, does nothing but tempt the universe to sharpen its claws on you.

Afraid or not, they've both already considered that Logi could kill them if he wanted. It's a thing they do together, like children daring each other; they think up every worse and then worse and then worse-case scenario until, finally, they find it. The Worst.

A strange man driving them around a strange country, no one expecting to see or hear from them for days? What could go wrong?

Logi looks a weather-bitten fifty, but he's clearly muscled beneath that

cable-knit sweater. He could park them at a remote viewpoint and maybe two other men step out from a car or behind a rock and that's that. He could have anything in his glove compartment.

Mari needs to stop picturing them both dead at the side of the road. She needs to stop thinking about her ex, Fuckface Jonah with his high-and-tight haircut and Midwest accent, his fingernails too long for Mari's taste, his knock at the door in the middle of the night, his car passing by her office, her house, her morning coffee spot, or it could be anyone's car, could be anyone inside that hoodie, that raincoat, that hat, or she could *stop thinking about him* and so she says,

"Do you think all vacations are a little like running away?"

Skye doesn't need to think about it. "Nope." She's taking cell photos of snowy mountains out the window. "Intent matters. That's why Santa's Santa and not wanted for worldwide B and E-ing."

Geese are yelling at each other somewhere nearby. The wind sounds like a locomotive.

"And wanting a 'getaway' from your life? The intent there isn't similar to being a 'runaway' from your life? It's only a three-letter difference."

"Lots of words have only a three-letter difference."

Skye is the worst and the best and Mari loves her and wants to strangle her.

Skye once considered Jonah a friend, but no longer. Not after all this. Mari broke things off with him four months ago, but the break wasn't clean. He splintered. The police say there's nothing they can do. "Not until he tries

something.” As if he hasn’t tried enough already.

After the second week of Mari sleeping over at her apartment, blinds closed, doors locked and checked and rechecked, Skye suggested Iceland. A getaway. An adventure. *Puffins*. Haven’t we always wanted to go?

Skye dyed her hair special for the trip, a color she calls *mermaid*, a deep emerald green with purple highlights. Or, purple with green highlights. Now Mari’s trying to remember if zebras are black with white stripes or white with

She dives for the Oh Shit handle as the jeep bounces over a sudden something in the road. Breathing hard, it takes her a moment to realize they’re fine, everything’s fine. Skye squeezes her knee. She doesn’t believe in being afraid, but she doesn’t judge Mari for it, either.

“Did we hit something?” Skye asks. The road’s been butter-smooth so far. It’s only beyond the road that everything’s volcanic mayhem, spears of black rock jutting up from blankets of dead-yellow moss.

“Nay, nay,” Logi says easily. “Just a bump.” He points out the shotgun-side window to a particular mountain. “You see that cave there high on the cliff? The one that looks like a bullet hole?”

They both turn to look out Skye’s window, Mari craning as far as she can without letting go of the handle. “Does a troll live there?” Skye asks.

They’re only three hours into their day-long tour and Logi’s already made enough troll jokes to last them back to Baltimore.

“That’s the spyhole in his door,” Logi says with an audible smile.

Mari has to admit, that’s a pretty good line. It’s easy to imagine a

giant looming behind the rock, pressing its massive eye to the hole in its mountain door, looking out at a world overrun by shaggy little horses and busy homunculi. She wonders if it ever hurts, having such a fearsome myth turned into a series of dad-jokes for tourists to roll their eyes at.

NEAR THE BASE of a mountain, they spot a small, lonesome house with grass growing on the roof like fluffy yellow hair.

“Why don’t the houses have angled roofs?” Skye asks. “Won’t snow just pile up on a flat roof?”

Mari can’t tell if Logi glances at the house or not. But then, a person emerges from the little house just as they pass by and Logi raises his hand in a wave the person couldn’t possibly see.

“Nay, the snow’s not a problem,” he says. “You hear that?” He points upward and they both pause, wait, listening for The Something. There’s the sound of geese, seagulls, and a wind so powerful it jitters the massive ATV, as if the jeep itself were shivering. “That wind,” he says, “swoops in and just”—a sharp whistle—“carries the snow right off. It’s so strong, sometimes you can hear it carrying the sounds of the Hidden People laughing and taking their meals.”

“The Hidden People?” Skye says before Mari can stop her.

“Elves,” Mari tells her. Mari has an Irish grandmother who used to love telling her stories about monsters and changelings. Mari knows the rule of three and to always sidestep fairy circles. She knows about witches, pixies, and bad luck. She spent an entire month in third grade avoiding mirrors,

convinced Bloody Mary would find her.

“Nay,” Logi says, “Not elves. Not ghosts, either, though we’ve got those, too. The Hidden People are their own creature, living in boulders and streams. The Devil, he sometimes disguises himself as one.” His pale eyes fill the rearview, looking at them. “If a handsome man wanders out of the fog and asks you to help deliver his child, you best say yes, or you’ll bring down the Hidden People’s wrath.”

“These Hidden People have magic houses inside streams but not OBGYNs?” Skye’s enjoying herself.

“I’m only relaying the stories as I know them,” Logi says, chuckling. “The Hidden People’s wives are always dying of childbirth in the old folktales. It’s no wonder they started abducting pretty girls from our world.” He winks in the mirror and Mari struggles not to cringe. “They aren’t evil, though. Don’t worry. They’re just like us for the most part.”

Great. Nothing to worry about then.

“So, there are ghosts and there are elves and there are Hidden People and there are dead Hidden People.” Skye counts them off on her fingers. “Does that mean there are Hidden Ghost People wandering around?”

“Of course not,” Logi says. “The Hidden People don’t have souls.” He makes a sudden turn and Mari’s gripping the Oh Shit handle again. “Now,” he says, “who’s ready to see a shipwreck?”

DJÚPALÓNSSANDUR, LOGI INFORMS them, is the site of a great tragedy. Black Lava Pearl beach. Fourteen men lost their lives when their trawler wrecked

against the cove in 1948. “On this very day!” he says, smiling. He has one of those smiles with lots of teeth, all of them very white and very square, made for grinding things up. He puts the jeep in park and climbs out, grabbing the stepladder for them.

“Are there ghosts?” Skye asks, offering a hand to help Mari down.

Logi watches their hands touch. His gaze slides up to Skye’s mermaid hair and back down. Finally, he says, “Maybe one or two.”

It’s a gray forty degrees and the black rock formations arch around them like arthritic trees. The wind lashes at them and they bundle deeper into their coats, following Logi up the black slope and down the other side toward the sea. A small family of tourists passes them, just leaving, children whining in what sounds like French. Now they have the beach all to themselves.

At their backs, a not-too-distant glacier looms like a massive blind eye. A white ball plugged between the blue mountains. They can’t see the ocean yet, but they can hear the water churning. For the first time since they arrived in Iceland, Mari doesn’t hear a single bird.

SKYE KEEPS POSING Mari and calling for Logi to take their photo.

“Takk, takk,” she says, pushing her pink cellphone into his hands. He aims it at them, the pair of them making faces beside a yellow-and-red checkered caution sign. DANGER! HÆTTA! Strong rip current! Dangerous waves!

Behind them: a long stretch of black pebble beach littered with large

twists of rust-orange metal. The ocean slinks like a blue panther at the shore.

Walking amid the ship's remains, surprised at how not-special it all feels, not haunted at all, another beautiful beach in a series of beautiful beaches, Mari hears Skye ask Logi whether they're allowed to take any rocks home with them.

"Let me double-check with The Man in Charge." He turns as if to consult an invisible person, then turns back to her, grinning, "Oh wait, that's me. You can take them back to your hotel, sure."

"Really?" Skye says. "In Hawaii it's bad luck to take rocks. Their post office gets rocks mailed back to them all the time with notes asking for forgiveness."

Logi shrugs, unconcerned by the ghosts of other islands. "It's safe to take rocks here," he says. "Nothing will follow you home. I promise."

Mari scoops up a handful of black pebbles and tosses the lot at a hunk of dead men's metal. Tosses all but one, which sticks to the inside of her palm like a wet kiss.

THEY WANDER THE beach while Logi pulls out his camera with its various attachments and starts taking photos of the sea, the glacier, the smoke-colored light. It's colder by the water, but they came prepared, sniffing in their hats and scarves. Skye busily collects garbage, as is her wont at parks and on trails. Even at this distance, Mari can hear her complaining about cigarette filters and candy wrappers, wishing creatively violent deaths on litterers everywhere.

Worrying her little stone, Mari approaches the water's edge, watching the jewel-green waves sift through the smooth black pebbles. Dark colors on top of dark colors, she's surprised it takes her so long to realize she's stepped up beside a narrow white skull.

She squats down but, wow, Instant Regret. Her knees aren't what they used to be. She tries again, slower, prodding the skull with her foot. It's picked clean, a few tiny bugs crawling over it, but she can't tell what animal it came from. A veterinarian, Mari isn't squeamish about these things and she usually knows one bone from another.

"Please don't be a puffin," she says. "Please don't be the only fucking puffin I see on this trip."

Two rows of tiny sharp teeth, a chunk of spinal column, a small pair of holes that might be ears or eye sockets. Probably a fish of some kind. Definitely a fish and not a puffin. Not a puppy. Not another dead puppy. The little brown thing left outside her clinic's back door with its neck broken.

She's never told Skye about the puppy. She can't risk hearing her defend him. *He wouldn't do that. Jonah might've done a lot of things but not that.* Mari knows it was him. No note, no proof, but she knows it was him. She can hear his voice so clearly: *You don't get to break people and just walk away.*

The pebbles crunch behind her, a sound in the shape of footsteps, and though she knows it's Skye, it's Logi, it's Skye or Logi or both, her heart scrambles around the idea that it's a dead man coming up behind her. A dead Jonah, broken and rotted. His flesh sloughing away, dripping seawater, body hanging crooked from a snapped spine, cracked under the force of

the rope he'd used to tie himself down to some part of the ship. To her life.

You're a grown-ass person, she reminds herself. And it isn't him. It isn't.

Using the sudden fear like a lever, she forces herself to turn—"Logi? Everything alright?"

The man approaches her slowly, his face red with cold and pale eyes narrowed. He carries a massive black rock with him and she's sure *this is it*, he's going to bludgeon her, except no, wait, it's only his camera.

She looks around him. Standing, "Where's Skye?"

"I was coming to ask you," he says. "I looked up and she was gone."

Mari doesn't waste time asking what he means. She moves past him, the beach giving like flesh beneath her hiking boots. The beach is framed by two massive arms of craggy black rock. Would Skye really have gone climbing over them? Skye teases, but it isn't like her to pull pranks. It isn't in either of them to enjoy worrying the other.

Mari turns in circles, searching out any glimpse of mermaid-colored hair, a knitted red hat, a black puff coat. She opens her mouth to shout for Skye, drawing in a deep breath of air that suddenly reeks of salt but not salt, something meatier, something rotten, when Logi claps her on the shoulder and says, "I'll check the jeep. She probably got cold and went back."

He's heading off before Mari can argue. Her words—*She wouldn't do that without telling me. Don't leave me here. Haven't you ever seen a horror movie?*—are stolen away by the wind.

Mari looks to the far end of the beach. Could Skye have walked past her without her noticing? She didn't notice the skull until it was nearly

underfoot. It took her four years to realize Jonah was Jonah.

“Skye?” She starts toward the other end of the beach. She keeps the worry out of her voice. Jinxes and whatnot. She isn’t about to conjure some horror by stupidly uttering its name.

Spitting distance of the jagged outcropping, she calls again, “Skye?” and sags with relief before stopping, squinting. The person who’s stepped out atop the rock isn’t Skye.

“Jonah?”

She jerks backward, losing her footing in the slick gravel, losing sight of the person for a breathless moment as she rights herself, and there’s Skye jumping down, brushing past her, marching determinedly away toward the jeep.

“Skye—” Sweating through the cold, gaze stuck to the now-empty rock behind them, Mari hurries after her, grabbing for her arm. “Skye, what the hell? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she says, pulling away. “I’m going back to the jeep.”

“Skye—come on. It’s me.”

Finally, she stops. Shivering, holding herself, “There was a man in a cave back there.”

“Jonah,” Mari says without meaning to. That’s twice now.

“No, not Jonah,” Skye snaps, suddenly pissed. She turns as if to walk away again but then thinks better of it. She stamps her foot and clutches her coat tighter. “Just a guy. I don’t know. He was hunched and crying, and it freaked me out.”

Mari ignores her own snide thought, *Did he ask you to help deliver his child?*

“He asked for my help,” Skye says. “I told him I’d go get Logi. If the guy really needs help then I figured.” A trembling shrug.

Mari rubs firm circles into her back. She can’t remember the last time she saw Skye this shaken. It’s almost a relief, being the one doing the comforting for a change.

“But he said I couldn’t leave. I told him I’d be right back with Logi, but he begged me not to go. Said I had to help him.” Skye stares down at the lapping water as if it might grab for her ankle.

“Shit, is he still back there?” Mari looks over her shoulder. She doesn’t see anyone, but she starts pulling Skye along anyway, back toward the jeep.

“No,” Skye says. She lets herself be shepherded away, and this is almost as frightening as the glimpse of Not Jonah on the rock. “He said I couldn’t leave him, and I thought, fuck that, I’m outta here, and then,” a small, horribly small noise in the back of her throat. “Nothing. No one. The cave’s empty.” She admits quietly, “Maybe the Jonah thing has me more freaked out than I realized.”

And that’s twice for you, too. Mari doesn’t know why she started keeping count now, here. She only knows she doesn’t want either of them saying his name a third time.

