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CUTBANK NINETY-SEVEN

Cover

Someone was talking quietly of lanterns—but loud enough to light my way.
by Syd Mills

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Frankie Zwick

North Country Kindness

— Winner of the Montana Prize in Fiction —

Early May and the pastures were parched. Usually this time of year things were greening up, but with the drought the grass was still yellow, livestock dotting it like cigarette burns. From where she sat in the tractor Meg could see a few hundred sheep and the tower of a gas well beyond them. Under her sternum she felt the familiar thrum of the sound it made as it fractured the earth, so deep you could almost mistake it for a heartbeat. She looked down at the ground where her friend Brooke stood next to the six-foot tires, gesturing up at her, voice lost to the drone of the engine. Slowly, Meg dipped the angle of the tractor bucket.

"Stop!" Brooke mouthed outside the glass.

"What?"

"STOP!"

Meg punched open the door of the cab.

"I can't fucking hear you!"

Brooke lifted her hands and made them into two claws opening and closing.

"Can you see this?"

Meg nodded, opened the forks.

The 300-pound body of a Targhee sheep landed where Brooke had been standing.

"You trying to fucking kill me?" Brooke said.

"You said open!"

"I said close!"

The ewe hadn't suffered any from the fall; it'd been dead three days.

Sheep, Meg was convinced, were the only living things trying their damnedest to die. Sure, cows were plenty hard to keep alive, but sheep died like it was their job. Especially her sheep. Last week during shearing one had jumped out of the pens and impaled itself on a steel post, three had been trampled, and two had just dropped down dead because they felt like it. And the more sheep died the more she and Brooke drank. On Friday they'd killed a six pack by noon and when the harder stuff surfaced at sundown they still had half the sheep in the chutes. By midnight Meg couldn't stand up. Brooke had worked the last few by herself, gotten in her truck and left Meg making dirt angels in empty corrals, laughing like it was the funniest thing anyone had ever done. Meg thanked god for Brooke a lot, even when she woke up on the ground at 3 a.m., sprawled out next to the bodies of six dead sheep.

As for the carcasses, they should have hauled them to the dead pile before they started to stink, but Meg's hangovers were hard to argue with. So three days later—three unseasonably warm days for May—when the bodies were baked so stiff and bloated that lifting them was out of the question, the two girls were attempting to load them with the tractor, which was how her friend Brooke had ended up here, dodging rank sheep as they fell from the sky. Thank god for Brooke.

"Hey Meg, I've been thinking," Brooke said, shoving another sheep up to the bucket.

"Well, that's what you're good at."

"Seriously, I—"

"You ready?" Meg shifted out of neutral. She wasn't sure how much longer she could sit behind the glass of the windshield smelling the booze in her sweat.

"Ok, tilt back, slowly," Brooke said.

Meg angled the right way this time, and the ewe slid deeper into the bottom.

Brooke gave a thumbs up.

"What?"

Brooke lifted her hands and made the claws again.

Meg pulled the lever to the right and the jaws of the machine jerked shut. The swollen belly of the sheep let out a whiz of air, and Meg looked up to see it skewered on the tractor fork.

"Sick!" Brooke mouthed, pulling her shirt over her nose.

Meg swung open the door of the cab, gasping for air.

"I said *open!*" Brooke said, and Meg vomited over the side.

•••

The fence posts between Meg and Brooke's ranches were so rotten they waved when the wind blew. A fenceline like that turned neighbors into family, whether they liked it or not. Meg Matheson was fifth-generation sheepherder and Brooke Reidy's parents were cattlemen, so the result of the poorly kept property line was somewhat of a western menagerie—lambs trying to nurse big Angus and adolescent calves head-butting the rams for sport. Eventually they just gave up using words like "yours" and "mine."

They'd lived next door their whole lives, had driven the thirty-seven miles to school together every day since Brooke got her hardship license at thirteen and began backtracking the Dodge fifteen miles east down county road 29 to pick up Meg. In junior high they were copresidents of the Future Farmers Association and in high school both finalists in the youth barrel racing category. Meg had been chosen as Gillette Wyoming's rodeo queen her junior year, but was pulled over joy riding with Shane Holleran and a fifth of Burnett's the night before the coronation, making her the only queen in Campbell County history to be dethroned before she was even crowned. Brooke—forty pounds heavier and hair more orange than a Kubota paint job—was runner-up, but declined the title in solidarity.

Meg Matheson was a hundred and ten pounds of pure muscle. Broke her high school boyfriends' wrist in an arm wrestling contest, then broke up with him on the way to the ER. Every other time she'd entertained a

relationship they'd always come out to the ranch trying to lend a hand and somehow manage to tank the whole operation. Pushed the sheep too hard, always favored force over patience. When it came to help she had all she needed in Brooke. And not just in terms of stock. Brooke would hit a man with a phonebook if he fucked with Meg (actually had once in Miles City at probably the only bar that still *had* a phonebook), but despite her allegiance she didn't go easy on her. Last fall at the stock show when Brooke spied Meg getting too drunk from across the convention center she'd grabbed her by the ponytail and locked her in a horse trailer before she could embarrass herself. Their friendship was all Meg needed in the way of romance.

Brooke also liked to tease Meg, saying she wouldn't aways look that good at 4 a.m., pulling a calf with last night's mascara on her cheeks. And it wasn't because Brooke envied her, she was just resigned to the things about herself she couldn't change. She didn't forgo makeup or anything, but had her eyeliner tattooed on her upper lids to save time in the morning. There wasn't a damn thing about her that was effortless, Brooke always said, and that was all right. She liked hard work.

"I'm think I'm gonna have a kid," Brooke said.

She and Meg were in the kitchen now, the stink of death still on their clothes. Meg, holding out the bottle of Pendleton, pulled it back towards her chest and cradled it there.

"Well, sonofabitch."

"I know," Brooke laughed. "Nick's excited. We only just started trying but he already pulled the permit for an addition."

"Guess I should stop calling him limpdick behind his back."

"You call him that to his face."

"Maybe I should have a kid," Meg said. "It's a tax write-off, right?"

"I'm sure you could find somebody to knock you up," Brooke said, "If you asked nicely."

"Nice isn't in my vocabulary."

Brooke shook her head and turned to go.

"Hey," Meg said, squeezing her arm, "I'm happy for you."

•••

She really was. Meg knew how bad Brooke wanted this, she just couldn't understand why. Those tiny hands that stuck to everything like suction cups, the constantly leaky assholes. Animal shit she was fine with. She'd gone down to Colorado and worked the feedlots a few years after high school, worked in three feet of it dawn till dusk, but when her mom left and her dad offered to let her take over the outfit she'd come home to the north country, moved back into the house she'd grown up in. She'd all but bought the old man out of the ranch, but he still kept exactly one share so he could limp around on his cane and curse her for running a business into the ground he'd built from scratch, recalling perfectly the long list of offenses she'd committed against him despite the speed with which he was hurtling towards senility. And the drought was still kicking them in the balls, but eastern Wyoming had its own stark beauty, even if that was just a word people used to describe something that wasn't actually beautiful.

Brooke was different. The love she had for that land was practically biblical. She took a million videos during calving season, was always showing them to Meg over microwave pot pies at dinner. Babies dropping in soft grass, sniffing blindly for a bag while their mothers licked the mucus from their backs, hair spiked up like wet kittens. She was careful to put smaller bulls on her cows to avoid complications, and always left the horns on them so they could fend off the coyotes that skulked around. They were good mothers, Brooke said, constantly. But it wasn't enough for her, just to fatten up the moms with cake pellets like their best friend with a pint of ice cream. She wanted to be one herself. Three years ago and a week shy of her thirtieth birthday, Brooke had married Nick Hodges, a divorced oil rig tech with an eight-year-old kid in Jacksonville, while Meg cried in the front row for all the wrong reasons. But he was kind enough, and the fact that his ex hadn't filed a restraining order counted for something. They'd freeze-branded a red longhorn hide at the altar and Arby's had sponsored the party, thirty percent off in exchange for letting them feature photos of

it on the catering section of their website. Meg knew Brooke sensed her disapproval, it was why she'd brag about him whenever he brought home those big Stouffer's frozen lasagnas for impromptu "date nights." Then last year he'd taken a job on a rig in South Dakota, the date nights stopped, and he was only home one weekend a month. Meg couldn't imagine it would be easy to conceive with those odds, but knowing Brooke it would just make her more determined. And when Brooke Reidy set her mind to something, she usually made good on it.

•••

"Pendleton, rocks," Meg said.

Tommy broke the seal on a new bottle, poured a glass and set it on the bar. She had to admit, the guy knew her pretty well: she was gonna be here a while. It wasn't like her to drive the hour twenty to Gillette for a drink, but after the day she'd had Tommy Lesh's face sounded nicer than the old crow who served beers at the rest stop bar on 387. She could always sleep it off in the truck a few hours before she drove home.

"You're not usually here during the week," he said.

"Had to get off ranch. Brooke's driving me nuts with this fertility shit. It's been two months of Femara and Clovid and Folic Acid and fucking Ashwagandha root. Like we don't have enough babies to take care of this time of year."

"Bad day?"

"Four dead lambs this morning," she said. "Eagles got one and a pumper took out the rest on the lease road."

Mendoza Energy Corps pumped day and night from sixteen locations on her ranch. Meg had spent the last twenty years getting run off the road by gas trucks and watching them mow down lambs stuck in cattle guards, a lifetime of getting out of her car to close every gate just so the truck drivers would have to get out and open them, of watching her water table dwindle as the wells multiplied. And what they paid her for surface use was barely

enough to keep her out of debt, but she was one of the lucky ones. A fifth generation ranching family that had been in the area since before the split estate statute, when they separated the mineral rights from the surface deeds and cut the landowners out of the energy deals. But Meg still had a small share—a slice of the trust split between about forty-five cousins—that got her tiny a siphon of Mendoza's profits, like a consolation prize. But it was more than most of her neighbors could say, who weren't seeing returns on anything pumped off their land, Brooke included. Meg did her best to go to bat for her at the meetings, to renegotiate the surface lease contracts and slow down construction on new pads at the Reidy ranch, but usually felt like her voice lacked the deep pitch required to be listened to. Really it was just principle. They were gonna get it out of the ground one way or another, the least she could do was make it difficult.

"Fucking Mendoza," Tommy said. "Booming isn't it?"

"Sixteen new wells this year," Meg said. "But when is it not?"

His jawline wasn't bad, she thought to herself, but she could see where his hair was thinning under his baseball cap. *Hat-fished*, she called it. What happened when you met a half-decent looking man in Wyoming, and then he took his hat off.

"Sorry, Meg."

"It's fine," she said, seeing the tire tread in the lambswool, the white bodies like stuffed animals in the road. "I'll cry about it later."

That was one of Brooke's sayings, and unlike Meg, she usually did cry about it eventually. Because she wasn't saying, *No use crying about it now*, she was saying, *I've got to make time to later*. That when you spent most of your days alone, riding a brown prairie with sweat in your eyelashes, fighting to keep a few thousand animals alive despite a landscape determined to kill them, you couldn't go around crying about everything—you just wouldn't have the time. But if you didn't find the time to cry about some of it, you could forget to—or worse—forget why. Meg respected Brooke for that, but didn't entirely agree. Maybe it was just that she'd spent the last twenty years feigning indifference at her dad's disappointment in a daughter, but

the more feeble he grew the worse it got. Was loathe to be dependent on anyone, but the fact that she was female was insult to injury. In any case, if she ever cried, she didn't go around advertising it.

"And a lot of help she'll be knocked up. Getting sick off the side of her horse twice a day."

"She'll be pregnant," Tommy said filling up her glass again, "not crippled."

"Six of one—"

"Don't you want kids though?" he said. "Like, eventually?"

"Absolutely not." Meg threw back her drink, saw the look on his face. "Do *you?*"

"Fuck yeah," he said. "A Tommy junior ripping around on a little plastic John Deere?"

"That's because you wouldn't spend nine months in purgatory for it."

"Better keep your voice down."

"I just don't get it," Meg said. "How's she gonna last a whole winter sober?"

Tommy laughed, but they both knew what she meant. That Meg couldn't survive drinking alone through one.

"I gotta close down," he said. "Might have to kick you out."

"Ouch," she said. "Your place?"

•••

The grass never greened that summer, just thinned out as the stock clipped it down, the stretches of bare soil widening between clumps. By August the pastures were bald, and Brooke still wasn't pregnant.

"Even *Aubrey Hicks* is pregnant. I mean, who'd she even find to fuck her?" Brooke said. They were bringing Brooke's herd in closer for fall works next month, to sort off the calves to ship, preg-check the cows. Ahead of them the herd coalesced like water, spilling out of gullies and joining the river of Angus flowing towards the corrals. The girls trotted behind them to

the tune of the empty Coors cans in Meg's saddle bags.

"How do you even know that?" Meg said. "You haven't talked to Aubrey since high school."

"Uh, Dawn? My cousin? She works at the clinic in Casper. Said Aubrey just came in for her ten week check-up. Alone."

"That's like, totally illegal."

"What is?"

"That she told you that."

"Oh come on, it's my fucking *cousin*." Brooke said.

Meg didn't answer, just loped up to hurry a lagging calf.

"Sorry," Brooke said, catching up to her. "I'm such a bitch on these hormones."

"I know," Meg said. "Even more than usual."

The cottonwood leaves were yellow and crowding the creek beds, filling up the draws with the the only flash of fall they'd get. The flicker of color that accompanied their last push of hard work before winter put them into hibernation. Temps at night were already dropping into the teens. Meg didn't love shipping calves any more than her own lambs. Made her think of the feedlots down in Fort Collins where they'd be freighted to eat corn in a cloud of dried shit so dark it blocked out the sun. It was the same dust that settled on the roof of her house when she'd worked down there, that formed piles of manure in the bottom of her gutter whenever it rained, sprouting white maggots two days later. But again, it wasn't the shit she minded. It was when ranchers sent cows to be finished and didn't even bother to check if they were bred, and she'd had to watch them drop newborn calves in three feet of crap, hours before they went to the kill floor. And no one there was interested in bottle feeding a bum preemie either. The men that did take the calves home came back with veal burritos for the crew the next day, but Meg wouldn't eat them.

"What about IVF?" Meg said once they were back at the barn, pulling their saddles off.

"You got fifteen grand laying around?"

"Jesus."

"I know." Brooke said, then gestured to the med box labeled *AI*, the syringes of Cystorelin and Lutalyse they'd use to regulate their heats if they ever had to artificially inseminate. "Should just shoot myself up with this stuff."

"Yeah, right."

•••

Two weeks later Meg was in bed, counting the hours she'd surrendered to insomnia, each one another she'd miss in the morning when she woke up at five to ship seven hundred of Brooke's calves. They'd do it all in a day this year, which was ambitious, even for Brooke. But she'd been on her broom lately, and Meg knew it was because Nick hadn't come home for his off-weekend this month. Part of her was glad. Maybe Brooke would finally stop trying now, for a kid, and to fix her marriage with a man who wasn't trying half hard. And Meg would have her friend back, the one that could drink three martinis before a ranch rodeo and still rope better than her, that didn't listen to anyone telling her she wasn't good enough. She knew the guy was foaming at the mouth for some little juniors himself, but also that he was the kind of guy who would make Brooke feel like she had to apologize for it.

Meg willed herself to sleep. But in the glowing green behind her eyes was Nick, a sad look on his face, as if he didn't understand that to claim even a sliver of Brooke's pain was more than he was entitled to. That what he was entitled to was not a damn thing, she thought, going now through all the ways she'd dismember him if he didn't pick the perfect words, if he let his voice sound even a little serrated when he spoke to her. When she told him the same news every month. If he couldn't see that the only thing Brooke had ever wanted more than something she could protect until it outlived her, something that wasn't a goddamn calf raised for slaughter, was to be loved. Not like Meg was any better. She'd practically wished for this, manifested it with her bad attitude. And now there wasn't anything she

could do—it was all on Nick. All of her best friend's happiness in his big dumb indelicate hands, his words the only ones she cared to hear. She'd kill the motherfucker. If somehow he proved to be even more worthless than she'd already suspected, if he didn't insist with every breath over and over until Brooke was forced to believe him, *It's not your fault. It's not your fault.*

•••

"Open!" Brooke yelled, and Meg switched the gate at the end of the chute, the one that would let the open cow into the pen with the other unbred girls they'd haul to sale. With the drought this year they'd have to sell off a lot more than that, but any of the older cows that couldn't breed up in the thirty days they had the bulls on them were just dead weight, eating precious grass with nothing to show for it, empty ovens burning fuel.

Meg shooed the next cow into the squeeze chute, and Brooke pulled the lever to clamp it tight, the animal's sides inflating like a turkey baster through the slats. Then she gloved up to her elbow and slid her hand into the cows rectum, shit falling down around her arm.

"Bred!" Brooke called, and Meg put down her beer to run up and switch the gate again.

"Listen," Meg said, jogging back to where Brooke was standing, "I can loan you the money."

"What are you talking about?"

"For IVF."

As soon as Meg said it she regretted it. She knew Brooke would never take it. Knew she wished she'd never even told anyone she was trying. Last week when they'd checked out at Safeway she could feel Shelly at the register looking for the bump that wasn't there, and every time they'd helped out a neighbor that summer Brooke had make a point of sticking around until they untacked their horses and opened the beer coolers, but could only sip pop for so long before excusing herself. Brooke said she'd gotten a lot of nasty looks in her life, but pity was the ugliest.

