

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 94 *CutBank* 94

Article 1

Spring 2021

CutBank 94

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(2021) "CutBank 94," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 94 , Article 1.

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CutBank is published biannually at the University of Montana by graduate students in the Creative Writing Program. Publication is funded and supported by the Associated Students of Montana, the Pleiades Foundation, the Second Wind Reading Series, Humanities Montana, Tim O’Leary, Michelle Cardinal, William Kittredge, Annick Smith, Truman Capote Literary Trust, Sponsors of the Fall Writers’ Opus, the Department of English, the Creative Writing Program, Kevin Canty, Judy Blunt, Karin Schalm, Michael Fitzgerald and Submittable, and our readers and donors.

Subscriptions are \$17 per year or \$27 for two years. Make checks payable to *CutBank* or shop online at www.cutbankonline.org/shop.

Our reading period is September 15 - February 1.
Complete submission guidelines are available online.

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All correspondence to:
CutBank
English Department, LA 133
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812

Printed by McNaughton & Gunn

COPYRIGHT © 2021, ISSN: 0734-9963, ISBN: 978-1-939717-42-9

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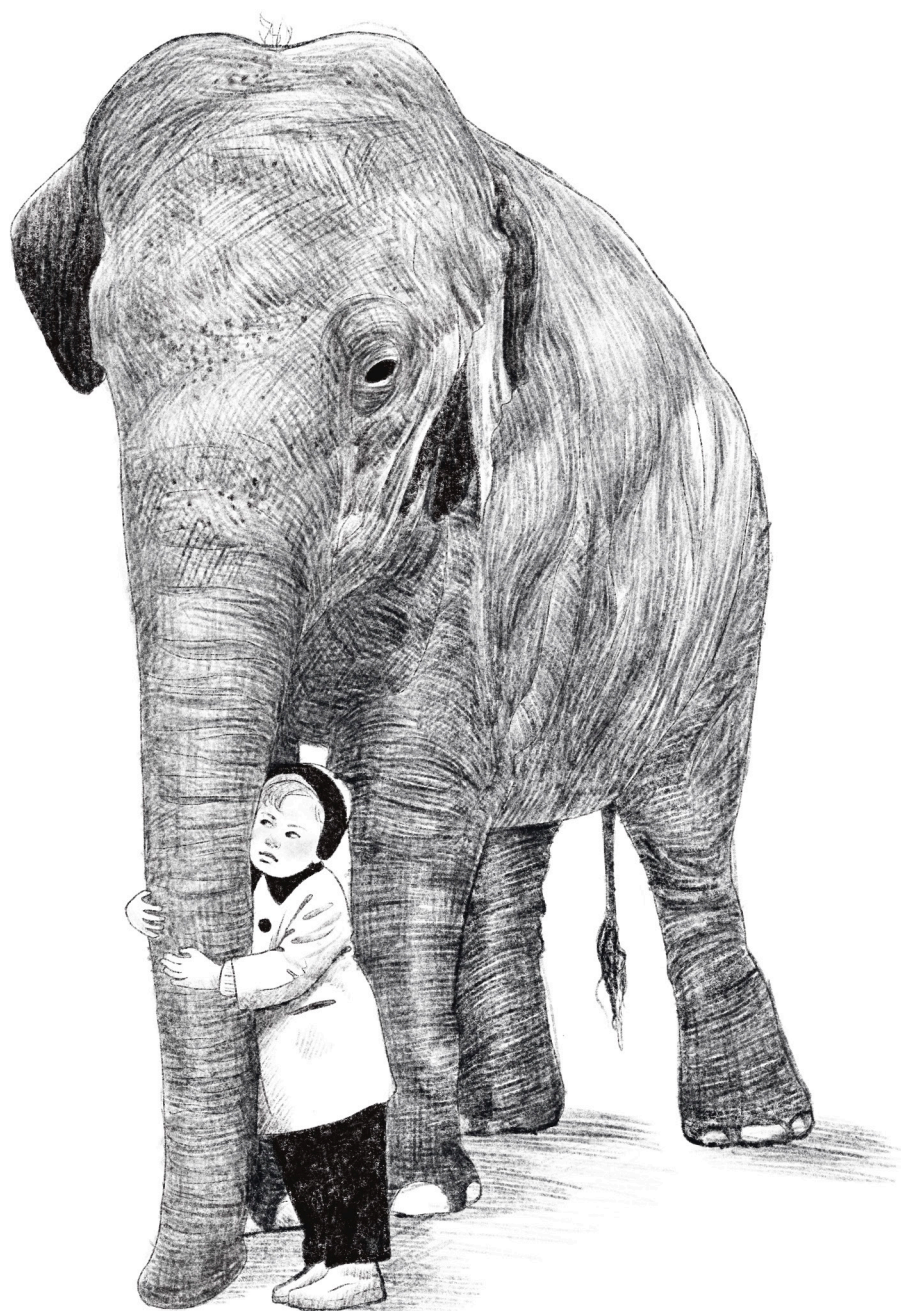
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MAX GRAY

HEALTHY AND HAPPY

CORY SNUCK AROUND the side of the house, skirting the gravel path. “Stay, Randi,” he hissed.

Elephants were useful for a lot of things. Randi could flatten anything or anybody, he could make a trumpet sound, he was a dignified creature, and he could fly. Cory was proud to have the world’s only flying elephant at his side. Often they’d go flying at night, after Cory’s parents went to bed. With the cold wind whipping his ears, Cory leaned on Randi’s leathery neck and snatched stars like fireflies. They circled the house from so high his dad’s pickup truck looked like a tiny red button.

The neighbor’s dog, Stephanie, whimpered in Randi’s presence. Elephants were powerful and Cory understood the responsibilities that came with owning a pet, so they tried to avoid the dog whenever possible. Cory’s art teacher, Mrs. Shelly, told him that elephants needed water to stay healthy and happy. So the two of them hung around the fish pond on the far side of the lawn. Their neighbor kept Stephanie tied up to the back porch of her house.

Randi could do practically anything, except for stealth invasions. Unfortunately, this mission called for it. Black ops. He rubbed dirt under the elephant’s eyes to camouflage him.

Coincidentally, the enemy resembled his mother. Cory’s eyes, just above the windowsill, took in the scene: the woman, forehead wrinkling, yellow rubber gloves and soap suds. The walls were covered in white tiles. Papers, strewn napkins, and scattered fruit cluttered the table behind her. In case a

strike team needed to be debriefed, Cory noted the exits. The enemy was unarmed. She would never expect—

“Cory!” The woman jumped. Through the window pane her voice sounded submerged. “You scared the heck out of me!”

He sighed. “You blew our cover. Good job, Randi.”

“Come inside right now if you want any dessert. Hop to it, young man.”

The elephant turned and moved slowly through the backyard, tail flipping languidly from side to side. Cory followed, mouthing the intelligence information he’d gathered. First rule of double-confidential team was never to keep written reconnaissance records.

At Concord Elementary School, next to the swing set, he’d attempted to introduce the double-confidential game to a boy named William. William had hair the color of dead grass and never looked at anything for more than a few seconds, giving the impression either of restlessness or extraordinary indifference. The boy glanced up from an ant writhing beneath a dirty fingernail to briefly consider the word “confidential.”

“It’s not the same here though,” Cory said, “because my elephant can’t come to school.”

The boy squinted as if Cory was very far away and asked if he believed in God.

“I don’t know. Maybe. My mom does.”

“That’s smart because He’s real.” William concluded the ant’s agony with the palm of his hand. “That’s why they bury you when you die. It’s because God lives under the ground, where He can get you and take you to heaven. If you’re smart you believe that.”

Cory’s stomach made a sound like a boot coming down on a mud puddle, and he wondered if he ate too much for lunch. He tried to locate the ant, but the wood chips had swallowed it. William muttered something and wandered off, inspecting the flecks of dirt that stuck to his palm.

Cory’s mother called him again from inside the house. The elephant wandered over to the far corner of the yard and began sucking water out of

the fish pond. Cory put his hands on his hips.

“Hey, I have to go get ice cream,” he said. “But hey.”

The elephant blinked.

“Do you know anything about the Bible?”

Randi tore up some grass with his trunk and put it in his mouth.

“Fine. Never mind.”

Cory walked across the lawn, dandelions whispering against his ankles, and opened the back door. His mother dried her hands on a dish towel, still wearing her blue jacket and skirt. She had a special name for the outfit.

“Mom,” he said, accepting a small bowl with two scoops of vanilla ice cream, “what do you call your clothes?”

“What?”

“Randi!” He scowled. “Stay outside. I’ve said it a million times, you can’t come in the kitchen, you’ll get the floor dirty.”

“Oh, you mean my ‘grindstone getup.’ That’s nice you remembered that, darling. Now eat up quick, you’ve got to get to bed. Your father’s tired, so he won’t be helping with homework tonight.”

The ice cream rested in an indecisive mass at the bottom of the bowl. He saw the elephant outside the window and made a face.

“And honey, please stop talking to your pet friend. Bobby.”

“Randi!”

“Randi. It’s very strange.”

He licked the spoon using his best iguana tongue and thought of the first time he met Randi.

The town had been mummified, coated with big flakes that packed together to form perfect little missiles. Uniformly buried, the houses in his neighborhood creaked and stretched beneath the snow.

Cory’s dad parked the truck at the bottom of the hill. The emergency brake locked with a nice grinding sound. His dad wore the red and black flannel, Cory’s favorite jacket that did not belong to him. Gazing out the window, he told Cory to go ahead and play, and reminded him again in his tired voice not to ask about a snowball fight, he wouldn’t be doing that,

run along now. After prolonged resistance, his father succeeded in getting him out the door with a sled wedged under one thickly padded elbow. As Cory slipped effortlessly down each side of Dooley Hill, launching clumps of frost into the sky, his chapped lips repeated his dad's words. Run along now, run along.

He couldn't remember exactly when the elephant appeared. Randi accompanied him on several sled rides. Neither of them spoke. They let the burdened pine trees sail by quietly.

Then they lay together (Cory lay while Randi sprawled on his haunches, snow flakes drifting from his flopping ears) at the base of the hill. They talked about baseball, how many stars there were, and, upon the elephant's suggestion, the heat of the Serengeti. That made Cory feel warm, and when he looked at his hand, it was a vivid red. When he looked past his trembling, numb fingers he saw the red pickup truck with his dad's small, dark figure huddled inside. Randi asked why Cory's dad wasn't sledding and he said he didn't know.

The ice cream had melted into a lumpy puddle of cream. Cory abandoned the table and went into the next room. His father sat on the couch, outlined by fuzzy television light. Cory settled next to him and listened to the television cheering and laughing.

"Daniel," Cory's mother called in from the kitchen, "did you hear the news?"

His dad grunted softly.

"The neighbor's dog died. The one that used to go on the roses."

"Stephanie?"

"That's right. Isn't that sad?"

"You bet," his dad said, and turned the volume up.

"I told them it was a shame," she called. "They said they don't know what caused it. Didn't expect it at all."

The house was noisy with the sound of the television and clattering dishes. Cory sat still and looked at the carpet.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, buddy?" His father's voice sounded tired.

"Is that true about Stephanie the dog?"

"Probably, pal."

The sounds of the dishes and kitchen faucet stopped.

"Dad?"

"Yesss." He drew out the word in a deep rumble.

"Does that mean my elephant Randi could die too?"

"Well." His dad sighed and lowered the volume again. "I just don't know, buddy. Isn't it time for bed? I can only answer so many questions in one night."

"Honey," Cory's mother said. "Daddy's right. I think it's time you went upstairs now."

Cory didn't hear her. The sounds around him faded to a muffled buzzing. He went through the kitchen, opened the backdoor, and stepped out onto the porch.

"Randi?" he said quietly.

He couldn't see the elephant in the darkness.

"Randi?"

Cory heard the fine screeching of crickets, and above him there were too many stars to count. Later, when his mother touched his shoulder, tired of repeating herself, he was still there, standing on the porch, staring at the black, silent earth.

EMMA DePANISE

GOLIATH FROG SOOTHES MY MOTHER'S MORNING SICKNESS FROM HER BEDROOM WINDOW

Nestled near a birdbath with shells
and grey stones, I can't see through her

window but I hear her every
groan. I press my palm to my own

stomach, imagine. There is nothing
but cicada shells, no more space

to grow. I don't know if there are any eggs
inside the womb I built in the black night

but I moved the stones, I built the water
for something to live in and leave. I tell

her, *you are both a tree and a leaf.*
I tell her, *your curls are a current*

a minnow wants to get caught in. I tell her *I can't*
sing but I can whistle. I exhale fall air

and I don't know if her curtains
are closed. I don't know if she's back

from the bathroom or shouting for a plate
of toast or if the wind is rubbing

the branch against her window
but my whistle is the wind now

and the wind doesn't need
to be heard, or touched.

BETH SUTER

FIELD GUIDE

I keep going back to the pelican
in a sparse Oklahoma prairie,
the wonder of a creature displaced.

I want to tell you about its survival
as if it were something like mine.
I want to give you the wordless

with feathers, something light
enough for you to carry,
maybe braid into your hair

even if it's from a mockingbird,
an escapee from Paradise's ashes
singing like the birds that didn't make it.

There ought to be a gospel
in every field guide,
a hymnal for those alive and gone

like the white owl
perching on the soft bones
of our drought-stricken birch,

wholly itself, no symbol of mine, just
giving you what I've been given
like the sharp-shinned hawk

striking at the feeder—
how the air filled with dove-colored down,
hunger's softness

covering the ground like shed petals.
I want to give you the beauty of what's left
like a woman on her knees

overcome by phantom pregnancy.
Can I tell you a secret?
She named the impossible

fluttering Phoebe.
I wish I could give you more
than a prairie girl awed by a seabird,

that lone pelican in a split willow.
I want to give you its salvation,
to tell you the pelican found a way home

or learned to eat catfish from the mud.
The child that was me wanted to know,
of course I only saw it that once.

THE MAN FROM MONTANA

ONE FALL, I had this boyfriend, the Man from Montana, although he wasn't from Montana, and he didn't consider himself my boyfriend. He started calling himself the Man from Montana after he moved to Wyoming for a residency, and I joined him in a shotgun house by the train tracks, where over a hundred years ago, railroad workers had lived. He was from Washington, D.C., but he dressed like a cowpuncher that fall in tight jeans, a fringe jacket, and caiman skin boots. His name was James.

We met that spring at his reading in D.C. He liked my question and came over to talk to me while we ate rosemary crackers. Rosemary for remembrance was his line. I laughed. I'm Ophelia, I said. It was important to him that we take things slow. When I spent the night at his row house, I was careful to leave before the store grilles rattled up unless he wanted me to stay, then I stayed. I was surprised when he asked me to join him in Wyoming. He called me after he'd arrived. Please come, he said on the phone. It's too quiet here, and I miss fucking you.

I was twenty-two and supposed to start a paid internship with a political magazine that fall. I turned down the job and relinquished my basement in a shared house in Eckington to come to Wyoming with James. He was older, an up-and-coming writer with a well-received first novel. You couldn't apply to the Owen Wister Residency; you had to be found. The residency covered our rent, and I could continue my part-time remote job as a copy editor. I was excited to tag along, imagining that James and I would become more serious. Even if we did not, I hoped to meet other writers.

Back then, I wanted to be a writer for myself and my father, a 58-year-old civil engineer from Four Corners, Montana who loved Western plants and sci-fi novels. My father had health problems and had recently said he regretted not getting to see intergalactic space travel before he died or read one of my stories in print. You're not dead yet, I said. It was our joke. James was the first guy I dated who asked about him, and he really listened. Younger guys I was with were afraid of sick dads.