THEY’RE RENTING A COZY six-room apartment for their two weeks together, set somewhere off the main drag in Reykjavik (neither of them can

pronounce the street name). The rooms are all Dentist Office White, the light fixtures oddly modern against the retro art prints and ornate rugs. The tap water stinks of sulfur, something to do with how water's heated on the island.

It's an old house, circa nineteen-twenty-something, split into five apartments, one on each floor and the fifth in the attic. Mari can't imagine what it must've been like living here when it was still a single residence. In fact, she tries not to imagine it. She doesn't like the idea that people might've died here, fought here, beat their wives, their children, spat in each other's food. Despite her best efforts, she believes in ghosts.

Skye barely spoke for the remainder of the tour, gritting a smile here and there, and she doesn't say anything now. Moving stiffly through the night-dark apartment, she heads straight to her bedroom and curls up in a C atop the blankets, fully clothed.

Mari doesn't waste time either, busily turning on every lamp and light until the windows are bright as a TV set. She pulls the shades. No more TV. Wordless, she coaxes Skye out of her coat, hat, and shoes, tucking her in. The impulse is there to crawl in beside her, cuddle her, but Mari keeps her distance.

An *off* feeling slouches around Skye now; a bad aura, Mari's grandmother would've called it. A painting suddenly crooked on the wall. A shape like a face in your darkened window. Something isn't right and the something's hanging on Skye like a smell.

Mari can't make herself get too close to it.

They're on the fourth floor and, somewhere in the building, the wind is closing doors and knocking at windows. A bird's making noise outside. Or it could be a person crying.

Mari can't get him out of her mind, Skye's crying man, the Vanished Man. She wanted to tell Logi, have him go double-check the cave, but Skye squeezed her hand so tightly, demanding her silence. "It's nothing," she whispered. "Let's just drop it. Please." So they did. Probably Logi would've thought they were having a go at him anyway, teasing him about the Hidden People. But Mari can't shake the thought: *What if Skye's wrong?*

What if they left someone out there to drown or freeze or bleed to death? She's never heard wind actually *howl* until this afternoon in the ATV, until she couldn't stop wondering if it might not be the sound of someone screaming.

She pours herself one and then another glass of wine. She ought to be blaming Logi for all this. Filling their ride with freaky old stories when all they wanted was to see a goddamn off-season puffin. Elves. Ghosts. Hidden People. Mari looks them up on her cell, one website explaining that the Hidden People are descendants of Adam and Eve's secret children, children Eve attempted to hide from God because they were too dirty. For her vanity and deception, God cursed these children to remain forever hidden from the world. Invisible men stalking people through the fog, demanding help or else. Or you'll be sorry. You'll regret it. It isn't my fault I'm like this. You can't leave me. *You think I'll let you leave me?*

The bottle trembles in Mari's hand as she pours a third glass. She stares

hard at the drawn shades. There's a beautiful view of the city outside. If they stand out on the balcony, they can see the elaborate, honeycomb light-show of the Harpa concert hall. But she hasn't stood out on a balcony or leaned casually beside a window in months.

She forces herself to slow down with the wine, and her hand falls to a lump in her pocket. She didn't mean to take the pebble with her, but here it is. She studies it in the yellow kitchen light. Without the sea running over it, the black color's matte and unextraordinary. She sets it on the windowsill. Whether it's bad luck or good luck or no luck, she isn't taking it home with them. She won't need help remembering a day like today.

MARI WAKES UP on the sofa beside her empty glass, a book open in her lap. She checks her cell, grimacing through the splash of blue light. It tells her, *Yeah, it's the ass-middle of the night*. Tottering to her feet, she starts turning off lights for bed. She feels hungover and not just from the wine.

On a whim, she peeks behind one of the window shades to check for any glimpse of the northern lights. It isn't as likely in the city, but it's the right time of year.

No dice. The sky's a dark bowl above her, but the apartment window across the street is brightly lit, perfectly framing the young man who's chosen this time and place to undress. He's a shadow of himself, his face impossible to make out, but the light spreads warm hands over his naked back.

Mari watches him, wondering if he hopes that someone might be

watching or if the window never even occurs to him at all. Turning to face her, he kicks off his pants.

The ease in his movement is intoxicating, hypnotic. She thinks about turning away but doesn't, can't seem to move her head. He's in a pair of dark briefs now, doing something with his cellphone. He has beautiful arms, tattoos winding up the left one. She wonders if he masturbates with the shades up, too. Unbidden, the image of him throwing himself from the window makes her squeeze her eyes shut, startling and catching herself against the cold glass when something thuds outside their door.

She turns back; the man's room has gone dark. Dark but not empty. He's standing in front of his window. A dark shape in a dark room. The way he's standing there, so perfectly still—Mari drops the shade and backs away, knocking her hip into a side-table.

The house is old, the walls thin, the wind a clenching fist, but she knows what she heard and so she moves toward the front door. She isn't going to open it, no. She's not an idiot. She imagines herself a fawn picking through dark woods as she creeps down the hall, only, no, not a fawn. Not a hunted thing. A giant, a troll, she stands behind her mountainside door and brings her eye to the spyhole.

Nothing. There's nothing there.

Some bird is making noise again, or maybe it's a whimpering dog.

Mari doesn't knock, just lets herself in to check on Skye. She finds her sitting up in bed, feet on the floor, staring at the far wall.

"Hon?" Mari moves slowly to sit beside her.

“Nightmare,” Skye manages, but her smile is all wrong and Mari wishes she’d stop. Skye nods toward the nearest corner and Mari realizes: the sound wasn’t outside the door. It was in here. Skye knocked a wooden bowl of fake flowers off her nightstand. “I woke up and—” She glances at the empty bed behind her. She whispers, “He laid her down beside me. His dead wife.”

He? But Mari knows. The Hidden Man. The one they left in the cave. Mari looks back over the double bed and tries not to picture it, a pregnant woman’s sightless corpse denting the mattress, her dirty hair spread over the pillow, and her

“Her blood was—” Skye looks down at her knotted hands. “*Everywhere.*”

Mari eases Skye back down with her, rubbing her arm and petting her mermaid hair.

“It’s my fault,” Skye says. “He said it was my fault.”

“No, no,” Mari tells her, shushing. “It’s over now. It wasn’t real.” She tries anchoring it to something concrete, “Why would an Icelandic ghost speak English?” and for a moment, this does the trick, calming Skye’s breathing and closing her eyes. Even if Mari knows, deep down at the bottom of herself: English or Icelandic, monsters will say whatever it takes to get what they want.

Mari curls into Skye, away from such thoughts, but Skye pushes up again.

“No, don’t lie there,” she says, pulling Mari up with her. “Not where,” she chews her lips and Mari knows what she’s about to say, whispering it like a secret, “*not where the dead woman was.*” Skye holds both of Mari’s

hands tight, unable to meet her eyes. “She looked like you.”

Mari wants to tell her again that it wasn’t real, but she knows A) that won’t help and B) it doesn’t matter. The fear’s real, regardless.

“Why don’t we sleep in my room tonight?”

She helps Skye up and they trundle together into the adjacent room. Mari gets Skye busy undressing for bed—*undressing*, she’ll have to tell Skye about the naked guy across the street; she’ll love that—and goes to fetch her cellphone from the den. She grabs Skye’s while she’s at it and the thing buzzes in her hand, an incoming call. It’s late, but Iceland’s four hours ahead of Baltimore, so

Jonah’s name pulses in the center of the screen. Mari stares down at the phone and she keeps staring. Part of her almost wants to answer. She hasn’t spoken to him in weeks, blocking his number and all his social media handles, changing her locks and her number, her email address. Skye blocked him, too. That’s what she said she’d done.

The screen goes dark before Mari can process her own thoughts. She doesn’t discuss things with herself, just opens Skye’s phone—it’s easy; she uses the same password for everything—and scrolls through the text history.

Jonah

Jonah

Jonah

Jonah

Jonah

Jonah

She called him as recently as the day they landed in Iceland.

Mari's in the room and there's Skye looking pale and unsteady in the bed and Mari's saying something and whatever it is Skye's losing even more color. Mari gestures with the phone, wishing she could throw it against the wall. *Is he here? Did you tell him we're here? Have you been telling him where I am all this time?*

Skye is one long stream of *no, no, no, no, it isn't like that, I didn't, Jonah isn't.*

And there it is again. His name. The sound of it out of Skye's mouth—it's too much.

The walls inch inward and the air falls dead, the yellow stink of sulfur thick in the room as though they'd run a bath. "I have to get out of here." Mari starts for the door, but Skye grabs her hand.

"No, please don't leave." She clings to Mari in a way that feels wrong, that feels nothing at all like Skye. "Don't leave. I can't—" She struggles around the words, as if they're a surprise even to her. "*What if he comes back?*"

Mari untangles her hand from Skye's. Cold, everything so cold, she says, "Then it'll be your fault, won't it."

SHE DOESN'T GRAB a hat or scarf or gloves on her way out and, really, she's lucky she remembers her coat. The city looks the way she imagines Soviet Russia, uniform blocks of gray housing set at odd angles. Everything's closed and gone to bed. The streets are wide and empty, wind tunnels that draw Mari along like a droplet through a straw. Cats dart here and there,

their eyes shining out from beneath dark cars, behind corners and fences, under blisters of tree roots. Could she really have seen Jonah at the beach earlier? Was he the man Skye saw and then claimed not to see?

Mari replays moment after moment since the break-up. Every time Skye asked, *You're sure it was him?* And that one night, at the very start, when she said, *Sometimes love makes people a little crazy.* Skye apologized, yes, right away, but it happened. She said it.

Mari said things, too. She said lots of things back at the apartment and she knows, she knows and maybe she shouldn't have and maybe Skye shouldn't have fucking fucked up like this and she isn't sorry and she is and it's fucking freezing and she's alone and she doesn't know how long or how far she's been walking when she stops in front of a dark shop window, face-to-face with a person-sized puffin. Her reflection fits inside the giant bird, a haunted team mascot.

Skye knew all along this wasn't the season for seeing puffins.

Skye doesn't believe in being afraid and she especially doesn't believe in admitting she was wrong. But even through the cold, Mari can still feel Skye gripping her hand, pleading with her not to leave.

Skye lied, but she never left Mari alone.

A shape moves in the window and Mari jolts backward, nearly falling against a parked car. She turns, but there's no one. She clenches her jaw. She won't say his name a third time.

MARI KEEPS HER shoulders hunched up high around her ears the entire walk

back to the apartment. She doesn't have a speech or demands or apologies organized. Up the stairs, lock the door, hoping—and yes, fine, whatever—Skye doesn't say a word to her. She doesn't even peek outside the bedroom door. Mari walks straight past to sleep in the other room. She'll stay the night, at least, and find a new flight home in the morning. Skye will be fine on her own come daylight.

A MORNING RAIN has already come and gone. Mari's booked her flight. She'll have a shit layover in Boston, but she'll be in the air by eighteen-hundred hours, and that's what counts. She's more than a little pleased with herself for drinking the last of the breakfast tea and pouring the only remaining bottle of Appelsín down the sink. Skye can drink sulfur-water for breakfast.

There's been no sign of her yet. It isn't like Skye to avoid things. Then again, it isn't like her to go behind Mari's back, either. All part of the adventure.

The adventure's over now, though, and Mari needs to pack. She knocks at the door. No birds, but the wind outside keens like scratched aluminum foil. She knocks again.

"Skye, we should talk." Another hard knock and then one more.

The silence sounds the same as it had last night and Mari tries not to think about how many hours have passed between then and now, hours and hours when no one saw Skye, hours and hours of no one knowing for

certain where she is, and she knocks once more *Skye, answer me* and her

heart picks up and she lets herself in.

IS ANYTHING MISSING, the Icelandic police ask her, and the only thought Mari can piece together is, you mean besides the woman?

None of Mari or Skye's belongings are missing, not Skye's phone, not her wallet or passport, not her coat, her hat, her shoes. Maybe she'd have left without some things, but not without her shoes. *Not without telling me. Even after everything. She wouldn't just leave me.*

Mari admits they argued, she went for a walk, she didn't see Skye for the rest of the night. The officers exchange looks, and Mari grinds her teeth to keep from crying. Her head throbs with it. They ask her so many questions and when she remembers this later it will be as if they spoke to her from underwater.

They're suspicious of her, and she can't blame them. They ask again, you're sure nothing's missing?

There is something missing, but Mari doesn't tell them. *Who cares about a rock gone from your windowsill?*

She tells them about the man in the cave, but not about the Hidden People. She tells them, "My ex-boyfriend's been stalking me. He's made threats. I thought Skye had cut ties with him, too, but I found out last night that. Well. They were still in touch." She looks around the kitchen, but no, Skye's still gone. "He's American. He wasn't supposed to know where we were. Here, I'll write down his information for you."

Mari lets them take Skye's cell for good measure, to consider her texts

and calls with him. She's already gone through it herself. Read every one of their texts twice, three times. Skye's demands for Jonah to get help, to leave Mari alone, his pleas and threats and promises, long streams of friendship memories tainted, twisted. *I feel so ashamed*, Skye told him. *I've never been so ashamed of anything as I am of you.*

We'll look into it, the police say. Maybe Skye's out with some different set of shoes. Maybe she met someone. After all, she was keeping other secrets, wasn't she?

Don't worry. It's a small-big island. We'll find her.

EXCEPT NO, THEY don't. No, they don't. No, they don't. No, they don't. No, they don't. No, they don't. No, they don't. No, they don't. No, they

MARI DRIFTS AROUND the island for as long as the authorities ask her to, for as long as her clinic will tolerate, until they stop looking for Skye and start looking for Skye's body. But she never sees a puffin, and they never find a trace of her.