"With all the new drill sites going in I've got enough savings," Meg said. She was in too deep to quit.

Brooke just shook her head, pulled the lever.

"What?" Meg said.

"Keep your dirty oil money."

"Oh, fuck you."

"I don't want charity."

"Why?" Meg said. "Because then something might actually be *easy?* God fucking forbid."

"What's your problem?"

"*My* problem? You're the one with the problem. I'm the one trying to solve it."

"By being the hero."

"Oh and we can't have that," Meg said, almost laughing as she walked down the line of cows, hustling them forward in the narrow alley. "Because that's your job, right? Raising a thousand cows and a dozen babies at the same time. Like a goddamn saint. That's the dream, right?"

Brooke looked like she'd been slapped. As if Meg needed any more proof of the hatchet where her own heart should have been. She didn't know what was making her so mean. Probably just needed to sleep, reset. Black coffee and Coors Banquet always made her feel like she was speeding with the brakes on. She'd ship her lambs next week and then finally get a break, settle in for the winter. Everything would go back to normal.

Up at the chute Brooke pulled the lever, donned the long blue glove silently. Meg watched her as she slid her hand in, feeling for the outside of the cow's uterus, where she would tap, then wait for the mass of the fetus to bump back against her fingers, if there was one. Brooke prodded one more time, just to be sure, then called it.

"Open!"

•••

Meg woke up the next morning with her head in the toilet. Had crawled there some time around five and passed back out with her cheek on the seat. It's wasn't like she'd had a lot to drink. At least not for her. Maybe she'd eaten something weird, or had a bug. Maybe it was nothing, she thought, but the truth was rising in her throat again.

Tommy Lesh. She hadn't had her period last month, but it had happened before. Mid-summer was always hell on her body, docking lambs in hundred degree heat, subsisting on Lean Cuisine and Twisted Teas. She'd chalked it up to stress, like she always did. But the timing was too perfect, the night coming back to her with offensive clarity. The gravel parking lot of his triple-wide, the way his hands held the smell of the moldy bar rags, how all she could think about after she got out of bed was how big his bathroom was. So much bigger than her own, practically palatial.

But now she was here, on her own curling linoleum, and this was really happening. Blood pulsed in her eardrums and panic thrummed in her chest, hammering like the beat of the fracking wells, deep and quick. But all she could think of was Brooke. How what her friend had been trying to do for months, she'd just done by accident. How badly Brooke wanted what she now had, and how certain Meg was that she didn't. That she had to get rid of it before it started to grow like some invasive species inside her, like the cheatgrass that choked the pastures, starving out the other plants until the land was unrecognizable. What other choice did she have? Carry a fucking kid to term just so Brooke could buy it baby Carhartts and feel that much worse? There was no way. But she was just as certain that Brooke could never find out. They'd survived a lot together, navigated the territory of luck and guilt and pride their whole lives, swerving from jealousy like the deep holes in the acres they galloped across, praying their horses' feet wouldn't find. But she didn't know if they could survive this.

She crossed off her options as quickly as they entered her mind. She couldn't go to the clinic, not with Dawn at reception texting Brooke in real time, so Casper was out of the question. And what was the closest one after that? Denver? She pictured signing herself in, being the thirty-two-year

old woman in the waiting room with a bunch of high-schoolers, girls that actually had a good excuse to be there. A reason to do it that transcended pure selfishness. Besides, the trucks were coming to haul off her lambs next week, she didn't have three days so spare for a road trip. She should call someone, Meg thought, but the only person she ever called was Brooke.

Meg slid into her boots and headed for the barn. She could fix this. She could do this herself. The AI box was on the cement floor in front of her now, empty bottles and bent needles crusted in oxidized liquid. She just needed a sterile sharp and a bottle of Lutalyse that wasn't expired. She knew how to use it on cattle. It was a prostaglandin that shortened heat cycles so a cow could sync up with the rest of the herd, or induce contractions if they'd had the wrong bull on them. Twenty-five mgs in the first trimester could make a cow abort within thirty-five days.

Meg smeared some dust off the label, started doing the calculations for her own weight in her head. Five ccs to the thigh ought do it. It was no wonder Kelly Donaldson had used it sophomore year. Or at least that was the rumor, but Meg had good reason to believe it. Could picture poor Kelly crying in a bathroom stall at Campbell County High, trying to think of how she could scrape together 500 bucks for a late stage procedure, when a bottle of Lutalyse ran about sixteen dollars. Tommy Lesh had been the year above her in high school, captain of the wrestling team. Tommy. With his stupid kid fantasy with those stupid baby John Deeres. Meg didn't know how she'd turned out the way she did. How the same god-fearing, mountain-dew guzzling country that had reared Tommy and Kelly and even Brooke had raised her too. But she also knew that she didn't have a choice, that she was this way as much in spite of Wyoming as she was because of it.

Meg spun the bottle around. *Not for human use. Keep out of the reach of children. Women of childbearing age should exercise extreme caution when handling this product as it can cause abortion and/or bronchiospasms, excessive hemorrhaging, infection and clotting issues.* She flipped back to the front. *Future reproductive performance of animals will be unaffected by injection.* And Kelly survived. How bad could it be?

•••

The first contraction came in the barn, three days later, on the night before Meg planned to ship lambs. The one she'd been hoping for, the one she'd been dreading. Just when she was beginning to wonder if the jab had worked. She was pitching hay into the horse corral when it knocked her to her knees. If she screamed she couldn't tell, but when she looked up the horses were all watching her, ears at attention on the other side of the fence. She took a breath. It wasn't so bad. One of the horses lowered its head to sniff her hair. She got back on her feet but couldn't get her body unbent, so she trudged to the house hunched over like a hinge in her abdomen was rusted in place. Inside she found the floor before she could make it to bed. The next contraction was coming, and something in her body just knew it would be bigger, that the pain would be like fifteen fixed-blades stabbing at odd intervals. She saw white and groaned so loud the dogs came out of the bedroom in a panic. Then the black fur of a border collie, and a pink tongue in her face.

The next morning her alarm went off at four. She slid into her jeans in the dark and hit the button on the coffee maker. Her body had a little more mobility now, and she knew she'd feel better once she got moving, but swallowed a handful of ibuprofen for good measure. The guys were coming at six, but she had to get her horse tacked up and a last group of straggler sheep into the pens before they got there. Brooke had called about sixty times in the last two days, but Meg hadn't answered. As much as she needed Brooke's help, she knew she couldn't look her in the eye. It didn't matter that she couldn't remember the last time they'd shipped with a crew this small, and now there was snow in the forecast and the wind was screaming. She tossed her sheets in the dumpster on her way out the door.

Outside a thin line of dawn was on the horizon but the stars were still bright as satellites. By the time she reached the barn her feet were numb and she felt stupid for not wearing two pairs of socks. Then she

saw something. She rubbed her eyes, still puffy from the night before. A large black silhouette was moving by the horse trough, growing as it came towards her in the dark.

"You look like shit," Brooke said. She was sitting on her big draft horse, the first clouds starting to glow behind them.

"The fuck are you doing here?" Meg said.

"You didn't answer your phone."

"Because I have plenty of help."

"No you don't. There's a storm coming and you've got three guys."

"I'm fine."

Brooke cinched her rope down on her saddle, looked up.

"You need me."

It was just the hormones, Meg thought as she started to cry, she'd taken enough for a 200-pound heifer. But the tears were coming fast, and she couldn't stop them. Brooke pretended not to notice, just waited as Meg threw a saddle on her horse and took her place beside her, the two girls loping out to the far corner of the pasture, spooking lambs out of the sagebrush as they rode. Up on the ridge the pumpjacks see-sawed, silently sucking at the earth, and the clouds dipped low and pink as if beckoning from another planet. One with softer edges maybe, that didn't chip so bluntly at their hearts, and with no force like gravity to moor them to the dirt; the skittering sand on which they were born.

"Think we're gonna stop trying for a while," Brooke said, looking at the dawn.

Meg looked up at her friend. The wind had clawed the blood to the surface of her cheeks, battering her into something beautiful.

"I just—" Brooke paused, "I just really wanted a girl."

P. HODGES ADAMS

SITTING MINOTAUR, 1972

— after Bahman Mohasses

find him perched in the center of thought,
pensive where one expects hot bolts of blood
and saliva—instead delicately jointed shoulders

and slender ankles, slender feet, more doe than monster.
roadside ghosts with spots or antlers, kin to
this boy with chin nestled in elbow, elbow perched on knee.

graceful thinker awaiting the myths to stumble in.
night after night the moon walks the labyrinth path
and she turns and she turns and she never approaches the heart.

yes i would lick the open bronze of his thigh yes set
the bronze horns on my head yes gaunt hipbone and graceful vein
of the upper arm yes broad and eyeless face.

he seems to me more real than the body, more serene.
my bed. i turn. i never.

John Sibley Williams

CHEKHOV'S GUN

more the potential for shrapnel / future
ruined classrooms / the collapsed spines
::
of decades-old textbooks & bodies
slowly separated from / brick / these
::
modern hieroglyphics & nothing / else
to read the world by / bomb-brightened
::
faces relearning their worth / prayers
imprinted on / the vestigial walls someone's
::
god pulls letters from in order / to weep
together / sincerely / consider the lack
::
of children / on today's streets & how
moths never seem to singe / their wings
::
on open / hearts / consider the papier-mâché
heart of the city & raw song of the city
::

& all the muted violence / of these
gorgeously rutted avenues joining

::

homes / & the barbed wire interrogating /
us & / like holding your breath underwater /

::

how we are speaking today / from one mouth
waiting / if not for the bullet / at least a loving hand

::

reaching for the bullet / the switch / even if
it doesn't detonate / we are here now / together /

::

auditioning for the role of grieving parent
lover captor captive / both exit & wound

John Sibley Williams

Galleons

— Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry Runner-Up —

Tenderness stained everything it touched.
— Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The hull still unsilent
as a dusty old cigar box
trembling with not-yet-
forgiven memories.
Bruised birds still
ricochet off our glass.
The same waves carry
the same blood farther
from this sublimely
static shore. Erasure,
I think I mean. What
a body owes us, they
used to say. & owns.
Ownership?, my daughter
who was born with all
the wrong parts asks me,
its older context worn down.
The world already wearing
her down. Making its ugly
myths from the constellations
in her soft night eyes. I tell her
someone else's great-
great-grandfather deep

in the belly of a ship &
mine likely somewhere
above breathing freer air.
Debt is a word I don't know
intimately enough to wield.
So, I say sorry. I say I love
how she still aches for
more light. Despite &, yes,
because of. As days divide
wound from consequence, each
word from its meaning, touch
from every damn thing we will
never touch tenderly enough,
I tell her she can be whatever
is missing from the song. & the song.
That there are still ships out there
as hungry as ever. & a box I'm scared
to open, that we can open together.

Abbie Barker

Steve's Boat

— Big Sky, Small Prose Runner-Up —

Steve is talking about his boat again. He says he misses all twenty-seven feet of "her." The dual console, the built-in wet bar, the deluxe lounge seating, and hydraulic tilt steering. I listen patiently until he describes the extensive rod storage.

"Rod holders?" I say.

"I took her fishing most Sundays. Like today, we should be out on the water."

We are standing on the balcony of his new apartment. Steve twists the cap off his beer and flicks it in the air. We watch it fall three stories to the alley below. A cluster of pigeons scatter.

"Maybe referring to your boat as a babe is the reason you're no longer married?"

When Steve called a few weeks ago to say he was moving home, that he and Lacey were through, I imagined we'd be like we were in high school—driving around aimlessly, mocking one another's taste in music, swapping inappropriate jokes. Our relationship was uncomplicated because we never dated. But maybe too much time has passed, or too much has changed. I have a husband, a mortgage, a kid. Steve is freshly single and claiming he never wanted kids.

"Like you're happy, in your situation?" Steve says.

"My situation?" Steve refuses to call my husband by name just like he refused to call my high school boyfriends by name.

He inches closer and blinks. "Your job. Your family."

"Of course, I'm happy."

A light goes on in the apartment across from us, revealing a stranger's living room—glass coffee table and orange L-shaped couch, a white fuzzy rug. A woman in a blue dress sets an oversized tote on a side table. Everything appears clean and put together, tidy in a way my home hasn't been in years. My husband would never agree to an orange couch. She must live alone.

"These buildings really are close," I say.

"That's Rebecca," Steve says.

"You've met?"

"Doesn't she look like a Rebecca?"

"Not any Rebecca I know."

Steve takes a swig. "Are you going to make me drink alone?" He leans into me, as if he's suddenly unable to carry his own weight. It's mid-afternoon and I can't tell how much he's had. Steve has always reminded me of a puppy, in need of boundaries and positive reinforcement.

"I thought I was helping you unpack," I say.

"I think there's a game on." He fumbles with the sliding door. I follow him inside where there is a leather couch and a dining table without any chairs. The edges of the room are piled with plastic bins and cardboard boxes, each marked with vague labels like, "misc." or "boring."

"Did you unpack your kitchen stuff yet?" I ask.

"What kitchen stuff?"

"Plates, silverware, utensils."

"Lacey kept most of it. I told her I didn't want any of the wedding gifts."

"Should we go shopping?"

Steve sets his drink on the carpet and lies across the three-seat couch. I drag a large bin marked "toys" from the corner to sit on.

"I can make room," Steve says. He pats the cushion near his ass.

"I'm good." I scan the apartment. Blank walls, queen mattress on the floor, a skateboard leaning against a mini-fridge. "Do you really need a second fridge?"

Steve crosses his arms over his chest and stares at the ceiling. "I should've had you up to the lake," he says. "You'd understand why I miss that boat."

I want to tell him there are times when I wish for less responsibility, how I can't help but dream of living alone. Would my apartment look something like Steve's, or more like Rebecca's from across the way?

"Why didn't Lacey just let you have it?" I say.

He makes this face, like I'm the child. When he goes for another drink, I ask for one.

"You're right. Today would've been a great day to be out on the water," I say. And when Steve returns with a handle of cinnamon whisky and starts describing his boat again, I don't interrupt. I let him list every feature, every cupholder and footrest, until we're both drunk, and he runs out of words.

Neil Richard Grayson

Morning Bell

— Montana Prize in Fiction Runner-Up —

Cold wind streams through the parking lot of the James Monroe Alternative Jr./Sr. High School, mixing with dead leaves and swirling against the hulls of cars like a broken river current. Paul Jeffries, teacher of English, AP Literature, and Senior Sem (also head of Philosophy Club, Outdoor Adventures Club, and JV Soccer) shuts his car door and hustles toward the building to swipe in. He hustles because it's freezing out and because, recently, he's come to the decision that everyone who works (or will ever work) at this school is deserves his hatred.

In front of Paul, the rear door of Chuck Barney's wrecked sedan opens up and Chuck sticks his legs out and Paul stops. Paul says morning.

Chuck props himself up in his backseat and squints as if before intense light. He teaches Economics while coordinating all substitutions: two full-time jobs. He's wearing the same rumpled orange polo as yesterday. He's still drunk. Pale breath sprouts from his mouth and the wind tears it away.

Chuck's phone's alarm has just gone off next to his head, pulling him from what's lately been the same dream: Chuck, standing mute in his living room, by the glass backdoor that leads to the yard and woods, staring at his piano, rocking on his heels and toes. For a year now, and at the grief counselor's behest, Chuck's been determined to teach himself piano, but whenever he sits down in front of the keys he can't bring himself to play. In his dream, Chuck watches a thread-thin blonde boy emerge from the woods and squat beside his rhubarb plants (which in real life he does not have) and munch on them and look him dead in the face, and he feels no hatred at all.

Chuck says sup. He squirms to reach his Rochester Rhinos cap and sways dangerously as he shuts his door, ignoring his warped reflection. Chuck holds the door for Paul as they cross the fluorescent threshold. In the front lobby they greet the usual gaggle of kids, plus Mrs. Kelly White (Spanish/Literacy/Culture Club/Cooking Club) who doesn't notice the two men until they're heading in opposite directions on the stairs, telling each other to have a good one.

Today it's Mrs. White's turn to supervise the early arrivals in the lobby. She scans kids clumping in loose groups, mostly by race and by reading level. It's 7:05 a.m., but first bell isn't until 7:33. Until then, students are confined to the lobby, which gives teachers time to turn on their lights, get organized, and take a breath. The alternative would be letting kids wander wherever they pleased, a recipe for chaos, especially since the school's contractor hasn't finished installing any of the new security cameras. A year ago today, Titus Marsden (9th grade/Advanced Math/Reading Intervention/Coding Club) brought his father's Luger to school and killed six kids, including himself. Chaos is not what it used to be.

Over the din, Mrs. White is talking with Nathan Wiley (Varsity Track/Varsity Cross-Country/Dodgeball League/Math Intervention) a gangling, huge-eared, 7th-grader who speaks with desperate speed. Mrs. White savors this time with Nate because he tends to be an asshole when playing ringleader with his peers but, one-on-one, he can be disarmingly insightful—and in fact, can even be quite receptive, if White is willing to twist his arm.