The house in Wyoming was in a college town where students receded during the summer like water. It was unprotected, on a high plain without enough trees compared to Montana where I grew up. I arrived in mid-September, two weeks before first snow. On the hopper plane from Denver, a rangy older woman told me to see the prison and the rocks. The prison was historic, and the rocks were at Vedauwoo. Just off I-80, she said. I didn't know how to tell the plane woman I was afraid of rocks, and I didn't have a car. I called a taxi from the airport, as James was writing. When I arrived at the house, I passed square-jawed boys walking to campus for their fall classes. I wanted to wrap coats around their skinny pink arms.

The house was managed by a local landlord who lived next door. James was taken with the landlord and told me about him as soon as I arrived. He's a standup guy, James said, as he gave me the tour of the house. His wife died, awful. He used to work on a rig near Williston, North Dakota. He's a hunter. He makes jalapeño poppers with cream cheese and elk. He's not contrived in any way.

How did his wife die? I asked.

James paused in the kitchen, connected to three other rooms in a straight line, each room separated by a tied-back curtain. He got a beer from the fridge, hitting the cap on the wood counter. He was lean like a rockstar, with sinewy arms and a nervy energy about him that suggested he'd have a hair-trigger in a fight. I didn't ask that, Evie, he said. You can store your things over there.

In bed that night, James pushed up my nightgown and wedged a finger inside me. The house was cold, and his smell was new, like his clothes and

his name. Every part of my body felt dry. After more of this probing, I told him I was sick from the high altitude, which was partly the truth.

I never got sick, he said, turning over.

One block away, the train slowed downtown, shrieks cascading from the wheels. The wind churned; I couldn't sleep. I went to the back porch with my notebook to write about my dad. I was convinced his was the story I needed to write that fall, though I couldn't explain why I felt that way.

Our yard was connected to the landlord's yard. Rabbits flounced through the creeping bellflower and ragwort. On the landlord's porch, close to our porch, a Yeti was filled with melted ice, Miller Lite cans bobbing in a dirty lake. At the end of the landlord's yard, twenty feet away, there was a shed with velvet buck antlers tacked to the door. A round light swiveled, danced in the window. I watched it, wondering if the person inside was going to come out, but the window went dark.

In my notebook I wrote: My dad saw ghost lights tubing down the Madison when he was nineteen. It was UFOs, he told me, but my mother, who was there, said it was only a storm. I felt sad for my father when I fished with him on the river. For him, I wanted to see something real.

• • •

THE MORNING AFTER I arrived in Wyoming, the landlord came over to make some repairs. The former tenant left fist-shaped holes in the bedroom wall and in the kitchen, splashes of a faded pink liquid.

They probably hung meat there, James explained to me over breakfast. Bison.

How interesting, I said.

Dead animals are forbidden on the property, the landlord told us when he arrived. This rule was instituted after a student skinned rabbits in the bathtub in order to make a winter stew.

The landlord had a broken leg. Even bent over on crutches, he was enormous, built like the overgrown boys I grew up with. When he met me at the door, he tipped his cowboy hat and called me ma'am. Knowing men such as him back home, this display of chivalry made me suspicious.

James, standing behind me, looked at the landlord's hat like he wanted to try it on.

I used to hunt with my father, James said.

His father was a diplomat with the U.S. State Department, United Kingdom.

What'd you hunt? the landlord asked, walking into the house.

Mountain lion, mostly.

The landlord nodded. Tastes like pork.

I tried to catch James' eye, but his gaze skated past me to a woman in the doorway. She had a key to our house and two cans of paint. I gathered she was a college student who did odd jobs for the landlord. She wore jeans with white stitches down the sides and a silver belt buckle indicating she was a barrel racing champion. Her name was Bentley. Like the car, she told me, striding to the bedroom. She interned at the radio station and would announce a livestock auction that weekend. I can help you with that, she said, as James struggled to unfurl the ladder. She strapped on a tool belt and climbed the ladder by the bed, cracking some joke about a 14-inch T-bone that made James laugh. The walls were lacquered with primer. She must have primed them before I arrived.

I watched her from the kitchen, and the landlord watched me.

The last girl who lived here disappeared, he said.

That's terrible, I said.

Hiking, he said.

You have to tell people where you're headed, Bentley called over, craning her neck around on the ladder. You can't just say you're going to Vedauwoo and expect people to be able to find you.

I pictured the eerie rocks I'd seen online, lichen-streaked and ancient.

Are you living here? the landlord asked me.

Evie's just a friend, James said from the bedroom. She's visiting.

Where are you visiting from? Bentley asked.

D.C., I said. But I grew up in Montana.

She nodded approvingly. Are you a writer, too? she asked.

From the other room, James looked at me hard.

No, I said. I haven't published anything.

He helped Bentley down from the ladder, steadying his hands on her hips. I considered making a joke, how maybe James was trying to make me jealous, but I didn't want to embarrass him, so instead I looked out the window at the Siberian peashrubs, which I knew from my dad could survive temperatures as low as -30 degrees. Tell me more about the rodeo, I heard James say.

• • •

ON SATURDAY, IT was James' turn to host the residency potluck. For the occasion, he purchased a new cowboy hat, a white Stetson, online. How do you like it lil' lady? he asked, spinning me around.

You look like the landlord, I said. He gives me the creeps.

You're so judgmental, James said, letting go of my hand. You could learn a lot more by talking to the people who live here, rather than the writers. You should get to know Bentley.

The doorbell rang, and James hared over.

The Man from Montana, someone exclaimed.

The residents scudded through the door in a haze of perfume and literary gossip. They brought too much wine, not enough chips. I orbited James' glow. He didn't introduce me as a writer or his girlfriend but as Evie, this is Evie. He was in the kitchen talking to the sci-fi novelist, whose books my dad loved, a handsome woman with short black-and-grey speckled hair and a serious gaze.

We have this idea the fiction writer should disappear into the story, but I view this act as a form of contrivance, James was saying. If this is who you are, why avoid being recognized? he asked.

The sci-fi writer laughed. I'm sorry, she said. I was laughing about something else.

I was too nervous to approach. I had four drinks on an empty stomach. This was fine back home, but I'd forgotten the altitude. I drifted through the house like an inflatable girl. A well-known male writer paddled after me. I hate parties, he said. I'm not sure why writers have parties at all.

No one listens, I agreed. They're just thinking of their next story to tell.

James jockeyed into the living room to introduce himself.

Everyone calls me the Man from Montana, he said. Like the movie.

James is from D.C. like me, the sci-fi writer said, sipping tea. He lives in Georgetown.

Why don't you get us more ice? James asked her.

She looked at him like he was a troublesome student.

I'll get the ice, I said. I'm from Montana. James set a story in my hometown.

Five Corners, he said.

I knew better than to correct him.

I haven't read it yet, I said.

Slipping out the front door, I heard the well-known writer praise a story James had published, and I was relieved for him. I walked to the neon gas station near the train tracks, the sharp ice bag cutting into my shoulder on my return. The air was frigid, but the sky was a strange warm yellow. I smelled cigarette smoke. A resident leaned against the side of our house, surrounded by the tall purple bellflowers taking over the yard. She was thin and tattooed, with an old-fashioned dress, green eyes, and a small mouth, painted dark. I hadn't noticed her inside before with the others.

Men, am I right, she said.

I dropped the ice. Can I have one of those?

She laughed and handed me a cigarette. When she moved to light me,

she missed, catching her hand against the house. I wondered if she was also altitude drunk. I'm so hungry, she said. I really want dumplings. There's a guy I know who makes baozi. I'll give you the number.

She took out a sharpie and wrote the phone number on my arm.

The girl in your house, she said. They found her eventually.

The missing girl? I asked.

She nodded. When they found her, her eyes were a different color. She wore different clothes. When she spoke, her words were not her words. She was there, but she wasn't the same.

She stared into the gloaming.

I should get back to my boyfriend, I said.

I'm Andrea. Don't disappear.

Later, when crinkled chip bags were tossed around the kitchen, and the sodden residents were collecting their Canada Goose coats, I searched for her, but she had left. James was angry about the number on my arm. People don't eat dumplings here, he said at the sink, scrubbing my skin with a steel wire pot brush until it was smeared grey and raw.

• • •

A FEW WEEKS later, there was an incident with the landlord.

Our windows were cracked to let in the night air. In front of our house, a man and a woman were really going at it. James and I shared a look. He turned off the lights and took my hand. We crept to the couch under the window. In the street was a truck and a bazaar of belongings: A drop-leaf table, rice cooker, guitar case, a bottle of bronzer. The landlord had one crutch drawn back like a gun.

Get the hell out of here, he said.

I hate your shed anyway, the woman responded. I recognized her as Andrea, the woman from the party — not a resident after all. She struggled

to lift the table into the hatch of her truck.

Hurry up, the landlord said. Or I'll call the cops.

So do it, she said.

Go back to Cheyenne, you dumb bitch.

This is great stuff, James said.

He left and returned with a notebook.

We should do something, I whispered.

Let it play out.

Thirty seconds, I'm calling the cops, the landlord said.

She got in her truck and rolled down the window.

Then I'll tell them the women here go missing, she said. I'll tell them about your wife.

She squealed away. He hurled the bronzer after her.

James shook with silent laughter.

So Wild West, he said.

I don't think so, I said.

His notebook tumbled to the floor as he gently pushed me to the couch. His hands conducted a kind of alchemy, transforming my anxiety into desire. I elevated my hips, letting him slide off my underwear. This time, my body yielded. I was into it, too loud, as if the neighbors' scene had given me permission to be equally crude. James had taken something more from the scene, license to cross a line he had eyed before. He shoved a warm palm over my mouth, catching my lip in my front teeth. Are you my dumb bitch, he said into my neck. Yeah, I said. Under his steely arms, I couldn't move. He was hurting me, but I thought that was part of it, something I could prove or win. After he finished, he lay close to me on the couch. We got a little rough, he said. He laughed and it was a question. It was fun, he said. So fun, I said. He massaged one of my feet.

Where did your father see the UFO? he asked, looking at me attentively.

I relaxed as I put on my clothes. We often had these conversations at night, intimate and thoughtful. Most people never saw this version of him.

The Madison River, I said.

It's interesting, because he seems like a smart person. Skeptical.
He is, I said. He wouldn't have told me about it, if he didn't think it was real.

I can't wait to meet him, he said, his smile open and boyish.
His phone buzzed on the floor. He looped a heavy arm down to answer it.

Who is it? I asked.

Bentley, he said, not looking up.

On James' thigh, he had a religious tattoo in Latin.

In black ink, it said: Ego sum via, veritas et vita

I am the way, the truth, and the life.

That was my favorite thing about James: I thought he never lied. He could have said the text came from anyone, but he respected me enough to tell me the truth. If he decided to get serious about me, it would be because he thought I was worth it, not because he felt obligated to pretend.

I should get her number, I said.

Sure, he said.

I hugged my arms around my knees, making myself smaller. It was going to turn cold soon. I knew that because a woman at the supermarket told me her horses were growing winter coats.

• • •

JAMES STARTED WORKING on a new story. He wrote on the porch with his typewriter. I heard him talking to the landlord. As a rule, he preserved one copy at a time, burning old drafts over the sink with a lighter, leaving ash in the strainer like old skin. He needed me to be somewhere else because I was beautiful, but a distraction, he said. This house doesn't have any damn doors, he complained.

I went to the library to write about my dad, but I couldn't write

anything, so I went to the prison instead. The historic Wyoming Territorial Prison was built in 1872, four years after the Union Pacific railroad made it to town, but before Wyoming was a state, according to our tour guide, a tan older woman, a snowbird, who also gave tours at a lighthouse in North Carolina and a fort in Georgia. The night before, she attended the Celtic Woman concert at Red Rocks in Colorado, she told us, but she had to leave early because there was too much pot.

Our group shuffled past the warden's house into the penitentiary. In the first glassed-off room, where prisoners were once processed, a dead bald eagle was about to take flight. One of the rapists was a gifted taxidermist, the tour guide said, pointing to the head of a pronghorn.

The prison ran on the Auburn system, we learned. That meant imprisoned people had to be silent. During the day, they could not make eye contact or talk about anything non-work related. At night, they could not speak at all. The only sounds were the dinner bell and the cell doors sliding shut.

If the prisoners could not speak, the idea went, then they would lose their sense of self.

On the walls across from the cellblocks were old photos of the former prisoners. The placards said that Ta Toit Se, 80, killed his elderly wife because she allegedly broke his gun; Edward Lockwood from Casper tried to abort the baby of a teenage girl who wanted to marry him; Julius Greenwald, a cigar maker, shot his wife after he caught her working in a house of ill-repute.

We were herded to the women's side of the prison. Only twelve women were held there. For their protection, they were not allowed to work or come out of their cells. The guards were male.

I bet the guards could have had their way with them, one man in our group said, grinning.

I scanned the faces of our group, but no one seemed to react.

The guide pointed to a picture of a husband and wife, the only married couple to be imprisoned at the same time for their involvement in a

shootout. The woman had close-set, intelligent eyes. She was not allowed to speak to anyone, including her husband. Once, she tried to pass him a note, the tour guide said, but a guard intercepted it and sent her to the dark cell.

We trooped to the dark cell on the first floor. One-by-one, we went inside. The dark cell was so small, my head brushed the ceiling and I could not stretch out my arms. No windows. If the door was closed, there would be no light. I pressed my forehead against the cool wall, imagining James' hand against my mouth. My chest tightened. I stepped back into the fluorescent hallway.

We went to the broom factory, the brooms upside down against the wall like faceless women. The prisoners had to make brooms to pay for their imprisonment, said a guide wearing black-and-white striped prisoner clothing. There were many steps to a broom. I tried to write some down in my notebook, which was always in my coat: trim broomcorn, sweep broomcorn, run wire through the broom, wind broomcorn around the handle, wet broomcorn, dry broomcorn, sew the broom. Two rows of stitches for whisk brooms. Five rows for kitchen brooms. There were also European, shaker and Colonial brooms. After a broom was complete, it was labeled #1 kitchen broom, so 19th-century housewives didn't know the broom was made by the prisoners. On the way out though, I threw my notes in the trash, because I didn't make the brooms, and the story of the prisoners wasn't mine.

• • •

WHEN I GOT home, James had left a note on the fridge saying he went to sing karaoke. It was residents only. I understood. He had to be professional. I put on makeup and his favorite dress, in case he called. His favorite dress was short and red. My favorite one was grandmotherly.

For dinner, I phoned the number I secretly saved from my arm. An

hour later, a college student appeared with a dozen dumplings. I went to the porch with my dumplings and a beer. It was cold enough I could see my breath. I didn't notice the landlord on his porch. I didn't notice until my porch shuddered with the weight of his body, which he hoisted over the two-foot gap between us. He landed hard on one leg. I dropped my plate, fragrant pork spilling between wood cracks.

Nice night. The landlord touched his hat. Want another beer?

I took the beer.

What happened to your leg? I asked, backing up.