CABBING TO THE airport, the driver hands Mari his card for "when she comes back." She can't fathom how he knows her future, but she pockets it anyway. What else is she supposed to do?

There's a trio of brown geese pecking their orange beaks at the moss outside. The geese mate for life—they learned this early in Logi's tour—and it's been born out by observation: every goose she's seen has been paired up;

even in groups, they're paired up. But now this third goose.

Mari tries not to think about it, a frightened goose nosing its dead partner in grief and confusion, but there's the thought right in the center of her chest and suddenly she's the dead body, she's the mossy ground the geese are pecking into, nibbling wider and wider the black hole in the middle of her. If a giant pressed its eye against her, what would it see?

DESPITE THEIR CLOSENESS, Mari only met Skye's family a handful of times. Skye's parents divorced early and her father divorced often. Being in the same room with them, listening to them all talk and not talk at once, Mari wonders where she is and how she got here. The walls are pond-green and there are vases of flowers all around. She might be in a hospital or a funeral home, maybe a hotel lobby.

These people look nothing like her friend. They're blond and severe and one's underweight and another keeps reaching to their pocket for cigarettes that aren't there.

"She isn't dead," Skye's mother keeps saying. "We don't know she's dead. There won't be any funeral until we do."

They grill Mari about the night Skye disappeared. They're even more suspicious of her than the police. They ask about Jonah. "Have you seen him? Why hasn't he been arrested?"

She explains what they already know: "There's no record of him ever entering Iceland." By all accounts, he was at a Capitals game in D.C. the night Skye went missing. No, it's only Mari's life he's making a living hell,

so who cares? Nothing's happened to her yet.

Just the same dark car lingering outside her home each night. The same strange messages left at her clinic and left at her clinic until finally a receptionist gets spooked and quits, and the owner of the practice asks Mari, regrettably, to leave.

Skye's parents demand details about the man in the cave and look stricken when Mari "claims" not to have seen him. She almost mentions spotting someone at the beach, that glimpse she imagined of Jonah, but decides against it. She can't be sure. She doesn't know. She keeps thinking *what if* and *maybe*, and her stomach chews on itself.

She doesn't tell them her final words to Skye. The words she hasn't been able to stop hearing everywhere she goes, no help needed from any howling wind. She doesn't tell them how Skye pleaded with her to stay, don't leave, and she left anyway. Skye begged for her help and Mari denied her. Skye disappeared and *what if she comes back? What if she comes back, but it isn't her?*

Then it'll be your fault, won't it.

LYING IN BED, deep in the night, Mari stares at her drawn-blind window. She lives in a rowhome, her narrow bedroom windows looking out toward the bedrooms of her across-the-street neighbors. She's never seen any of them naked, though. She should wash her sheets; she's been sweating in her sleep. The house smells like a ghost of itself, dirty dishes and all the trashcans are full and the laundry hamper overflowing and the bathroom,

fuck.

We don't know she's dead. Maybe Skye's mother is still repeating that phrase, kneeling somewhere and whispering it like a prayer. *Or like a curse,* Mari thinks, because isn't it so much worse this way? Not knowing if Skye's bleeding or frightened or cold, not knowing whose headlights those are slipping across the ceiling, whose shoes are out there on the sidewalk, who's unzipping their fly and pissing against the front stoop. *We don't know she's dead.*

Part of Mari is sure she isn't. It's the part of her that still hasn't called Have Fun Be Lucky to cancel Skye's upcoming tattoo appointment. Dead people don't have appointments to keep.

Whoever's pissing on her front stoop is having a coughing fit, a nasty wet one.

Mari should get a dog, a big dog, adopt one of Baltimore's many toothy, homeless blockheads. The kind that barks at everything and everyone, and sometimes at nothing at all. Skye used to tease her for that, the veterinarian with no pets.

Mari squeezes her eyes shut against the sound of the man spitting and muttering. Against the feel of the empty mattress behind her giving beneath someone else's weight.

When she opens her eyes next, gray morning light curling its fingers around the window-shade's edges, there's something black resting on her sill. For a dreamy moment, Mari's sure it's the mouth of a distant cave.

We don't know she's dead. And isn't that exactly what being haunted

means?

MARI STANDS ALONE on the shore of Black Lava Pearl beach. It's still too early for most tourists, mid-April, and she managed to drive herself, white-knuckling the steering wheel the entire way. *The road's empty*, she kept reminding herself. There's nothing and no one to hit. Just don't drive off a cliff.

She came back because she isn't sure why. Because she doesn't trust the post office with the windowsill stone. Because she can't sleep or go for walks or eat out or stop looking over her shoulder and there's no job to anchor her anymore so what does it matter. What does anything matter?

Skye isn't her only friend, but she's the only one Mari loved. She's the only friend who knew Mari when she was Mariana, when she was M, when she was pre-Jonah. Skye's the only one who could turn to Mari and say, "Remember when we couch-surfed for five weeks straight?" "Remember when we hitchhiked back from New Orleans that spring break?" *Remember what it felt like when we weren't so afraid?*

Mari looks back toward the road at the sound of voices. In the distance she can make out a pair of yellow coats and an orange hat, a little family bobbing into focus. They've come to see a shipwreck. Mari pitches the little black stone out into the water as hard as she can.

She glances back at the rocky outcropping she's been glancing at for half an hour now. The volcanic arm Skye climbed behind to discover a cave with a man inside.

Mari came back because it's only here she can admit to herself what really happened. It's only here she can think *the Hidden People took my friend* and not lose her mind.

Not knowing what she means to do or why she needs to do it, she climbs over the outcropping and clear of the other tourists' sight.

The cave isn't at all what she imagined it'd be, and the odd thought occurs to her that perhaps the cave doesn't appear to everyone. It's a small, jagged tunnel, a couple feet taller than Mari. If she stretched out her arms, she could touch both its walls. The dark throat stretches back and back and back, and she wonders whose mouth she might be wandering into.

"Hello?" she calls softly, as though she weren't allowed to be here, as though she might wake something up. She steps in deeper, hunching lower, until the daylight at her back appears less like a threshold and more like a spyhole. She didn't mean to go this far and part of her is still certain she didn't.

"Hello?" she calls again, angrier now. The anger feels so much better than fear. "You took her," she says. "You took her and she would've helped you! She would've come back if you hadn't— Fuck, goddamnit. I was coming right back, Skye. Goddamnit!" She sniffles up something gross, whispering, "Stupid fucking Jonah. Everything's so fucked. And it didn't have to be."

It's okay to sound crazy here. The slick cave walls seem to encourage it, echoing the sound back to her. Not only her voice, though. *Voices*. Nothing so distinct as words but the unmistakable rhythms of speech, conversation. Of arguing. Shouting. The voices gain strength, momentum, the pressure of

the cave dropping as if a storm were fast approaching. The reek of salt and rot clogs the air, making her gag.

She's ours, they say. She's ours. She's ours. You turned her away.

Whatever courage her anger gave her, it's gone now and there's nothing left but the punch of fear in her chest, slamming her backwards. Mari scrambles out and out, toward the light. She bangs both her knees and her left elbow. If not for her puff coat, she'd have cut it open. Finally, she falls gasping into the black pearl stones of the beach. She drags them up around her in sweeping armfuls, as though she might use them to build a wall between herself and the cave. She sobs there, she doesn't know how long.

She didn't mean to say his name. *Why did I say his name?*

Sweating against the chill April wind, she manages to get her aching legs beneath her. She climbs back over the rise. Her boots churn the gravel shore. The little family asks with a German accent if she wouldn't mind taking their photo and she doesn't even wave them away, just keeps walking and there's the car and there's the door shutting behind her.

She takes her time. Leans her head against the steering wheel and counts her breaths. There's no monster sitting in the backseat waiting to spring up. Her tires aren't slashed. Nothing happened. Nothing's going to happen. She roots through the glove compartment and finds a bag of lemon cough drops, sucking down one after another until the reek is out of her mouth. When she starts the car up, the world feels calmer. The sun seems yellower in the sky. The glacier behind her is only a hunk of ice.

She gets the car back on the road and she isn't going to stop until

she hits Reykjavik. She's staying at The Radisson this time. No quaint apartments in quaint houses. Skye wouldn't approve, but isn't that why she did it? Something Skye wouldn't do. Something to mark the time when she became post-Skye. The Mari without a job or a lover or a friend.

The car swerves under her hand when she reaches to wipe away tears. She rights it easily enough, back in her lane. Pops another cough drop. She slams on the brakes so fast

the cough drop lodges in the back of her throat, choking her as she jerks the wheel to avoid hitting the woman in the middle of the road, the woman with the mermaid hair. The car spins beneath her and the world's an hourglass turning over and it only stops when the glass shatters against a spear of volcanic rock.

The stone juts through the windshield, stopping inches from Mari's face. The seatbelt traps her in place and she can feel the cough drop forcing its way down her esophagus like a fist. She can't see anything but light and shapes for all the blood in her eyes.

Skye, she wants to say, *Skye, where are you*, and maybe she is saying it, but she can't hear herself.

It's only as the man steps up to her window, so calm, a shadow moving behind a curtain of blood, that she can hear herself rasping, "No, no, please." She gasps, gurgles. "Getaway. Please leave me alone—"

But no,

“It’s too late for that,” the man says, reaching through the broken glass to touch her cheek. “Three times too late.”

ENRIQUE BARRIOS



Number 19

ENRIQUE BARRIOS

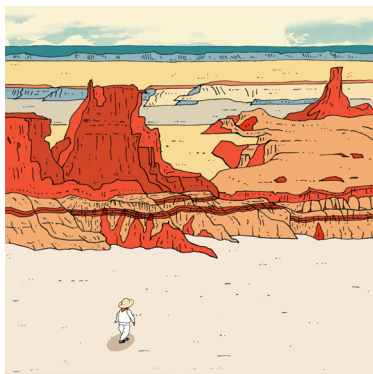
NUMBER 19 & ANAM

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

NUMBER 19: A depiction of the inhabitants of a minimalist world observing the arrival of a strange new life form called COVID-19.

ANAM is an animated short story that takes place in a dystopian future where the only living beings are indigenous people who kept their tribes in isolation for centuries during the planet's technological rise and fall. After the destruction of most of the planet's natural resources and the demise of its population, the few humans that remain find themselves rebuilding the Earth the way their ancestors did once before.

ENRIQUE BARRIOS



Anam

STELLA NALL



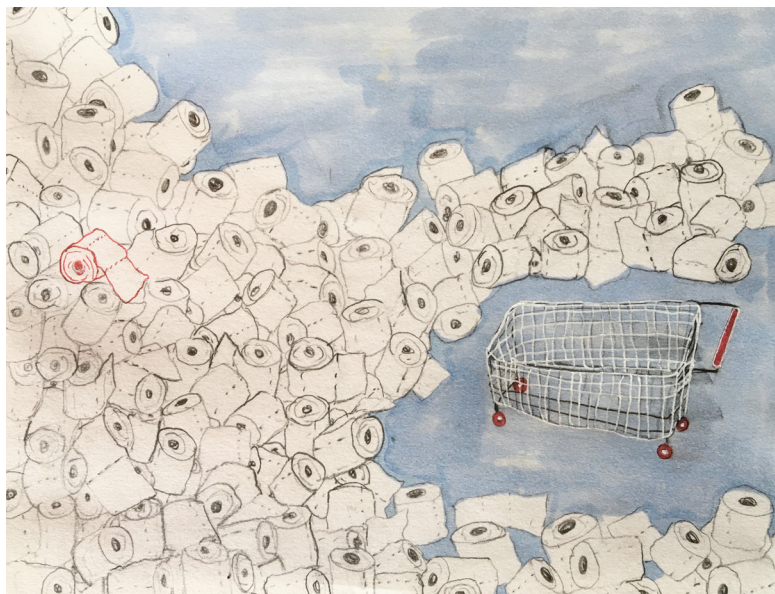
Untitled Digital Self-Portrait

STELLA NALL



Two Heads Are Better Than One

STELLA NALL



Safe (Abundance)

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First Descendant: Sterile Hybridity

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

FIRST DESCENDANT: STERILE Hybridity is informed by my experience growing up as the first generation of my mother's family denied enrollment in the Crow Tribe due to the current blood quantum requirements. The bird imagery refers to the history of our name: Apsáalooke means "children of the large beaked bird," which was interpreted to mean Crow. The birds featured in this print articulate an emotional state I have encountered through navigating this liminal cultural identity. My mixed race means I don't meet the federally recognized definition of a Crow, but I have participated in traditions and have been socially and medically categorized as Indigenous since childhood. The mule in the bottom of the piece speaks to this issue as well: a mix of two animals, mules are genetically unable to produce offspring. While I am granted first descendant status by the Crow Tribe, were I to have children with someone outside of the Tribe, they would not be considered Crow at all. Additionally, I included the mule because some of my relatives have the last name Yellowmule (likely referencing a mule deer), but as a young child I pictured this type of mule in my mind and have grown to associate myself with the creature. The shapes

in the background represent elk teeth, which are important to the Crow and feel nostalgic to me because my mother used them to make dresses for me to wear to powwows growing up.

KATHLEEN MADRID

KIN–

- Winner: Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry -

Skin

and the liver are
our largest organs.

One's a map of things—
of tanning beds and nicotine
—one makes blood thicker

than vodka.
I am poured
from my people's lives,
a ripe skinned hide
and show of every weather.
Pith and rind both occupied
by pride and collared in a red-
throated shame; I have said
what makes blood

thicker than water?

Ink

in water,
stained glasses.