This morning Nate is pissed, because he got in a fight with his dad last night about how gay his best friend Randall McClelland (7th grade/Dodgeball League/Marching Band/Drama Club) is or isn't. Randall is zero percent gay, just slight, and Nate is aware that his dad is being somehow unfair, but he's also scared of disagreeing with the man, even when he's not in the room. On That November Day, Titus Marsden and Nate stared at each other from opposing ends of a hallway with two kids pretzeled on flat red shapes between them. If someone had asked Nate how Titus had looked (which no one had) he would have said *afraid.*

Mrs. White tells Nate that what he should really be pissed about is, honestly, what a waste of his finite childhood this discussion re: Randall's gayness is at all. She says Nate knows two things; One, Randall isn't gay; Two, Nate's dad is willing to yell and physically intimidate him in order to win any argument, regardless of its topic or scope. Which honestly means that he need not try to convince his dad of anything, ever. He can just skip the whole fight on moral grounds, and taking the high road will save him a lot of work.

Nate blinks at her, somewhat diplomatically. By now, Mrs. White figures he must be pretty used to these rants from her, his Spanish teacher, who long ago stopped giving a shit about the fortysomething corporate auditor who wreaks nightly emotional havoc on her favorite boy. On That November Day she locked her kids inside her room and imagined killing a shadowy, essential version of the shooter, over and over, with various items on her desk.

She presses Nate further—and besides, what's *behind* his dad's problem with the gayness anyway? What would Randall's gayness *mean* for Nate's father? That's the thing for Nate to unpack. But also, Nate doesn't necessarily need to solve his dad like an abusive Rubik's Cube.

Nate tells her yeah, but he's just more in general pissed because Nate's dad took his XBOX away because Nate and Randall game together online basically from the time they get home until like two or three in the morning (Nate is not a homework-doer). And he has to get over that part before thinking about other things like what exactly is behind everything else.

This doesn't stop his thoughts from turning over though, not even when Randall slinks in through a cold flurry of leaves and taps him on the shoulder from behind. They retreat to a corner, leaving Mrs. White to do her thing, which is stand there, try to levitate within her shoes, and think nothing at all.

Near them looms Joseph Mulaney, youngest of the Phys Ed teachers (also head of Varsity Basketball/Varsity Soccer/Varsity Track/Soccer Club/Dodgeball League, and unwilling teacher of a single Health class), chewing

a chrome whistle and surveilling students who've spilled from the crowded lobby into the front hall. Each day, he quietly protests his salary—which he approximates to be thirty percent of his value—by working thirty percent hard. (Since JMAS is technically a charter school, Joseph's pay is fiscal centimeters above the poverty line.) He joined JMAS in June after the last gym teacher retired early, and now dearly wishes he'd done more research before taking on the job.

Mr. Mulaney stands trying to look kind of military so kids won't talk to him. Student Council elections are coming up, which means bullying is a concern, and generally, everyone's on edge today. In his periphery, he observes Gwen Kershaw (10th Grade/Philosophy Club/Yearbook Club) grabbing onto the backpack of Sam Ohler (10th Grade/Coding Club/Outdoor Adventures) and yanking on him pretty hard. Beside them is the friendless Leah Blake (10th Grade/Reading Adventures/Poetry Club/Drama Club/Jazz Band/Marching Band/Show Choir/Model UN) who laughs louder than either of them and kind of slaps at them as they revolve. On That November Day, Leah went home with a sore throat hours before Titus raised his hand in Home Ec and asked in a quavering voice to retrieve something from his locker. In the weeks after, in some mixture of grief and fomo and guilt, Leah went around hugging everyone and telling them she was so sorry for their loss.

Mulaney considers intervening; Sam and Gwen are good friends, but she's pulling Sam backward in circles with gusto and he's nearly knocking Leah over, and none of them are a kid who knows when to stop. By everybody's metric, Gwen's become a hellion since her mom died in August, now liable to call American History revisionist bullshit or throw punches over the yearbook layout. On That November Day, Sam and Gwen were safe in Mrs. White's room, but their friend, Aaron Mackey (10th Grade/Advanced Science/Show Choir/Coding Club/D&D Club) was shot in the stomach while getting his pencil box from his locker, and died while Nate Wiley stood over him.

It's not until Sam and Leah start barking like dogs that Mr. Mulaney

finally tells them to shut it—too much noise will bring Principal Willis out, which no one wants this early in the morning. Mr. Willis is a world-class yeller. A few years ago, someone taped a picture of Old Yeller to his office door, but that just made the problem worse. Mulaney scans the cars in the parking lot and is relieved to not see Willis' truck. Mr. Willis—especially since That November Day, he's been told—usually comes in late.

Just as a tight shape of children fills the lobby like wind in a lung, as their laughter and squawks swell and the crowd begins to garner its own will that could drag them anywhere like the scream that foretells a train, just as Mr. Mulaney almost fucking pulls Kershaw off Ohler himself, the bell rings, and the lobby doors pop open and kids flow into the school proper. The prepared ones have transcended lockers and run straight for homeroom. They get preferred seating, and the quiet, and maybe a few words with their teacher, if they like each other, and are both in compatible moods.

•••

Things go smoothly until afternoon classes, when the science wing is corrupted by a pop and a scream. Technically a response is choreographed, but half the teachers within earshot run straight for their doors, ready to charge through however many bullets it takes to snap the fucking neck of the retard who fired them. A gang of kids brings up the rear with a similar idea.

But, instead of a petite blonde 9th-grader standing hunched and hesitant over an enormous black pistol, frontrunners find themselves crowding around Leah Blake, curled up on the floor amid a rainbow of school-supply shrapnel and blood. Mrs. White slides into home and yanks Leah's wrist up like a chalice while Mr. Barney uses a first-aid kit to pack the wounds with gauze. More kids crowd around them, shouting and unpocketing their phones. Leah wails and holds her remaining seven fingers while tongues of smoke descend from her open locker, licking at her shoes. Bright shimmering blood pours down all five arms in a pentagram. Teachers

form a perimeter and shove it back, yelling at everyone to return to their classrooms, now.

Principal Greg Willis erupts from his office. He's taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves for this. Pit stains span from his elbows to his waist. Screaming, he demands a full emergency assembly. He says he wants all of them right where he can see them. Part of his logic is that a bomber would expect lockdown, protocol, business as usual. After a moment of fidgety contemplation, the crowd begins to shuffle toward the auditorium.

On That November Day, Willis was riveted to his chair by the sounds of gunshots and screams as he waited and waited for someone to burst in and beg for his guidance. In an attempt to make himself move, to do anything, he told himself over and over *I was born for this.* He now believes he was born for this.

•••

The auditorium seats fill quickly to capacity with a total disregard for grade. Kids pace in circles and then sit on the floor. The room's not designed to hold everyone from every grade, not even close, and some teachers are crying *fire hazard.*

Mr. Willis strides in across the stage and screams for everyone to sit down, shut up, this instant. He points at the floor. His voice cracks. He's all business. He's way past business. He tries not to notice that he's being recorded on dozens of cell phones at once. Under the hastily maxed spotlights, his eyes are dark. He screams that he can't fucking believe what just happened out there, you guys. After what happened to them last year? He says what the fuck. He says that this is the most vile, humiliating, and disgusting act of terrorism he's ever witnessed in his entire life. He says that they've all put themselves in some incomprehensible freaking danger.

He stops pacing and puts a hand over his face; his groan, wretchedly undignified, veers upward toward a scream.

He says he doesn't know what to *do* with you guys. He says that at

least Titus didn't *know* what he was doing when he gunned our poor little boys and girls down, because Titus never *went through* what he put us all through. Titus didn't have to live to feel, or understand.

But actually all of you are worse, because everyone who bombed that locker knows exactly what this kind of horrible, insane, senseless, tragic, insane, terroristic, and *stupid* violence does to a school, to this family, and they *still* chose to add to the avalanche of pain already heaped upon us, and on himself. He says he can't believe how *ungrateful* they all are. He says they live and work and play in the greatest country in the world and they still can't stop killing themselves.

He screams that he's disgusted. He says that he feels wrong inside. He says whoever did this all need to come forward right now. This. Instant. Right. Now. The room is quiet as bone. Teachers and students alike wonder if someone should stop Principal Willis, and if so, who.

Willis, meanwhile, expects the appeal to work—for Titus himself to stand, flip the hair from his eyes, and clamber gingerly over his peers, who will brush him with their fingers as he passes toward the stage, where under the weight of all that light he'll screw up his face and say that he's so sorry, and he'll weep for himself. They'll give him a standing ovation and everyone will burn with forgiveness. Mr. Willis imagines someone will get a photograph—him on one knee, holding onto Titus, while they are both transformed forever by the embrace. Mr. Willis imagines being interviewed by *The Rochester Chronicle* afterward. He contrives the opening sentences of his statement in the auditorium's vacuous proceeding silence.

•••

When school resumes on Monday, a bandaged Leah Blake declares her intention to run for Class President. Teachers approve of this bold and unexpectedly healthy coping mechanism from a heretofore shy and dickish kid like Leah. Everyone agrees that something's different about her. She stays after school to hang posters in the halls, thanking Mr. Dominic

Salisbury (Night Custodian/Groundskeeping/Set Design) by shaking his hand upside-down with her uninjured left before walking herself home.

•••

Video of Mr. Willis' onstage meltdown blazes through the student body. Kids are able to find a hilarity in it proportional to the trauma it recalled: as in, they've seen almost nothing funnier. When Sam Ohler gets to Health and realizes he's left his folder at home, he puts a hand over his face and groans, in a perfect impression of Willis. Even Mr. Mulaney laughs. Soon, the hallways are filled with the sound of kids doing The Willis. When the cafeteria's vending machine breaks, they take turns pacing in front of it and groaning. Nathan Wiley says do you know what you're doing to us, Titus, and slaps the side of the machine—which is generally considered to be taking the joke too far until the machine dispenses a soda, which Nathan chugs, while the cafeteria chants for him to do so.

•••

On Thursday, Leah comes in before first bell and passes out tri-fold pamphlets, which vow to make the school safer for everyone. They say *A* ***Vote for Leah*** *is a Vote for You!* They say she wants to fight for (among other things) a later start time and longer lunches. They include peer-reviewed evidence that supports the efficacy of both these positions. Students are excited about the prospect of bettering their grades and attendance with no apparent effort on their part.

On Election Day, the school paper (*The Monroe Llama*) runs a picture of Leah waving to the crowd with her partially-deleted hand. She wins the 10th grade by a landslide. Students have never seen anything like her. Her two challengers announce their plans to vote for her. Kids see it as a gesture to vote outside their class and, by a hair, she gets more votes than there are 10th graders. Teachers hang the photo from the *Llama* on corkboards above

their desks. Everyone's proud. A teacher emails it to *The Rochester Chronicle*, and Leah briefly trends. When Leah googles her own name, it autofills after *Leah Bl*, and she feels a great head turn its eye toward her, just like she thought it might.

•••

In Philosophy Club, students orbit back to the subject of Titus. Mr. Jeffries started P-Club to discuss great ideas, but recently he's considered disbanding for a while, just to give everyone a break, because ever since That April Day all the kids seem to care about is whether stuff is "right."

But today discussion is derailed, again, by Basil Morales (8th Grade/Anime Club/JV Equestrian) recounting for probably the dozenth time how Titus' feet creaked inside his shoes as she hid under her desk and covered her mouth in order to not be heard breathing. Basil uses this story as a means of hacking her way out of every philosophical thicket she (or anyone else) falls into, and Mr. Jeffries lacks the patience or grit to guide her out. Basil doesn't grasp the difference between winning an argument and just making the other person stop, something Mr. Jeffries also has difficulty parsing. He dismisses them fifteen minutes early and they loiter by their lockers until the busses arrive.

•••

During her first Student Council meeting as 10th Grade President, Leah opens a discussion about JMAS' start time of 7:33am, and proposes that they move it to 9:15am. She says it seems like a good place to start as Class President, since no one really disagrees that it'd be healthier for both students and staff. Student Council unanimously votes in favor of starting a petition to weigh student support, which Leah offers to present at the weekly School Board meeting on Friday.

In less than a day the petition garners the signature of almost every

student at JMAS who can write. Kids marvel at the weight of their own names, as if each one pushes the morning bell back by a minute.

•••

When called upon at the Friday meeting, Leah reads a prepared statement off index cards, making a case for moving—or at least auditing—JMAS' current start time. She cites sleep studies, Norwegian schools, Student Council's petition. She cites the American future.

Mr. John Mcintire (School Board Chair) tells her that New York State Law decides when school begins and how long it should be, not JMAS itself.

When Leah notes that this is not true, Mr. Craig Stevenson (School Board Secretary) tells her that since bussing is coordinated by numerous districts, which pay big money to send kids to a charter school like JMAS—and which all have different start times—it'd be impossible to set up a new one, even if that's what people wanted or might have to agree would be better.

Leah asks the Board if they've ever tried. Mr. Mcintire replies that they're always working with teachers and parents at every level to make positive changes to the school and its environments at every possible level.

Leah points out that schools already start at different times all over the state, in fact all over the country, and everyone's making it work, so how hard could it really be to move one school's time less than two hours?

Before anyone can reply, she adds that JMAS, as a charter school, might actually be in a unique position to experiment with making positive changes like this.

Mr. Mcintire points out that Leah might have benefitted from doing some research on what exactly a Class President does before she got herself elected, because a decision like this is actually far above her pay grade, so to speak.

After a long moment, Leah asks, so how then is anything supposed to be improved if everyone's so completely interdependent on each other's

shitty systems? Some adults in the audience laugh. Mr. Stevenson informs Leah of her disrespect.

Leah asks if anyone's actually out there trying to make schools better, or if this is just what she should expect from the quote unquote Real World. Mr. Mcintire says that she's not helping either. Leah says that's explicitly your fault you fucking cockwit.

The Board kicks her out of the meeting and threatens her with suspension. As she is escorted from same room where Principal Willis catharcized his shame by comparing Titus to his victims, Leah screams that adults encourage kids to "participate" but then placate them with meaningless issues like Theme for Prom while making real participation hopeless, and it's not only boring it's fucking stupid, because it demonstrates how obviously willing they are to let the world go to shit so long as they control it. She shrieks that her arm is being hurt.

The School Board bans her from the next two meetings. Leah waits until she's standing outside with the snow barreling down around her, until the school doors slam closed, and until she sees more than a few people watching her from the parking lot, before she balls her fists at her sides and screams *Fucking suspend me* at the pavement.

•••

Mr. Jeffries cuts off discussion in P-Club when Gwen Kershaw demands to know what the population of JMAS did to deserve a reckoning like Titus. They have become fixed on this idea lately, that everyone's suffering might have somehow been earned. (Which, to Mr. Jeffries, seems like a strange outgrowth of all their moralizing over the last year.) Mr. Jeffries tells her that no one deserves to be gunned down in the hallways, full stop. Gwen agrees in the abstract, but she still wonders what was so wrong with Titus' immediate world (i.e., the school) that he wanted to wreak such vengeance upon it. She says he must have been really upset. Mr. Jeffries says well it's not anyone's fault that Titus was a messed up violent kid. Gwen points out

that Mr. Willis punishing everyone after the bombing does imply a guilt. She says isn't it technically kind of everyone's fault? She acknowledges that lots of people were actually quite mean to Titus. She points out that school and life often suck, so they probably did for Titus too. Mr. Jeffries says the very fact that Titus came in and started shooting a gun aimed at children was proof that he was far, far beyond help. Sam Ohler asks but was Titus *always* beyond our help, or is that just how he *became*—because if he was ever *not* beyond our help, like even for a second, wouldn't that mean that it *was* our fault?

Mr. Jeffries says that what they're asking about is whether we're our brothers' keepers or not, and that they can rest easy on this one, because to some degree that may be true, which is why we have libraries and handicapped parking spaces and such, but certainly we don't need to blame the victim when children get hurt or murdered. The truth is, the real world is so much more nuanced. At a big enough scale, it's like meaningless mush. Bad things can happen to good people, and sometimes good people hurt each other. He says Titus was mad at that world.

Gwen says he didn't shoot the world, he shot kids in this school. And besides, if it was "the world's fault," then wouldn't that prove Gwen's point that they *do* bear some fraction of the blame? So wasn't it possible that Titus had been one of those good people, to whom *we* were the bad thing that happened? And we all fucked him up hard?

Mr. Jeffries slaps his desk and demands to know why she is insisting on taking blame for a deranged man using a literal Nazi relic to murder children. He says the situation is so much more complicated than you're acting like, and stop swearing in class. Gwen grimaces and shrugs. After a long silence, Sam Ohler asks if being born beyond help is the same as being evil. Mr. Jeffries snaps no, those are completely different, and we're done with this train of discussion for today because clearly we're not ready to be having it. Gwen asks if imposing arbitrary limitations on their discussion kind of proves the point that their lives are couched in miseries and oppressions. Mr. Jeffries says no and he's sick of this. He says you'll learn

more about this stuff next year when you're ready. Gwen opens her mouth and Mr. Jeffries says shut it. Jeffries watches them slump in their chairs and look up at the clock, and he feels both that he has lost and that he has won.

•••

Nathan Wiley shows up to the next School Board meeting with a backpack full of video equipment. Adults in the audience turn around to watch him set up, and one or two clap. Nate's hands shake as he extracts the tripod from his bag and unscrews the legs. He looks up at the School Board and tries to imagine a fat layer of zoo glass between them and him as he thumbs Record and takes his seat.