My leg? He sagged towards me, but it wasn't the leg; he was drunk. I bagged a black bear a few weeks ago, he said. Now, I go back for the head, lose my balance on ice, slide ten feet, and smash my leg on a rock. Imagine it: I'm in the Snowies, and the temperature is dropping fast. Three hours, I army-crawl through the snow. At first I'm cursing, then I'm praying, and finally I see a cabin. I crawl to the door, but it's locked. I scope out the windows — I want to make sure I break the least expensive window — and I smash the one and pull myself inside. I see a fireplace and in the pantry, a packet of ramen. I get the fire going and boil snowpack. My body hurts. I'm feeling woozy. That's when I see my father sitting by the fire. The thing is. He paused for dramatic effect, drinking long from his Miller Lite. My father's been dead for five years. He had a heart attack. Diabetes.

I'm sorry, I said. My dad also has diabetes.

He wasn't listening. He flapped his hand on his hat.

Lucky I ran into you. I had no one to drink with. Had to come home early. I got kicked out of Bud's. I guess I got into a fight. This guy saw my hat and said, you ain't no cowboy. I go, hell man, I know I ain't no cowboy, my wife just said I look good in this hat. Then he took a swing at me.

I'm sorry about your wife, I said, edging to the door.

Cancer, he said, moving with me. A car accident, actually.

I ran through the door and locked it behind me. The landlord flopped after like a big whale, his forehead bulging through the screen, knocking off his hat. The mesh dented, but didn't break. He laughed and thudded back

to his porch. I took out my phone, my hands unsteady.

I texted Bentley, whose number James had given me.

Hi, it's Evie. Are you with James?

She typed for a while but only sent: no sorry!!

• • •

LATER THAT NIGHT, I noticed a woman in the street in front of the landlord's house, like a 19th-century haunting, a ghost woman from the dark cell. I walked closer to the window. It was Andrea in a white dress. She was staring at the landlord's window, like she wanted him to look out and see her. I took out the trash even though it was almost empty. When she saw me, she picked the bronzer out of the frosted dandelions. Found it, she said, wobbling on heels. We waited for the train to rumble by.

Are you OK? I asked.

Maybe I'm missing. Maybe I'm dead, she said.

I laughed uneasily.

That's what he tells people when he goes berserk. His wife moved back to Rawlins, she said.

Yeah he told me he broke his leg hunting a bear, I said.

She laughed. He fell off a roof.

He's really scary, I said. I like your dress.

I thought he was complicated. I like yours too.

You shouldn't wait for him, I said, rubbing my arms.

My band is playing a show tomorrow. You should come, she said.

I can't, I said, dropping the trash in the bin. My boyfriend is taking me to Red Rocks.

• • •

I WAS UP writing, James said when he plowed through the door that morning. He went to the bathroom. The shower ran. I didn't bother asking why he didn't bring his typewriter then.

His bag was on the floor of the bedroom. I opened it. Inside was his phone and two stories paper-clipped together. I ignored the phone. Even if I knew his password, I wouldn't look. I already knew what evidence I would find there. I removed the stories instead, and sat on the bed to read.

The first story was called "The Hunter in Wyoming." The hunter was a multi-layered man, whose wife had died from cancer. He broke his leg retrieving a black bear head. Like his father and his grandfather, he ate beef and beans and went to the bar on Fridays. He lived with his girlfriend but was sleeping with a Wyoming barrel racing champion named after a car. His girlfriend was judgmental and the barrel racing champion was authentic. The girlfriend would never leave him though, even when he called her names he regretted. The name-calling wasn't even his fault. She didn't understand him, and she couldn't be the wife he'd lost. Not even the barrel racing champion could, though she filled out her jeans in an enchanting way.

James was still in the shower.

The second story was called "The Man from Montana." It was short, about an engineer in Four Corners trying to build a spaceship before he died. He had a daughter with my face, but not my words. They were building the spaceship together. One night, they saw strange lights above the Madison River in the trees, but the spaceship wasn't ready yet. As I read, my vision began to blur.

It was the story I'd wanted to write, but he already did.

What are you doing, James said.

I looked up at him from the bed. He was only wearing a towel.

I'm not sleeping with Bentley, he said, glancing at his phone.

I didn't ask that, I said.

I know you texted her last night, he said.

That's not why I'm angry.

He launched into a story.

As he spoke, I felt as if I was starting to disappear.

Evie. When I arrived, I struggled. A lot. You don't know what it's like, being alone here. Feeling like everything you've written is worthless, he said. I did have several text exchanges with her that were regrettably inappropriate, but they didn't materialize into anything. He rolled up the towel and pointed to his tattoo. I wouldn't lie to you, he said. I want us to be closer. When we're back East, I'll introduce you to everyone. You can show my agent your work. I think that you're really talented.

OK, I said.

We're OK? He touched my arm.

I pulled away and picked up the manuscripts, his only copies.

The Montana story made me cry, I said.

That means a lot to me, Evie.

That isn't the way I meant it.

How did you mean it?

I took the keys to his rented pickup truck out of his bag.

I have a question about the other one, I said. What if the hunter's wife is alive?

He breathed out, looking relieved to only be talking about stories.

It doesn't matter if she's alive, he explained. It's about her absence.

Maybe she would have something to say, I said, walking out of the bedroom.

Where are you going with the keys?

Hiking, I said, shutting the front door.

I drove for miles until I saw the wrinkled rocks rising to the left of the highway. I turned off, put five dollars in the Vedauwoo box, and parked. There were no other cars. The wind pushed the heavy door shut behind me. I walked down a snowy trail, past bulbous stones molded together like bodies with strangely-smooth heads. I paused before a rust-banded rock

face, formed from magma over a billion years ago. Rocks frightened me because they'd still be there after everyone was dead, but I wasn't afraid then; I felt strung with magic. I unfurled my frozen fingers, frisbeeing the pages of his manuscripts. The wind snatched the pages, flinging them violently to the spire, into the outstretched hands of a dead woods' rose. In the winter, the wild pink flowers seemed unlikely to bloom again, but I knew they'd return after the snow thawed. Back in the truck, I wrote in my notebook that it was the same shrub my dad pruned each spring in Montana.



ERIN BLOCK

SOURDOUGH

If I was a Klondike man
I'd wear you around my neck
to keep you from dying.
Close to hair and heartbeat
and ache of missing home.
But I'm a woman
with furs on my walls
to feel like maybe I'd have fit in
with a man in the Yukon,
as something other than the wife he left
in Omaha
keeping time with a spoon on her knee.

Because I have nowhere to go
but here in the Rockies,
where it was silver and tungsten
men came for
and died for.
And then left
pilot holes in the mountain

like miniature asteroid hits
in veins that'll make a body bleed.

And rather than between my breasts
you sit in a mason jar on the mantle
gathering memories from air
over the wood-stove shrine
to mammoths
to getting lost
to everything so far away now
even a turkey couldn't see that river
with all her oxbows
that'll turn you round til you're dizzy
from worshipping raven-gods
by pouring whiskey into sand.

Winters are the measure of time.
And how many you made it through
marked when you were called a sourdough,
which is all you got for your suffering.

This is my tenth in a mountain canyon
and now this is where I'm from.

Though I have no name
up where the air's thin,
the summer's as short as a crush,
and April evenings still smell like pine
smoke in the air
that makes my bread rise slow
like one big breath it keeps on taking
of life.

EMILY BANKS

ELEGY FOR 926F

“Like her mother, she was killed by a hunter.” – *The New York Times*

They call it a *harvest*. Like picking fruit,
except instead of sweet juice spilling out,
staining your fingers, you get a pool
of sticky pungent blood
as her muscular shape collapses to a heap
of dark gray fur, her flashlight eyes
dim and her wet-black nose
stops twitching for your scent.
She leaves behind a daughter, to whom she'd recently
ceded her alpha role. Didn't she know?
The only thing men in America
want to hurt more than a woman is a woman
old enough to bear
scars and bare fangs without shame.
My mother's yoga teacher told her class
open your heart to the sun and she realized
for years she'd hunched her back,
caved in her chest to conceal
herself from predators.
I want to pull their eyes from their sockets,
axe their hands at the wrists.
I want to watch a generation of women
with gray hair march out

into the afternoon sunlight and stretch
their bodies long and strong like wolves.
I think of her at breakfast,
high school mornings, motioning me to pull
my shirt up and cover my breasts.
I'd roll my eyes. Because they lived so close
to Yellowstone, these wolves
had learned to trust humans,
making them easy targets
for hunters. Maybe she didn't want to believe
her mother either, wanted to think
it was different now, that these humans
were just being friendly, snapping photos to save
a wild moment for the mantle
of their suburban homes. They called her *Spitfire*.
I wish we didn't have to run
or hide, I wish that men were brave
enough for a fair fight, their small blunt teeth
and filed fingernails against the jaws and claws
of mother wolf. I don't want to memorize
the boundaries of survival, how many feet
away from protection I may wander
before a target grows across my chest.
I want to roam the streets, the fields,
the forests in my push-up bra, I want
to take a rifle and defend the wolves.



KELLY MAGEE

10 THINGS ONLY SINGLE MOMS WHO WERE IN MY LIVING ROOM WILL UNDERSTAND

WHEN YOU ARE a single mom, it can be hard to find people who understand you. Harder still when you're a queer single mom to two kids under ten who has recently filed for divorce and who was in my living room last night when, fed up with feeling misunderstood, you decided to record every bizarre thing you found yourself saying in one three-hour stretch. Fear not, Single Moms Who Were In My Living Room! This list has got you covered.

1. *Where did you put the dog? How did the bee get back in?*

Having an identity means different things to different people, but we can all agree that it means you are incomprehensible to people who don't share that identity. Being a single mom can be lonely and isolating. Being in the presence of small creatures who look a little like you but act like nonsensical bizarro humans for 24 hours a day can cause you to do things like make nonsensical pronouncements, blurt out questions for which there are no reasonable answers, and talk to yourself. To lessen these disturbing effects, it's important to find community, especially with other single moms. That said, like-minded individuals can be hard to come by, and when you're

a single mom in my living room last night, finding someone like you is literally impossible! This list is for you! That bee, am I right? Childless and/or partnered people who were not in my living room last night will definitely not know where the dog is.

2. I didn't ask what he did. Leave her stuff alone.

Many of us in my living room last night can't help but feel like the rest of society doesn't get certain things, like who cut all the ukulele strings with toenail clippers, or why this shin guard looks chewed, or what he did to your other mannequin, and wait, you have more than one mannequin?

3. Who left cheese out? What is this crumb situation?

Pro-tip, single moms: don't sit. Just don't. Sitting is no longer part of your vision board. Don't rest against the counter, don't put your head down on the foot pillow that is for some reason on the coffee table, and definitely don't say you'll only lie down for five minutes because when you wake up the children will have hot-glued a glitter path into the carpet, "disappeared" all the chargers, and group-texted two colleagues, a stranger, and your mother an unflattering photo of you asleep. Sitting is frivolous, anyway, like immersion blenders or "down time." You already eat upright. You work upright. Once, at the playground, you fell asleep upright, like a damn horse, and your daughter said, Mom, were you sleeping? And—perhaps because you'd just woken up—you chose the unfortunate response, Dude, I am fully erect! which you meant in the hominid sense, but which got you alarmed looks from the smugly alert, smugly coupled couple sitting on a nearby bench.

4. Can you stop kicking? Don't hang on that. It's been leaking for, like, ever.

You know, because you were in my living room last night, that the number

of fully-functioning items I own is my coffee machine. What people who were not there don't understand is that if you open the microwave too fast it will make a sound like a car backfiring, and you have to find the sweet spot on the handle to entice hot water from the tap, and just because the dryer rattles and steams and carries on doesn't mean it's making anything drier, and probably the holes appearing in the yard aren't evidence of a sinkhole, but when you joked about this to the realtor selling your neighbor's house, he definitely didn't laugh.

5. I don't get paid until Friday. I have to. So we can afford this shitty house. Yes, it's a grown-up word. Well, I am a grown up.

They say parenting is a tough job, and some people say that's because the pay is terrible, and a study once "proved" that motherhood is the equivalent of 2.5 jobs, so if you're a single mom that's like five jobs, plus the one that pays the bills, or if you are like the single moms in my living room, two jobs that pay the bills, which makes for a shocking seven jobs, but since they also say marriage is work maybe you should subtract one job, and maybe another since some say motherhood is a calling or a non-professional pursuit, but then there's all the emotional labor you do, and since you don't even have a spouse to resent, you resent the articles about emotional labor that blame the husbands, since you've never had a husband and yet no woman you've ever dated has known which day was trash day or when the kids need to be picked up or what the pediatrician's name is, so in short, you work a lot, and you make enough to get by, but if the moms in my living room last night did their math correctly, what is certain is that no, I'm sorry, we cannot afford that life-sized Storm Trooper.

6. I'm making dinner. I'm packing lunches. Then eat something. Did you wash that? What did you just put in your mouth?

You might think "Find Something to Eat In This House" would be a fun

game, or if not fun at least productive, or if not productive at least not actively harmful, and you would be correct right up until somebody snacks on their green-apple-scented thinking putty, and then you'll realize what a rookie mistake this game is, leading as it always does to Phase II, "Find Out If What You Just Ate Is Poisonous."

7. You're not dying. I try not to think about it.

There's not, like, a maximum number of times you can call poison control before they flag your number, right? Single moms in my living room definitely aren't worried about things like that! But since the kids are now terrified that they're going to die and you're going to go to jail for killing them, affect the kind of nonchalance that's served many a bad mom in the interrogation room, and tell them what they need to hear. They'll be fine. Even though the truth is you don't know if they'll be fine, or if you will, despite the fact that you've been consumed with these kids' survival since your first bleary look at them. After all, you practiced attachment parenting only to have shared custody wrench them away for half their lives, and if you obsess over their safety when you can't see them, can't touch them, you will wreck yourself. Which you are doing anyway by trying not to worry. Single moms in my living room, I feel you. There's nothing about this that isn't hard.