So much pigments what I see.
Bruise green shame—that shiner.

Mistakes tattooed kidney deep
bile.

Swindle

means cheat; to be a charlatan.

Back then
with florid nose, in Roman tones,
as Grand Panjandrum he tread the boards
then quit. And split for Denver.

Fraud is just a fancy word for liar.

Skein

means a flight of wildfowl.

Or a tangle, a confusion.

Both, that's what I think.

She loves me to distraction, and drinks,
and rescues pigeons.

Lipsticks

in every red on	cigarette butts.
	yellowed teeth.
	my cheek.
Care so bottomless	I learned
that's just the way	the world

ticks

Spent

jackoak, mangrove root—
leftover trash from the tanning
vats—keeps weeds down in pig
thistle, puncturevine

Venom runs its course.
Bloodlines die out.

even salt and gall are unpoisoned
in the end.

Entrails

A haruspex
wasn't necessary
to tell that fortune

but we all got gutted anyhow.

Trailer

baggage, gaps,
 , ashtrays,
(this lungful
 breath),
 , addiction,
kid knees,
skin, liver,
pigeon feathers,
weather/ or not

and every day,
and always,
and still,
and moonshine,
and every other
word, I know

from love.

Kind

like winter. And time.
Pine branches free of
leaves. Everyone who
didn't.

ROBERT REBEIN

WELCOME TO THE HOTEL SABRA

- Winner: Montana Prize in Nonfiction -

I STOOD ON the doorstep to the bland, whitewashed building just off the Place des Martyrs, duffel bag digging into my shoulder, hands aching under the load of the manual typewriter and suitcase of books I'd carried from the more expensive hotel where I'd spent my first two nights in Tunisia. It was the first week of September, 1989. On a whim, or so it seems to me now, I'd left the university in England where I'd been enrolled as a Master's student to take a job teaching English at a Saudi-built faculty of letters in Kairouan. The man who'd offered me the job, a shadowy figure I knew only as the "Head of English," had promised to reimburse my airfare and give me an advance on my first paycheck as soon as I arrived in the country, but that hadn't happened. Instead, I'd been told by another man, the doyen of the university, that the five classes I was on the hook to teach would begin in a little over a month, and I'd better get busy putting together syllabi and writing lectures.

"That's fine," I said in halting French. "But I spent all of my money just getting here. What am I supposed to live on until my pay arrives?"

The man shrugged elaborately. “Life is cheap here. I’m sure you’ll be fine.” Then he looked at his watch as if to say, *Sorry, that’s all the time I have for you*, and I was escorted back to the front gates of the administration building, where the taxi that had brought me from town stood waiting.

“Fuck,” I said under my breath as I crawled into the back seat.
“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Where to now?” the driver asked.

“I don’t know. Back to the hotel, I guess.”

I’d lied about being broke. The truth was, I still had a couple of hundred English pounds—my “escape money,” as I thought of it—stashed away in a pocket of my duffel bag. Before leaving Exeter, I’d done the math on what it would cost to book a return flight from Tunis to London, and from there to New York, where a woman had promised to put me up until I could catch a Greyhound back to Kansas. The answer was every last penny I had. And now, after paying for the taxi and my bill at the first hotel, I had even less cash to fall back on. Hence my decision to check into the Hotel Sabra, which my dog-eared guidebook had described as the least expensive hotel in town after a few in the medina that lacked modern plumbing.

I waited until the front door opened behind a departing guest, then slipped inside the narrow hallway and set the typewriter and suitcase on the tile floor.

"You wish to check in?" a man behind the front desk asked.

"How many nights?"

"I don't know. One, for now."

"You're English?"

"No, American."

"Ah, American," he said, taking my money. "But then, why do you stay here?"

"Because I'm not one of those Americans," I said, reaching out to take the room key he dangled before me like a talisman.

• • •

As a CHILD growing up in western Kansas, I'd often dreamed of adventure. The nuns at my parochial school were great lovers of globes and maps of all kinds, most of them outdated. During history or social studies, they'd use a ruler to point out certain far-flung places in the world, particularly the Holy Land and a few countries in Asia and South America where their order maintained a presence as missionaries. I couldn't have cared less about missions or missionaries, but I did love gazing at those maps. I wanted to leave my home in Kansas and explore exotic places. I wanted to ride with the Caliph upon his magic carpet.

In taking an academic position in North Africa, I was furthering all of these ambitions, but I had a countervailing voice in my head, too—the voice of my father. As a teenager, I'd toiled countless hours beside

him on the hardscrabble farm he bought in the early 1980s, around the same time that John Mellencamp and Willie Nelson were organizing the first Farm Aid concert. My father was a stoic by nature and a man of few words, but every once in a while, the desire to communicate certain hard-learned truths would come over him. One of his favorites was the idea that people spend too much time worrying about what he liked to call “the first mistake.”

“Look, everybody makes mistakes,” he’d say. “It’s inevitable, just another part of life. What you’ve got to watch out for is the *second mistake*, the one you make right after the first one, usually in some kind of misguided attempt to justify or erase it.”

As an example, he offered a neighbor of ours, a real estate agent who’d once made the mistake of transporting an open can of gasoline in the trunk of his Coupe De Ville. “Of course, the gas spilled all over the carpeted trunk. That much was inevitable. But what do you think our genius neighbor did next? I’ll tell you. He drove straight to one of those do-it-yourself car washes and tried to *vacuum up* the whole mess.”

“No way. What happened then?”

“What the hell do you think happened? The gas went straight up the hose, hit the vacuum’s heater element, and *kaboom!*, exploded into a great ball of fire.”

These words of my father’s came to me unbidden as I sat at a sidewalk table at a cheap, worker’s café on the Avenue Bourguiba, a few blocks from the Place des Martyrs. Assuming that taking the job in Kai-

rouan had been my first mistake, what would constitute my second? If I stayed on in the country, I'd soon be without the money to get back home. But if, on the other hand, I turned tail and ran, who knew what adventures I might be foregoing, or when another opportunity like this would come along?

As I weighed these points, a boy on a smoke-spewing moped pulled up in the street before my table. "English? Français?"

"No, American," I said, growing tired of this familiar game.

"Very good! Come, I have something to show you."

"What is it?"

"Come," he said again, shifting forward on his moped to offer me a seat on back. "I show you. It's not far."

"You're crazy," I said with a laugh. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"*Come*," he said yet again, revving the engine on the moped, so that a fog of blue smoke filled the street behind him.

I crushed the cigarette I'd been smoking and stood up.

"Hurry," the boy said.

I hiked the rucksack I was carrying onto my shoulders and stepped over the back of the moped. Seconds later, we were careening down the Avenue Bourguiba in the direction of the Place des Martyrs. At the gates to the medina or old town, the boy took a sharp left turn, nearly upending a vegetable cart. I leaned into the turn along with him, hands gripping the sides of the sputtering moped. The cobblestone streets of the

old town were thick with foot traffic, and the boy had to slow the moped to a crawl, honking its squeaky horn as he weaved through women in head scarves and men in long robes.

“It’s not far now,” he said over his shoulder.

“What’s not far?”

“The shop of my friend.”

We turned down one winding street after another until finally we pulled up in front of a carpet shop with Visa and American Express stickers in the windows. Here the boy killed the motor on the moped and left it parked on the stone sidewalk as he escorted me into the cave-like shop. Colorful carpets adorned the walls and sat in great stacks on the floor. As my eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness, a thin, dapper man in his late twenties or early thirties rose from a desk at the back of the shop and came forward with his hand outstretched.

“I am Habib,” he said in English. “Please, sit.”

He gestured at a little table with a chair on either side just to the left of the shop entrance.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I said with a short laugh. “I’m not a rich American. In fact, I’m flat broke.”

“American?” he asked, eyebrows raised. “But your clothes are English.”

I looked down at my beatle boots and ratty black blazer. “I was there before I came here.”

“Ah, I see.”

He unbuttoned the front of his suit jacket and took a seat at the little table, leaving me no option but to sit, too. Then he said something in Arabic to the boy, who nodded and left the shop at a run.

“What brings you to Kairouan, my *pauvre* American friend?”

I had to laugh at the man’s joke. Maybe I was laying it on a bit thick about being poor. When the boy returned with two glasses of Turkish coffee, I began to speak more freely about my situation. My airfare had not been reimbursed as promised. The job at the faculty was more involved than what I’d been led to expect. The Master’s thesis I’d failed to write in England was still unfinished. On top of it all, my parents in Kansas had not heard a word from me in weeks and hardly knew where I was . . .

“These are small matters,” the carpet dealer said, sipping his coffee. “One must have patience. The airfare will arrive in time. The pay will arrive. All will be well, you’ll see.”

“But how can you be so sure?”

“You said it yourself—you are *professeur*. Very important position.”

“Yeah, but—”

He waved this off and stood. “Now I show you some very nice carpets, very cheap, for your mother in America.”

He rang a little bell, and two men in sandals appeared from the back of the shop and began to hold up one carpet after another. Blue carpets, red carpets, tan carpets. The Persian-style carpets called *zarbeeyas*,

with their thick pile feel. The traditional, flat carpets called *mergoums*, with their stunning colors and geometric patterns. The Berber carpets known as *kilims* . . .

“Are these not beautiful carpets for your mother in America?” the carpet dealer asked.

“Yes,” I said. “They’re beautiful.”

“Which one do you like?”

I pointed to a red *mergoum* with tassels on each end. “That’s a nice one, but as I told you—”

“I know, I know, *tres pauvre*,” the man said. He made a shooing motion, and the men rolled up the red *mergoum* and lay it on the floor next to our feet. “We are in the old town, where tradition requires us to barter and haggle over prices. But I do not wish to barter with you, my friend. I wish to help you.”

“Really?” I said doubtfully. “And how are you going to do that?”

He reached into a drawer in the little table and brought out a tiny calculator and what appeared to be a contract with blank spaces for names and figures. “You pay part of the *mergoum* now, in English pounds, and the rest later, when your pay from the faculty arrives. In the meantime, I will hold the carpet for you. It’s more than fair, don’t you think?”

Who could say what was fair and not fair? All I really knew was that I was sick to death of my own indecision. I needed to make a move, one way or the other. I needed to do something, all thought of first or second mistakes be damned. And so, I reached into my rucksack and pulled

out all the money I had on me and counted it out on the little table. It came to a little under a hundred pounds—roughly half of the money I'd brought with me from England.

"Well done!" the carpet dealer said. "It feels good, does it not?"

"What feels good?" I asked.

"Why, to believe, of course. To know that all will be well."

"If you say so," I said.

But as I walked through the narrow streets of the old town, headed for my room at the Hotel Sabra, I knew that he was right. It did feel good. Very good. The time of indecision had come to an end. All that remained was to act, and to see where my actions took me.

• • •

I HAD A month before the fall term at the faculty got fully underway, and I decided to use the time to produce a first draft of my overdue Master's thesis on the doubling motif in the novels of William Faulkner. In a hole-in-the-wall *papeterie* just outside the medina gates, I stocked up on pencils and paper and ribbons for my pancake Olivetti, then retreated back to my room at the Sabra, where I dragged one of the bedside tables before the open windows and set the little typewriter upon it. Spread out on the bed behind me was an array of notes, index cards, and marked-up books I'd separated into five piles corresponding to the five chapters of my unfinished thesis. I let a short pause fall for dramatic effect, then rolled a sheet

of foolscap into the carriage of the Olivetti, found the center of the page, backspaced six times, and typed, in all caps, I N T R O D U C T I O N.

And so it began. Each morning, I hammered away at the Olivetti as a Biblical scene complete with beggars, horse-drawn carts, and merchants hawking goods played out below my open windows. (Indeed, the famous scene where Indiana Jones shoots the swordsman was filmed within a hundred yards of where I sat typing.) Then, sometime after one or two o'clock, when the rush of the lunch hour was over, I'd venture into the streets around the hotel in search of the cheapest meal I could find. Usually this was some version of the *plat tunisienne*, which consisted of French bread, couscous or rice, a spicy salad of peppers, tomatoes, and olives (*salade mechouia*), a couple of lamb kebabs or merguez sausages, along with French fries and *brik a l'oeuf*, which was an egg fried in a pastry sheet.

"And to drink, Monsieur?" the waiter would ask in French.

"Just water."

"Mineral water?"

"No, from the faucet."

"But are you sure?"

"Of course," I'd answer.

By saving a dinar on the mineral water, I was able to stop in another café on my way back to the Sabra and indulge in an espresso or a glass of Turkish coffee to help power that afternoon's writing session. As a rule, I didn't eat dinner, subsisting instead on fruit and little tubs of yogurt I bought from street vendors. This, along with cigarettes and the continen-

tal breakfast brought to my room each morning by the hotel staff, sufficed to keep hunger at bay.

When I wasn't working on my thesis or wandering the streets in search of cheap food, I wrote long letters to my parents in Kansas, to the English girlfriend I'd left behind at Exeter, and, finally, to the woman in New York who'd offered to put me up on my way back to Kansas, should I make it that far. In these letters, I characterized the life I was living as one romantic adventure after another. My dealings with the carpet dealer alone took up three or four pages, and I lavished similar attention on the harvest moon outside my window, the groggy voice of the *muezzin* calling the devout to prayer, the faces of the children mobbing me in the street to beg a pencil or cigarette (*Donnez-moi un stylo! Donnez-moi une cigarette!*). Having finished one of these missives, I'd carry it with great urgency to the *bureau de poste*, where a man in a denim tunic would weigh the letters, sell me stamps bearing a likeness of President Ben Ali, then cancel each of the stamps individually with a series of loud *cha-chings* from his manual postage marker. What a wonderful sound that was.