That night, among some other finances stuff that Nate really doesn't care about, the Board proposes that JMAS hire a new lunch lady to replace Shelley Heridan (Cafeteria Manager) who retired last month. The resolution passes, along with the acknowledgement that they will dedicate the yearbook to her. The next morning, Nate trades the video to Leah Blake for a carnival-sized bag of Funyuns and a hug.

•••

Quietly, something has begun to happen at JMAS. Across all grades, a silence grows like a culture of cells. Students are no longer interested in class. Or rather, they're becoming so absorbed in taking notes that they no longer ask questions or even speak. Use of phones is rampant until teachers take them away, at which point kids begin passing paper messages—which, when intercepted, reveal that they seem to be conducting their own intense discussions on class material. When questioned, students repeat like a mantra that an illegitimate power structure has no means by which to convince them to participate in it. Teachers, willing to blame low morale (and frankly, hurt by the lack of attention) fail to notice that both attendance and grades are slowly on the rise.

•••

At Student Council, Leah puts the matter of Mrs. Heridan up to a vote. After some initial confusion (kids didn't realize this was something they got to vote on) Student Council aligns itself with the Board, including the yearbook dedication—68% in favor of replacing Mrs. Heridan, 5% against, and 27% abstaining or writing in memes.

Attached to their vote is an official statement, reminding the Board that yearbook dedications are explicitly within the jurisdiction of Student Council, and also condemning the Board's presumptuous and sexist use of "lady" when discussing a prospective lunch service professional. Students then vote in favor of increasing pizza sizes, of forming a Paintball Club, of a second Prom. Then, a new resolution is introduced, which creates the position of Student Council Executive Officer, to be elected out of the current acting Class Presidents. This person would represent not just their own grade, but would "bear representative, executive, and protective responsibility for the student body as a whole." S/he would be able to veto resolutions, directly manage funds and events, and "otherwise oversee and enact all desires of the student body." The resolution passes 81/0/19, and Leah Blake is voted in with no contest. Student Council then votes to move the start time to 4:20 p.m. They amend it to 4:21, then 6:09, and then back to 9:15 a.m.

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A certain amount of distraction and discord is to be expected what with the year's events, but even fun electives like Mr. Mulaney's Coding Club have almost completely atrophied. Mulaney can't get kids to show up, and even when they do, they write their names on the attendance sheet and then don't even log in to SmartLearner. When Mr. Mulaney sneaks up behind Sam Ohler and takes his iPad away, he sees that Ohler is editing some kind

of document:

—Operation PBSUCCESS which in 1954 toppled Arbenz's democratically-elected government by directly equipping and training nearly 500 Honduran and Nicaraguan soldiers under the command of Carlos Armas, an exiled military officer with an axe to grind (and thus, dictator-for-hire). Arbenz did initially manage to repel Armas' "rebels," but, leading up to the invasion, the CIA spent millions (of taxpayer dollars) waging a psychological war (then called "Nerve War Against Individuals") on an innocent Guatemalan people, which included installing dozens of pro-Armas "news" stations in an effort to undermine their sense of a Guatemalan identity or national consensus, which constitutes a rape of the collective mind (see p.823)—

As Mr. Mulaney brings the screen to his face, new words march like ants across every line at once. It's a shared document on which two hundred children are working. He looks up from the essay growing in his hands to his former students, hunched before their screens.

•••

Student Council releases a statement. It declares JMAS to be "existentially unlawful," because it was built on land stolen from its original inhabitants with the formation of the Province of New York in 1683. It contests that in the United States, the notion of compulsory education rests on a moral high ground which does not, in fact, exist.

In light of this realization, students propose that JMAS (and all other schools) disband. They propose that educational jurisdiction be passed to the Tonawanda Reservation, the closest thing students can find to anyone with a real claim on their futures. They propose that JMAS' budget be liquidated for the purposes of bussing students to Tonawanda, and begin drafting letters to the leaders there.

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In P-Club, Gwen Kershaw gets into a full-on screaming match with Mr.

Jeffries. She says that America's moral foundation was built on quicksand and it was unconscionable for adults to hide this from kids. She says the longer we put off reparations, the closer we slide toward pitchforks. Mr. Jeffries says that Gwen doesn't have to bear responsibility for the actions of people who settled this country hundreds of years ago. Gwen says that's fucking stupid then because everyone can just be evil until they die and no one's responsible for anything. Mr. Jeffries shouts that he doesn't know how to deal with Gwen when she talks to him like this. He points out Gwen's privilege and calls her ungrateful. Gwen asks how is anyone supposed to be grateful when everything she's supposed to enjoy is built up on top of literally millions of oppressed and dead. She declares every single continued American happiness to be a crime. She screams we have nothing to lose but our chains.

Mr. Jeffries calls her unoriginal. Gwen says it doesn't have to be original, it's not fucking home decor, it's the blood of the wealthy curdling in poor people's stomachs. She says that no techy prowess will ever fully insulate the oppressors from the oppressed because oppressing is still a form of need. She then calls him a bitch.

She tries to organize a walkout but eventually comes back inside. She punches a dent in the passenger side of Mr. Jeffries' Prius and gets away with it, because the snow quickly fills in her footprints, and because Mr. Jeffries doesn't notice for like a week.

Later that same day, school grinds to a halt because teachers are inundated with thousands of calls to their classrooms and their personal phones—someone has listed all their cars for cheap on Craigslist. Chuck Barney, flattered, and in need of a bigger backseat anyway, happily sells his Camry to the charming young father of a fourth-grader in another district.

•••

Leah reads a prepared statement at Student Council, which by now the entire student population attends. It acknowledges the notion of an Original

Sin, but, not like any Bible says—instead, it's a long chain of wrongdoing going back way further than America. It says we all know that we did fail Titus, no matter what the adults say. It says we hate him only because we're guilty of failing him, even though we can't exactly know how, or how much, because of how he finally failed us back. It says that while Titus was wrong to murder children, he was right to want to tear down the system that enslaved us. It says that in a way, the aims of Titus and the Student Council are the same. Which is why we must forgive.

Because in a society, all failures are mutual. Gaps will always exist between people, and our only bridges are forgiveness and trust, and they must be maintained, especially in times of pain. It says that even if there's no God out there judging us, our forgiveness of each other can be enough. Because that's how we become human. By recognizing that we are all, each and every one of us, damned, and only we can save each other. It begs unborn generations for forgiveness, for whatever terrible future they inherit from us. It posits that in our shoes, they would have done the same. It also declares that the school's start time will be moving from 7:33 to 9:15.

The student body goes apeshit. Kids are crying while ordering t-shirts with either misquoted epitaphs or *9:15*. A video of Leah circulates within the school and is quickly swept up in larger online currents. Within a week, a million people have held Leah in their hands and listened to her tinny voice. *The Rochester Chronicle* runs a piece on her, and in addition to all the phone calls from people wanting cars, the school is now hit with a wave of reporters asking to be put in touch with Leah.

In the halls, kids stop doing The Willis and start passing Three-Finger Salutes behind their backs and under their legs like hacky sacks. It turns into a rock-paper-scissors game, where Willis beats Bomb but Bomb beats Leah and Leah beats Willis. During the hubbub, cheating rises to unprecedented levels. Teachers show the video in class in a bewildered attempt to boost morale, cutting it off before Leah mentions the start time. When they call home, parents confusedly admit that they've never seen their kids working so hard.

•••

On the same day that a food fight spawns with nightmarish speed, the school's website crashes as the result of a DDOS attack. Mr. Willis asks Mrs. Norris (Main Office Secretary) what a DDOS attack is, and then tries to google it on his inoperative computer, and then finally looks it up on his phone, which interrupts him as it receives call after call after call.

Mr. Willis feels he is a portal that's being wrenched open against his will. He punches his keyboard and breaks two pencils and a pen. He has some fucking words for Leah Blake, believe you me. He knows in his gut that somehow, Leah's behind all of this—perhaps even Titus. He doesn't know how far back her manipulations go. Obviously she bombed herself. Mrs. Norris knocks on his door to ask what he wants her to tell the bounce house people.

At the thought of how sociopathically *willing* Leah is to rile up his population for her own malignant ends (whatever those are) at the insane notion of thousands of students with the "same aim" as Titus—and at their laughable fucking combination of sanctimony and blasphemy—his head crackles like a yellow sheet of plastic has been draped over it.

Different moments of his imagined conversation with Leah pop through his mind like a flip book.. He's saying let's cut to the chase, shall we? She's wide-eyed, finally pinned against a locker. All his blame is pouring into her like a funnel. He's saying so to what degree are you really planning this "rebellion," huh? Now that you and your little "colleagues" have all "realized" that "the system" isn't "what you thought it would be?" Which it always wasn't, by the way, and will always be, just so you know, fucking news flash. And so when are you going to pony up and admit the fact that all this hashtag "resistance" is so much fucking grandstanding and a sham just to get attention and "likes" and "views," while I'm over here trying to run an actual school like a goddamn adult? Like what's your real agenda here? Are you an icon on a platform, or are you a member of this fucking community? Do you have a *plan for the future?* Because sometimes you're

talking about the start time and sometimes you're talking about pitchforks. And, honestly— pathetically—would you even know the difference? Between *an* issue and *the* issue? Would you know the difference if it lit you up on your porch? If it tore down your front door and blackbagged you? If it droned your loved ones in the night?

Willis finds that he's picked up his office phone to summon Leah to his office, but he can't get a dial tone. He snatches his cell and accidentally answers a call from a woman who attempts to purchase his truck with breathless need. He throws the phone at the wall and screams that he wants to see Leah Blake, now. Then the sound of Mrs. Norris retreats and he settles into his chair, staring at his office door, while his heart slams his blood like a gavel.

Leah Claire Kaminski

Henry on Language Day

— Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry Runner-Up —

Henry in the crocodile's mouth.
The first thing he remembers is
his mother's mole. Nipple-
flexible and dark on her face,
he would thumb it while nursing.
When he went from
no-language to language (the butterflies
taking shape of b b b b b
B B B B
butter
fly
A
I
R
plaaaaaannee

LEAF
) he raised his arms to the sky and
there grass
met him, Bermuda grass sharp
and stout like a bed
of woven reed.

Closed his eyes and rolled his head into
language. He scudded on the waves and startled,
saw face and face and face,
like the sky was a collage.
On Language Day, he
saw that
        Crocodile was blackGreen and Alligator pooGreen
and that Snout kept open the
window of every car crossing the culvert.

There is no end to the places he was.
He opened like a lotus into the moments
and petal petal petaled down the treads.

To Henry on Language Day was revealed: the invasive Asiatic lily, and the rot of the child racoon under the deck, and the deathblue vat of a bottle-fly's body, and the rusting humdrum of a transformer and its

P O P

no, its

B **O** **O** M

The bottom-ed out O and how
most of it could hold as much sound as you could
zoom in on. Pinch the screen grab
grab grab, drag and drop,
the words flying blue, his parents
and what his mother
repeated — he put his whole hands
in her mouth to take them.

Pinch around the tongue
and in they went, into the world which was
absolutely his now.
The mat of sebum under his nails
when he scratched at his skin,
the twin roar of planes to the north and
south landing from east to west
from places he could name,
and the new smell of Bufo Toad and the new
smell of the Name of the wet Stucco, the
tickytacky Concrete, the torn-off face
of an urban-rural interface Townhouse.
The carpet of shell-
pink Townhomes curling
at the edges in the brassy dark of Homestead,
the long lines of Road. And on Language Day,
he knew what was past was
as real as what is coming is not.
He saw the Real coursing through his veins
cursing through and grabbing
on the nicks and tabs of mitochondria, those
alleles that bent to the will of trauma
so that his mother stopped
his great grandmother in her
tracks, stopped
that matryushka of Egg in Egg
in Egg with the first spouting of his little fountain
of vas deferens. If she could
have a Girl, if she could risk it then maybe —
but for him now no future, blank old man,
little body and its slack biceps drooping happy belly.

Open and shut, open and shut. But he was there and
there and there, scribbled in the water by Light
as it (the water) sluiced and skinned and chunked
on and around and off
an oar of a metal canoe at night and the streaming by of fish and the
paddle-coast of alligators and he knows
how warm the water is, he
knows Warm is not Cold and
that is that, the
words fix them there. Are on a switch, not a dimmer,
and this water is warm. Warm as
his mouth, as his fish cave
where he grew, ate
the placenta like a nibbling Fish.

Allen Braden

Turning Seven in Summer

Mom waters rhubarb
browning in the garden
with her back to me

and the morning sun.
Beside the silage pit, I flex
my entire body above them.

It doesn't look like a "hill"
or my ant farm before
I ruined it with honey.

Just endless traffic pulsing
among granules of quartz
that catch the August glare.

Before grasping the word "colony,"
I dig in the heel of my PUMA.
A chamber collapses then

a fluster in unison. Hundreds of tiny
reactions to one giant stimulus.
Their rush hour of industry

quickens to mend the hidden
city. I too quicken
and storm. My anger now

their anger. My gestures,
their freak disasters.
I am a Frisco earthquake.

I am meteor shower.
I am.
I am.

Christopher Torockio

When It's You

Wes Funderburke needs to shut up. Like, now. He sits directly across the table from Angie, talking about the stock market, his face freshly shaved and splotchy pink, a Band-Aid on his bald dome where they recently scraped off what might yet turn out to be a cancerous mole. But it won't be. In the past two and a half years, Wes Funderburke has had, from top to bottom, multiple melanomas, a double-bypass with two stents, gall stones removed, blood clots clipped off in his legs, and surgery for severe Morton's neuroma in his foot. Yet here he is, having just devoured his osso buco and awaiting a slice of red velvet cake. He claims the cake is for him and his wife, Carol, to share, but Carol will sip her coffee, oblivious, while Wes eats the whole thing along with a shot of Sambuca. When the check is placed on the table, each couple will toss in some cash or a credit card, presumably splitting the bill four ways. But Angie didn't order dessert and, while everyone else ordered cocktails and bottles of wine, she didn't have anything to drink, either. Just water. An appetizer as her entre. No way she's spent twenty bucks, total. The three other couples are probably pushing a hundred each. She shouldn't have to "split" the bill. If Jim were still here, he'd handle it. She wouldn't know *how* much they've spent, and she wouldn't care, though she and Jim would talk and laugh about the silly injustice of it all on the drive home. You'd think someone would say, *Hey, the DePaolas didn't have any wine. Maybe they shouldn't have to pay as much*, wouldn't you? But, oh well, what were you gonna do. These were their friends, they'd known each other forever, and Angie and Jim had always enjoyed their

company, looked forward to their evenings out with them.

Now, though: No, Angie does not look forward to evenings out with these people. She feels bad about this fact, a little guilty, but everything is different now. She accepts their invitations because the dinners give her something to do, an excuse to get out of the house, an event to look forward to, words and times to scribble on her calendar, because the alternative—being home after the sun goes down, just herself and the dog—is unbearable. Her running joke is: "Don't invite me to something just to be nice. Because I *will* accept." Everyone always laughs at this.

But, seriously: why should she have to pay the same amount as the Funderburkes? She won't say anything, of course, she'll keep smiling, keep laughing, and then she'll be annoyed for the next few days. Or someone will suggest Angie not pay at all; the others will get it for her. This happens occasionally. Which, while very sweet of them, makes her feel even worse.

Her decaf tea arrives. Just to give her something to do with her hands.

The other couples are the Troutmans and the Dolans. Angie doesn't know the Dolans very well. They're friends of friends. There's a real possibility that Angie will never see them again. The restaurant itself—chosen this week by Wes—is low-ceilinged and darkly paneled.

There are no windows visible from their round table in this corner of the room. Strings of white lights are tacked up along the molding, illuminating framed portraits of strangers from other eras. It's a table for eight. The chair to Angie's left is unoccupied.

The food was pretty good, Angie must admit, though she isn't sure she'd come back. "I'm thinking about jamming some dough into Kevin's…bar, or whatever it is," Wes is saying now. His armpits strain against his sport coat. "Gotta be a tax write-off, if nothing else, right?"

So, okay, he's moved on from the stock market to taxes and their son's fancy new business venture, an establishment in Middletown that brews its own beer and serves small, overpriced plates prepared by some up-and-coming chef from the city. *Gastropub*, Angie thinks is the word for it. The Funderburkes scoff when they talk about it, as if it's all just some frivolous

side hustle the son will outgrow before he moves on to his real career as a hedge fund manager. She hasn't been there yet, but Angie knows the place is doing well. It's been written up in *Connecticut Magazine's* "New & Noteworthy" column and is getting a ton of word-of-mouth all over social media. Angie has no idea where the kid got the money to open the place. Well, okay, not true—of course she knows where he got the money: from his parents. Or his grandparents. Maybe both. Whenever Kevin Funderburke and his entrepreneurial adventures arise in conversation, Angie feels a clenching inside, a kind of soul-nausea. She hates that the Funderburkes have the means to set their son up with his own hip, fun, publicly successful business, and Angie doesn't; she hates that the Funderburkes have at least one kid who has stayed in Connecticut, who they can see on weekends and holidays and for grandkids' birthday parties or even just dinner on a Wednesday; and, in her darkest, most shamefully hidden moments, she hates that Wes Funderburke, with his enormous belly and chronic hypertension and mysterious polyps, is still alive, while Jim, seemingly healthy as a horse for seventy years, is not.

She wouldn't mind a splash of milk in her tea, but it's all the way on the other side of the table, and she doesn't feel like asking for it.