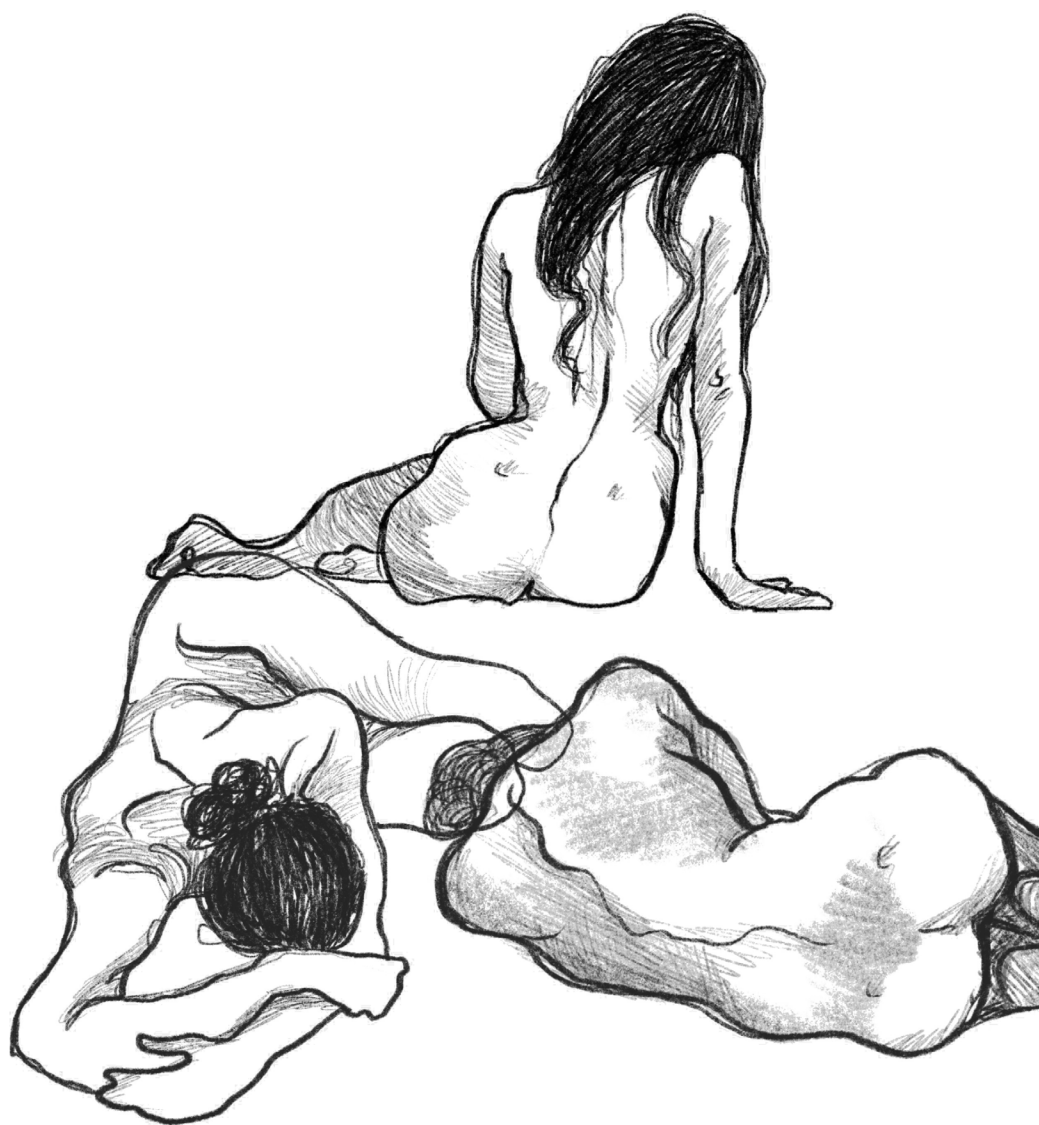
8. Time for bed. I know you're scared, but you're okay.

Kids these days! Always worried about the damndest things, like being hurt by things they thought were safe, or people they thought were safe, or places—and this is what outsiders don't understand, the record scratch of how quickly the conversation can turn—like how the number of school shootings, statistically speaking but also literally, tonight, will have increased by the time we go to bed. Sometimes the news hits like a power outage. Suddenly we're alone, more alone than before, and in the dark, which is

more terrifying than before. We wonder how to survive this world with its terrible refrain of atrocity. But also, you know...surviving. You remember what we did, single moms? We did the kind of quick thinking we're known for, and we made a game out of being scared. Finally, we reassured them: your school is safe. Maybe sheltering them is doing them a disservice, but why is "shelter" a negative thing, anyway? We believe, because we have to, that this living room can contain all the words we'll need to find our way, if only we can put them in the right order.

9. I guess technically it's an addiction. Why do you want to be a bodybuilder? I never said I didn't like your bowl. What sound does the first letter make?

You know what, single moms? I take it back. Sit. The microwave will backfire, and the dog will materialize, inexplicably covered in glitter. Your list will disappear into the pile of unpaid bills and drawings of kids in chains—note to self: ask about the chained kids—and spelling tests. You'll feel like a secondhand appliance someone has barely coaxed to life, but it's one that works for now. Help your children with words that aren't spelled like they sound. Watch how they begin to understand. See how your pockmocked yard holds and holds, though the ground has every reason to collapse.



CHARLOTTE HUGHES

SEND NUDES

In Belgium, in 1635, Peter Paul Rubens painted *The Three Graces*, which depicted the Greek goddesses Aglaia, the grace of beauty; Euphrosine, the grace of delight; and Thalia, the grace of flowering. Helene Fourment, who had married Rubens at sixteen, inspired the figures in *The Three Graces*.

Instructions, Part 1: Please shade in every answer completely. Ink or oil only. Stealing and cheating is encouraged.

1. Which tradition inspired this painting?
 - A. The art market
 - B. Baroque
 - C. Classical
 - D. Send nudes

2. What is a muse?
 - A. A body transformed to something higher
 - B. Money as meaning
 - C. A girl down the street, picking dead leaves from a white tulip
 - D. Unpaid labor

3. Fill in the blank: Beauty is ____.
- A. Tangled pearl chains below one silver earring
 - B. Pain covering a stomach
 - C. A girl who liked to throw red balls for her schnauzer and count the scales of fish
 - D. A soft body a soft body bent at the knee
4. How does classical sculpture influence *The Three Graces*?
- A. His idea of a woman
 - B. A body suspended, a body cold as marble, feeling nothing
 - C. Inaction
 - D. A second man's opinion
5. Fill in the blank: Delight is ____.
- A. Three pairs of feet on the yellow forest floor
 - B. A fan-brushstroke away from vulgar
 - C. A girl who liked the color egg blue and counting the wooden ships as they came to the harbor
 - D. The second wife
6. In this painting, women are painted as ____.
- A. Refined, tasteful, because the ____ said so
 - a. Critics
 - a. Money
 - B. Open
 - C. The same woman
 - D. A shadow on the ripple of a thigh

7. Fill in the blank: Flowering is _____.

- A. A wreath of wallpaper roses
- B. The *look* between three versions of the same girl
- C. Green valleys spotted with deer
- D. A girl who liked to read the latest Marquis' novel

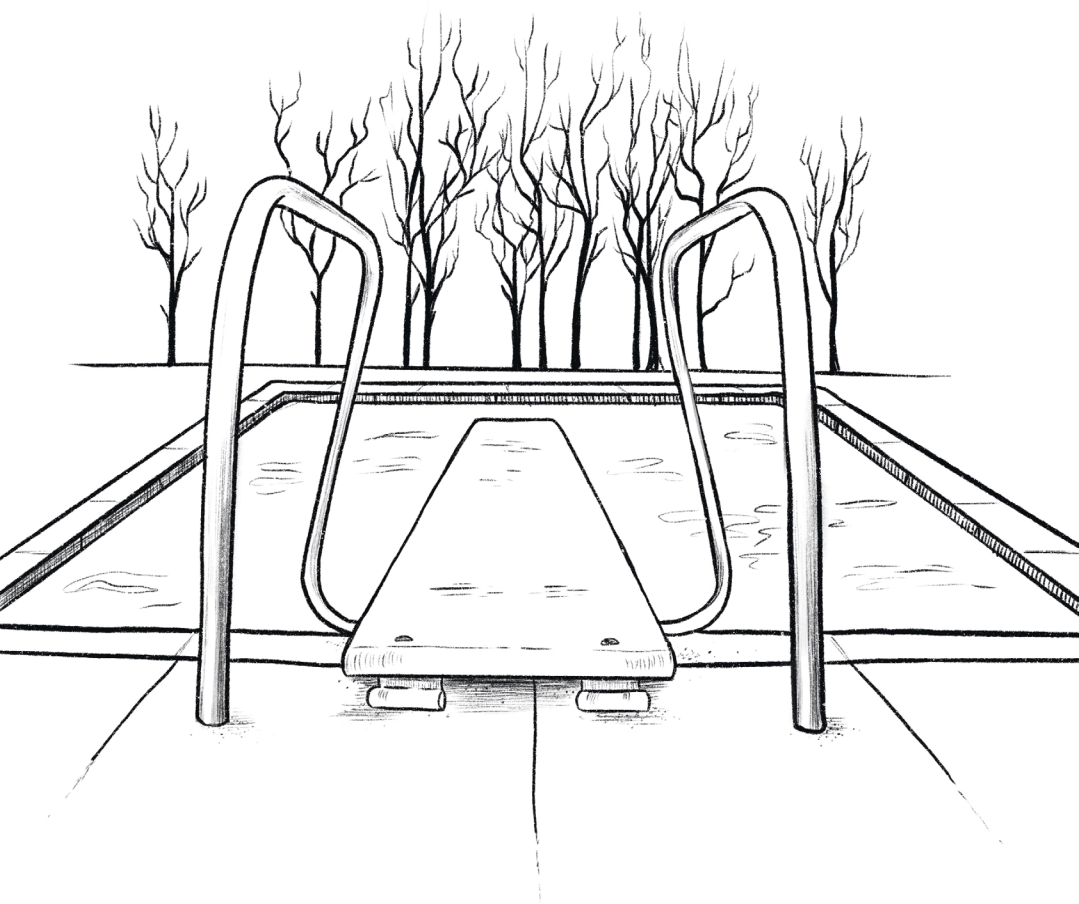
8. What is the value of *The Three Graces* (Choose two)

- A. Four thousand guilders passed from palm to palm
- B. A blown-glass vial filled with tears
- C. However much it costs to have taste
- D. Linen stained with three types of wine

Extra Credit:

9. Who is Helene Fourment?

- A. A teenager from Antwerp
- B. A girl running through the striped grass of The Steen
- C. Married to an important family
- D. None of the above; three pieces of paint



REBECCA MOON RUARK

THE PEARL DIVER

PEARL FISHING IS not a bad summer job. Even the uniform is alright, though the suit is a one-piece that makes me look like a prude. At the Sea Town tryout, my mom had me paste Band-Aids over my nipples, which are always hard, now that I'm finally getting boobs.

Breast buds, my sister Hilary calls them, and she strokes my hair and calls me precious, like I'm her pet, even though I'm almost sixteen and she's only four years older. But ever since she studied abroad last semester, spring 1993, she thinks she's mature—and French. *Mais oui*, she answers everyday questions like, Are you enjoying your summer? She eats brie after dinner. She flaunts her new, French butt in her cut-offs, taunting me, since I'm cursed with my mom's half-Japanese flat ass. And now she's too good for the guys who called her Moon Face in high school. Now she wears a scarf, even though it's summer and the lake makes it so humid it feels like you should be doing the breaststroke to get to the mailbox instead of walking. Next year, it'll be me waiting at the end of the driveway, for my acceptance letter from Stanford, where I'll study marine biology and I'll dive.

I'm a rising sophomore. Sophomore year is when I must prove myself, says my mom. Excel or be lost with the tide. "Focus," she says, and then she repeats it in Japanese—"shouten"—and nods her head solemnly, like I'm supposed to feel blessed she directed at me one of the five words she remembers of her dead dad's language.

When my mom says "Focus" and smiles her tight smile, I think she'd really like to tell me not to become like Hilary, who waits for the mail lady

to bring her par avion letters from some guy who probably boned her in Nice.

I'm the youngest, and still my mom hasn't figured out how to talk about sex. My brother Chuck clearly figured it out on his own, since at twenty-six he's already got three kids with his wife Sarah, who was married once when she was very young and was some kind of Mennonite in Pennsylvania, though now she's sorta-Catholic like the rest of us. Their little girls always have snot running thick from their noses like slugs. They make me positive I'm never having kids, not that I'll have time between my careers as a marine biologist and a competitive diver.

So, my mom's given up on Hilary and has started giving me her pearls of wisdom—and she thinks she's super clever now, because of my new job at the Sea Town Pearl Pagoda. Pearls! She's terrified my breast buds will grow into full-fledged boobs between now and Labor Day, and all the high school guys who see me diving for pearls, soaking wet in my black suit like an eel, will want to bone me. And I'll forget my dream of studying the migratory patterns of Pacific gray whales to become a full-time slut, or just a mom who does nothing to better herself except for working at the department store during the Christmas season, folding cashmere sweaters she would never dare buy.

Before school let out earlier this month, I heard my parents arguing over whether or not I should get a summer job. Responsibility vs. maturity vs. academics vs. distraction vs. time-commitment vs. independence. I wonder sometimes if grown-ups know how dumb they sound. Really, my dad is worried I'll find common ground with people who never went to college. He would rather have dinner with a rapist than with a dropout. All his years of school—B.S., M.D., Ph.D., residencies—to wind up using lasers on old people's cataracts in an office next to a Greek pita place run by Croats. When he thinks I'm not listening, he calls his life a waste.

AP Ace, Student Council Treasurer, Competitive Diver, Good Girl: I'm the shining hope, which sucks, because what I'd really like to do sophomore

year is try oral sex. But first I have to get through eight weeks of work at Sea Town.

Diving at the Sea Town Pearl Pagoda is easy. Our shift doesn't start until ten, when our team of four divers—two girls, two guys—stands at attention beside the pool, waiting for our manager to flash us an orange, yellow, or green card. These cards correspond to the stickers on the underside of the oyster shells holding cultured pearls we bring up from the bottom of the pool called “the deep.” The park guests, who stand underneath the Pearl Pagoda's fake grass roof and inside the fake bamboo walls, get what they pay for: orange-stickered pearls are the smallest, yellow a little bigger, and green biggest yet.

The sides of the pool are painted a blue that gets darker the deeper you go, so that it's hard to see us in our black suits, and you can't tell the pool's only twelve feet deep. There's Astroturf on the bottom, and fake coral that's glued down so it doesn't get suctioned out through the vent on pool-flushing day, which is Tuesday. The big vent keeps the water in the pool rippling, so that it looks like the sea, or at least like Lake Erie, which is the closest any of the lame park guests will ever get to the sea.

I auditioned with six other girls: diving for oysters, checking the sticker underneath, cupping the oyster in my palm like a magic egg, smiling and crouching down to present the prize from the deep to a little girl. At the try-out, the little girl was really our manager, Janice, who is an adult but not old. She is as fat as Namu, the killer whale, even though she was on the Olympic Performance Diving Squad before her husband moved her to Ohio, where she forgot her dreams, had kids, and took this job.

My dad walked me all the way through Sea Town before my first shift working at the Pearl Pagoda. He glared at the Puerto Rican men picking up trash before the park opened, at the high school guys setting up snow-cone stands, at the college guys waterskiing and goofing like clowns on Waterski Lake, and at the animal trainers at the entrance to Penguin Paradise. My dad stared at them like they're shit, and we're all just working inside this giant blue toilet, waiting to be flushed down.

He's worried every guy is looking at me because I perform in a bathing suit, so he made me wear a track suit to cover up, and the whole walk I sweated like a pig. In my duffel bag was my Pearl Pagoda kimono-cover-up, a bath towel, shampoo, conditioner, body wash, waterproof mascara, and a laminated photo my mom gave me. It's a picture of her grandma, whose lover in Japan was a real pearl diver until he drowned. My mom actually said "lover!" Evidently there's a family history of jumping into water for stones in shells. I guess the photo was supposed to make me feel proud, so I didn't tell her that our shells are marked, the pool is shallow, and even the algae is fake.

Our first day, my dad made me pull the legs of my suit down so it looked like a maillot from olden times. But if I pull it down far enough, I show some side-boob, so that's okay. Janice ran through the rules, and she leveled with us about the attention we girl divers may receive. There are oyster shells, she told us, that are empty. They have red stickers underneath, and they are reserved for the men who linger poolside for much of the day, watching us dive. Red for stop. They're supposed to get the hint and walk away.

And men do watch, I realize my first week. Men with kids like my nieces. Men who look at me all moony, like they could cry because they're not rising sophomores. And I see their wives looking at them looking at me and thinking that their husbands are imagining their daughters when they're my age, but they're totally not. So, I show some side-boob, because the more skin I show, the more I'm chosen to dive. The more I dive, the better chance I have to earn a nice tip, even though we're not supposed to accept them. We girl divers put on a happy-smiley Japanese girl vibe—like Hello Kitty meets soft porn—though I'm the only sorta-Asian. We're athletes, all of us, from good swim and dive teams across Northeast Ohio, so we recognize each other, but we're not too competitive, because it's summer. It's hard to get to know anybody, except over lunch in the designated employee lunch area. We're not allowed to talk while we're standing at attention, poolside, waiting to be chosen to bring a prize up from the deep.