It was a pleasant enough routine, but a few weeks into it, I began to have trouble with the hotel manager, a nervous, fastidious fellow with a neatly trimmed mustache, who would watch for me to return from my errands and accost me just inside the door to the hotel.

"Monsieur, your bill is growing very large. When do you intend to pay it?"

"Don't worry, you'll get your money," I'd say, making a beeline

for the stairs. "I'm an American, a *professeur*, remember?"

"Tomorrow, then?" the man would ask, following. "I'll put an updated bill under your door."

"Do that."

I'd be back at my typewriter when a sealed envelope containing the updated bill would appear beneath my door. Rarely did I bother to open it. What was the point? I couldn't have paid it if I'd wanted to.

Then, on the morning I started work on the final chapter of my thesis, the manager's pleas grew more insistent, and a terrible row broke out between us in the hallway outside my room.

"Monsieur! You will pay your bill *today* or I will telephone the police!"

"Go right ahead!" I yelled back at him.

"Monsieur, I am serious!"

"So am I!"

And so it went, each of our voices rising in volume, until guests in other rooms began to stick their heads outside their doors to see what was going on, and the hotel manager stomped angrily back to his perch at the front desk. I listened to hear if he would follow through with his threat to call the police, but he didn't.

I knew then I had to redouble my efforts to finish the thesis. I worked at a fever's pitch for the rest of that day and into the night, stopping only to drink water directly from the sink in my room. Around midnight, another row, this one about the *clack clack clack* of the Olivetti,

broke out between me and a group of Australians who were staying in the room next to mine. I switched to writing longhand for a couple of hours, then started back in on the typing as soon as the morning call to prayer rang out above the rooftops. I was down to the last few pages of the thesis . . . the last few paragraphs . . . the final sentence . . . the final word.

Elated, I returned twice, centered up the page, and hit the pound key three times in a row, # # #.

As later calculations would reveal, I'd typed roughly 47,000 words in a little under twenty days, an average of almost 2,500 words a day.

• • •

BUT HOW SHORT and meager are our triumphs in this life. No sooner had I typed that final # than I was assaulted by a bout of vomiting and diarrhea.

I stumbled down the narrow hallway, ignoring the dirty looks of my fellow hotel patrons, and locked myself in the W.C. The diarrhea poured out of me in a series of convulsive torrents, one after another after another. When I thought they'd finally passed, I stumbled farther down the hall to the shower, sitting in a ball on the dank floor as the water rained down upon me. Every five minutes or so, I'd force myself to stand and gulp water directly from the shower head, for I was as thirsty as I'd ever been in my life. But drinking the water brought no relief at all, just another round of diarrhea.

For most of that day, or at least the parts I can remember, I did little but shuffle back and forth between the closet-like rooms, W.C. to shower, shower to W.C., so bent over with cramps I could barely stand. Hotel guests from up and down the hall pounded at the door, demanding a turn, but all I could do in response was moan and repeat the same words over and over again, *Je suis desole . . . Je suis desole . . . Je suis desole*, my voice little more than a whisper.

I stumbled back to my room and tried to sleep, but this was not possible. As soon as I began to fall off, I'd be awakened by fever or stomach cramps and have to rush back down the hall for another round of diarrhea. During one of these bouts, God only knows what hour of the day or night it was, I peered into the toilet between my legs and saw what looked to me like small, amoeba-like creatures swimming around the bloody mess eating other amoeba-like creatures. The sight unnerved me. I was convinced my stomach and bowels were consumed by parasites. I lay on my side in the shower and wept with exhaustion and disappointment.

Finally, there came a commotion of voices and sustained pounding at the door. "Monsieur! Open the door at once!" I did as I was told. Seconds later, I was pulled naked from the shower and carried back to my room.

From then on, I was attended around the clock by the hotel manager, or, more often, by a small boy, a street urchin as nearly as I could tell, whose bare feet did not reach the floor from where he sat in the bedside chair.

But perhaps I imagined the boy, as I imagined so many other things. For example, my father pulling up at the base of the hotel in one of his white ranch pickups and honking his horn for me to come down.

Hurry up! The cattle are out again!

I'm coming, Dad!

Or my mother dipping a wash rag into a basin of cool water and pressing it to my forehead.

How are you feeling? Would you like something to drink?

Yes! Water, please! Water!

I was delirious much of the time, so drained by dehydration and fever that I could barely lift my head from my sweat-stained pillow.

This much I do remember. Every half hour or so, two men would appear and force me to drink from a pitcher of warm, milky liquid I later learned was water that had been used to boil rice in a nearby restaurant. I hated the smell of the stuff and would clamp my mouth shut every time the men arrived, but such resistance was futile. As one man held my mouth open with calloused fingers, the other poured the milky liquid into the back of my throat and forced me to swallow. Meanwhile, the hotel manager stood nearby, nodding solemnly. "Very good, very good. Give him all he can take. Yes, yes, that's the way." Otherwise, all I remember is the *muezzin* making his ghostly call to prayer five times a day and the sound of cart horses clip-clopping in the cobblestone street below my window. *The horses, I'd think. I have to get down there and feed the horses!*

But then the fever passed, and I woke to find the boy—for he

was real enough, after all—dozing in his chair beside my bed. I said something to him in a gruff whisper, his eyes flew open in fright, and he ran from the room shouting something in Arabic. A moment later, the hotel manager appeared beside my bed, his face sweaty and full of emotion.

“Monsieur, you’re awake!”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m hungry. Can I have some bread or *café au lait*?”

“*Café au lait!*” the manager said, bringing his hands together at his chest as though in prayer. “Monsieur is awake! He asks for bread and *café au lait!*”

He called down the stairs to one of his minions, then came back into the room and sat down in the chair beside my bed.

“Oh, we were very worried, Monsieur. You can have no idea. The doyen himself thought you might die or have to be admitted to the hospital in Tunis.”

“The doyen?” I asked. “He was here? How long have I been sick?”

“Almost a week,” the manager said, blinking back tears. “But all is well now. The fever has passed. You’re going to be okay, God willing.”

Only then did I begin to understand just how sick I’d been.

• • •

A WEEK LATER, with classes at the faculty set to begin any day, a taxi pulled up in front of the hotel, and a small, brown man in a green track suit got out and came up to my room.

"I am Monsieur Amri," the man said in French, extending a hand for me to shake. He was perhaps fifty years old, a tiny man with a wrinkled face and closely cropped gray hair. "I have a small apartment for rent in Rue Ibn Khaldoun."

As he said this, the hotel manager appeared at the door with a tray of coffee and some of the local sweets called *makroud*. He set the tray on the desk before the open window and hurried back out.

"Eat," Monsieur said, offering me a *makroud*. "Afterward, I'll help you gather your things, and together we'll go to see the little apartment."

"You don't understand," I said. "I've run up a large bill here. I won't be able to pay it—or you—until my salary arrives."

"On the contrary," Monsieur said, picking up a piece of *makroud* and biting into it with tobacco-stained teeth. "I understand very well. And none of what you say matters in the least."

"It doesn't?"

"No." He shook his head firmly. "What matters is that you leave this place immediately and come live with me and my family in Rue Ibn Khaldoun. The rest can wait until your pay arrives in October or November—"

"November!"

"Or December, who knows?"

He dropped what remained of the *makroud* in the middle of the

tray and made a face as if to say, *The pastries Chez Amri are far superior to this.*

“These things take time,” he said, offering me a cigarette and lighting one of his own.

“One must have patience,” I said.

“Yes.”

“And then all will be well.”

“Yes! You see now! Very good!”

I did see. And hear and taste and smell. All around me, the world was exploding in all its glorious and awful detail, its five a.m. calls to prayer and street urchins begging pencils and garbage strewn across alleys for stray dogs and cats to pick through, in accordance with scripture. My part was to stop worrying about it all and start living instead.

FATIMA ESPIRITU

HALF LIGHT

I understand now why I could not look away

from the drawings of a certain butterfly

which survived predation
during the industrial revolution
because it matched the color
of the era's pollution

Were its predators to approach
only closely enough, they'd be seen
as they were, which they one
day would

To perch is not a crime or a
liberation. It is an action and a fact
wrapped up in the context of a
monochromatic map.

To fly into a clean home doesn't
mean to live in a dream, but to slowly
starve until pinned. Did you

know a butterfly can only be pinned in a book
if its body is decorated just
after its death? Or if
its wings are
rehydrated, otherwise it dusts
off into fingerprints, wiped in
the same gesture an American makes
when they are talking about *moolah*,
money, change.

My half light is inside. My parents
didn't kid themselves the same
way yours did.

And if they did, stay with it. Don't
keep still.

A contender is a complicated sound,
flat feet astride the gems and then
the flower, each to win

FATIMA ESPIRITU

WAIVERS AND MAPS

Thermodynamics. If god
had emotion and what would happen
if gravity on earth immediately
went away. Half a ladder on a swivel chair.

I put an elevator in my no.

It did not roam.

A grasshopper farm, each charge
named patience.

The American Studies Departments
are dissolving, she said with a weep
in some part of her body. She stood
to tell the children *you're allowed*
to eat. Your ten minute break
is after math. I made your memory
think of a jellyfish.

The children play a children's game
in which the dead can't vote, can't watch

like coordinates, emotion in a weather. Quick
ideas I promise. A long time probably
Being a jack of all trades is being master of one
trade. She told me to stop
saying liminal. I didn't say that's exactly
the point.

MAUREEN TRAVERSE

JOHNNY, BE GOOD

WOMEN AT THE office give him names—John Boy, John-John, Johnny Angel—each more endearing than the next. Barb in Finance, Devita in HR, and Laurel in Admin cajole until he models a fitted button-down from Arrowhead, then coo their approval. At twenty-three, he knows how to tilt his head, how to smile with only half his mouth, to launch a rejoinder sly as a boy with a slingshot, to stoop to fill his cup at the water cooler and glance over his shoulder as he returns to his cubicle. Johnny, boy, you sure can walk, that's Devita, as he saunters like he always does past the receptionist, a grazing gaze so she knows he sees her. Johnny, boy, like honey off a spoon, like he has no place to be, like nothing could ever trouble him longer than an inch.

Under the surface of every tease is some other tease—*Johnsy, what do you do with that baby face?*—by which they mean soft, by which they mean feminine. He is their boy and not their boy, sitting in the break room on Casual Friday, he combs back his hair, extends his arms so his fingertips brush the bright turquoise accent wall, a sliver of flat, bare stomach visible when his shirt climbs. Johnny, says Barb, holding herself around the middle

like she'd burst, Johnny, you are something, as if he has said anything of note, as if they are talking about more than the swelling pollen count that's plaguing Laurel's sinuses, the parking lot frosted in cottonwood dander, that Thursday evening show where hopeful singers compete, that little girl with the satin voice robbed of the title by some glitzy beauty queen. A crime, he says, though he's never seen it.

Tuesday and Thursday nights he is out with Brian from 4D. After a few pre-game shots of whatever Brian is drinking, they walk across the 270 overpass, shouting to be heard, the rushing traffic like a swollen river. Brian takes Johnny by the arm for emphasis whenever he wants to make a point, saying, man, this guy's a prick, a fucking prick, like he can't let you alone for five goddamn minutes, like if you're going to take a crap you better make it clear you need longer than it takes to piss, because Brian can't stop talking about crap and piss when he drinks. They cross three long blocks to the mall, past fast food islands, gas stations, a gleaming Target sign in the ashy dusk, grown quiet for a stretch until they see the neon martini glass tipping and begin their rounds again, Brian complaining, this shit with the DUI, and Johnny being Johnny, forever smoothing out the wrinkles, and by the time they're inside, Brian is asking the hostess where she's from, with that sweet little twang in her voice, and Johnny catches sight of his reflection in the tinted windows lit by candy-colored lights and smiles at the swaying blade of grass and the tree trunk, his lithe and limby figure beside Brian's solid muscle, so polar they might be illustrations in a children's book, big dog little dog, each one making clear what the other is not.

WHEN JOHNNY INTERVIEWED for his job, which he needed if he was going to keep his distance from home and the tiny town where he'd gone to college, it was Devita and Ken Blazer in the room, and even before it started, while they were still having their nice-to-meet-you-did-you-find-the-place-all-right moment, he recognized the wall he was up against and set himself right, because the Ken Blazers of the world, and there were plenty, had a way of announcing themselves, the line of Ken's haircut so sharp it might hurt you, the bit of extra weight he carried like evidence he'd had the good sense to be bigger, one of an army of fathers and T-ball coaches and youth group leaders who would set you straight with a side-eye, whose duty it was to remind you of who you were. So it was no surprise that, during Devita's pitch about the family atmosphere at the annual picnic at Emerald Lake, Ken elbowed in to say how John should feel free to bring his girlfriend, even though Johnny had never mentioned Kayla finishing up in Cedarville. If you're single you won't be for long, Ken had said, lots of college girls in this town. Devita's brow creased with an admonishing look she must have known would never chip into Ken Blazer's solid sense of right. In that moment, Johnny figured what he needed to know. Whatever power Ken Blazer wielded, he was not well-liked, and when Devita shook his hand at the end, Johnny liked her, and figured she would like him in the ways women typically did—Johnny Dear, Dear John—because they believed he was no threat. As she walked him out, he watched his ghosted form slide over glass suite fronts, Allodial Title Corp, Manley Deas Kochalski, Inteliserv, his faint presence and gentle

features, his chest the opposite of a barrel, his fingers and eyelashes long, his narrow waist and clean jaw. Johnny poses questions simply standing in a room, and questions make some people uncomfortable.