"I need to get home."

It's Betty Troutman, leaning in from Angie's right, her voice barely above a whisper. Betty has a pretty, youthful face (if a bit over-Botoxed) but a severe man's haircut, dyed reddish-brown. Tonight she's wearing big, colorful earrings of a complicated geometric shape, and a gray, wool poncho. Whenever she uses her fork, she needs to flip the poncho out of the way to free her arm.

"Those mussels," she says, "are not sitting right. I…I need a bathroom."

"Oh, no," Angie says, keeping her voice down. "Just go here."

Betty looks over her shoulder, as if checking for spies. "I'd rather not. It could—"

"What are you two conspiring about over here?" Betty's husband,

Ron, leans his elbows on the table, stretching around his wife to see Angie. "Plotting a coup, are we?"

Ron Troutman is a nice enough guy, if a bit stiff and formal—Jim used to say Ron would get visibly annoyed if you cleared your throat during a backswing or walked through his putting line—but Angie has never seen that side of him. To her, he just seems like a nervous guy who plans one joke or witty thing to say ahead of time and then picks an inappropriate point in the evening to awkwardly break it out.

"It's nothing, dear," Betty says, not turning toward her husband. "Don't worry about it." Ron stays leaning on his elbows, holding his smile, unsure of what to do next. He's wearing a brand-new, button-down shirt, right out of the box, creases clearly visible. Angie feels a jolt of pity for the man. Finally, he leans back and shifts toward Wes Funderburke, who now appears to have switched the conversation to the perils of lawn chiggers.

Betty puts a hand to her mouth. A thin layer of sweat glistens on her forehead. "This is—oh my God, this is so embarrassing—this is an *emergency*, Ange."

"Come on." Angie feels around under Betty's poncho for her hand, then pushes her chair out and stands. "We'll be right back," she announces to the table.

Betty stands, too, gingerly, gripping Angie's hand, trying to relax her face. She attempts a smile that comes off looking more like a sneer.

The other two women, Carol Funderburke and Judy Dolan, glance at each other. *Are we being left out of something?* they're probably wondering. The thought, Angie finds, is kind of exhilarating. She gives Betty's hand a tug and they head off toward the bar.

"I don't want to do this here," Betty is saying, real fear in her voice.

"Don't worry," Angie says. "I'll stand guard outside the bathroom door. No one's getting past. You'll have complete privacy."

"Oh, good Lord."

They circle around the bar to the back hallway, Betty squeezing Angie's hand harder as they go. There is only one single-use bathroom. Angie tries

the doorknob; it's locked. Betty groans.

"Don't worry," Angie says and begins banging on the door with the heel of her fist. "Excuse me. *Excuse me!* We have an emergency out here!"

"I'm going to die," Betty says. "I'm going to kill myself."

"Oh, stop that." Angie keeps banging on the door. "For goodness' sake, Betty." Lately, Angie has found herself snapping into abrupt, silent annoyance with people for routine indiscretions—a mix-up at the pharmacy, her granddaughter sleeping till noon, her mailman's occasional late arrival, Wes Funderburke—and she recognizes it happening now: the mussels aren't agreeing with Betty. She's embarrassed. It's not a big deal. At least Angie's aware of this about herself. That's got to count for something, right?

"It'll be fine, honey," she says now, gently. "Just hang on."

Finally the bathroom door opens and a big-chested middle-aged woman fills the space. The woman's hair is pulled back so tightly her eyebrows seem to be lifted upwards from the tension. "Rude," the woman mutters.

"Yeah, sorry, but, seriously—" Angie makes a shooing motion with her hand—"out of the way. We have a situation here."

The woman steps slightly, grudgingly, to one side, opening up a narrow strip of space in the doorway. She's wearing a flimsy, loose-fitting, shiny top, and her breasts are so big that the top's fabric drops straight down from them, as if plummeting off a cliff, giving the woman's torso a boxy, rectangular shape. She looks like a Lego person.

"Seriously?" Angie says. "We're gonna do *this* now? Listen, this woman is in *distress*. Will you please move?"

The woman waits a beat, then another. Her eyebrows try to squeeze into a scowl, then—reluctantly—she steps fully aside. "*Rude*," she says again, before shuffling off.

Angie pushes the door all the way open, flicks on the light. The walls are painted a soft periwinkle, which is nice, but there's another one of those black-and-white, old-timey portraits of a stranger on one of the walls, which is weird. She turns to Betty. "Okay, there we are. Totally private. Now off you go."

"Don't listen."

Angie puts her fingers in her ears. "I'm just on guard duty."

Betty takes a deep breath and holds it—the expression on her face looks like someone being pinched—then slides past Angie and closes the door. The lock clicks, the faucet begins to run.

Murmured voices float down the hallway from the bar. A Beatles song—the one that repeats *life goes ooooon*—plays softly on the speaker system. For a moment, Angie feels good, then catches herself feeling good and recognizes the meaninglessness of that joy. Still, it's nice what she's doing now, helping Betty out this way. Once, a couple of years ago, when Jim was still here, Angie was playing in one of her bridge leagues at someone's house—she can't remember whose—and, some time toward the end of the evening, after several bottles of chardonnay had been opened and emptied, one of the women posed the question: if you could go back in time, back to when you were twenty or twenty-five years old, and re-marry your husband, would you do it?

There were about a dozen women there, set up around multiple tables in the dining room (it was the Funderburkes' house, now that Angie thinks about it, that giant dining room of theirs), teams rotating from table to table to play different opponents throughout the evening, and only three women—Angie, Betty, and one other woman, Laurie Wells, who has since moved to Norwalk—said that, yes, of *course* they'd marry their husbands if given the chance to go back and do it again. It was a silly, wine-fueled discussion really, but Angie remembers the enthusiasm with which all the other women (including Carol Funderburke) expounded upon their reasoning for why they would *never* marry their husbands again if offered a do-over. The conversation grew animated, everyone talking over each other, trying to one-up the previous illustration of spousal inadequacy. Hilarity ensued.

Angie kept quiet, wondering, Could this be for *real?* Maybe they're joking.

But, no, this was how they really felt.

All of those husbands are still alive, walking around in the world, continuing to be inadequate disappointments. Except for Jim.

When it's you, then you'll know, Angie thinks. *Then you'll know what it's like.*

But, then again, maybe not. Maybe they *won't* know. Maybe they'll never know. Maybe the dull, aching emptiness living inside Angie day after day will, for them, be *relief*.

Behind the bathroom door the toilet flushes, loudly. The tenor of the running faucet changes—Betty washing her hands—then turns off. Angie prepares her face, hoping to appear welcoming and sympathetic, yet also to convey a sense of normalcy, of putting this behind them and getting back to life. The bathroom door opens. Betty switches off the light and stands in the doorway, looking exhausted, haggard. Her poncho hangs crookedly to one side. The ring of hair framing her face is damp, from sweat or maybe from having splashed water on her face, or both.

"That was," Betty says, her voice raspy, "brutal."

Angie laughs. She can't help it. Just an unintentional bark at first, but then she has to cover her mouth, unable to hold it back.

"I mean, really just…*catastrophic*," Betty says, and then she's laughing, too, and they reach out and take each other's hands to steady themselves, and keep laughing, the occasional snort slipping out, until the laughter finally subsides and they can catch their breath and then they're standing there, holding hands in the hallway, eyes moist with tears.

Finally, Betty dabs at the corner of her eye with a knuckle and says, "I'm thinking those were the last mussels I'll ever eat in my life."

"Probably wise."

"We must never speak of this."

"Speak of what?"

Betty smiles. A man enters the hallway and makes his way toward them. The man is in his forties, movie-star handsome, fit and trim, full head of grey-flecked hair swept back, sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm, expensive-looking but unpretentious watch on his wrist. They watch him approach for

a moment, then Betty takes Angie by the arm. "Yikes," she says. "Let's get out of here before he goes in."

They sidestep the man, who nods cordially to them, and head back through the bar, still holding onto each other, moving quickly, as if fleeing a crime scene. Back at the table, the waiter is tallying up the bill. As Angie and Betty approach their chairs, everyone looks up at them, oddly expectant.

"Well, there they are!" Wes exclaims. "So what kind of hi-jinks have you ladies been up to?" He laughs impishly: *heh-heh-heh.*

Betty's face twitches. "Oh," she stammers, "we, uh…"

Angie reaches out and snatches the check from the waiter's hand. "This is on me," she says, then starts digging around in her purse, which hangs off the back of her chair, for her credit card. There's a moment of stunned silence, and then everybody starts talking at once.

"Angie, no—"

"—out of the question."

"We couldn't let you—"

"That's really not neces—"

Angie waves them off. "I insist," she says, finally locating her credit card. "Please, let me do this." She hands the check and her card to the waiter and gives him a nod that she hopes says, *I'm in charge here; you can listen to me.* He takes the card and heads off with it.

"Angie," Wes says. "Really—"

"Nope, it's done. I want to." She sits, feeling charged and buoyant. "You all—I can't tell you how much it means that you continue to include me. I just want to say thanks. I've *been* wanting to. Please, let me do this for you all."

Betty settles in her chair and squeezes Angie's knee under the table. "Thanks, Ange."

"Yes, thank you, Angie," says Wes, and raises his glass of Sambuca. "Cheers."

No one again asks where she and Betty have been. When the receipt is placed down in front of her to sign, Angie tips thirty percent.

•••

The drive from the restaurant in West Hartford to her house in Marlborough should take her about twenty minutes. Earlier in the day, the Troutmans offered to pick her up, but Angie declined, and now she's glad she did. Sitting in the back seat of the Troutmans' car would have felt awkward, plus now she has the luxury of sitting alone in the sweet hum of her own car—she still drives a minivan, just for herself—cruising through the darkness. She merges onto Route 2, radio off, the dashboard's glow on her face, and feels a feathery warmth move through her. Maybe she should call one of her kids to pass the time? Her daughter is in Charlotte with her lawyer husband and two children. Might be someone's bedtime, though; she probably shouldn't get in the middle of that. Her oldest son is in Tampa, but talking to him always fuels Angie's anxiety. He's "working from home" as a PR rep, though Angie suspects he's actually "between jobs" as a PR rep. She also suspects he and his wife aren't getting along, fighting over the causes of their son's recent delinquent behavior, shuttling the boy from therapist to therapist. Phone conversations with him can be taxing, in other words, and Angie doesn't want to sabotage her mood. Her youngest son is single and works for Spotify in Amsterdam. He might have some fun things to share with her—tales of his latest European travels or Danish women he's recently dated—but it's three in the morning over there. So that's out, too.

She doesn't think she has any plans for tomorrow. She'll have to check her calendar.

Maybe she should clean out the closet in the back bedroom.

She could take the dog for a long walk, if the weather's okay.

She exits Route 2, and as she turns onto 66, a two-lane country road cutting through fifty miles of central Connecticut, her headlights sweep across a stand of thin trees and underbrush and illuminate a bright set of glittering, ghostly eyes. The eyes belong to an animal of some sort—though she's never seen an animal like this before—standing on four legs in the

gravel just off the road, low to the ground, looking back over its shoulder at her. The head is weasel-like, the body long and curved and dark, the legs short but somehow longer than they need to be. Angie's blood shivers. Oh, God, she's seeing things. That is not a real animal. It's…mythological. Or extinct. Or *should* be extinct. It holds there in the beam of her headlights, momentarily arrested, and the headlights glide past it as she completes the turn, back to the road ahead, and then it's as if the animal never existed; only the image of it remains, burned into her brain.

Angie realizes she's been holding her breath and struggles for a moment to take in air. She considers pulling over, regrouping, but she wants to put some distance between herself and the animal. She's only a couple minutes from home. She touches her own cheek, her forehead, feeling a startling absence. *This* is what she misses most, what she longs for: being able to turn to someone—to Jim—and say, *Did you see that thing? What in the world was that?* She understands now that it's possible for fear to be thrilling, when shared. Yes, that's what she misses.

She makes the final turn onto her street and wonders if she'll ever get used to the permanence of Jim being gone, the terrible truth of it. She supposes not, yet for the first time she feels a strange, hopeful comfort in this knowledge.

Maybe she'll tell Betty about the animal tomorrow. Or one of her kids. It won't be the same, though. She knows this. There will be a loneliness in the telling. Maybe this time, she thinks, she'll just keep the memory for herself.

Karissa Chouinard Carmona

What Little I Remember of Yreka Court

— Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry Winner —

aloes
clustered in glass jars by the sliding
door, their barely formed roots
gauze-fizzy in the sun;
the under-side
of our dinner table; the taste
of the neighbor's decorative
candy-cane soap; acrylic
blankets
rolled against the window
jambs; a pair of
red panties
pinned to the laundromat job-board
with a note: *These yours?*; Dad,
in a shroud
of steam, emptying our tea
kettle onto the carpet,
scalding
that summer's infestation of
ants;
saltine-and-peanut-
butter sandwiches;

a sausage
moving on its own across
the kitchen floor; Mom, in bed,
collapsed
over textbook, hands in her hair
saying *I can't I can't I can't;* one
widely disputed
night in particular, seeing—
and swearing that I'd seen—
fire
in an apartment across
the street; and how I cupped
that flame
in my mind, wondering if there
was a candle out there, somewhere,
holding
the late-night flicker of a girl in it.

Andrea Bianchi

Cat on a Cold Wood Floor

In a secret corner of the apartment, where the crevice measures just the breadth of the extended whiskers of a cat, you hide while the worst is happening.

The danger arises first with a warning to your nose: the thud of the cinnamon candle toppling from the nightstand to the floor. The crash of the floor lamp shattering across the boards.

Then his voice, wild and loud, overpowering mine.

My tone falters, falls far below the soprano I reserve for conversing with your meows.

And then I go as silent as you. Your ears pointed, listening. Your paws tensed against the hardwood floor.

Until my fleeing footsteps shake the room. My hand rattles the doorknob. My cry for help scratches the hallway walls. Before his palm slams the door back into the frame. Hurls my body against the baseboards. Clatters my handbag to the dented wood.

The demolition of a home.

zzz

I leave the door ajar when I rush out. Too hurried to worry you will emerge, with the orange and black cats, from your hideaways. And in the stunned Sunday morning silence, you might try to follow the wisp of my perfume out into the corridor, out into the cold where I have escaped without even

my coat or purse.

Among its detritus, strewn beneath the chandelier in the entryway, you surely sniff at my wallet, my lipstick and my blush, missing only my phone and my car keys.

Until he gathers the pile into his hands and tosses it into the center of our bed.

Where I imagine you waiting, there on the mattress edge, your paws marking the spot where his hands pinned my neck, as you watch for my return. While the sun slants lower and lower through the windowpanes. Like eyes aghast, open wide.

zzz

His shout explodes a hole in the dark of the apartment.

"Where are you? Answer your phone," he says. "The cats are fighting."

His hiss is diminished in the voicemail, flat against my ear. But in our living room, the sound must flatten your tail, chase you the same way the orange cat scratches at your fur until you and the black cat become but a lump under the bedcovers. While the victorious orange legs stretch out on the rug in front of the fireplace.

But tonight, the grate stays empty, ashen, in a blackened hole.

zzz

The flame of his anger rises and falls with the next sunsets and sunrises. And in between, unpredictable like tongues of fire, he burns my ear with *bitch, fuck you*, then douses his cruelty with tears of penitence, murmurs of *love, love, love.*

"It's morning," he texts, mourning. "I should be holding you."

So is he kissing, petting you, as I hide miles away at my brother's apartment, then at my parents' house? Or is he stalking the halls. Raising his hand to slap my surrogate. Lifting his shin to kick the innocent cat.

zzz

He joked that it was cat porn, the video he sent me long before, when he had come home early from the office where he works with me, and you greeted him on the pillow, his hair buttery with styling balm.

You licked and licked, nudging your nose deep into his scalp. Rubbing your ears and whiskers up against his beard.

"Oh yeah, right there," he moaned. "Here's a close-up of the money shot." And he chuckled, lifting his phone to your pink, sniffing nose, up to your slowly closing lids, up to the purring of your simple trust.

zzz

High atop the refrigerator, where the orange and black cats cannot leap, where I cannot locate you with my call, echoing in the empty apartment, your ears twitch at my return.

"I don't want to do this, I can't do this, I don't want to leave," I repeat to my parents in each room.

In the office, where I try to pry for one last caress the clenched weight of the orange and black fur from inside the sofa's torn underside lining where they sleep.

In the bedroom, where I pick up the cinnamon candle and place it back into the candlestick, then gather my belongings littered on the still-made bed.

In the dark of the closet, where I sniff his shirts and suitcoats hanging in a row, with his shoes lined up below.

"Hurry," my mother urges, fearing his unexpected return in this eerie middle of the workday.

"You have to do this," my father demands as he lifts whole haphazard handfuls of hangered dresses and deposits them with a muffled thud into hampers and laundry baskets as some kind of makeshift suitcases.

And then a new cage coaxes you down.

zzz

I BEND MY head to the slatted plastic of your cage, squeezed between the boxes and baskets of my disassembled life in the backseat of my parents' SUV.

The windows blur with the familiars of my neighborhood, disappearing into the past. Where I cannot, will not look. At the home improvement center, where we bought brackets for the shelves he installed after hanging the new chandeliers. At the furniture shop, where we chose the mirror we smiled into together in the entryway.