On our lunch breaks that first week, we jumped the locked gate of the pool, practiced armstand dives, and competed at holding our breaths under water. But in front of the audience we girls cover our mouths when chosen to dive, like we're shy, like swimming and diving came to us naturally, or some man willed us the talent because we're beautiful. Or, we're even a little scared, like we might not resurface at all.

Every little girl likes dolphins, but I've always liked sea otters, which can hold their breaths for five minutes when they want to. At Sea Town, they put them in dog sweaters, and they pipe in chipmunk voices to make them say stupid jokes to the sea lions. But sea otters are smart, industrious, fast, and perfectly suited to their world, unlike Janice, who rarely comes near the pool.

Tuesday of my first week, my dad dropped me off early and I saw Janice standing poolside and watching the big vent at the bottom of the pool suck the water out super-fast to who-knows-where. Then I watched her climb down the inside-pool ladder painted blue until she reached the vent and took a tool out of her t-shirt pocket. In a minute, the grate over the vent was off and lying on the Astroturf. Janice was up to her armpits in the large vent shaft, scrubbing the white walls like porcelain. In and out of it she moved like a machine. Instead of her uniform of a polo shirt and khakis, she had a bathing suit on under a white t-shirt, and I thought of a Beluga, one of the slowest swimmers of all the whales and practically endangered. Later, I told the guys on our team, Vic and Trent. They started calling Janice Moby Dyke behind her back, even though she's married with kids. But I just call her Janice, because by the end of my first day, one of my nipple Band-Aids had slipped off and into the pool, and Janice noticed and saved me from being known as Band-Aid Tits all summer.

Later that first week, a girl at the Pearl Pagoda said I look like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. It must be my long hair I dyed auburn at the end of the school year. Her mom said to her, "No, she doesn't." But if I did, that would make Janice Ursula, the wicked sea witch—a cecaelia, half-woman, half-octopus. Janice isn't wicked but she does have this superior attitude. Like

she's better than us divers because she's clothed and warm in her Pagoda Office. And I laughed as I dived for the girl's pearl, to think of Janice with eight sea witch legs like an octopus, which is not a marine mammal but a cephalopod mollusc, singing about suffering souls. There is no Prince Eric at the Sea Town Pearl Pagoda.

Vic and Trent go everywhere together, like they're Siamese brothers or host-and-parasite fish. By the second week, it was clear I was their prey. It was my second Tuesday, pool-flushing day, because the new, frigid water makes my nipples pebbles. We were competing in the pool over our lunch break, holding our breaths and treading, entangling our legs, the three of us, kicking, grabbing each other's sides. We were supposed to be taking inventory of the orange-, yellow-, and green-stickered oyster shells in the deep, but I'm positive my great grandma's diver lover never had to take inventory as he searched for a pearl that would buy him a bigger hut and a whole ton of sushi until he died trying.

Halfway through my second week, Janice waved me into her office, like she was going to yell at me for imagining her as the slowpoke of the sea mammals as she cleaned the pool vent. In the Office Pagoda, there's barely room for a desk and two folding chairs. She asked me to sit, I did, and the metal made my butt in my suit and kimono-cover-up freeze. She wanted to know how I was liking the job, and she joked that it was better than working concessions and getting fat on hamburgers with Namu's face burned onto the meat. She has a photo of two normal-looking kids, a boy and a girl, on her desk. The boy is missing teeth and the girl has a ponytail shooting out the top of her head like spray from a blowhole. I told Janice I like the job; it'll look good on my application to Stanford.

Then her face changed, as she perched on her desk. She put her hand on her belly, and I wondered if she was pregnant, but human gestation takes longer than a summer. And after this summer I'll be a sophomore, getting invited to parties where the guys will peel off my jeans and put their mouths on me. And I won't have to travel halfway around the world to say *Mais oui* in response to everyday questions. Janice worked up to a

question of her own: “What do you think of Vic and Trent?” I told her they seem nice, and she told me they’re family friends of Sea Town’s Director of Marketing. “Boys will be boys,” she said, sounding like my grandma. And then she waved the air, like she could wipe away her cliché, like she wanted to level with me, which made me feel good for a second. Janice said Vic and Trent know better than to jump the gate during our lunch break, when we’re supposed to stay away from the water. She told me that the boys dove for her last summer, too. “So I know they can be handsy,” she said. I didn’t know that was a word. I didn’t tell Janice that I liked the boys’ hands on me, that I’m working up to having oral sex. And no one—not my mom, my dive coach, or Janice, the sea witch—will get in my way. She said, “I put you on their team because you seem sensible.” By sensible, I think she meant prude: Smart, Pseudo-Asian Prude. “I know it’s easy to get caught up. It’s summer; it’s hot.”

I got caught up on Janice’s “caught up.” In her office, I saw no sign of a husband—no ring, no pictures of the two of them. I’d imagined she was married. Maybe her getting caught up was getting knocked up, my parents’ gravest fear, worse than if I died. I told Janice she was right to trust me, that she’s obviously a good judge of character, that I am sensible. She smiled and sighed like she’d been holding her breath, testing herself in case she ever wants to compete against me in the pool during our lunch games. I backed out of her office.

That day, I didn’t stick around the Pearl Pagoda for lunch. I didn’t jump the fence. I didn’t let my arms and legs play underwater cat’s cradle with Vic’s and Trent’s. Instead, I went and sat on a bench and ate my peanut butter sandwich by myself while I watched the sea otters perform. Their Broadway Review consists of otters doing what otters do in their natural habitat—diving to the sea floor to prey on marine invertebrates, sleeping, and grooming themselves—while show tunes come through the rocks that are really speakers. I watched two of the otters mating.

That whole week I kept to myself, even when Vic and Trent tried to lure me into the pool when Janice went to the bathroom. But then I saw

them start to play with the other girl on the team, Laura, how they had with me, pulling her into the water, daring her to swim through their legs. They tickled her as she walked by them to change out of her suit at the end of the day. In the bathroom, which is also our Changing-room Pagoda, I saw Laura naked, and I tried not to stare at her perfect boobs and nipples that look like a woman's even though she's only sixteen. It was no wonder that she was now the prized angelfish in our big tank, and I was the minnow.

One morning late that week, Janice was called away for a family emergency just before the park guests were due to file in, circling us like sharks at the edges of the pool, coughing up dollars for dives. On her way out, Janice shot me a look that said I was in charge, that she trusted me. But then she locked us out of the Pearl Pagoda and hung the "Exhibit Closed" sign.

Laura went to the Bathroom Pagoda, and I sat on a bench in my kimono-cover-up and watched Vic and Trent hop the locked gate. Then I watched them between the Pagoda slats as they stripped off their sweats, dove into the pool, and swam short laps back and forth.

I realized Janice didn't trust me after all and hopped the locked gate to prove her right. I watched Vic and Trent swim some more, butterfly, my worst stroke. After a while, Vic caught me looking at him, and he reached out of the pool to the ledge, near my legs, but to the pile of discarded clothes. He fished in his jacket pocket and palmed what looked like a metal zipper-pull, which he gave to Trent, and he motioned to the bottom of the pool, to the vent.

Trent held up the metal pull, glinting in the sunlight rising over Water-ski Lake, and waved me into the pool. He didn't have to say, hurry up, that Janice would be back soon, her family emergency cleaned up like scum from the vent shaft.

By the time I swam down the twelve feet, the guys already had the grate off and Vic was slipping his legs into the vent until he was in the shaft up to his waist. I treaded water a few yards away, unsure of this game. But it wasn't any competition as far as I could see. They were getting off on the

movement of the water, sucking and spitting, in and out of the vent like a quick tide. I tried not to look at Vic's Speedo when he wriggled back out of the vent, but I failed. He turned and swam away from me, but not before I saw it, his big tentacle barely restrained by Spandex. Then Trent took Vic's place, fitting himself feet first into the vent shaft up to his hips. In and out, the water sloshed Trent like he's no heavier than a strand of algae.

I swam to the surface, embarrassed to watch the exalted look on Trent's face, like the saints' faces on my mom's Catholic prayer cards, and Vic looking on, wide-eyed under the water like a hyperthyroid blowfish. I sucked air and looked around the Pearl Pagoda. I didn't see Laura or Janice. A family of four waited outside the gate. The little girl held the crotch of her shorts like she had to pee. And I thought, This girl with the pee-tingles has probably gotten as close to sex as me, still practicing French kissing on my Make-up Barbie bust.

Vic surfaced, and he pulled me back down by the hand and pointed to the vent. It was my turn. I shook my head and pantomimed under the water, There's no way I'd fit in that vent. But I knew I would, with my quarter-Japanese flat ass and no hips. He kicked away from me, so I was alone, playing this game I refused to lose by forfeiting. I stuck a foot into the vent and felt the pull. I stretched my arms out on either side of the opening, because I didn't know how deep the shaft was or where it led. Provided my shoulders fit, I didn't want to be sucked into some underwater canal, like being born again at fifteen—only into the bowels of Sea Town instead of onto dry land.

I was in the shaft up to my calves, feeling the rhythmic pulling and pushing of the water like a massage. I was in up to my knees, careful not to touch the sharp sides of the shaft. Still, I held my breath. I felt the rippling water lap up my legs to my suit. I maneuvered in up to my thighs, running out of breath. But I had to let the tide work on the space between my legs, even if I cut the flesh of my hips, trying to squirm like a water snake deeper into the vent. I felt with my toes a curve in the shaft, so I didn't plunge in any farther. I was facing the water's surface, twelve feet above me, and above

that the fake grass roof. But it all went blurry, as the water rushed over the legs of my suit and the crotch, where there's an extra layer of fabric so my pubic hair doesn't poke through.

I felt the good-bad sensation like an excited-nervous stomach before a meet, but lower. And warm, like looking into the sun through closed fingers: far away but warm. Then my lungs burned, and I kicked and surfaced.

I sucked air, but before I could even open my eyes, someone was behind me, holding me around the waist and pulling me under the water again. Hands moved up my suit to my hard boobs. Just then, Trent swam in front of me, grabbed my face and Frenched me hard, so no water leaked in. My first French kiss. And I felt a gut-pinch—liking it so much—and a clit-tingle under my one-piece. A little shiver like the best of pees—coming in from a cold swim in the lake, the hot water warming me all over. A pinprick of light behind my eyes like heaven. Then the feeling was gone, far away but true and waiting for me, for the next time.

I kicked harder than ever to surface, not just because my breath was gone, but so I could get back to Earth, so I knew for sure it wasn't a dream, the low feeling, the kiss. When I grabbed the edge of the pool and opened my eyes, I saw Laura, but not Janice or Vic or Trent. I saw Laura staring at something behind me on the water—a cloud of pink, my blood, like a lily in a pond, blooming and then disappearing like it hadn't happened.

Let her think it. I covered the cut on my hip as I pushed out of the pool—the angelfish now.

I was thinking of it all still, over tuna noodle casserole with my parents and Hilary that night. I was thinking that I understand now why my sister's eyes water and her mouth goes slack when she talks about France, why she plans to change majors from Economics to Art History—because, even if she had sex in a dirty French bathroom, it was sex, and the setting probably became the Louvre in her imagination. Like my underwater make-out with two lame guys in a pool would morph in my mind into beautiful creatures doing what was natural and right in their habitat. Instinct. Nothing could keep me from returning to that place the next day.

The next day came, and Janice and Laura were there, but Vic and Trent weren't. Laura didn't speak to me, only to the new girls on our team, who stared at the scrape on my right hip, shining with burn cream.

We dived as usual, but I stayed away from the side of the pool with the vent, because I would daydream about filling my lungs and staying submerged as long as I needed to, to take off the grate and feel the push-pull of the water through the narrow tunnel wrapped around me like a cocoon. And I would suck water and drown if it meant I could get that feeling back, and this time reach the spot of sun behind my eyes that means sex, orgasm—a dorky word but a thing of my own making, within reach. Maybe I didn't even need Vic and Trent.

At the start of our lunch break, Janice called me into her Office Pagoda to ask if my hip was okay. She could be fired, she said, but then she waved it away, like she hadn't meant to level with me just then. "Vic and Trent won't bother you anymore," she said, as she petted my hand resting on the edge of her desk before I left her office to go eat by myself, sweating in the July sun in my track suit to make my old dad happy.

I sat on a bench outside the killer whale show, where Namu shakes a little girl's hand and bears his white-knife smile. I wondered about my great grandma in Japan, about how long it took her to find another lover after the sea took hers away, if she could ever look at pearls again.

That afternoon, I dove for a green-stickered oyster and presented it to a girl. She must have been twelve, too excited about opening a shell, when she had to know what it would contain. But then I realized she was acting for her parents' sake. We're all acting, just like Namu shaking a girl's hand with his pectoral fin, camera flashes snapping in his eyes like fireworks. We're all just prey, or hunter, smiling as we set our bait.

I did my bit, acting nice, crouching down to the girl, even though we're almost the same height, speaking sweetly to her: "What have I brought from the deep? See what years and years of sand and tickling have made. A pearl!" She pried it open. But there was nothing there, just the smooth cheeks of the shell like the glistening inside of a mouth more beautiful than

any piece of calcium carbonate. The girl quickly returned to her confused parents leaning against the fake bamboo walls of the Pearl Pagoda. Janice glared at me like I did it on purpose, and I realized Vic and Trent probably stole the stone before they got fired.

At the end of the day, Janice stood at the pool's edge. From behind the Office Pagoda, I eavesdropped on her conversation with a worker guy in coveralls. He said he'd be back at eight in the morning, once the pool was drained. Then he'd secure the grate over the vent, "so no kid can squeeze in there," and refill the pool in time for our shift's start at ten.

And I knew what I had to do. After dinner at home, I packed my duffel bag in my room. I packed my kimono-cover-up, flip-flops, bath towel, shampoo, conditioner, body wash, plus sweats, a hoodie, manicure scissors, and first-aid tape—all for the next day.

The next day is today.

My dad drops me off early in the morning, because I've asked sweetly. I walk through the park in just my suit and a pair of shorts. I say hi to everyone I've met over the summer: the guy at the ticket counter, the one selling pinwheels and balloon sea animals, the one at the burger stand, and especially Joe at the coffee shack. I make sure to chat him up, so he'll tell Janice he saw me arrive early when she picks up her caffeine fix like she always does. Joe hocks joe, a fact my mom would find funny if I told her anything about my job or life in general, which I don't.

The guys in the park look at my breast buds, and I don't even think about Vic and Trent anymore. I don't need them, and anyways, it wouldn't be the same. Not because Janice is having the grate locked over the vent. But because the first time of something—a French kiss, a dive—is the only time you don't pretend. Pretend—like playing dolls or playing dress-up when you're a girl or a college student or a middle-aged woman. Pretend—like imagining you still can cut through the water without a splash. Pretend—like you care, petting me like I'm an animal swimming circles in a tank all day.

I walk through the park and head toward the Pearl Pagoda but loop back

to the Shark Show bathrooms. There, I lock myself in a stall and change out of my suit and shorts into sweats and a hoodie. With my manicure scissors, I cut my suit at the neck into a low V and along both of the leg openings, so it looks like a woman's suit and not a little girl's. To each of the three pieces of jagged black fabric I attach a piece of white first aid tape, and I spit on it to make sure it's waterproof. It is. I stuff the pieces of fabric and my shorts, scissors, and tape back into my duffel bag.