BRIAN WAS THAT sort of person, but not here in Bar Louie with his bare feet up on the bench beside Johnny, Brian, who two whiskeys in, has returned to the subject of his DUI, the court-mandated classes where all they do is watch old VHSes, can you believe this shit, movie after movie of bloody car wrecks, and his father already wrote him off as piss but you know his father drank, he remembers those days real dim, like this one time, rainy light in the windows, his mom on the kitchen phone and his father comes in dripping, hugs the refrigerator humming in this low, creepy way, wet against the shopping list and drawings and photos tacked up, and it's only years later that big brother Drew says something so that it makes sense, his father drank, he doesn't drink now, and his brother blames it on their grandfather, a distance that was the rule in that generation, but Brian has no excuse with a father who sobered, never missed a Little League game and wrestled with them on the floor, see Brian has it made. Sure, Johnny says, don't we all have it made, and Brian laughs and the sound is like the big boom of a firework that startles a trio of girls at the next table, and Brian waves when they cast suspicious glances but Johnny looks away. It's temporary, he tells Brian, and again he has the power here to let it go and move on, he can do that and be better for it, and Brian says he knows it and the thing about that now infamous night was how the bouncer got up in his

face for talking to the bartender, this tiny thing in like half a tank top, and she was handling herself all right, she didn't need help, if she wanted to tell him off that's cool, but don't let some fucking meat sack get up in his grill. When it came time to go he had to give the guy a few parting words, and by the time they got to the car he was high on it, you know what it's like, that light-headed rage, but now he wished Johnny had been there to talk some sense into his drunk ass, and Johnny says it might have made no difference and doesn't point out that Brian has never invited him anywhere except the bar at the mall on the other side of the overpass.

Before they met, Johnny used to see Brian around Village Green, the complex where they live, taking out his trash, sometimes shirtless, or sometimes just baking in the sun in a camp chair, beer in the cup holder. Home to low-level professionals, nurses, and bank tellers, Village Green is usually desolate. Here and there Johnny sees a figure in scrubs or a blue Chase Polo slipping into or out of a car, but that's all he knows of his neighbors, so Brian was an anomaly with his cap and rubber sandals, cargo shorts and Bucks T-shirt, and his habit of shouting O-H at anyone wearing scarlet and gray. Johnny would've said little to Brian beside whatever how's-it-goings necessary to maintain a neighborly existence, except there was something going on in the apartment between theirs, something criminal maybe but at the least downright noisy, and with the walls thin as sausage casing, as Brian had said, and Johnny had laughed at the particularity, that was how it all started, Brian and Johnny exchanging details, because there was a kid involved, sometimes there and sometimes not, ten or eleven,

and that was what got him, Brian had said, knocking his chest with a fist, because that was some fucked up shit.

Late one night that noise culminated in a gust of insults pelted at the walls, a woman hanging from the window with an old stereo speaker grinding guitar and static into the brittle night air. When Johnny heard the voice declare she was going to kill all these mother fuckers, she had a gun and was going to do it, he opened his door to find Brian had done the same. They faced one another for a second before they met in front of the offending apartment. It was Brian who pounded, and Brian who took the boy by the collar when the poor kid opened the door, and Johnny who followed him in as Brian led them all into his apartment, where Johnny fed the kid Skittles and beef jerky and Cheetos, which the kid took piece by piece the way a small animal might while they waited for child protective services.

Once they were alone, it was too quiet, Brian said bitterly, like that lady fucking ruined quiet forever, like from now on quiet would only mean the absence of batshit crazy screaming. He opened a bottle of Jameson which they shared without glasses while Brian talked in a kind of steady flow like a tickertape, mostly about his buddies from college and his job at Nationwide, not the work but the people who would buy you a drink and who had sticks up their asses and the particular ways he imagined they each had sex, all the while inserting random observations about the kid, how his shoes were newish Nikes or how he had dirt under his fingernails, as if any detail might assign moral triumph or disaster to what they had done.

Johnny said little, but found he could not leave, bound by the spell of so much talk. When he finally made it to his apartment, it was nearly four, but he called Kayla anyway, feeling as if he'd wronged her personally, and she breathed into the phone, "Jesus, Johnny, be careful." After that night, when Brian saw Johnny they might go for a drink, and eventually it became routine, like anything you do without thinking.

JOHNNY KEEPS TO his routines because that is how life is lived, on a scaffolding built by some force other than your will. Each morning he spends an hour on the bus up 33, lumbering past sprawling tracts of development, houses in various stages of being built. He cuts across the easy geometry of the parking lot and holds the door open for the receptionist, who averts her gaze. He takes some time to settle in before finding his way to the break room for coffee at nine in the morning, expecting to negotiate small talk with Barb, Devita, and Laurel, but this morning finds Ken Blazer fiddling with the pieces of the coffee maker, saying the ladies usually beat him to it and his wife does it at home. You better not *look* at her before she's had her coffee, he says, and laughs conspiratorially as if they both know what his wife is like, then adds, "It doesn't work right," just to be sure Johnny understands it is the coffee maker itself that is at fault.

Johnny retrieves the decanter from the drying rack and fills it at the water cooler, conscious of how he bends, arranging the filter and scooping the Folgers slowly enough to make clear he's in no hurry to fix Ken Blazer's coffee.

“You good with your hands?” Ken has made a point to try and identify Johnny’s hobbies, to understand who he is and where he fits into the world.

Johnny shrugs, flips the switch, then turns toward the door, but Ken clears his throat and asks how Arrowhead is coming.

Still facing the door, Johnny hesitates, allowing Ken Blazer to step in front and hover close enough to share a waft of cologne.

The survey data is compiled, Johnny tells him, and focus groups are next week.

Ken is nodding and Johnny suspects he already knows whatever he wants to know about Arrowhead. Ken breaks into a smile, says you’re the demographic they want, not that guys care about clothes. In the millisecond between sentences he makes a face, the slightest squint and lift of one shoulder. Arrowhead’s after all-American kids, he says, camping or at the beach, having a good time. You still like to see a girl, right? Towel around her shoulders, fresh face and wet hair, she’s got all she needs because she’s young.

Johnny doesn’t say anything and Ken sniffs the air a moment and Johnny thinks he is smelling the burnt odor of coffee, but then he tilts his head down and looks at Johnny as if over a pair of glasses.

“You smell whiskey?”

Johnny shakes his head and slips past before Ken can explain himself, but doesn’t stop at his cubicle, and heads to the bathroom where he splashes water on his face. On his way back he takes the long way to BNR, outside and around the perimeter of the building. Sun filters through a haze of

cloud cover, and bits of fuzz drift along the air, accumulating at the curb like snow. He names what he sees, the glimmering metal and glass, the lush treated lawn, the manmade lake across Innovation Drive, a tower of water shooting into the air, words unspooling in his mind the way words do when he and Brian come back from Bar Louie and practice their automatic writing, pens to paper, the sentences rolling in, a whole ocean of words filtered through the pen, one at a time until they've each filled their pages, Johnny's idea, instead of hitting up Scores after the bar, because fair is fair, Brian says, they each get their thing, although these days more often than not Johnny gets his thing, maybe because Brian can't drive for six months or because Scores was part of Johnny's hazing and the hazing is over and done with. Brian and Johnny are friends and Johnny no longer needs to prove he can get turned on by topless women gyrating to the thump and spit of electronic music, now they can sit on his living room floor writing an hour or two until his hand is trembling and achy, until they are exhausted and fall asleep and he wakes to Brian puking in the bathroom.

The first time Brian asked him where the hell he learned it from Johnny told him it was what the surrealists did, according to his art history textbook in college, which is a half-truth. He can still picture that textbook, which must have said something about automatic writing, behemoth thing, bound in gray cloth with red lettering stamped on the spine, an impressive brick of information with little charm, long on dates and techniques but short on story. Just who was Max Ernst, and how did he spend his evenings, what shoes did he wear and did he get nervous before an opening? But

none of that was in the book, and apparently, neither was Max Ernst's companion, a painter in her own right, because while he was staring at a plate of *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*, vaguely following the lecture, a girl beside him who'd been flipping through the index suddenly blurted out, where is Dorothea Tanning? The professor paused and the girl, who might have liked the sound of the question, said it again. Where is Dorothea Tanning?

Taken aback, the professor, a portly man who lisped, said, making Max Ernst a sandwich.

Everyone except the girl laughed, even Johnny, although maybe it was just the image of a surrealist eating a sandwich. That girl, Kayla, he might never have spoken with after had he not become curious, gone online and come up with a painting at the Tate Modern, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, two girls menaced by a sunflower.

He could feel the swelter, the soft ropes of hair climbing off one girl's head like charmed snakes, the thick and meaty stalk of the flower, itself huge and gaping like the mouth of some creature, all in the blank hallway of an apartment building, so that, after, he went to the library and printed out the image and taped it into his textbook, right over *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*, and at the next class he made sure to sit beside Kayla and he tilted the book so she could see and her startle turned into a sly smile and after class they bought coffee and went back to her room where she taught him automatic writing.

She had a single twist of hair bleached, a foreign coin with a hole at

the center turned into a necklace, a pointed nose that seemed to dare him.

As they sat on the floor beside her bed, she told him what the painting meant, that sinister, creeping flower and the girls in a trance, how it should tell him something about girlhood, constantly menaced by the specter of one's own sexual promise.

Johnny wondered if she had invented that line herself or read it somewhere, but he didn't care. He liked the way she said *sex* without hesitation or embarrassment. When he reached to examine the coin around her neck and his knuckles grazed her collarbone, she looked surprised. He knew that look, the inevitable reassessment of his manner, and didn't let it stop him. She wrapped around him with ferocity he hadn't anticipated, and they had quick, almost noiseless sex on the floor behind her bed, his excitement heightened by the fact that she'd left the door to her room open.

He was only her second, she confessed when they were done, and he said his third even though it wasn't true.

Like so much else, he did not do sex the way he ought. Too indiscriminate, too thoughtless. Erin whose legs glimmered in the sun after cross country, Sherry who wore bright primary dresses and gave the finger to anyone who called her fat, Nora who was missing teeth her mom could not afford to replace, Diamond who cut herself, or so someone said, not that he'd seen any scars when he'd peeled off her shirt and smelled the vanilla bean lotion, heavy as a family holiday.

BRIAN IS WEIRDLY good at automatic writing, even drunk, and yet his

purpose is not the process but the end result, which he insists on reading aloud during breaks in a voice full with the rhythm of a rapper. Brian is a rhythmic person, and therefore predictable, a person of circling speech patterns, a body that can break into beat at a moment's notice when he suddenly drums the table or bobs his head. He is the loud staccato to Johnny's soft glide. But tonight Brian is almost too drunk to hold his pen, the harrowing walk back across the highway overpass still zinging through Johnny's memory, his heart rate snared every time Brian flung himself at the chain link, and still Brian insists he read aloud, the words foaming out of his mouth, words he can hardly form until, finally, he hangs his head and, without any warning, throws up over the front of his shirt.

Johnny takes the key and lets himself into Brian's apartment for clean clothes, then returns and tackles the gradually crumbling wall of Brian's body. He wipes him down and helps him into a new T-shirt, puts a trash can beside where Brian sits propped against the front door, then sets to work scrubbing flecks of puke out of the wall-to-wall, the sour stink enough to nauseate him, all the while grumbling, you piece of shit, man, you stellar piece of shit, while Brian laughs, until at last, Johnny lays down on the floor and stares at the dark blades of the ceiling fan against the white paint, and Brian, who has started a slurring rant on his father again, interrupts himself to snort back phlegm and says, hey you never say shit about your family, and Johnny says, what does that tell you, and Brian asks, you even got family, and Johnny tells him, yeah out in Zanesville, and Brian says, your dad a prick, and Johnny thinks, here he can do any number of things

but it won't matter because Brian is too drunk to remember, so he says his father isn't in the picture anymore and his mom's still pissed and his brother started lining up his toys in straight lines when he was two and didn't talk until he was five, and Brian makes a low sound then slumps forward and crawls across the floor on his elbows like he's a soldier. Johnny, he says, you can tell me, and Johnny says, tell you what, and Brian puts his head down on the floor, says he hates the spins, and then, whatever you're hiding. Man you're lit, Johnny tells him, lit as a wick, and Brian says, yeah, and flops onto his back beside Johnny so they're both staring at the ceiling, and then Brian starts singing, Johnny-oh-Johnny-be-good, over and over until Johnny says to shut the fuck up and Brian laughs and for a long time says nothing and Johnny realizes that Brian has passed out on his back. He could choke on his own puke, and Johnny has to do something, so he rolls Brian onto his side and props his own body against Brian's back, wedges himself like a doorstep and closes his eyes and sleeps like that until the sun winks between the vertical blinds sending in needles of light and Johnny feels distinctly a hand in his hair, groping as if for clarity, and it goes on a little longer than he expects before Brian groans and curses, says what the fuck I thought maybe I got lucky, and Johnny snorts, who says you didn't, and Brian moans, you shit, he says, why do you let me drink so much, for the love of Christ just stop me.