I peer down through the prison bars at you. And like black holes in your gray face, your eyes look back, just as lost as me.

zzz

THE FELINE SPECIES, with your wild history and partial domestication, are creatures of habitat. Attached to territory, the experts say.

Yet are not humans, in many ways, the same?

The separation from him, from the orange and black cats, a loss of love as much as a loss of home.

zzz

"DID YOU TAKE Roxie?!" he texts in the evening.

Perhaps, before he even noticed the bare dresser drawers, he sensed your absence when he entered the empty apartment. And maybe he rushed to all your hiding spots. The top of the refrigerator. The cupboard at the end of the bathtub.

All vacant now.

"I didn't get to say goodbye," he says.

zzz

"Farewell to a perfect little lady," he writes beneath your photo that he posts on a website I keep bringing up on my phone.

"Sorry for your loss," someone responds. Because people think that you have died.

But has not a death of sorts occurred?

"I could have killed you," he will tell me later.

"I wish you had," I will reply.

But now, I type below your photo only a simple phrase: "She loved you more than anything." Speaking, in the pain of the past tense, for you, as much as for myself.

zzz

You sniff the new food and water bowls on the linoleum of my parents' kitchen, after I open the cage's gate and carry you to the bathroom door, to the new plastic litter box. Purchased the previous evening at the pet supply store.

Where in the parking lot, I waited with my head against the headrest, as my neck pulsed with pain from every bump in the day's long roads. When my mother drove me to the doctor, who documented the invisible injury of the throat, the purple bruises of the eye, the chin, the elbow, and the hip. And then a therapist asked me to condense into fifty minutes the enormity of him and me, our expansive passion that burst apart our spacious apartment, our vast future plans.

Plans that would have somehow collapsed into harsh, hard reality if I handled the inflexible plastic and admitted to the necessity of this new litter box.

So instead, my father carried it for me from the store's fluorescent lights out into the long, dark night.

zzz

Under the bed in my upstairs childhood room, you wedge your whiskers beneath the hem of the dust ruffle, still sprinkled with the roses I long ago selected when I dreamt of pink bouquets blooming in some future lover's hands, not purple bruises blooming beneath his palm.

In the morning, my cries rise through the vents to your under-bed hideaway. Until you emerge, your nose twitching with the cinnamon apple pies my parents warm in the oven to try to coax my appetite at the kitchen table where we convene.

Laptops and cellphones are strewn between the rejected delicacies that my father plates in front of me as your paws wind around the dishes on the tabletop. Which we humans lunge across, shouting above each other about listings, landlords. Looking for a new apartment. Or returning to him.

"You cannot go back," my mother cries. "He will kill you," she prophesies.

My father waves his outstretched arms, palms down, begging for calm.

I set my mouth in a line.

zzz

A line of books rises on my bedside dresser, where you calculate a leap so you can investigate the titles: on surviving abuse, repairing relationships. While in the accompanying workbooks, I try to decipher our chances for safety if we go back to the orange and black cats.

With your paw, you hold my place on the page when my phone lights the dark with his messages pleading for my return, and I turn my mouth to the pillow and whisper across the miles into his ear.

Then suddenly my mother's frame blocks the bedroom door.

"You will never change him," she declares, "no matter how many books you read." And she waves away the flimsy paperbacks on the mattress edge.

zzz

Why not just throw the covers off, push past the doorframe, latch you into the carrier, snatch the keys from the counter, scrape the ice from my gray car stationed in the driveway, and retrace the asphalt highways all the way back home?

Where I can just pull from my handbag the pepper spray canister. Switch it with the cinnamon candle on the nightstand. And then just stay.

zzz

"I'm going back," I announce when the flimsy written note that my mother demanded from the doctor can no longer exempt me from my office desk, only steps from his, where perhaps his wrath will trap me in the skyscraper's back stairwell and send me careening down.

"You will quit after these sick days expire," my mother instructed.

"But I can't lose my job and my partner and my home," I replied. Something must remain. The lamps on my downtown desk the only surviving simulacrum of home.

But when I leave for work with my father, who is to drive me to the suburban commuter train, before I kiss your nose goodbye, I slip the pepper spray into the side of my high-heeled boot.

zzz

On my stockings and coat cold from the train ride home, you rub your whiskers a few evenings later against my lover's scent, mingled with the herbal fragrance of the tea shop. Where his big hands reached out to clutch my icy fingers twisting on the back corner table, hidden from the wintry lunchtime sun, after I at last acquiesced to his text: "We've suffered long enough. Let's just be together."

And then we came together later, slipped into a back bathroom, where his hands gripped my neck in the mirror while I watched him behind me, bending me. The way he used to in the mornings while you peered from

your bathtub perch as we giggled together.

The way we laughed tonight afterward as we sneaked down the back stairwell and then separated on the sidewalk to our now separate stations to catch the late, late trains.

"Working late," I explain to my parents' queries. And when I shut the bedroom door, the earthy scent of his body clings to me as I bend to kiss your head and unzip my dress.

zzz

From the heaps of clothes and shoes beside the overturned baskets in the living room, I begin gathering outfits into a weekend bag. Clattering together my toothpaste and hairbrush, my boots and books. Zipping in all my grief.

So that after the rising wail of voices clashing every evening in discordant canons on relentless recurrent themes—my love for him, my parents' prohibition—silence descends.

You curl your tail, waiting, one, two days.

Until I at last come back and gather you into my arms, and you attempt to detect the mysterious activities of my absences in the aromas drifting from my skin. The chlorine of a lonely hotel hot tub where my tears dissolved into the roiling water below. The salt of the city streets where I circled to search for red FOR RENT signs in the snow. The whiff of hotel rooms where I opened all the dresser drawers, and just to pretend I had a home of my own for two short days, I put my clothes away.

zzz

Among the contents of my travel bag, perhaps you sniff the flimsy slip of paper I printed in the hotel business center, where I typed a kind of contract that I plan to present him over a sandwich at an upcoming workday lunch.

When he will take the slender pen I offer him, and at the bottom of the

unfolded note, he will find a place to sign.

"I promise never to hurt you again," the paper states. And beneath, strong enough I believe to hold back any punches from his huge hands, stretches a thin black line.

But later, among my piles of papers and books that you try to topple from the dresser top, you might find a copy with his scent, but never his signature.

zzz

Later, then, you must wonder at his musk on the hotel notepad and lotion I pilfer as mementos of stolen moments with him. When we pranced in matching bathrobes around a cramped hotel room—our makeshift, momentary home. Where our legs entwined on the borrowed mattress for the first time since he had last wrapped his arms around me in our own bed. Where the orange cat used to make peace with you and the black atop the comforter for only the hours between dusk and dawn.

But in the morning, the hotel sheets were an empty white beside me, and he was gone.

zzz

Then one night, I leave you alone for far longer, after you tracked my laptop screen in bed each night switching from cheap hotel deals to rental costs for moving trucks.

The boxes rise high in our dining room as I try for days to untangle my belongings—my life—from his. Which is his spatula, which his towels? He does not answer, staying far away at his father's home.

The apartment echoes eerie, emptying of my possessions as I lie later in the center of our bed, the cinnamon candles on either side. And while the orange and black cats curl in the other room, while you must dream of me miles away, I keep watch at the black ceiling, the black walls of my future

closing in, during the first of countless coming scuffles with insomnia, its dark marks later visible, like his purple slap, beneath my eyes.

In the morning, I throw the bedside candles into the depths of a trash bag, so you need never detect the scent of cinnamon again after its last faint traces on my hand.

zzz

On my fingers afterward, you rub your whiskers against my blisters, where I twisted the skin as I screwed together a new coffee table, a new chair for him. When I kneeled, pleading, on the floor of the apartment entryway, trying to decipher the impossible instructions to construct a new life and a new home.

"Will I have any furniture when I return?" he texts. Not knowing I am leaving him the sofa, the pillows, the mattress, the kitchen chairs. And the vintage floor lamp we selected as our first purchase for our new home. Where, in those early innocent evenings, he hummed along to the stereo as he unscrewed the rusted bolts and replaced the fraying wires until the light shone, unbroken, just like new.

zzz

"It looks like a hotel in here," he writes later when he returns. After I scrubbed the dishes, bleached the bathroom floor, hung a new curtain for the tub, swept every room one final time.

"Why are you doing this?" my brother asked, standing in the center of the apartment, after we had struggled beneath the boxes, the tables and the chairs, down the back twisting stairs, then up a hundred times again. "Why are you being so good to him? Isn't it enough you promised to continue paying your portion of the rent?"

I continued the silent stroking of my broom.

But I whisper the secret answer into your pointed ears. I am hoping

someday to come back home.

zzz

As I DRIVE AWAY, behind the flat back of the moving truck blocking the view ahead, I nearly veer off to the snow-packed side of the highway. Nearly take the next exit and turn around.

This is wrong, my mind repeats with the whirring of the tires. *Wrong, wrong, wrong.*

zzz

SOMETHING SMELLS WRONG when my father deposits your carrier onto the cold wood floor behind my new apartment's door, where the walls crash into each other at a cramped diagonal.

You nose along the limits of the baseboards until their abrupt abutment with another wall in each segmented room, and you must catch in your nostrils the ashes of past tenants' cigarettes, the black pellets of mice droppings, the carcasses of dead bugs. As their sweet rot rises above the chemicals I spray onto the closet shelves and kitchen cabinets.

zzz

THEN THERE, IN the wrong room—displaced according to the name—the first bedbug falls dead onto the kitchen counter.

On the edge of the bed, the mattress choking the room, I sway, my fingers shaking, slipping on the digits to dial the pest company.

"If you've found one dead one," the saleswoman says, "there's almost definitely an infestation."

So we wait.

Long sleeves and pants cover my skin under the covers to protect from the red segmented bodies slithering up underneath. Traps and detectors

arrive in brown boxes with a sickening thud. My phone's flashlight startles the dark at the hint of any itch inching up my toes. And I dig my fingers into your fur and tug out tufts to search for what could perhaps lurk underneath: black specks of flea dirt, rows of red raised bedbug bites.

The sweet, distinct smell emanating from the insects' glands wafts over to your nose from other units, where my landlord will later tell me the bugs are congregating, waging a battle against a terminator's chemicals behind the tall brick walls. Which you survey, from your window ledge, as you peer across the building's courtyard, laid out like a jail.

zzz

I escape.

Beneath the chain-locked back door, I fill your food bowl on the floor extra heaping high, so you will have to portion out the kibble for two, three days.

And then out into the winter sunshine, down miles of speeding highway, I rush back to him. To our old kitchen, whose aromas you will later investigate in the folds of my clothing that brushes his sleeve as we lean over the stove. And then in the living room, in the bedroom, our legs entwine.

But no matter the room, I remain faintly aware of the exit, and of my relation in the space to his big body, his huge hands, that could deliver at any moment a blow, or a caress.

Yet when he holds me on the rug before the fireplace, I smile as the flames dance, and as the smoke drifts up, like all my worries, and escapes into the starry sky.

zzz

Down in the cold one evening long before, as the smoke of his cigarette drifted up from the sidewalk outside our apartment building, he lifted his

phone to you.

"Kitten in one window," he said, low and gentle, narrating a video he then sent up to me, waiting on the sofa inside. "Cozy fire in the next."

zzz

So can you fault me for the smoky, wood-fire scent that clings to my hair so often now after my time with him?

I am only going home.

zzz

"This feels like home to me," I tell him. "Can I stay longer? I think my new place is infested."

"You're crazy," he interjects. "You can't be here all the time." Not on the sofa that I left him. Not in the rooms that I still secure with monthly withdrawals from my bank account. Monthly offerings of my love.

zzz

"Please be kind," I plead, my voice careening about my dark bedroom while you scurry beneath the bed, where I have started sleeping, long-sleeved despite the warming nights of spring, without leaving for his bed.

"Please see me," I say.

His curses, muffled through the phone, slap my ear and flatten yours against the bottom of the box spring.

I spring up and shake the mattress above. "I'm a human. Treat me like a human," I lash out, wild. Wishing for at least the domesticated deference that he reserves for your feline species, the orange and black cats. The caresses rubbed beneath your chins. The endearments sung out in his dulcet, falsetto tones.

zzz

His silence settles heavy upon the apartment then, its only sounds the scurrying of the rodents and the roaches within the walls.

Tonight, though, they echo with the voices of some unwatched film, while I lie on the sofa, and you curl your fur against my side. But my stroke is listless, subdued by the punishments of the workday, when my hand tapped, tentative, at his office down the hall, and he hissed at me to leave. This instant. *Now.*

Suddenly, his words burst onto the screen of my phone beside the screen of the unfinished film, and I spring up to open its message, to open myself to his final rejection, knocking me to the apartment floor.

I keel over.

Rise up and stomp the splintering planks.

"No, no, no, no, no," breaks from my lips.

zzz

When you lick my lips to clean away the sobs with the bristles of your tongue, you must taste salt. It persists on my cheeks for weeks, despite your kisses, despite your purrs rubbing the contracted muscles of my arms. They end in clenched fists, pummeling the pillows on my bed with futile thuds.

On the mattress, I rock from my waist from midnight until dawn, back and forth, back and forth. Pace the short hallway from the bedroom to the living room, back and forth, back and forth. "I live here now," I mutter, instruct, marvel. "I live here now. I live here now."

And then I crumple to the floor. Reach out a frantic finger and stab at some dark detritus resembling, sometimes revealing, another dead bedbug.

And then I gasp for breath as the tears inflame my nose.

zzz

The cold, wet noses of the feline species possess millions more odor-sensitive cells than does a human's far inferior olfactory system.

"What are you when you can't smell?" I asked him once, curious for the word.

"Dead," he replied.

zzz

Dead grasses cling to the blanket I drag home at dusk each summer Sunday, when I lie alone in the mud of the nearby park and look up at the branches, stretching beyond the library books I hold above my head. To study forgiveness. Recovery. Reconciliation. Resurrection of a dead love.

Until one afternoon, when I return, a huge brown roach, instead of you, waits, stationary, in the center of the floorboards in the apartment entryway.

"I'm going to leave here," I resolve. And as I smash its crunching carcass into the floor, I still hope that he will reopen his front door.

zzz

But then, from our old apartment, the janitor calls one late autumn afternoon to tell me he has disconnected the chandeliers that hung above our home.

"He left them when he left," the janitor tells me later as he lays them in the trunk of my car.

"But what happened?" I repeat, refusing to believe.

How could my lover have discarded this apartment and its memories? Neglected his half of the rent. Abandoned the lights that he installed to sparkle above our little family: him and me and you and the orange and the black.

In boxes, the drooping crystals lie, as if in caskets, as I retrace the highway away from my once happy life for the final time.

Now I can never go home again.

zzz

But as the light of my laptop burns later in my bedroom dark while I search for a new place, you lay your paw across the keyboard, maybe to try to make me understand.

You have been here the whole time.

You will always be my home.

zzz

You cannot stop me, though, alone at my office desk, still steps from his, on the gray winter morning when my screen lights up with images of a lofty high-rise condominium, for sale only blocks from our office tower. Blocks he maybe walks now, every day, to the train to his new neighborhood. And on the way—if I wait, if I make the down payment with the last of my savings, borrow the remainder from the bank—maybe he will stop to see me on his route home.

zzz

"Would you come over?" His unexpected text links to a map of his new address, and my finger shakes as it traces the grid of the unfamiliar city streets on my screen.

Perhaps they can function as a kind of foundation, a kind of crosshatched floor, on which we can construct a new, dual home stretched across the sturdy city squares.

"When?" I reply.

But only his silence answers, like a locked front door.

zzz

Silence extends up the lofted walls to the ceiling when I open my new apartment door.

"Here we are. Come on out," I say.

You scurry past the gate of the carrier and lower your belly to the ground, where you can brace for an attack from a black or orange cat, or from a hulking man, lurking with his huge hands in some secret corner of this strange location.

But the space is clear, the windows tall and wide, opening to an expanse of springtime sky.

Up, up, you poke your nose. Sniff the air, with its lemon disinfectant. Investigate the baseboards and the walls, empty and quiet inside.

And then your nostrils cease their twitching and just breathe.

zzz

You try to claim the place in the days afterward. Rubbing your face against the corners of the walls. Arching your back on the furniture.

And you slide your whiskers across the boxes where both the old and new chandeliers lie cushioned inside. Waiting for the day, a month later, when my father and brother will arrive to hang them up and light the rooms.

When two months afterward, a last cruel text will light up my phone.

But in the peaceful dark later that night, with your gentle purr vibrating the bed, I at last pause my restless tossing that has for so long shaken the mattress and disturbed your dreams.

I reach to the nightstand for my phone.

"Please don't contact me again," I reply to him.

Then I extinguish the blaze of the screen.

And we are finally home.

Where you can unclench your jaw in the morning in a languid yawn. Mirroring my smile.

And in the center of the wide, warm floor, you can stretch your whole body, all the way out.

Elizabeth Childs

The Creation of Man

It's been years, *but I never could forget you, Rick. You lived three houses down in a dark house with no light in it. Behind your house someone had begun digging a pit for a pool and then stopped; they left the ground churned up in tall piles. From my window I could see into your backyard, and it looked as if your home and everyone in it were sinking into the earth.*

On summer afternoons you would crouch your small body in the grass just beyond my property line with bouquets of weedy flowers for me. I would pretend not to notice. Then you'd inch your way toward me, hand outstretched. I would bring you water in my mother's good teacups. You sounded out words from the only book you had in your wasteland of a house, some collection of American poetry that seems to have lodged itself in your soul. Even then, you would sometimes stare into the trees and seemed not to hear the words I said. You were a poet, even then. We were seven, and you loved me, and I loved you back.