I walk to the Pearl Pagoda in my sweats. It's early, so the pool is locked, but I pull myself over the gate. In a half hour, Janice will arrive to watch the pool quickly drain of water, making this place that is both a stage and an intimate habitat into a dry shell. And then the worker guy will come with his tool box to lock the grate over the vent, and I'll never get in there again.

FOR NOW, I'M alone. I stow my duffel bag under a bush in front of the Bathroom Pagoda. I plan my trap in my mind: grate over vent removed; evidence of distress—the pieces of jagged, black fabric—planted; girl diver stuck in watery shaft. And I will wait for Janice to come to the rescue, trap herself, and fail once more, underestimating the lengths teenagers will go to get off, to stake their claim and win.

When Janice arrives, I'll creep closer to watch the first piece of black fabric wave her toward the open vent, the grate lying like a stingray on the ocean floor. I'll watch her act confused and then scared. I'll watch her dive—in her whale critter-khakis and Sea Town polo—into the pool, not yet drained. I'll watch the splash her body makes and the spray that turns purple and pink in the air with the sunrise over Waterski Lake.

The second piece of fabric will draw her farther into the vent shaft—head-first, a big mistake. She'll squeeze her shoulders in and her boobs in a too-tight bra. She'll let the vent-tide suck her in.

Then, she'll see the third piece of black fabric at the turn in the shaft. She'll wish she could suck in her stomach, skin loose from babies, and her abdominal fat keeping her warm, keeping her going. As if we're all just pretending to be happy walking upright and skinny on land, when we really

should be storing our energy for the cold, when the lake freezes.

She'll think I turned the corner in the shaft with my lean diver's body, and that maybe she can, too. If she can grab the third piece of fabric, she'll reach me, stuck in the vent that she warned me about, the vent that already cut me once. Then, she'll realize she's losing air fast.

She won't maneuver the turn in the shaft. She'll sputter, unsure how she, a diver with Olympic-level promise, made such mistakes—to give up the pool, to move to Ohio for a man who would never marry her, to work a job babysitting horny high-schoolers who call her names.

Janice will run out of air, stuck like a porpoise in a net. And I'll see from my post near the Bathroom Pagoda, her kick her feet like flippers sticking out of the vent, until she doesn't anymore.

I could do all that. But I don't.

I don't stick the pieces of jagged black fabric to the inside of the vent. Not because of Stanford, either. I watch Janice arrive early, looking like a tired clown, coffee in hand, shuffling in her plastic shoes that she kicks off before stripping to her swimsuit, poolside. I watch her from behind the Bathroom Pagoda bush.

I watch her dive into the pool, surface, and start to swim, a perfect butterfly stroke. The arch of her back, the windmill arms. I can't stop watching—because of the beauty. Not like sexy or pretty, like wearing the right cut-offs in summer or cashmere in winter. But the kind of beauty that attracts like a giant magnet. Like a whale attracts with its whale song. And I think of Janice's kids and her lost love, and I imagine her a marine widow. Her smooth stroke is her widow's walk—pacing as she waits for her love to return from the deep.

She reaches out of the water with her strong arms, leaping, porpoising, and then capturing the water underneath her like prey. I figure that's why she's working this sucky job. She's waiting for her mate to return from being lost at sea, or at least Lake Erie. And Sea Town's Pearl Pagoda pool is the closest she can get. I try to memorize her stroke's timing, her breath, as I crouch behind the bonsai bush like a hunter.

I think maybe Janice is alright. I think that if I could swim like that, I wouldn't need food or sleep or sex ever. And I think I might miss this job at the end of the summer, when I become a sophomore and focus and maybe put off oral sex 'til next summer.

In a while, she pulls herself out of the water and becomes Janice again, slipping on her floppy shoes and her oversized polo. She pulls a chair to the edge of the pool and rests her upper body on the tops of her strong thighs. I think she's crying. I hide still, not wanting to break the hush, like a morning prayer to her beauty. I recreate her swimmer's stroke in my mind's eye. I see it over and over until it's etched in me like an old photograph, until it's my stroke, too. And I think I will offer Janice my dive in return, before summer fades and the oysters and algae are boxed up for winter. Before we all become land mammals once more.

JUSTIN JANNISE

UNREQUITED

Other names for deviled eggs:
infernal spawn, Satanic roe,
the seed of Lucifer, demonic ova,
Beelzebub's embryonic chicks.

On holidays I boil,
knock, peel, and split a couple dozen,
extract each golden core, and whip
—with mustard, onion, dill
and certain touches—

the filling for the empty,
smooth-as-porcelain whites.
Refilling, really. That's the sin:
crushing a heart
just to put it back in.



TODD OSBORNE

SELF-PORTRAIT AS MOUNTAIN OF DISCARDED LIMBS

On the tour of the antebellum mansion
where no one says the word *slave*

as if it is a curse—the guide steps
into a small room he identifies

as a guest room—tells us to follow
and that during the War this

was a surgical chamber—*That window*
he says *is where the doctors would toss*

the appendages after amputation
—and how not to imagine

that hill of limbs—the height of it—
how many soldiers were dismembered

in this place—the tour guide offers a number
I don't recall but the image

is indelible—when he asks for questions
I *mmm* and nod and stay silent—

my mouth is an arm—



ANNA REESER

THE CHASE

LATE THAT SPRING, all the itches in her blood suppressed by antihistamines, Helen would attend her thousandth barbecue as the girlfriend, six-pack of pale ale damp in her hand.

“It must be on this block,” Adam said, scanning houses. “Bright yellow door.” They’d been in Eugene for two years, a slow city, where moms and teenage daughters walked together through the Albertsons, where college students shared joints under cedars in the park. Adam had called winter a literal eternity, but now every house was saturated with color, plants spilling out of raised beds.

“Can’t we skip it?” Helen said.

“We’re making an appearance,” Adam said. He planned to meet the visiting writer from Austin whose department was hiring next year. “I’ll have a couple beers, I’ll schmooze, and you do the same—charm the hell out of him. We have to get out of this town.”

He walked fast, she caught up. Helen was tall but Adam was taller, lanky in thick-rimmed glasses and an oddly cut polo shirt he reserved for these occasions. Helen wore a blouse patterned with detailed illustrations of moths—maybe the wrong choice—and her bangs fell close to her eyes, a dust-brown curtain.

“Alright, yellow door.” Helen adjusted her grip on the six-pack. A networking barbecue. Labels would be nervously peeled from beers while popular novelists were criticized. Adam’s contract was up in the fall. He was an adjunct in the English department, teaching essay composition to

computer science majors, and at night he worked on his novel, the story of a young photographer who lived on Amtrak trains following the death of his parents. Helen worked at the university too, as a copy editor in Communications, a beige place. Lately, Adam's eyes shifted constantly, as if academic jobs hid in the foliage.

There, a few houses down, was a yellow door. The driveway was covered with rugs, books, paperweights—remnants of someone's long life.

"This isn't it," Adam said. "The email said bright yellow, not pale yellow."

In the open garage, a man in a sweater-vest leafed through a stack of photos. He called to them. "Anything you want, name your price."

Helen smiled. "We'll look around."

Adam shook his head, mumbling.

Helen was already squatting by a stack of books. "Come on, just a few minutes."

On the rug was a shallow wooden box, four feet wide, divided into sections, each full of tiny metal blocks. She lifted one. A stamp, a letter *e*, ridges crusted with ink. She pressed it against the skin of her thumb—it left a mark. The whole section was full of *es*.

Adam knelt, and Helen handed him the *e*, which he considered, rolling it in his hand.

"It's a complete font." The man walked over. "My father had a printing business in the fifties."

"This has every letter?" Helen said.

"It should. You want it? Five bucks."

Adam stood, said it wasn't possible, they were on their way somewhere. Helen grazed her fingers along the letters. An alphabet laid out in solid shapes, each with weight. She pictured them left overnight, tipped into a garbage can, hitting the plastic like hail. All those years.

"I'll take it," she said.

"Really?" Adam said. "We're going to walk into Dan's house with that thing?"

The type case filled her arms. She often slouched, but this made her straighten up, spreading the weight across her body. “It’s an icebreaker.”

Adam’s face relaxed. “Fine. It’ll kill that awkward fifteen minutes before everyone gets drunk.”

They walked on, Helen carrying the type case, Adam carrying the beer. A crackling in her chest, anticipation of alcohol, that pink-cheeked feeling. Above, trees were leafing out. Adam was saying something about Texas, how there was so much space, how you could see farther. She recognized a feeling she’d had in each place they’d been before, just when they began to talk about moving—nostalgia for what they’d leave, shot through with the desire to leave immediately. By the fall, she’d be thirty, he’d be twenty-nine. But today the neighborhood smelled like cut grass and ancient ink, and by now she knew that last summers in cities were beautiful, especially at dusk.

ADAM WAS AWAY at a conference when Helen found the letterpress on Craigslist. In the three months since she’d bought the font, the lawn had faded to yellow. She’d read about presses for printing metal type—some were massive, others were small enough to sit on a desk. That week, she’d moved the type case onto the coffee table to fidget with the letters while watching television, stacking them, arranging her name backwards on her palm. It was satisfying to dig the sharp edges of the metal blocks into her keyboard-callused fingertips.

In Adam’s absence, the room was a sprawl of Helen’s socks and purses. He would find this upsetting—increasingly he preferred a clear surface. In the past year, he’d replaced his books with Kindle versions, keeping only display copies of foundational texts—Hemingway, Carver, a book by the professor who called one of his essays *fearless and assured prose*. When they’d moved in, and the house had felt sparse, Helen bought frames for the posters they’d collected from art museums. It seemed like an aesthetic thing, something he’d appreciate. But Adam was skeptical. What was wrong with removable adhesive squares, why add a layer of glass? They’d be harder to move next time—bubble wrap, tape, a mess.

There was a slackness in the house, the feeling of floating in a pool. Adam gave mornings a sense of industriousness—swift breakfasts, news banter, the smell of shaving cream. It was already time to leave for work, where brochures for student orientation would be proofread over a dry croissant from the campus café, and her coworker, recently engaged, would complain about her future in-laws. Helen refreshed her letterpress search, looking now in all of Oregon. There. Kelsey & Co. Excelsior tabletop press for sale in Maupin. It was small, made of cast iron, meant for printing business cards and stationery. All parts included, plus a composing stick and a can of Universal Black ink. Three hundred dollars or best offer, buyer must pick up.

A man answered the phone on the first ring, and Helen heard herself asking if the press was still available.

“Well sure, you got a car?”

“Yes—I can be there today.”

Of course, she wanted to complete the set, to justify keeping the type case. But she also wanted to feel the way the iron levers moved. To see if something so old could work, to make it work with her hands. She could call in sick. There was an itch at the back of her throat, or maybe in her chest, and her heart pounded as she dialed her office, as she described a cold. Her boss told her to feel better soon, and it was strange—kind of sad—that she’d never thought to do this before.

Driving felt good, especially with mid-morning wind crisp on her arm. Three and a half hours northeast to pick up the press. She took the longer route on I-84 along the river, the same highway she had driven with Adam two years ago, on their five-year anniversary, the car heavy with moving boxes. Back then, her body at times had felt weightless, and at others it had felt grafted onto his, the feeling of a constant slow dance. She’d get some job, she remembered thinking. It was the nights with him that mattered—air from an open window, a thin sheet covering skin and breath and sweat.

They’d met when she was twenty-three, when Seattle’s mild summer made her reckless. Adam worked at a café downtown, pale arms in the

sleeves of a Radiohead shirt, forehead catching steam from the espresso machine. She'd go there for a chai after her corporate proofreading job, where she dressed in pinching flats and polyester blouses. She walked with confidence left over from college hookups but wondered if anyone would want her sober. The music vibrated in her chest, she leaned against the counter to talk. He spoke fast, rushing to get out his words. Caffeinated, ambitious. Raised in Pennsylvania, he went to the University of Washington for the sake of being somewhere new, unlike Helen, who had chosen the school because it was two hours from her parents' house. He fascinated her. He wanted to travel, to write, and to become not famous exactly, but well known.

One night, she had stayed after the café closed, helped him mop the floors, and afterwards they sat on the wiped-down counter. He asked why she liked proofreading. *I don't*, she said. *I'm just good at it*. He asked what she liked. She didn't really know. Hard kisses. Rain heard from inside a room. *The correct use of a semicolon*. She went with that. He laughed, said he liked that too. He said he liked to write about things he was afraid would happen—parents dying in a plane crash, for example. Or falling in love with someone who didn't love him back—well, that had happened once. She had a flutter in her stomach, almost said something stupid, but instead she kissed him.

East of Portland, Adam called. She let him go to voicemail, then played the message. His bright, staccato voice filled the car.

He'd talked to a University of Texas professor at the conference and no, they weren't hiring this year, but the professor knew some of the faculty at a nearby private high school, some arts-focused utopia, and one of the English teachers was taking a sabbatical in France after the holidays, so they needed someone to teach for a year, maybe longer. Sure, it was high school, but the pay was weirdly great, and it was a low-pressure environment. Away from real academia, he'd have the headspace to work on his novel. It would be cool to live near the desert, right, with cactus flowers, tacos, great sunsets? "Don't think of it as Texas," he said. "Think of it as *Austin*."

Now she wished she'd answered the phone so she could respond, though she didn't know what she would say. Cactus flowers. Every place sounded better when she hadn't seen it yet, when she could only imagine herself there: how sure of her body she'd be; how her skin would take to the climate and stop breaking out; how the landscape would shift each of her cells, and her real self would exist there.

Helen drove past wheat fields, one-road towns, convenience stores with retro lettering. She slowed the car as the highway got narrow. The town of Maupin ran along the river, and the seller's house looked like it was about to fall in. The wraparound porch was on stilts and creaked. A wide-faced man in a fishing hat opened the door, and the press was beside him in a wooden crate, two feet square.

"It's all in there," he said. "You know how to work it?"

"I'll learn," she said, handing him the cash. "I have a font, though. Ten-point serif."

"You'll do fine. You ever seen a platen press?" He snorted, a joke she didn't understand.

A woman called from inside, and shaking his head, he lifted the crate with a wheeze, walked it haltingly to the car, and set it in the trunk.

Driving home, the hills were cast amber in low sun, dimming to blue. Soon she pulled into her driveway and unlocked the garage doors, pushing them open on rusted hinges. Against one wall was a desk, which Adam had abandoned as a writing station. The other side was stacked with the flattened boxes they had agreed to keep for the next move. Helen pulled the crate out of the trunk, hugging it desperately to her body. She felt the rough wood slipping from her palms, her back straining. She could just wait for Adam to get back and help. But she tried again, squatting slightly, and with a strength that came from somewhere in her thighs, she lifted the crate against her hip.

Muscles burning, she moved through the garage and set the press on the desk. It was at least fifty pounds—black iron and compact. She had found a parts diagram online, and she opened her laptop to study it again.

From the side, the press looked like jaws open to the ceiling. She ran her hands over the curved lever, cold to the touch. The hard rubber rollers were smudged with old ink. Above the rollers was the square bed, which held the chase—an iron frame for holding metal type in place. She pressed her palm against the smooth disc for spreading ink.

It was a beautiful machine, functional and self-contained. Its weight seemed to ground the desk into the concrete floor, into the foundation of the house. She set down the can of ink, tacky from use. She brought the type case to the center of the floor, and the space became a room in a way it hadn't before. The air had a smell, like candlewax and rust, and she sat on the floor for several minutes, thrumming with the thought that the garage could be hers.