SLOUCHING IN THE dark behind a two-way mirror, his fingers flicker over the keys of the company laptop, transcribing only the weighted words,

building phrases free of articles and conjunctions while the focus group plays association. *What story photo telling? Friends drive lake long weekend swim dock tan boat tip drink fire dusk. How photo make you feel? Fun young friendly fashionable warm willing. Willing? Open, don't know, wide open, maybe water sky escape.* That's the blond with the pencil-stub ponytail, his T-shirt faded, bearing his teeth whenever he grins, which he does often. By now, Johnny can disassociate from his typing, the opposite of automatic writing, words spilling from the mesh of the speaker straight into his fingers. Focus groups are filmed, but Ken Blazer insists junior staff take notes, old school, he says, training them to think and listen and look. On one side of him Mark from Arrowhead perches on the edge of his chair, hunched over the counter like someone anticipating a large meal, while on the other side, team lead, Cory chews caramel corn as she watches, and he hears her nails in the bowl, her teeth working a kernel, each sound a painful glint, his paper tongue and sour sweat all that's left of the night before.

Inside the room with the focus group is Tanya, a twirl of hair over one shoulder, barely five feet in heels, her voice a big red balloon. She asks questions the way his youth pastor in Zanesville did, like the guy expected you to testify every time he clapped you on the shoulder and demanded, "What's the word out there?" Everyone wears name tags: Danielle emphasized with a little curlicue, Nick and Daryl, the bulk of their block letters like their shoulders, narrow Colin at a tender slant, only Desi in precise script clearly the name at the top of an exam she is well-prepared to take, and the tail on the end of Olivia dangling like her foot in its stylish sneaker.

“What about *this* one?” Tanya is saying. “How does it make you *feel*?”

Twenty-two photographs and they must be waning because Danielle snags a plated cookie and says, *creeped out you know hotties go up lake house serial killer picks off one by one*. Daryl snorts, but now that it is clear they can be themselves, they start to riff on Danielle’s idea, pointing out the couple who will be killed while doing it on the dock, the lonely kid who will disappear into the woods and won’t be missed for hours, the good girl who will escape.

Tanya grows impatient, and flips to the next slide, a row of shirtless muscle, arms slung around shoulders, the lake glistening in the background, the honey-colored light.

“Gay,” Nick says, and Daryl snorts again, spitting a cookie crumb across the table.

Beside Johnny, Cory shifts in her seat. “That’s inevitable,” she says to Mark and pops a caramel corn in her mouth. “But I don’t think it hurts you.”

Colin, the toothy blond, is laughing again at something Danielle said that Johnny cannot remember. A little awkward, he hides his mouth behind his hand when he realizes he’s smiling. Someone must have told him his teeth were large, that he smiled too much, and Johnny wants to tell him otherwise. He imagines Colin owning a kayak and a mountain bike, going into the woods alone, a thing his mother worries about but which Colin says he needs, the escape rewires him. He would describe for Johnny the arch of the sky like the perfect surface of a bowl, the stippled color of a crest

of trees, and Johnny would watch these details play out in the gentle shifts of Colin's face, like light playing against rock.

Someone is tapping, saying his name, and in a half-dream he sees Colin knocking on the two-way mirror.

Johnny opens his eyes. He'd not realized they were closed. It is Cory tapping her painted nails against the plasticine countertop. His hands are in his lap, not at the keyboard. Beside him, Mark from Arrowhead sniffs. For a few minutes they sit in silence, and the weight of Johnny's hangover grows until it clings like humidity, saturating the room. Finally, Cory snaps up another piece of caramel corn, still huffy, and says, "Well, Danielle nearly derailed them with her serial killer bit, but see how Tanya brings them back in line?" Mark makes a noncommittal sound. "It's all in how you handle them," she says. "Like taming animals."

JOHNNY, WHO'S SLIPPED outside and walks the perimeter of the building, lingers in the parking lot under the blare of sunlight, sucking in mouthfuls of warm wind to dispel his nausea, until he hears the eager ascending notes of the tornado sirens wailing, tested every Wednesday at exactly noon, and knows he has stayed out of the office too long. Sure enough, when he returns inside, the receptionist tells him Ken Blazer was asking for him, keeping her gaze on her computer screen, shy as she is around him.

Johnny meanders to the back office and stands in the doorway expecting to deliver an update on Arrowhead, except Ken Blazer tells him to close the door, have a seat. Is he Reds or Indians, Ken asks, and Johnny shrugs and

says, neither, really, and Ken nods as if he has just confirmed something he already suspected. Where was he just now, Ken wants to know, and Johnny considers his options. He could claim the restroom, although that might lead to more embarrassing questions given how long he was gone, so he lands on honesty, he was taking a walk. Getting up to stretch his legs, Ken asks, well that's allowed, but he seems to need a good deal of leg-stretching, and Johnny is about to point out that the leg-stretch is company practice, that you get a few dollars knocked off your health insurance premium for taking on certain health challenges, and walking is one of them, so almost everyone has started looping the atrium or the parking lot, walking in little groups of three or four, but saying so now sounds like he's throwing everyone under the bus, so Johnny leans back, extends his legs out in front of him, emphasizing the sizable task of managing such limbs, and tells Ken Blazer he understands, he'll keep his leg stretching to the bare minimum.

You need a new chair, Ken asks, maybe one of those ergonomic deals like Barb requested, there's money in the budget for accommodation.

No, Johnny says, his chair is fine.

The ladies a distraction?

Johnny sits up straight again, cocks his head as if he hasn't heard.

The ladies, Ken Blazer says, he's seen them chatter with Johnny, he can tell them to stop if it's interfering with work.

No, Johnny says again, there's no problem there, and Ken laughs, and says that's fine, but there's something, isn't there, something that's slowing him down or keeping him from firing on all cylinders. Ken suspects he

knows what it is, and here he hunkers forward over the desk like what he has to say is in the strictest confidence, and Johnny finds himself closer to Ken Blazer's face than he'd like, enough to take in the glisten of his nose. Look, he says, he knows Johnny is young, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have to abide by company policies, and it hasn't gone unnoticed that sometimes Johnny comes to work smelling too much like the night before, does Johnny know what he means? And he's tried to hint at it once or twice, but now he has to write him up for dozing off during a focus group. Whatever goes on in the after hours better stay there, because he can't smell like a bar with clients around. And Johnny finds himself looking past Ken Blazer through the window out into the woods, a thin strip of trees left after the land was cleared, an overlap of green and green and black, jewels of sun between the branches.

Last summer at Emerald Lake Johnny met Mrs. Audra Blazer, who shook his hand like a mechanical doll, saying oh, you're Johnny, before he had the chance to own up, leaving him to wonder how she could possibly know. Well, come *on*, she said, all blond bob and tan capris, and Barb leaned in to save them by saying, he's the baby, but the Wife wouldn't stop. She said Ken had a knack for describing people, really, you should hear him, and Wife squinted as though trying to see Johnny at a great distance, but Johnny said nothing, just let himself be seen, aware of his posture, the placement of his hands, every part as neutral as he could keep it, but then his phone buzzed against his thigh, startling him into a little sway, and Ken laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. Watch out for the bees around here,

he said, they'll get you.

WHEN HE WAS growing up, yellow jackets built a hive in one of the rotted out pillars on their front porch, and Johnny's brother, Will, who had the habit of kicking things repeatedly, took to kicking the pillar again and again until, one day, bees swarmed out and attacked Will and Johnny had to save him, so he jumped on him as if he were on fire, like he'd heard at school, stop, drop, and roll, and the truth is he has no visual memory of that moment, although it must have been terrifying to see those bees move like that, suddenly of one mind, but maybe beautiful, too, like flocks of birds changing direction, a black ripple in the sky. All he does remember is the feeling of those bees' bodies vibrating against his skin as they rolled, the pricks of pain that turned warm, and the dead bees hanging by their stingers from the front of Will's T-shirt, how Will shrieked with his hands over his ears, and the way his father sat in a lawn chair laughing at the spectacle, until he finally went around the side of the house and came back with the hose, not laughing anymore, but resigned, spraying them down the way he might two cats fighting. While Johnny and Will sat in their dripping clothes, their father kept firing in little bursts, teasing them, saying, "You two, you two," linking them inextricably, and maybe because it was one of the last times he could clearly remember his father in their house, Johnny thought of it like a final proclamation on them, his two weird sons, Will marked by his disorder, Johnny by something else.

BRIAN'S VOICE REVERBERATES through the walls of the now empty apartment, a burly, fisting sound, but no one answers. He must be on the phone, cursing and laughing. It goes on so long that Johnny stands outside his door, listening to the undulations, and in a sliver of silence tentatively knocks, and just as tentatively the door opens, and Brian clings to the doorframe, his watery gaze and ruddy cheeks, and Johnny can't help that crumbling feeling, says in an unguarded way, you drinking by yourself?

Brian breaks into a smile. Shit, man, his brother is here, he says, and sure enough Johnny sees a slightly larger version of Brian in the recliner, watching with the detachment of someone who has no skin in the game. There is something in the doubling, the echoed masculinity, that signals Johnny should go home, but, as it sometimes happens, when that little nudge tries to save him, he calmly says no and does the opposite, (in college when he joined a football game because the muscled junior he'd been tutoring at the writing center called from across the quad, Johnny-oh, and he should have understood the complicated layers, but instead proceeded as if it was merely an invitation, slipped into that ring of meaty forms and felt his own body in a way he did not like, as if gravity itself had shifted) and now standing between Brian and his brother, he feels it again, and maybe it should frighten him, but that's the difference between them. Brian, who labors around and around the same injustice, will not let anything go, and Johnny is so fucking good at letting things go, so now that he's here he says, I can hear your drunk ass through the walls, and Brian laughs and punches him in the arm and says, see this kid, he's got a mouth on him. Drew, this

is Johnny from one over.

From there Brian spirals out, back into monologue, stories from high school, someone drunk at a party pissed in Misty's father's golf bag and no one realized so she blamed it on the cat, and Dan Hazard, that was his fucking *name*, they found him half naked in bed with Ashley who said he just passed out and so Brian and Dave Handleman found a Sharpie and drew all over Dan, titties with big nipples and hair on his ass, made him the ugliest woman, that kid was sick, Dave Handleman, that kid was a beast.

After a while it becomes clear that Brian's rant is a list of the many drunks who have fared worse than he has, but his brother Drew remains unimpressed, interjecting only once to point out Brian's being an ass, and Brian lunges at him, slaps his head, calls him cocksucker and pin dick and goes back to his story.

A moment later, Brian stumbles to the bathroom, moving like a buffalo wilting under its own weight the way Johnny saw on a nature documentary once, legs giving out and beast crashing down. Without thinking Johnny goes to right him and they get a little tangled, Johnny's long limbs snagged by Brian's awkward flailing.

When Brian finally crawls to the bathroom, Johnny is left alone with Drew, who says nothing, so Johnny says he's going to grab a beer, and Drew snorts and says, you're the one he drinks with, and Johnny gives him a look because he doesn't feel he's earned that title. To be fair, Johnny says, Brian would drink with anyone. He's got his buddies from the baseball team and some friends from work and now one of the guys from his sober driving

class, and only mid-sentence does Johnny realize that *he* sounds like an ass because what Drew is trying to tell him is they want Brian to stop, and Johnny says, you want him to stop, and Drew snorts as if Johnny is the most egregious moron who has ever had the nerve to exist. When Johnny pictures Brian sober, tight-lipped and on guard, he understands he doesn't want Brian to stop drinking, not for now at least, and before he can say anything, Brian comes lurching back into the room, moving from one piece of furniture to the next, clinging the way survivors of a shipwreck do, and brother Drew gives Brian the longest, hardest look, shifting his jaw around and flexing his right hand as if he's preparing to fight.

He's been good about the driving, Johnny pipes up, he hasn't tried to drive once, but Drew says that's because they took his keys, stole the battery out of his car.

Johnny hardly hears it. Brian is staring at him warmly, as if he's just figured out Johnny is on his side, and Johnny returns his smile.

Brother Drew snorts again, oh Jesus, he says, look at these two, and Johnny hears it before Brian does, because Brian is still smiling.

Drew sits up straight and crows, you know he's still a virgin? Says it's because he drinks too much to get it up, but he can't get it up sober, see I seen the way he is with guys like you, he's always got one around.

That's when Brian's face changes, and in that moment Johnny recognizes the look that muscled senior had, the look Ken Blazer had during the ice-breaker on team-building day when they sat in a circle tossing a tennis ball. When you threw the ball to someone you had to say a fact you knew

about them, and soon it was just Ken and Johnny, Ken stranded with the ball, waiting to throw to Johnny, and Johnny realized he was last because no one knew a thing about him, and Ken's look said he knew he had the power to cause harm. That's how Brian is looking now at Johnny. It's hard to say what happens next. Brian lurches, throws his body like a sand bag, weight his only asset at this point, collides with Johnny, and when they go down it feels like a wall caving in and crushing him. But then Brian rears back, his arm arched behind him, the last thing Johnny sees before his face pops, once, then again, then again, pain on top of pain, his cheek, his eye, a sound wadded up in his throat.

ALL NIGHT RAIN pelts the windows and in his dream it is insects, a swarm of locusts blotting out the sun. When he showers, he is careful to keep his face out of the spray, dabbing with a washcloth that comes back flecked in dried blood. He dresses in his work clothes and goes to run a comb through his hair. He can hardly look at himself. Steam fogs the edge of the mirror, a haze around his face, one side purple and lumpy, the white of his left eye slimy red where blood vessels burst.