But we are not seven anymore. No. We are not seven at all.

•••

Here she is, and here am I, as if our brutal growing-up never happened. I catch Shannon's eye in the chilled lobby of her Colorado motel, brushing crumbs from the breakfast tables still sticky from departed guests. I ask her if she knows the year.

"Yes?" she says and almost laughs. "It's 1976."

And how about the month? I ask next, and again she says yes, and

she tells me that, too, though I forget what it is. Her words get lost in the ringing haze of such softly parted lips, the pink flush of her neck. This is Shannon who I have known all my life, since we played husband and wife in the wild backyard of her parents' house. She kissed me then; then she forgot me. Now, I have found her. I don't think she remembers at all.

I stand near her in weak fluorescent light as she hands a room key to a withered and wrung-out woman. I want to live in the put-on smile that stretches far into her cheeks. She flicks her eyes to me and says:

"I will follow you into the yellow-grassed morning. I will be with you forever. Rick, are you listening? I will never leave."

Once the room is empty, I sweep an arm around her waist. In the sallow motel lobby where she works and sometimes sleeps, she kisses me with full lips that taste like pineapple chapstick. She has blown her hair out in soft wisps in the way of the '70s, and I tuck it behind her ears, yes, I tuck it behind her velvet ears as she whispers through her fingertips, "Rick. I am like the sea. I will pull you deep. You will drown in me. I am those faraway white-capped waves—you will never want to leave."

She also says, louder, "I gotta go. My kids will be home in a minute, and I should be there. I should put some dinner on the table and pretend to be some kind of mother."

"Will you come with me?" I ask her over and over. "Meet me by the edge of those trees just there." I gesture to the forest beyond the motel, then run my hands down the front of her shirt. She laughs.

She brushes a hair away from my eyebrows. "I have to pack a bag."

Now it is evening—the evening of perhaps the first important day of my life. I will call it the first day. Once the light is swallowed up by dark, I watch for Shannon among the branches of the pines. I sit on the sharp-toothed steps of my lumbering RV with a mug of coffee in one hand.

We will lie together in the woods under a blanket of stars.

We will let the current take us out and never bring us back.

She said yes, but will she come? I love every light brown hair on her arms.

"I had thought," I said before she slipped out the motel door, "once we were grown and you belonged to someone else, that this flame for you would be gone. But I have fallen quickly again and beyond rescue, and maybe this seems off-putting. I'm sorry. Perhaps I seem too much, too eager and sincere. I cannot help it. I cannot help it at all."

The forest beyond my RV is ready: thick blankets for the cold and the chill inside our bones. Thinner ones for wrapping in once we have warmed each other up and fogged the forest clearing with our breath. I set out chairs for reading aloud to one another. I string up strips of paper—red and brown—to create a home for us among the trees. She will never want to leave.

I hang metal coffee spoons from low branches like wind chimes, and she will understand the reference. In the motel lobby with cereal boxes stacked behind us, I whispered Eliot in her ear like a secret—Let us go, you and I—and watched her shiver in the language of it. I set out a feast of toast and oyster shells that I steamed over my sputtering RV stove.

It is fully dark and I have almost given up. Then, there—I sit straight, then stand, and perhaps my heart leaps visibly, because there she is. She is here. She said she would come. Yes, she said yes, and here she is—this tide-driven lovely thing I could drown in. My desire is untethered, like wild animals with no earth to run across, stars blazing without rock to shine upon, the heads of flowers plucked from their stems. We drink strong tea under the eaves of the pines. She smiles at the food and the spoons, and my heart swells.

We wrap ourselves in the thick blankets and let our warm skin slip together. But in the morning light I see that she has gone, so quickly gone. I gaze at the home I have built for us, this damp clearing in the woods. I am sorry and not sorry I have done this at all, but it seems I am alone again.

•••

I am sorry. *I meant to stay. But when the moment came, I couldn't. You*

whispered poetry to me, fed me with your fingers. From me you drew an aching breath that stuck in my throat. How beautiful you are—Rick, who I have known all my life. I remember the way your golden curls caught the light as you stumbled across the field to me one day with an oversized tie around your neck. In your hand you held two shells. You gave one to me, pressed it deep into my palm and said, "I'll marry you." We made our shells kiss with a tap. You are still the small boy I knew, and I miss you already.

Last night you laid me down like a flower petal fallen. You tucked me in and fell asleep.

Then I got up and stole away. I watch you now from behind the dark trees. You tear down the paper and pack up the chairs. You pour cold water over your campfire in slow circles.

I cannot stay. I slipped away. But already I feel this is only half the truth, that there is some line I have missed. I turn to leave for good, and I can't seem to do that either. Perhaps we have indeed had our wish granted, that I would never leave.

•••

On the second important day, I drive to Wyoming, where Janet leans herself against the door of my RV when I stop for gas. She is made up and ready.

"Do you like Coke?" I ask.

And she says yes. "You have some?"

"Wait here." I buy her a bottle of soda from the convenience store. There, a balding man presses coins back into my hand. He seems to search my face and linger as he does it—perhaps he has not felt anyone's skin in a very long time.

"Thanks." She smiles and seems a little confused and a bit amused. As she drinks with the bottle tipped up, the muscles in her throat constrict and relax with each swallow, and I wonder if I could love her, too. Perhaps I fall a little bit in love with everyone I meet.

"Come away with me," I say, and she laughs, but I know she will come.

I start my campfire, but the flame is weak—I can hardly see by it at all. I flick on my yellow indoor light and let it spill around me. My shadow falls long across the field where I've parked. I listen close for her footsteps in the grass. The stars come, though the stinging smoke obscures them, and then, in a moment, she is there. Yes, she said yes, she would come, and she did! The grey wood is waiting for us. Once again I have stashed thick blankets and thin sheets to catch our fall.

I lay her in white clover beneath the steel knife-edge of the Tetons. I close her eyes, kiss her eyelids, and I love the thinness of the skin just there, like marble carved shallow enough to let starlight through. So fine I can trace the veiny rivulets that branch over her eyes. It is as if there is no foundation below us, no solid earth to hold—we are bursting flora and fauna unrestrained together. I feed her flowers from the palm of my hand and say, "Please stay. I will sew you clothes of fig leaves and wrap you warmly from head to ankle."

"I will stay. Rick, are you listening? You will never be parted from me." It is as if the words do not come from her mouth but from the air all around us, yes.

But by morning, she has left me, laughing in her throaty way as she went, saying, Were you listening at all? Did you hear what I said?

And I am once again as cold as the damp in the trees, as alone as one can be.

•••

She is sleeping *at my feet. I drop white flower bulbs on this new girl's brow and she stirs. I pull her up to standing. I press her back against the trees beyond your view and say:*

How dare you. That is Rick who loved me, who shivered in too-thin clothing one winter morning in my yard, whom I wrapped in a thick comforter snatched from my parents' bed, who thought kissing shells together made us married. That is my Rick, who said, 'I will make for you a beautiful place, Shannon. Someday.

You will never want to leave.'

But you asked for this, threw yourself in his way, and now look what you've done to yourself. You are missing your eyes—how careless of you. And how clumsy of you to break your neck in that way, but what did you expect?

Janet laughs at me.

I watch you, Rick, run back to your rusty RV and drive fast away, though never so far that I am parted from you. I feel you like a rope around my neck pulled tight—an invisible line I can follow wherever you go in the world. You do not see me, the one you loved. You do not see her, that next one who surely meant nothing. You wrapped her from head to ankle in white film and laid coffee spoons atop her eye sockets. You left only her feet unbound. They are already white and stiff.

We shuffle our feet through frostbitten leaves and follow our lines over miles and more miles until we find you again. I walk at a short distance from her, saying:

What did you expect? What did you want? Did you think you'd stay alive forever, the way you were?

•••

The third day, though it is winter now where yesterday it was summer and it is impossible to know quite what I mean, I drive over rumbling roads to Montana in the middle of a frost and a storm. Even cold, I roll up the bottom of my jeans and step into the night. The spring flowers were in their prime last I remember; now they crunch icily under my bare feet. I hate my shoes now. I want to dig my toes into the earth like roots.

Here red-haired Amy is waiting for me—Amy from the chilled diner down the road, who served me briny pickles sliced into long strips. I told her to keep the change.

Her arms are thin as the thinnest of trees, so easily someone could snap them. But I wrap myself around her with my breath in her hair and she says, "Rick, just take me and eat me." I lay her gently down with her hair spread

around her like rays, like the sun and all the stars.

I find red berries in the woods that fit inside her navel. I string a necklace of white flowers around the bright pulse of her neck. In a blanket under the snow, I wrap her warmly and tuck her in.

I wrap her in my beautiful way in thin sheets clear and twisting, but when I turn to leave her, she has disappeared. I hear a whisper as if it has followed me here, "Did you see the way he carried me and wrapped my neck with vines? And now my skin is cold as marble, veined with light blue ice?"

•••

You cannot see *us so near, and you find another to love. But perhaps you hear Janet when she digs out her voice and says:*

How funny he was, don't you think? He said, 'Come and stay,' and he carried us away. How ridiculous, he thought he could keep us contained in these blankets that don't cover our feet.

I hiss at this new girl with her bright red hair:

You were not loud enough, and what were you thinking, only lying there? He didn't mean it. You said nothing. How could he have known at all?

But it is hard to know what I mean with a lightening memory of something around my own neck in a perhaps-too-tight way.

An accident. Rick, what did you whisper to me, before I disappeared for a moment? 'Shannon,' you said. 'Do not come and do not go. There will be time, there will be time. See? You don't ever need to leave.'

Amy peers at me with her ruined face and says, Shannon. And she takes my hand. Look at your own thin blanket and missing eyes. Did he not prepare a place for you, too?

But it is too much and too sad to bear, that my golden-haired poet has grown into a monster unleashed. I touch my fingers to the wet caves carved deep in my face, and I cannot comprehend it.

•••

I FLICK A cigarette into the dry weeds at my feet and stamp out the small fire it starts, so bright and hot, then gone. There is a misty fear following me, hunting and chasing me. It draws near and retreats, and I cannot quite see it or grasp it. The cold morning has fingers that reach out to brush my cheek in the middle of the night. It shocks me awake, this vapor. It clears my head and I see what I am, for a moment. I fly from this dread that pursues me.

By the fourth day, I am home again in the frostbitten lands that formed me. I grasp my solid steering wheel as I fly along the road. I can barely hold on. It seems I am all animal. Or perhaps I am all human with no grace to tether me to the ground. I keep the lights on all the time now. It is possible—yes, I must admit it—that I will be swept away in this current and never find the solid surface of the world.

But when I am far enough away, I shake myself and say, If I am so doomed, then let me be free. Let me take and consume what I need. I find her—my Denise. She is as black as night with stars peeking out—bright eyes in her head, white teeth shining out of her mouth. She is waiting for me.

I catch her bottle of wine as it rolls off a checkout counter, and she says, "Thanks."

"You're a fan of red?"

She laughs. "Yes."

I buy it for her with a few bills and a pocketful of quarters.

I bring her here, Denise, who said yes, she said yes—yes, I heard it. Through a field of yellow Idaho grass that waves about my ankles like thin smoke, through boulders that stretch to the horizon like the surface of the moon, I carry her gently on bare feet to the wildest, most beautiful forest.

"Rick," she says from a distance once we are finished. Her fingers stretched out. I cannot reach her, then, so quickly she is fading, and where is the line between here and there? Where her eyes are still open and heart still pulsing red through all her veins, and then gone? I hover with her on

that thin line between breath and no breath. She whispers but not out loud, "I cannot stay, cannot stay in my earlier way, but Rick—you know I will linger."

Then a mist surrounds me like a wave and I cannot catch my breath as it says straight into my brain, "Look at him, wrapping thin marble around her legs and waist and arms and head. You scoop her eyes like she is clay unformed, as if you are some great sculptor whose work will endure. How ridiculous. What a fool. Somehow, you imagine this is nice of you."

I leave that place with the gas pedal pressed hard to the floor.

•••

We women stand *in curls of fog and whisper in each others' ears at a distance you can hardly hear, saying:*

Did you feel the way he held so tight and clung to our ribs like he owned them? And after we were cold and dead how quick he tucked us into bed with pinecone pillows beneath our heads, then fled as if we were loathsome?

Rick, I watch you this time. I cover my mouth with my hand. Is that how you touched me, too? Why was this not it at all—to lie in the woods with you under stars and sky and never grow old even once? Now my cold wrap is wet with tears I do not remember shedding. I will not speak to you again.

The women pull me away and wrap me in their arms.

They say,

He heard what he heard, but did he hear what you said? You told him 'No' over and over. The fact of the scene, when we say what we mean, yes, here is the truth:

It hurt.

•••

In a Washington town that's been almost swallowed by an ancient forest, Marianne meets me in a church basement with a cup of something in her

hand. I ran here, to the first church I could find. I threw myself on the altar and gripped it, wanted to pierce my skin with the cross of Christ and let my desires run red and free of me.

But at the last moment, as the knife-edge of the crucifix hung above my throat, I was afraid. It would hurt. Instead I dropped bright coins into the collection box as Marianne watched.

Now she is saying with a sly little grin, "The Lord God created, and heavens, it was good." She lets me run my fingers along the white of her inner arm. I press each freckle like a star. We eat cake and drink tea in the room below the pews where prayers are given and taken and whispered and felt, and no one has to say them out loud.

"Come with me." I say it in her ear like a secret, into the blonde hair that will fill my vision for days, smelling of strawberry soap.

She says, "I will be with you forever."

That is what I remember, yes, because that is what she said.

On the evening of the fifth day, in the damp of the Pacific Northwest, she comes with stars in her eyes. Her breath lingers under my skin as she melts away with the sun.

But when I look back, she is standing again, her feet bare, peering at me through the branches of trees with that shroud around her face like a veil, like marble carved thin and twisting.

•••

Five women now, *chasing him, through these forested rooms of trees. We have swelled in size. We have said our words out loud to each other, the truth. We have expanded in our sadness. Some of us have children who ask where we are. Some have dogs that have run out of our houses and into the wild. We seethe. We press forward. Soon, we will step out of the vapor. We will chase him to land's end with our grey toes splayed in the snow.*

Now here is a sixth he has brought to the woods, this woman bound up like a deer. Is he listening at all? Can he hear her say no, or does he only hear what

he hears? We gather around them silently, dressed in our thin wraps with eyes missing. We breathe heavily and we rustle like leaves. We are no longer smoke lightly hissing.

We lean over him. We whisper Eliot in his ear like a secret—

'Did you prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet?'

His eyes are wide and tremblingly wild, his hands are loosely shaking, and he runs full shrieking with his manhood winging in the stinging-cold air with feet aching.

And this bound-up deer struggles free.

We help her stand.

I pick leaves from her hair and say, 'It hurt, yes, I know, my dear, but look—you are alive.'

•••

I HAVE HURTLED my RV with its faltering engine to this Oregon gas station by the sea. It dies. They follow me like hunger, still wrapped in their sheets, shuffling through the forest edges behind me, pushing me on. They have trapped me against the shore and the crashing waves. My mind is a terror I cannot see through. I thread my keys between my fingers whenever I step outside as if that will do anything at all.

I buy bottled water and a bag of chips from a lonely man in a short-sleeved shirt who leans forward to take my money. When I ask, he says, "It is 1984."

And he must be mistaken, isn't he mistaken? Because my years have disappeared in such an unremarkable way. But I hardly listen, hardly care, because my wrinkled hand that holds my change tremors and my eyes dart around. They wait in the shadows for me, mocking and saying, "How weak he has become." Or perhaps they are saying, "How strong we have become," and are not speaking about me at all. It is hard to make out the words.

There behind the leaning man are my girls in black and white, all pinned up in a row and wriggling in the breeze of a fan, with smiles on their faces and hair parted down the middle and bold dates printed below them.

MISSING.

MISSING.

MISSING.

And I want to tell him. I want to clasp this man's cool hands to steady my own and say, That is not it at all, no. That is not it at all.

At the end of the land, at the edge of the sea, they have pinned me down. They have caught up to me.

It is the seventh day. On the beach I bury my feet in the sand, but the whitecapped waves uncover them. The women swarm around me, pressing in with their strawberry hair and light brown arms, their gleaming teeth and missing eyes, and I am suddenly far too hot, I cannot breathe, and I shed my layers into the rising tide. Here I am, the thing I am, naked as Adam fresh from clay.

I expect the women to pull me into the sea, to bind my hands with seaweed and hold me under, even as I say, no, please, go away. But they rush past me. They seem not to notice me. And it is my own runaway passions that drag me down now, my body flinging itself into the depths.

Beneath the surface, they have come untwisted from their shrouds at last. They touch each other's cheeks with long fingers and laugh.

The current pulls me out. It drags me along the ocean floor like a scuttling crab, like an oyster shell with the life so vulgarly slurped out.

They are almost out of sight now, their voices almost gone. Still, I follow them. I cannot seem to stop, though they will not sing to me.

•••

I cannot help *it, even now: I am sad for you. I return, just for a moment. I twist a golden curl around my finger and wonder what might have been.*

•••

The light is far above my head, too far for me to reach. My lungs stretch and cry out, and here is the truth: In the end, it hurts.