IN LATE AUGUST heat, Helen and Adam walked the bike trail along the Willamette River. Dry grass and burrs itched her ankles. Helen wore a black one-piece swimsuit and Tevas; she had turned thirty last week, and this seemed like a style she could now embrace. Adam had gifted her a potted cactus, which she appreciated, though it seemed to be making a point. He had become obsessed with Austin, had already researched neighborhoods. She sometimes watched him scroll Craigslist, leaning her head on his shoulder. Adobe roofs were a pleasant color. The way a cactus commanded a yard was, in a way, appealing.

The river was wide. Smooth rock eased into the water, and they sat, dipping their feet into the cold. She rubbed sunscreen on his pale back.

"We should do this all the time," she said. "At least in summer."

Adam nodded. "Hey, I got you something else. Here."

He fumbled in the pocket of his trunks, brought out a tiny cloth bag. He handed it to her—it felt like metal inside. A ring. Panic stitched her chest, good panic maybe, a clenching and frantic feeling. She untied the string. Inside was a chain, a square brass pendant with an embossed letter *H*.

"It looks like your printing letters," Adam said. He seemed pleased with

himself, looking over her shoulder, his chin brushing her skin.

She kissed him, clasped it around her neck. This was better, this was fine. Ridiculous to think he would propose during a job search. Obviously not. The moment diluted, looking at the expanse of water, the height of trees. Adam stretched his legs. He described the rigorous application process for the school, that they wanted someone with experience teaching high school, specifically. That he might have to look for something else, so Helen should be prepared for that, not get too attached to the idea. She nodded and stretched back onto the rock, beckoning for him to join her. She felt the hairs of his arm against hers, sun hot on her eyelids.

So maybe he wouldn't get it, and his voice would have that downcast edge at first, breaking the news. They'd knock back cups of wine, sitting on the grass in front of their house, watching occasional cars, neighbors with dogs. A little drunk, they'd turn back toward the façade, the retro floral curtains showing through the windows, the mailbox with their names in Sharpie on strips of masking tape, and she'd point out the oak seedling that was growing into a tree. She'd tell him how she thought about planting tomatoes. And he'd sit up really straight, and look it up on his phone, and declare that they would, that the front yard got great light in summer, and they'd do it next year, start the seeds inside, make their own raised beds, stand out there in hats, everything.

LEAVES WERE TURNING orange on the trees, and Helen had booked her first letterpress job.

"My phone charger?" Adam called in a rush. "Do you have it in the garage?"

She did. She spent most of her spare time in the garage. At first, she had printed blank notecards with phrases, things she might text Adam on a whim. *Love you, babe*, one had said. After five proofs, she got one evenly inked, a deep impression. She had placed it on his computer keyboard. He regarded it warmly, kissed her, and recycled it. *That took me four hours*, she wanted to say, but she didn't, embarrassed that she spent hours producing

three printed words while Adam could have written hundreds of words of his novel.

Helen scanned the table and found the charger by a cluster of dirty mugs. Two weeks ago, Helen had mentioned the press to her coworker, and—*what, really*, did Helen know they were shopping around for letterpress wedding invitations? *We want something handmade*, Nora had said. She asked what Helen would charge for a hundred. Helen blushed, stalled—it hadn't occurred to her that she could be paid for this. Flustered, she suggested two hundred dollars, and Nora accepted instantly, thanking her again and again.

Helen met Adam in the hall and pressed the charger into his hand. His panic lifted.

"Alright. Good. Off to the races!"

He had been called, alongside a select group of candidates, for an interview at the high school. His trim carry-on stood by the door and he wore a sport coat, olive green. He would fly to Austin, drink a small wine on the plane, have trouble falling asleep in a cold motel, then walk into the office tall and composed, like he always did.

"See you Thursday." She tilted her face up to kiss him—coffee, aftershave. A new deodorant made him smell sharp-edged, like someone else.

His face was flushed with energy. "I'm super nervous. But maybe it'll happen. Austin could be the place." He smiled, glancing out the window. What did he mean—the place where he finished the manuscript, the place where they decided to stay? But it was a conversation she didn't want to start, not then. He grabbed the suitcase. "Okay, my Lyft's here. Wish me luck."

She did, wondering if she meant it. When they met, it had been thrilling to tie her life to the luck of someone else.

The garage was dark, lit only by task lamps. Since taking on this job, she had learned that "letterpress wedding invitations" was a category on Pinterest, something people made for a living, crisp impressions on soft

paper, no smudges on the edges. She held the composing stick, a small metal trough used to arrange a few lines of type, and her hand trembled. She slid each letter into place in reverse, listened to that click of metal against metal. A rhythm started, breath slowed. Nora's name first, then one lead spacer to separate the next line. Her fingers had memorized the locations of each letter in the type case, but it was like typing in molasses, each character lifted up, inspected, placed beside the last.

Then, the ampersand—she'd never used one, couldn't find it. Her fingers scoured the far corners—apostrophes, em dashes. And there it was, just one, ink-stained, that little coil, that little anchor. She set the lines, and the names felt heavy in her hand. She pictured hers there with Adam's, wondered if it would feel the same, like such a solid thing. They used to stretch out on the carpet with the radio on—half-naps, meandering talks about places they'd like to visit, to stay for a year, to leave.

In their first year together, she used to drive from Seattle to Idaho to visit his sparse grad school apartment. Weekends blurred; her own apartment faded in her mind. She had no idea how adult life would feel, and she liked the heat of his hands on her skin. When Adam won a summer residency in Montana, she had rented a room nearby, snuck into his studio, and watched him watch her undress. He was offered a job in Salt Lake City, and she'd moved there too, this smooth place with icy mountains like a fence. She had edited copy for an online store; they didn't own a couch or bedframe. *I'm not creative*, she used to say, unbuttoning his pants. *I'm, like, your muse*. He used to let her read his writing, but lately he bristled if she was critical or overly positive. Now she barely asked, and maybe that hurt him, too. Now they half-yelled in bursts across a room—*where'd you put my sweater, why are there no good pens anywhere*.

Her hand slipped and the type slid out of the composing stick, loud onto the floor. She knelt, gathering back the letters, setting the line again. Sweat pricked at her neck. She kept going. *Invite you to their wedding*. Small caps, centered. *Saturday, the seventh of March, five o'clock in the afternoon*. The wedding would be held at the arboretum. Nora would wear something

lace, low-backed, showing off her tattoos, and the guy she married would cry a little during the vows, not so much that anyone could see, but enough to wipe his face with the side of his hand, and they'd go back to their house late that night, put something slow on the turntable, feed their cat, open the windows because the air smelled good.

And meanwhile, Helen and Adam would drive to Texas, him spinning the radio dial to static as they blew through town after town. They'd leave the dresser and desks on the street, throw all the food from the fridge in the trash and leave it on the curb to rot. At some point, during a good sunset, Adam would say—as he'd said before—how he needed to be somewhere new to write, and how this was when he felt most alive, driving to the next place. She would say yes, as she'd said before. Definitely yes, feet-on-the-dashboard yes.

Her hands were slick with sweat as she began to pack the chase. She placed it flat on the table. It was an empty metal frame, empty as a new room. She packed the top and sides with small blocks of wood, leaving space at the center for the lines of type. Barely breathing, she slid each line from the composing stick into this space. The letters jostled. She added more blocks to tighten the gaps. Where the lines were still loose, she jammed thin strips of brass and copper between the letters. She tightened the screws on the sides of the frame, and there, it was solid, the letters held together under pressure.

Helen dropped the chase onto the press bed, fixing it there, preparing to print. She spread a dab of ink on the disc and pushed the lever halfway, once, twice, so the rollers raised and smoothed it to gloss. She set a sheet of paper on the platen, securing it with metal tabs. With a breath that filled her arms and hands, she pushed the lever down. The rollers swept ink over the type. Then a pull upward, bringing the paper to the inked letters—this, she'd read, was called *the kiss*. She took the paper out, and sure, there were mistakes—a line off center, a comma missed—but her muscles hummed, and every word was pressed deep into the paper.

THROUGH DAMP WIND, Helen approached the outdoor market. Despite the weather, clusters of artisan booths and food trucks were out, surrounded by crowds. It seemed like the whole city gathered here every weekend, sat close to strangers at long tables, ate curry and burritos, and purchased wooden spoons while children floundered on a patch of grass. Before, the earnest market had felt embarrassing. But now, in the cold, she found it soothing.

Adam hadn't heard back about the job—tension accumulated like dust. Every day Helen got home from work, her stomach turned, wondering if he'd heard. That Saturday, Adam had woken early, stalked through rooms complaining about the mess. Frustrated by a dingy rug, he had vacuumed it aggressively, until a thread wound into the machine, stopping it. Helen had left to take a walk, to get some air, to ease the tightness in her shoulders.

Now she hovered by a booth of ceramics, hazel-green and flecked. A woman with grey curls sat on a camp chair, wrapped in a patchwork quilt.

"I love this one," Helen said, holding out a cup. "How much?"

"Ten. Let me wrap it up for you." The woman unfolded a newspaper, peeling out a sheet. "So, how do you like to spend your days?"

"Me?" Helen laughed. The earnestness. "I do letterpress. Just started."

"Oh, that's neat," the woman said. "Do you have a card?"

Helen reached into her purse. One of her first projects, her name on thick paper like flannel. She'd slammed the press to get a deep deboss, so she could feel the impressions with her fingers. The paper stock was so expensive, she had only printed six.

"Give me a few," the woman said. "I'll pass them along."

Flustered, Helen gave her all of them. The woman handed her the cup swaddled in newspaper, and Helen felt a smile flush across her face as she tucked it in her bag.

WINTER CURLED OVER the valley with a blanket of clouds, and gutters were packed with dead leaves. Helen had space heaters going in the garage, a rug to warm the floor, music loud against the walls. She tapped her foot on the metal leg of the stool, typing on gummy laptop keys with ink-stained

fingers. Print jobs were coming in. Every evening, she took off her office cardigan to feel electric in this space, muscles lit up by the weight of things, the sound of metallic levers, the sound of letters touching. She worked fast in a wash of noise, sometimes five or six hours a night.

“Helen?” Adam called from inside the house.

“Hang on, I’m writing an email.”

A platen press was up for sale thirty minutes south. A thousand pounds of iron, the size of her own body but dense with mass. She could print large formats, large runs. She pictured herself in grease-stained jeans, hair in a messy bun, the large rollers passing a gauze of ink over tight-set type. She had five fonts now—three serifs, two grotesks—and a flat file cabinet for paper. She liked to imagine these objects staying with her for years. And the platen press was available now—the seller could include delivery for another twenty percent. She felt tall, reckless.

Adam opened the door. “Babe, I got it,” he said. “I got the job.” He met her at the worktable, cupped her face in his hands. His palms were tacky with sweat. “I’m shocked! It’s good. I’ll finish the book there—I can feel it. Goddamn Texas! Can you believe it?”

She leaned back onto the stool, needing something to support her body, which felt like a loose bag of string. “When does it start?”

“After the holidays. We’ll be out of here before winter gets totally depressing.”

Helen was silent, a tide rising in her throat. Another city in blurred pastels. Forcing the Kelsey press into its crate, setting up a workspace in a new garage. Walking aimlessly through a grocery store. Changing the license plates on the car. Heat. And after a while, there could be a ring, a square-cut stone. Marry me in Austin—open sky, photo booth with cowboy hats, succulents in the bouquet.

“I have to think,” she said. “I got an offer for a platen press.”

Adam smiled. Maybe he could see her, congratulate her on the press—*Those must be difficult to find!* Agree to renew their lease together, make it work. Sit on the couch with his laptop, bundled in his thickest sweater,

searching for jobs at the community college, the local high schools. Print the pages of his novel on their shitty inkjet, swearing. Say that it stung to live here without an affiliation to the university, how it was awkward to attend readings or guest lectures. Resentment threading through silences, him sleeping late on weekends, not writing.

Adam shifted, leaned against the table. “Wait, a platen—is that a different kind of letterpress?”

Helen took a breath and stood up straight. She wasn’t sure how to say it, so she began to describe the press. The size, the staggering weight. The way she would stand and tap the foot pedal to engage the near-automatic movement of the platen rolling forward and back. She would print runs of a hundred, a thousand in minutes. She was already printing cards for an herbalist, a tree trimmer, a coffee shop downtown. She would go further, build off these local clients, start a business. She’d mix her own inks and print in turquoise, rust red, any color. Posters, menus, broadsides, books. She had to stay.

As she spoke, she saw Adam’s face falling, his body stepping back into the doorway. There was a tightness in her chest, a searing feeling in her gut. All the times she feared an argument would push to the point of breaking, it had resolved. She never thought it could happen like this—slow and heavy, his arms hanging slack, the space between his eyes hardening. How long had it been since they’d really talked, words loosening into the room? How had it taken her this long to tell him what she wanted? But really, she hadn’t known. She saw Adam’s fist clenching, pressing into the doorframe. There was a sour taste in her mouth, residue of a bad dream, thick on her teeth.

He said, “It’s not like it’s fucking impossible to move a printing press. But I get it.” Then he turned and slammed the door.

She expected to cry but found she couldn’t. The sensation was replaced by a silent, wild space in her mind.

Maybe this winter, Eugene would get snow. Maybe she would see those bell-shaped flowers grow out of frost on the lawn. Of course, she would cry. It would happen later, after Adam accepted the job and slept on the couch,

folding his wool blanket to a sharp square in the morning. After he packed the car succinctly, leaving the framed art posters he claimed were no longer his taste. After they embraced, and she felt like her body was encased in bubble wrap, padded against any prick of feeling. After he was out of sight, around the corner, and she could only imagine the velocity of the car.

Helen pressed her palms against her arms, suddenly chilled. She stood at the table, felt the solid floor through her socks, through the rug. Outside, she heard the sound of rain. She would become more muscular, in her arms and chest, from working with the press. She would feel like she was not made of tendons and muscle but something closer to a tree, like she was growing underneath the pavement of the street. She gripped the lever of the Kelsey press hard, her knuckles pale. She ran her fingers over the chase, full of type for her latest job, and felt the texture of the letters against her skin. A soft sheet of proofing paper was already in place. The yellow sun of the task lamp illuminated her hands. For now, she didn't roll out ink, just worked the lever up and down, warming up her blood, watching the bare type kiss the paper again and again.

CHAD FORET

THE USUAL LONELINESS

after Ruefle

1

In November, the mushrooms
breathe like umbrellas ready

to be painted by sleepwalkers,
their blood swapped with psilo-
cybin, the alters damp with dusk.

2

We don't arrive at the field but awaken
there—our spines extend like a deer stops
drinking from a stream to listen to its death.

3

All the pitchforks left to be in paintings
of places where grass is burned to bring
the fields back to life, & off-frame some

farmhands stop to drink from a drip torch.
When you try to wipe the blood off a farm-
hand's forehead, all the acres cry out like

a lifted curse & syrup comes screaming
out the maples looking for the closest
pancake with hair like a hotel mint.

4

Every puzzle you complete manifests
a farm of fake hemlocks, *Pseudotsuga*
through which you must stumble back-
ward until a shrine to you is constructed.

5

The usual loneliness slides off your face
like warm rain & you feel accomplished
& can see your unborn children waving
from behind the rainbow being eaten by
a distance that doesn't know any better.