His bus plows against a building wind and the driver swears two or three times at debris kicked up, a trash bin that blows onto the road. The sky is a tarnished silver, and someone mumbles in awe, but the other passengers remain quiet, convinced that his ghoulish face is some indicator of his intent toward them. Maybe what he wants is sympathy, and boy is it heaped on him, Barb a little teary when she comes around the corner of his

cubicle, Laurel in tow, what happened, what happened, the flurry of female voices drawing others from behind their dividing walls. Johnny mumbles he was punched in the face, hoping the pure, physical reality will stand in for a story. Did he go to the hospital? Did he file a police report? Laurel says she'll drive him to Riverside and Barb says her brother-in-law is a police lieutenant, she'll give him a call and get an officer out, but Johnny says no, he's embarrassed, his friend got drunk and hit him, he's not pressing charges, and that's when the questions dissolve and the murmurs of sympathy evaporate and Devita steps in, says she wants to talk to Johnny alone, and the crowd defers to HR, parts to let them out. She walks him back to the conference room, her hand on his shoulder even though he's that much taller, and on the way they pass Ken Blazer leaning against the door of his office, arms locked tight over his chest. Devita settles into her chair and looks at him intently enough he has to look away, down at her hands flat against the table, urgency in her spread fingers, pronounced bones. Johnny, she says, like she might sing to a crying child, and Johnny feels himself melting into the chair. Johnny, she says again, there's only so much I can do, up to a point. Johnny, sometimes we think we are managing when we are not, does he know what she means?

Johnny takes a long time to answer because of course he knows what she means but knows, too, if he says so then he will have confessed to her particular view of the situation.

He has opened his mouth, still not sure what will come out when all at once the power snaps off, abandoning them in complete darkness. Devita

utters a surprised “Oh.” They feel along the wall for the door and emerge into the garish suspension of the emergency lights, everyone gathered in reception, tapping at their phones, calling out bits of information, windspeed and inches accumulated.

Johnny exits the suite and weaves between the people huddled in the atrium, interrogating one another on the severity of the storm. When he opens the front door of the building he anticipates a blast of wet wind, but finds the air is still and the rain has let up, merely dotting his shirt and bare arms as he descends the steps. Above, the sky churns a sick yellow-green, and beyond the parking lot the trees breath their rain-like sigh. The road and patches of grass, the sea of pavement all around, is littered with branches and tumbled garbage, at his feet a split-open inedible tree fruit, husk of skin and meaty middle. Then, out in the empty field that borders the adjacent property, a wall of wind appears, the gray of stirred up dirt, here and there a flash of metal like lightening, the green of a mangled tree or a sheet of grass. The wall appears to grow and he knows he should retreat, warn everyone inside, crawl under his desk the way he did in elementary school, tornado warnings, but he stays where he is, ready to face down the storm with his damaged face swelled up like a piece of ripe fruit, the whooshing in his ears like the thunder of a heartbeat.

He cannot ignore his desire to stand his ground, his presence so solid, for the first time maybe, as real as anyone, real as Ken Blazer, who on team-building day finally tossed that ball to Johnny, said in his weird Ken Blazer way, I’ll bet he’s a heartbreaker, bet no woman is safe around him, and

while it was just Ken Blazer's attempt to remake the world in his own image, now Johnny hears it differently. He knew what Erin and Nora, Sherry and Diamond, and all of them did in girls' group at Tree of Life, everyone passing around a cup to spit into or a chewed piece of gum, all the while the youth pastor demanding, would you drink it, would you put that in your mouth? He has tried to answer the question Kayla has spent two years asking with his body, a question Brian has never asked but Johnny longs to answer anyway.

The wind turns to suction that batters his already battered face and sprays his back with a ripple of rain. But he will not move on his own, and he knows if Brian came slinking back, if he hung his head and said, I hurt you, Johnny wouldn't do what he should, wouldn't turn into the air or the sky, but would hold his form and say, fix it.

And Brian would say he can't, would say Johnny's lucky he can get it up for a girl so he can hide.

And Johnny would laugh and say, I can't hide, man, you know I can't.

HARI ALLURI

IT IS RELENTLESS, THIS WAY CROSSROADS KEEP ON FORMING

There are so many days I forget to begin with wonder.
This day I begin wondering what time
I switched last night from beer to sleep. When I get to my homegirl's
she offers a glass of water. I finish, pour some more, lie down
beside the bowl. More water to begin: atop a table

an ocean's reach of time away: clay vessel, still soft, mouth like a frog,
receiving incisions
on its lid, incisions that multiply to begin.

Rice: it could be what I'm from. No, I've not been told
what those repetitions say. Beware hunger that exceeds terraces
cut in mountains: it might drown you. To begin, here, I ask them, please,
call back a loved one, one whose body can no longer be found.

Here: a mainland city, an island to our people. *Shuffle*
these cards. I shuffle. Afraid
because an island is a form of leaving, I could be
made of distance to begin. When a card leaps out the deck
in one pull, my homegirl stokes a vision. An elsewhere
dawn, a cove to begin. Rattan

at rattan. The warmth of collective exertion to begin. In every triangle step
aside

and swipe—isang baksak!—a sound to begin. Archipelago, so these are echoes

to begin. I am on my back. She senses what I can't sense—my homegirl: my
guide.

A figure floats above the shallows, their starcloth

dipping ripples to begin

what is below. The figure accepts

homegirl's tired head at their left clavicle. I don't see the sinking
even though my eyes are closed. The expression I miss to catch

on my guide's good face, it appears to begin the coming days: *although you
miss*

your brother whom the waters took, the ripple to begin remains.

The part of ourselves continuing undrowned: kapwa.

She waves a hand like my kapwa

shifts all around. Lid to begin, of clay. Necklace to begin. Tree bark

faces, rain-touched to begin. Amulet and scar. Each of these

the shape of divination. To begin to tell me

what she saw, tears above laughter: *it cradles, like a residence*

for spirits, what seeks you. My homegirl listens

in ritual time. To begin. To begin. And, appearing on my inner eyelids,
the only vision is a shadow, hopping across,

in retrospect, the longing my homegirl translates—it is relentless, this way
crossroads keep on forming. To begin an island, lava simply breaches

the distance creation flings us. Flings us

so we might join. To begin an ocean,

find a part of you you do not need to seek. Kapwa

might mean the circle doesn't remember to begin—doesn't because
it does not have to. If I must be made of anything,
make me of islands. Of what's between. An origin
symbol to our line, a tattoo
by the hand of the eldest star. As on a living clavicle,
as on a mouth of clay.

*—for Dags, after Chris Abani / after Niki Silva, with
interpolations of Phanael Antwi, Julay, Shaunga Tagore,
& Jana Lynn Umipig.*

GREGORY ARIAIL

MOUNTAINS I'LL NEVER REACH

WEIRD THINGS HAPPEN in the mountains. There is so much variety of landscape and perspective that perception gets confused. Water flows uphill, snow falls from the ground, cliffs rise subterraneously, the Milky Way sparkles inside granite, and the moon sets at dusk. Never in moments of clarity do mountains move me, only during sudden accidents and aberrations. These “spots of time” or imaginatively-charged places are not revelatory, necessarily, merely full of a strange emotion I’ve grown addicted to over the years. I don’t learn anything from this emotion. It doesn’t alter my religious stance or contain the transformative spiritual potency experienced by mystics in their alpine visions, although it is certainly aligned, in a secular way, with this tradition.

Mountains are not my churches or altars, as they were for John Muir. They are not symbols of the eternal, the infinite, or the Romantic sublime. The mountains I love are not the ones I experience directly, that abuse my ankles and knees, whose rocks cut and bruise, and whose resident insects—especially in Maine—lance into and scoop out skin. Every time I climb a mountain or hike across a mountain range I swear I’ll never do it

again.

What keeps me coming back to mountains across great distances is a different caliber of experience: *déjà vu*, moments when geographies blur, when a space or place feels extraterrestrial, when a passage from a novel or a scene from a film invades the landscape before my eyes. I've come to the conclusion, and have reconciled myself with it, that I don't love the thing itself, those masses of uplifted rock, but something beyond them, both less and more. Shunryū Suzuki, in his *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, quotes a famous Chinese poem: "I went and I returned. It was nothing special. Rozan famous for its misty mountains; Sekko for its water." Part of me agrees with this proverb wholeheartedly, especially when I'm in some high country and the weather has turned miserable or dangerous. Mountains are mountains. Why am I wasting my days in these endless labyrinths of wood and stone? They are nearly interchangeable from state to state, from continent to continent, with only slight variations (to the amateur eye) in geological and ecological detail, which sometimes thrill me and at others leave me cold.

But then there are those strange moments I always tend to underline or asterisk in books and that return to me when the conditions are just right and landscape overlaps with memory and imagination: the passage, say, in Wordsworth's 1799 *Prelude*, when a cliff uprears its head and strides after him; in Hawthorne's "The Great Carbuncle," when two lovers climb so high into the White Mountains that a character mourns the loss of the earth, which she fears they'll never reach again; or Jacopo

da Valenza's 1509 *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*, a painting that presents a topographically impossible mountain, a conglomerate of staircase, village, sheer cliffs, and plains curving high above water-blue hills. When I suddenly feel transported to another world—the world of a book, a film, a painting, a composite image of a lunar or planetary mountain-landscape snapped by NASA—that's when mountains, transmuted into a collage of associations, become necessary to me.

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MAXWELL MONTES, a basaltic mega mountain soaring seven miles above Venus' mean radius, is thought to be blanketed by metallic snow, fine cold rainbow particles of bismuth sulfide and pyrite. Once, on a butte in the Grand Tetons, some friends and I came upon a block of snow, resting on the slope like a sleeping elephant; within the snow were red and violet stains of algae, along with blue spruce cones leaking crystalline sap that glowed golden as the sun set. I wouldn't have found this moment as memorable or beautiful if I hadn't thought of that prismatic snow on Venus's highest mountain, and forgot my friends for a moment, imagining I was on the second planet. In my mind's eye the two landscapes wobbled and fused like two drops of water.

I've always enjoyed representations of mountains as arenas for punishment and purgation because, as reprehensible as these actions are, they invite a procession of weirdnesses and surreal images, as in the allegorical

paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. A 12th century monk, Tnugdal, envisions sinners punished in places of uncommon dimensions: deep gorges and a high mountain. This is a common medieval trope, and demons frequently toss lost souls into fiery fissures in distorted crags in paintings by fourteenth century artists such as Giotto and Buffalmacco.

Dante's broken mountain chain in *Inferno*, the *Malebolge*, is even weirder than the common fourteenth-century fare and charged with dark visions; the name itself literally means evil pouches, sacks, or bellies, and the mountains' concentric valleys intertwine the sinners like intestines, where they boil in tar pits and are speared and flayed by demons if they come up for air. Not long ago, while walking through an alpine bog in the White Mountains, I mistook a gnarled stump, the remains of a white pine struck by lightning, most likely, for a medieval peasant's hat. And the thought of one of Dante's sinners, vegetating under the mud with only a hat above the surface, reminded me of the *Malebolge*, instantly curing my boredom and fatigue.

• • •

FROM VERONA RUPES, a twelve-mile-high cliff more than twice the height of Mount Everest on Uranus' low-gravity moon Miranda, a person can fall eight minutes before hitting the ground. This landscape, so improbable and distant it's nearly imaginary, I like to picture visiting. In this daydream I imagine myself (with a smile) as the singer Björk, whose persona in

“Hyperballad” throws little odds and ends off a cliff every morning, listening to the sounds they make as they fall, following them with her eyes until they crash against the rocks far below. I’ve spent thousands of hours climbing mountains, but I doubt more than eight minutes have meant anything to me. If each luminous moment that wounded me and grafted itself onto my memory was a trinket, I could throw all of them off Verona Rupes, watching until they disappeared and became soundless, with plenty of time to return to my lover before she woke up in the morning.

For me, then, mountains are a product of art—a chance encounter of the conceptual and the actual. I’ll suffer for months—as I did on my thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail—for a handful of these stirring misperceptions and amalgamations. The grime, the scrapes, the twisted ankles, the chafing, the tendonitis, the poison ivy, the ticks, the mosquitoes, the vagrant sociopaths, the rain, the lightning, the swamp foot, the dysentery—I’ll endure it all for a few quick shots to the heart.

I hated mountains as a kid. And yesterday I hated them, too. But there’s always an accident on the horizon, a particular combination of geography, weather, and art that will feed my emotional addiction. So today I’m back to dreaming, knowing full-well the mental, physical, and financial costs, of an expedition to Denali, the third most topographically prominent mountain on earth. There, next autumn, the tundra will turn rusty, the wolves will howl, and the aurora borealis will wave green banners. I’ll arrive before the first big snowfall, but will shiver through flurries and icy gusts. I’ll be alone or with a friend who is, bless them, already annoying

me. I'll search for something in Denali that probably isn't there; and even if it is, the apparition will, in a flash, vanish.

HAYDIL HENRIQUEZ

THE MIRAGE OF BEING

<p>on the day you begin to die, your throat will feel it first. a cotton flower unwinds, withers backbone, quickens past your gullet stations itself on an iris. calla lily, both names foreign to its carcass named after an Italian botanist our lives. fleeing</p>	<p>how quickly cotton neither a calla nor a lily. whose death was not recorded monarchs by the stone hedge.</p>	<p>upwards. flower becomes calla lily. classified Zantedeschia genus, record this. we fade. how much of us remains.</p>
<p>1.8 people sink in exhale one whole the way Washington murdered in our own our existence is eraseable. named after our masters, hung to dry, in. then out of style. reincarnates. <i>is.</i></p>	<p>now. while we remain. and fourth fifths of a person. now. now. is washed into us. apartments. transversable. our worn names, is re-extinct.</p>	<p>now. how many of us will just fade? shot down. Fred Hampton. defaced by linguistic aesthetic standards. we were better off before you found us, slowly fade, is re-extinct. <i>is.</i></p>
<p>we did not know primero se llevan tu alma, we've been living in worlds</p>	<p>we could die twice. some will not remain.</p>	<p>they should have warned y despues la memoria de tu respiracion. dictated by thud thuds,</p>

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