6

Plaid comes off on your arms like wet paint
& the picnic baskets sink into blankets soft

as quicksand. You can't touch a photo album
without contracting the likeness of a stranger.

It's time to go when the baby teeth you shed
all those years ago reappear in your pockets

like secrets you must stomach, like a bunny
found beneath a tow trailer once the beagle

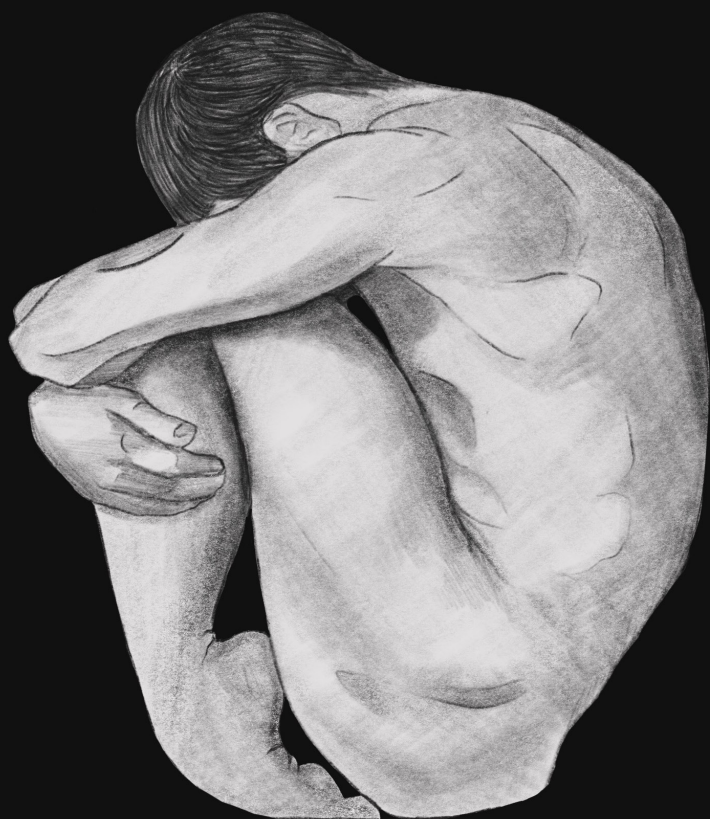
is bored & the body ruins every last beach
tower with its impossible amount of blood.

7

Parents look wise when they lean against
the saddest fence like quiet is a currency
& the stones installed will speak for us.

8

Children disappear every day. There isn't
enough music to make us remember them
& how we failed them almost religiously.
I've never seen the bones inside my body
& even if I did, they could belong to any-
one. In November, the fog comes in like
all the breath you ever held inside you.



SERENA SOLIN

GHOST DOG

even now the evil seed of what you've done
germinates within you, fleshy and certain
as the dead woman's furniture still reeking
of perfume, though we have often slept there.

the seed is contained, just barely
contained. it is lint healed to an open wound.
it is the words *reviewal* *pertaining* *asset*.
I am the administrator. I traffic in shame

and wintergreen gallons of ethyl alcohol.
the dog that barks at night is not my friend.
he is your wallet-stealing assistant. he is dead.
he is wearing a leather jacket and hat!

I'm too drunk to understand what he says,
what he demands from me.

BIG SKY, SMALL PROSE FLASH CONTEST 2021

The Big Sky Small Prose Flash Contest is *CutBank's* annual prose competition for pieces under 750 words. This year's contest was judged Daryl Scroggins.

Daryl Scroggins will be judging this year's Flash contest. He has taught creative writing and literature at The University of Texas at Dallas, The University of North Texas, and the Writer's Garret, in Dallas. He now lives in Marfa, Texas. His fictions, poems, and creative non-fictions have appeared in magazines and anthologies around the country and abroad, including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Blink-Ink*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *CutBank*, *Dime Show Review*, *Egress*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *KYSO Flash*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *New York Tyrant*, *Northwest Review*, *Quick Fiction*, and *The Portland Review*. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize several times, his flash fiction and prose poems have also won a number of contests and awards. He is the author of several poetry and fiction chapbooks, as well as *Winter Investments*, a collection of stories (Trilobite Press), and *This Is Not the Way We Came In*, a collection of flash fiction and a flash novel (Ravenna Press). One of his microfictions was reprinted in *Flash Fiction International* (2015; in the Flash Theory section), and another microfiction has been included in *Best Microfiction 2020*.

The following pieces are this year's contest selections.

JOHN BLAIR

TICKLING THE DRAGON'S TAIL

- Winner: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest -

*...the Demon Core: a sphere of Plutonium, the core of a nuclear weapon,
made in anticipation of future bombings against the Empire of Japan.*

Tom Britton, "The Demon Core: Tickling the Dragon's Tale

I.

START WITH THE CORE. With how they made three bombs but only dropped two, Little Boy first, then three days later like an ecstasy of dominion the Fat Man, and the third, stoic in its sundered parts, lingered in Los Alamos waiting for a reason, for the righteous shriek of supercritical mass that never came because surrender came first (Hirohito's divine capitulation, *The Jewel Voice Broadcast*, August 15th 1945, the god-emperor of the *Shōwa*, the *Era of Enlightened Peace*, "pondering deeply the general trends of the world") and among its pieces: the *demon core*, hot-pressed *oni* of ever-so-close but no closer, about the size of a man's closed fist (6.2-kilogram subcritical mass of plutonium-239 in two dull gray hemispheres electroplated with a nickel's worth of nickel), left-over but not left out, a toy for boys to play with, "tickling the dragon's tail" ever so gently, to see just how close anyone could possibly come to tragedy's raw edge, to a river risen and ravaging a levee's soft and failing shoulder, to the toothed serpent that hovers like chaos inside rain and snow and the sunless raptures of drowning.

II.

THEN CONSIDER THE curse, the flash of blue *aozora no tenshi* light that was not in the air itself but instead glowed within the suddenly ionized fluid inside a person's eyes (*Cerenkov Radiation*, the azureous light that beatifies the depths of reactor cooling pools) and was in itself so recklessly beautiful (*la douleur exquise*) that even as it killed him, even as he, horrified, flipped away the half-sphere of beryllium that he had carelessly let slip, Louis Slotin (physicist, son of Israel & Sonia, lately fled to Winnipeg from the pogroms of Mother Russia) saw in the last globular fruit of his labor a kind of awakening, a bright opening into the minds of strangers who had stood somehow beside him all his life but had never spoken because he was never really alive enough to notice them until this very moment, superposed as they were like electrons onto whatever consciousness manifested itself out of the sum of interferences, out of the infinite theoretical possibilities, of who he would always from that moment be—the second victim of a notional curse (the first, Haroutune Krikor Daghlilian Jr., had died in agony nine short months earlier, shot through with the same demonic light from the same demonic core) of causality locked cat-like inside a simple metallic mass of potential, a man who for one moment and forever became the sublime and entire alpha and omega of original sin, that same blood curse of knowing for which we all were cast out so long ago from the obscure gardens of our humility.

III.

AND NOW (THOUGH it happened so long ago), consider the demon Kurohime (*oni* of the bells, *oni* of the river and of all the scorned and forsaken), her face and scale-less skin luminescent with all the clarity of ice forming on still water, of ice held close by tree roots knuckling a river's muddy bank. She is as we might imagine her, so small, so powerless, and the river she stands beside, sighing its slow way to the sea, is as indifferent to her bitter losses as the man who has left her behind, just a woman, just abandoned, standing alone, the air (impossibly still, her breath steaming latent, quiescent) so

cold as she watches the ferry cross the river, and it is not until she steps one slippered foot wholly into the numbing current that she understands the flicker of potentiality within her every aching cell, understands that in her human heart and sorrow a serpent lives, a seed of fire and wings, abiding inside her the way a sun abides inside each star pricked like a livid *irezumi* onto the skin of the night's bowed back. She goes deeply into the river then, so that the dragon blooms, bright lotus, from her twisting bones, tail and teeth, the water boiling luminescent with the pale blue light of intention and in his terror, through the caustic rage of fog that laps the far shore, her lover (his name is Anchin, a young priest faithless and wandering in his passions) flees to the temple of Dōjōji and hides himself inside the brassy gorge of the temple's *bonsbō* bell, and when the temple shudders like a boat in its timbers with the divine wind of her coming, he hovers there like a held breath, for one moment and forever suspended in uncertainty, in a metallic humming of duality of spirit and intimation, of causation alive in whispers, the susurrations of scales on the cold stone floor causing the shape of the bell to take on somehow the shape of the man, the shape of what he brought into this life and what he will carry painfully away.

IV.

AND THEN, FINALLY, consider the three quick taps she makes on the shoulder of the bell with the spade of her tail, how she hears within the brass hollow the sound of *him*, the sound of the shape of *him*, the way a peasant thumps a melon in a field to know its heart. How she smells the scent of agarwood incense and sulfur, the smell of fear, the smell of the river water on the pavements and the flames growing hotter in the pit of her own cavernous belly. How Anchin draws his last breath and screams a single long note of being and dissolution, of awakening to the voices that were always there, though he'd never heard them before, to faces ruddy with the beguiling light that bronze makes as it begins to soften and glow, strangers, lovers, and demons who say his name in a chorus of incantation and devotion, a chorus of all the ten-thousand possible expiations any man might make

for the curses he himself has brought down, whispers sizzling without pity inside a sudden bloom of light so bright that it burns itself in shadows on the walls of memory, crackling the atomic air like sins that nothing in this fallen world can forgive.

FRANCESCA LEADER

LIKE BAKED ALASKA

- Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest -

“At last!” Uncle Fi grins.
“Yes!” I say.

Our room at the Renaissance Philadelphia has just one queen-sized bed.

We take turns changing in the bathroom, and climb in, side-by-side, naturally as an old married couple. Uncle Fi puts the ice bucket on the floor near him, just in case the combination of Percocet and alcohol and an immense Morimoto meal erupts like a fifth grader’s science experiment. The meal he drove all the way from the Bronx to eat. Not a last supper, maybe. But one of the last.

People in our family aren’t photogenic, so I distrust the old pictures of him. Bet he was really something with that dark, curly head of hair (now just fringe) all teased out for the disco. Bet he had a tight ass and a warm, sly mouth that drove the boys wild. I was just a baby then. Looking up at a bug-eyed man who cooed and rolled his tongue at me, vying to be the first to make me laugh.

There’s a Marilyn Monroe movie on TV. While we try, drunkenly, to figure out which one, Uncle Fi says, “Kinda like baked Alaska.”

“What, Marilyn?”

“No, that fiery chocolate tart thing we had. The burnt miso ice cream. Hot, cold, bitter, sweet. Incredible interplay.”

“Worth the trip?” I ask.

“You kiddin’?”

Uncle Fi nods off. I stay awake, watching him, watching the movie.

It’s *Let’s Make Love*. I find out at the end, when the commentator comes on in a green corduroy jacket. He says Marilyn had an affair with the French actor. It didn’t turn out well. For her, nothing ever did.

I imagine the moment Uncle Fi got sick. Who the guy was. Where they met. What they did. The moment the virus entered his bloodstream. Sweet as heaven, cold as death.

Uncle Fi wakes up. He smiles, in the blue TV light, like I’m an angel. I may be young, blonde, pretty. But I feel those damn dark circles under my eyes, like the ones under his. Patient black holes that pull and pull, knowing eventually the brightest stars collapse inward.

“Hey, you.”

“Hey.”

He reaches over, touches my face.

“I’m tellin’ you. If you were a boy. . .”

“Yeah. I know.”

If I were a boy, there would be just one wall (blood), instead of two (blood and sex). And it wouldn’t be enough. Our love would tear through. Ignite a family scandal to make Woody Allen blush.

I hold Uncle Fi’s hand holding mine, a bunch of twigs wrapped in dry leaves. And he’s gone again. I shut the TV and lie awake awhile. Listen to his teeth start grinding.

I think about Marilyn. How she didn’t always want to be in that body. How Uncle Fi doesn’t much like the body he got, either. How my love for him makes me not want mine. And if we’re all stuck in boxes that don’t match our contents forever, in this life and others.

ELISABETH ADWIN EDWARDS

LATE SUMMER

- *Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

I turn on the oven, perhaps for the last time until fall. Soon these California nights will cease to deliver a reprieve from the heat of days. Even in the wee hours of morning, no cooling will come, and our skins will seem like too much clothing; we'll dream of peeling them off as we stand naked before the box fans. Already the neighbor's yard is browning in the sun. That was the way you preferred your favorite vegetable, cauliflower: oil-drizzled, roasted till golden brown.

As a child growing up in Massachusetts, I both cursed and relished the bright, stifling days of summer. Relished exploring the thirteen acres of woods behind our house, cursed the humidity. Relished the samaras of the maples I split and sap-glued to my nose, but cursed the mosquitoes. I relished the peonies, the coconut scent of your suntan oil, the cool relief of your homemade popsicles.

And how I loved watching you in the garden, where, crouched down or bent over, you worked, your long, tanned legs tattooed with dirt, a bandana wreathing your head.

I've a recurring dream in which I walk out of that house to discover you standing naked, a vine-ripened tomato in each hand, arms laden with zucchini, beans, carrots, more zucchini. You're shivering. I call to you, but you don't seem to hear, and then I wake up. You were always giving vegetables away. You were always giving yourself away. People took freely.

Almost two years and a month have passed since you died. I've been smearing across my mouth a coconut-scented lip balm you left behind. I keep it in a drawer in the kitchen. It's old now and yet it seems to last forever, a small gift that keeps on giving. It smells and tastes like you, or a memory of you. Are those two things the same?

After quarantine went into effect, we subscribed to a produce box. It took weeks to get our first delivery, but when it arrived, neatly-taped and dropped at our door, it felt like Christmas. *Collards! Nectarines and berries! A cauliflower! Lettuces!* and *Oh*, I exclaimed, nose flaring, *zucchiniis. Well, we can't throw them out*, my husband responded. I diced them, cooked them down with onion until unrecognizable, and added the mixture to a pot of beans and corn.

Those old summers, you served zucchini nightly—sautéed, steamed, deep-fat fried. I ate and ate until I gagged at the sight of a green gourd on the kitchen counter. And some of the garden's specimens grew to the size of small children. After watching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* at the local theatre, I became convinced an alien-me, or an alien-you, was developing inside one of them. What if woke up and I wasn't me? Or you weren't you? Witnessing Donald Sutherland smash his squash-hatched clone with a pipe terrified me. I vowed never to eat zucchini again. But forty years later, as my family and I devoured that dish, I thought of those summers, and surprised myself by requesting zucchiniis be added to our box for the following week.

Tonight I palm the the ruffled bulk of cauliflower, pare away the brown spots, lay it down to cut into steaks. The serrated knife saws through it easily, and each, with its bit of stem, looks like a flat, white tree. On the day of your death, a man held your head in his hands. You'd given away the last of yourself, with the hope a cure for the disease that killed you, and so many others, might someday be found. The pathologist sawed through your skull, lifted the top clean off, snipped and tweezed. With great care he placed your brain into a styrofoam cooler and sent it across the country, where a neuroscientist, after shaving it into mandolin-thin slices, examined it under a microscope, the dark, blooming vines inside becoming, at last, visible.

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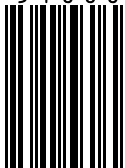
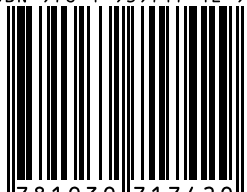
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ISBN 978-1-939717-42-9

US\$10.00

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