How impossible now to say what I mean, but they seem to grow as I fade.

"Did you notice," they say, "the illusory way he spoke? Did you hear the mirage of excuses he made and the words he put in our mouths? Perhaps after a time he was swept away by a surge. Only 'perhaps.' But was it not he who bought our plastic tarps with pieces of silver pressed into someone's hands? Did he not set the stage and take the first bloodied steps in the beginning?"

•••

Where do the *women go, when we come and when we go, through the earth's vast chronicle of days? We fall through the ground and thunder as we go, saying:*

Did you see the way they met our face in the quiet dark of a lonely place and said, there will be time, my sweet, my love, to murder and create?

We said:

We could torture him forever. We could, and why should we not? Once he drowns in saltwater and opens his eyes again, we could drag him behind us through the singing sea-grasses and keep him our captive. We might never leave.

But let's not.

Let us never touch him again, or even think of him. See, he is already small and growing smaller. He has already betrayed himself.

Instead, let us find a new heaven and earth. Let us push our faces above the waves and watch the stars come out in order. Let us glory in the dawn that follows night, dark then light, the first day. Let us fashion new eyes out of pearls scooped from oyster shells. Let us grip the ocean floor with our feet and delight in the wash of the sea.

Laura Rock Gaughan

Here and There Wars

— Big Sky, Small Prose Runner-Up —

Rain-soaked news slams the front door. Another on-time delivery: tap the virtual tip jar for the grey-haired woman working one of her retirement jobs, cruising the streets in a beat-up van. You like getting a daily paper; it makes you feel attentive to the world. And you appreciate small services that make each day hum at a pleasant frequency. How easy it would be not to think about this woman who rises at 4 a.m. to bring the paper to your door.

Wake up, parse headlines with the first meal of the day. It's all triumph over sorrow this morning, indigestible fruit of far-flung maneuvers, nauseating. You didn't expect to be laid low by words on a page invading your kitchen. A mediated account, to be sure; an abstract description of pain inflicted at a safe remove. Over there, yet undeniably here: formless, spreading, and funded by you, citizen, while the planet heats to boiling and no one does a thing to stop it.

A sopping paper must be read slowly, each page lifted with care from the spongy mass below. Fact and fiction run together, reports of humanitarian food drops mixed with rocket-red glare. Ink bleeds into the tablecloth. Coffee gulped with mass destruction burns on the way down. Sugar's ill-advised, though there's no lack of sweets here, as pastry boxes littering the table would attest if they could, those damning witnesses to excess: get moving.

So, it's onto the chores with weeping. Clear away the wreckage of breakfast, sweep clutter into piles (a life's worth; what's a life worth?),

fill the dog's bowl with high-priced diet kibble, put out small fires set by the children, howl at a bureaucrat blocking vital paperwork (your call is important), howl at the sky. Eat something else. Poor you.

And if you can wail in your plenty house, then what about the sister you invent who's trapped at nightfall, pinned by rockfall? Where was her son playing when the kitchen exploded? The story doesn't say. Her son your son's age. Why don't they report that? Small boy lost in the ruins of home.

And this sister, does she marvel when the ashen sky rains meals-ready-to-eat? Does she raise her voice in song, thankful for gift-wrapped consolation bombs, sudden soft persuasion bombs? This is how a victor tests the air on the ground: pack canary-yellow crates, stamp with greetings in a wrong language, push from planes, watch them fly. Freak birds in free-fall, scattershot crumbs of laughing gods. Hunger the soft underbelly of winning, but the papers sell a different meaning: *see how we help; they will be helped.* Today's top story.

A sister is as true as the news. You're no eyewitness, but sitting at home, sheltered on a rainy day, drinking coffee, you feel it. This is what happens.

No, she won't sing praises as her sustenance hits the ground. She doesn't even know about it. Live-buried in rubble, she claws her way out with filthy hands and a serving spoon, a lucky catch as the wall crumpled. Progress is measured in spoonfuls of grit, but she pretends they're mounds of rice, warm and fragrant. To pass time in the tunnel she's digging to her boy, to pacify her ghosts crowding round so greedily, she feeds them the way you used to feed your infants—spoon in, in again, lips ajar to mime the joy of eating.

Mara Lee Grayson

Listening to "America," I Find Myself Feeling Homesick for a World that Never Existed

— with lines from Simon & Garfunkel

There is no falling out
of the picture because there is
no picture, there was
no frame to fall out from,
but the moon rose over one
thousand blurred red lamps
freckling the hills, doubling back
east after midnight.
Oh, she holstered her arsenal
upon my ankle, left
her language on my shoulder blade, a knife
that sounded almost like a voice
in an open field. When it rains
in Southern California,
the doors lock by themselves.
Stoned,
I look at the scenery:
a desert, wrangled, bound
a tree that so
consumed with thirst
will fell itself

palms, filled with meal
a mouth that does not open
when set free.
I am running out of ways
to language about palm trees.
(If only I had known I'd need
a different tongue,
one that could
predict the weather.)
It was over before
the plane touched down in JFK.
No, there is no back
to turn back to,
instead one thousand red lamps
in a line, sitting
stoned and still, counting
the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike.

Shana Ross

Declaration

You can declare bankruptcy—I do it all
the time you just let go of your guilt

like balloon strings, a flash flying
mylar miraculous; let go like peaches

bought last week. Now, before the first
white spot of spoil erupts and declares

no contest. They are already too far gone.
I have spent years and plenty cash money on

therapy so I can tell myself I don't need
to wait for the skin to breach. Save myself

the leaking, the stains on my wicker
fruit basket. I have already decided

I will never answer that email. We watch
Rube Goldberg machines roll slowly

unto completion. I hold my breath hoping
something in motion could escape. Just one

bad bounce. A stroke of luck. Would you
regret grieving now if you got a surprise

reprieve? No. The guilt pipes into the room,
settles heavier than air, an invisible puddle

that displaces all the oxygen
makes it impossible to breathe if

you lie flat on the floor, tears leaking out
the sides and filling your ears. Sometimes

I would stare at a ringing phone, my chest
squeezing the same stuff out of me as I wished

your name would disappear, as I came to terms
with waking, with daylight. That last chance

to talk—shot past and was gone. When the news comes
I nuke my inbox for the third time in sixteen months.

Jeneva Burroughs Stone

400m Hurdles as Metaphysics

—for Edwin Moses

Curve in the track like a giant sail. Lines one must stay within
make the rules, and everything becomes measurable.

The mind clears, an open field. Running through tall grass
giving way on either side. In the night sky, constellations
wheel, hurdles of sorts, leaping its long blue-black arc.

Life is filled with obstacles, none of them haphazard. Rather,
these line up as ordinals will. Sequences map a way to grace.

Know your steps, then forget them. Your body remembers
the number, remembers the leg forward, the trailing leg
cocked and flicked behind.

A ripple, a wave. You are gloss and weave. Tidal, as the
moon waxes full over a low fence, then wanes on the other
side, throbbing across the low hills, stride by stride.

Jeneva Burroughs Stone

Dock at Finisterre

August darks slip in under a bank of clouds. Such a deep iron gray, the color of my grandmother's hair. Flecks of silvered rain that fleeting glisten as they slice toward earth.

I love you has become routine. Blessed are those who check the weather forecast at the beginning of each day. Who understand that chance makes a poor umbrella.

Don't make it complicated. How many more seasons will lift a skirt above the knee? Wade out with me as time pools in the harbor before a current carries it out to sea. I waited for you. Never forget that. I waited.

Sienna Zeilinger

Surge

— Montana Prize in Creative Nonfiction Winner —

I'm growing up in a place that anticipates disaster far more often than it strikes. I've felt the electricity in the air preceding a tornado, seen the sky go sick, but never been caught directly in its path, never seen the cloud cover corkscrew up on itself. In the Cleveland area, tornadoes touch down nearby enough that it's important to learn how to respond to them, but far away enough that our preparation borders on performance. Twice a year, during drills in school, we observe the ritual acknowledgment of their possibility. We process in a line down the stairs into the bowels of the school, away from any windows, past the tomb of dusty extra desks, past the boiler room. In tenth grade my lab partner leads me down here after Chemistry and comes out to me in this same hallway, and I feel at once honored and uneasy; we aren't all that close, and I'm afraid of whatever kinship she thinks she's recognized.

During the drills, our teachers call out directions over our bent heads, reminding us of the correct way to pose. Face the hallway walls. Kneel. Fold over yourself. Cover your head with your hands to protect against imagined chunks of earth raining down from the sky.

Tornadoes are measured on the Enhanced F-scale, a 2007 improvement on the F-scale used for decades. The EF-scale incorporates the estimated velocity of a three-second gust at the point of damage together with a judgment of the damage done, on a scale of one to eight, to any of twenty-eight absurdly specific indicators. Much of this is measured in retrospect. Small branches broken off a birch—on the "#27, Hardwood Tree" indicator,

a mere first Degree of Damage—would suggest winds of 60 mph. Loss of rooftop HVAC on the "#13, Automobile Showroom" indicator would correspond to a fourth Degree of Damage and 101 mph gusts. Because it's so difficult to access the point of impact while the damage is occurring, and because gusts of wildly different strengths can cause similar looking destruction, the wind engineers at the National Weather Service acknowledge that this system of assessing tornado strength is "(at best) an exercise in educated guessing." The whole cataloguing mechanism is built on approximation. The best anyone can do is almost.

•••

Have you ever stood in a cornfield? One plant bursting through its husk is inaudible to humans, but in a large field, when it's quiet, you can hear them in rapid succession, and the effect is a grand, chastising *hush*. Cleveland is a "real city," as I insist to my friends. It has an airport, an art museum, skyscrapers. But Cleveland is an urban island. It's bookended by Lake Erie to the north, and everywhere else, country. As a teenager ready to be anywhere else, I have a recurring nightmare of running as far as I can and still finding myself in a *field*.

For me, that anxiety dissipates with the introduction of foul lines and a backstop. Softball is important to me, bodily and spiritually. For weeks, when I'm nine, I become convinced that if I can somehow become part of the ground I'm covering, I'll be a better shortstop, able to move with the earth instead of against it. Before games I pinch some infield dirt between my fingers and sprinkle it on my tongue. I'm fully absorbed. I love everything about the game: the deception of steal signs, the thrum in your blood on a 3-2 count, the feeling of knowing whether you've lifted your back elbow up high enough at bat by whether the breeze ripples through your shirt. In high school, I find a home at catcher. The demands of the position make intuitive sense to me: leading from relative invisibility, finding the right words to buoy your pitcher in a tough inning, guarding something

important. Your home is everyone's home. Thick, white lines cascade away from your body and carve fair from foul. And you, crouching down small in a posture not unlike reverence, with your back to the backstop and your face open to everything else.

Maybe the lesson wouldn't be imparting so bodily if I weren't learning it from two teachers at once. Playing catcher and growing up in the Rust Belt Midwest are teaching me how to live and play in confined space. I need to be cradled on one side by reliability, predictability—a chain-link fence at my back, a Great Lake always north—in order to take risks. Otherwise, I'm a little edgy, hackles up, like writing with your back to the café door. At tournaments we get demolished by teams from Iowa or southern Illinois. We joke that those girls hit so hard because they've grown up aiming for the barn the next town over. Our imaginations are limited, but our admiration is true. Thinking of their lives in the prairie states makes me dizzy. No wonder those girls root themselves so deep into a game. How else would they know who they are, or where they're safe, or where they're free?

•••

Nobody has yet solved the mystery of exactly what's happening at the eye of a storm, but that's not for a lack of trying. In 1969, the Alberta Hail Project sponsored chases in which sampling vehicles were driven into hailstorms, so researchers could study the storms' physics and design suppression strategies. But storm chasing existed before institutional backing. The first storm chaser, David Hoadley, founder of *Storm Track* magazine, began trailing tornadoes near his hometown in North Dakota when he was fresh out of high school in 1956. One of the reasons he chases is to pursue "an experience of something infinite," as he wrote in a 1982 issue of *Storm Track*. "When a vertical 50,000-foot wall of clouds glides silently away to the east… and goes golden in a setting sun against a deep, rich azure sky," he writes, "one can only pause and look and wonder."

Dr. Chuck Doswell, one of the first scientific storm chasers, was a

forecaster on the National Weather Service's VORTEX projects in the '90s. He is one of today's most vocal chasers, and equally reverent. He writes of what he calls the "loss of self" that occurs during chases, when the storm is "so overwhelming in its majesty and power, you can become completely absorbed in the event. The 'self' has disappeared, in a flood of astonishment."

But Doswell is also a rational man. He recognizes that news stations interview him not out of a desire for him to share his careful research, but in hopes that he'll "spit out a colorful turn of phrase" in his signature white cowboy hat. He's an outspoken atheist; on his blog he has a thirteen-point takedown of the scientific validity of the Noah's Ark story ("What about microorganisms? How would they be gathered and maintained?"). And he recognizes that what is beautiful to him is the same force that may bring others the most devastating, frightening moments of their lives. In his keynote speech at ChaserCon 2014, Doswell denounced thrill-seeking "yahoos" who chase with no respect for the towns in the storm's path. Those who court danger for a photo, driving recklessly, with none of the equipment to report what they see, endanger both the local and the chaser communities, not to mention themselves. A tornado's beauty, Doswell insists, comes from *not* reaching it, from beholding it from afar. Once he knows he's on the storm's path, he says, that's "virtually always a signal to me to move."

•••

The summer I turn fifteen, my body seems to forget its arrangement with gravity: here I thought I had puberty in the bag, and now I'm constantly tripping over myself. I don't quite hate my body. It's just that it's a stranger to me. My body decides to reintroduce itself by knocking into doorways and the corners of tables.

It's also, at least a little bit, not my own fault. One day, I'm subbing at shortstop. The other team's batter hits a one-hopper to right and tries to turn a perfectly respectable single into a double. I'm at the age where

I'm toggling rapidly between brimming self-assurance and wishing I were a ghost, so I can't stand any displays of hubris. I call for the throw and set up to guard second base like it's home, planting my body like a tree instead of swinging like a door, daring the runner to knock over all 110 pounds of me. She does, and she's out—of course she's out—but my hand is suddenly thick and wrong inside my glove. I pull it free, and my thumb droops from my wrist. I stare at this limp thing and for the first time in months I'm entirely sure that I'm synonymous with the rest of my body—because this? This is simply a thing I own, no longer me but *mine*. It doesn't even hurt.

I have surgery, have my birthday. Pins in my hand, candles on the cake. The next week I'm setting a ball on a tee for a younger player, trying to make myself useful. A shadow quickens over my right eye, and the next thing I know I'm waking up from the deepest nap of my life. Later I overhear the younger player bragging about how her swing was so strong it almost cracked my skull. I feel bad for her; I'm at least permitted to be in pain, while she has to mask the waver in her voice with self-importance. She is too shattered to make eye contact with me while my stitches are in. Meanwhile, people are talking to me about my body all the time. Everyone keeps joking about my thick head. I joke back about my hulk hand. I decide that yes, actually, I do hate my body. When I get my cast off, I discover the scar on my hand is the exact same length as the one on my hairline. A summer marked by what's been split open.

After I'm cleared to rejoin the team for fall ball, my parents and coach collectively forbid me from playing catcher. I'm dispatched to center field, catcher's inverse in every way. I'm used to thinking of my legs as coils, ready to spring up when it's time to throw down a runner at second, but otherwise planted. Now I bob on my toes between faraway pitches, keeping my legs loose enough to take wing at the ping of the bat. My position is no longer defined by how immovably I can guard the same pentagon. Now, it's expansive: how much territory do you want to claim for yourself?

And how much do I want? All of it. Out here there's room for abandon. Sprawl, but with direction. Flying, not floating. I dive for a swooping line

drive and come up with a mouthful of grass. It's a little like remembering you're an animal. It's a little like sex. It's the first time my body and I are asked to be as much as we can be and, no surprise, the first time I catch myself loving it.

My coach tells me the secret to playing outfield is to learn to read the ball off the bat, decide the exact spot where it'll land, then turn and make a break for that mark—everyone's faster when they can run without looking back. This means, unless the ball is hit precisely where you're standing, you're sprinting toward a guess. I'm not very good at guessing correctly, hence the last-minute leaping and diving. But I'm decent enough to stay there, and I stay long enough to realize I love it. There's no steadfast boundary delineating center field: you decide together with your left- and right-fielder where your respective territories start and end, and that negotiation changes batter to batter, sometimes pitch to pitch, so that one day at golden hour you look around and everywhere that's green looks like home. From out here, you see home plate upside-down, or maybe right-side-up? A tiny house, all along. You can't remember how that ever felt like enough.

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Over half of Ohio is farmland. From the air, the state is tattooed with yellow-green grids, proof of productivity. The earth under our cleats is fed by lake and glacier, cushioned by enough clay to retain water and enough sand to drain it. My teammates and I are growing up on land that's so fertile, people have moved across the world for the dream of farming it.

The blue-collar suburb where we play has enough funds to hire a groundskeeper twice a season. For the first game, everything is in order. Crisp, correct. Dirt paved with the right dirt. The perfect infield, by the way, is twenty percent more sand and thirty percent less silt than northeast Ohio's soil. By July, I'm kicking the petals off a daisy in deep right that has charmed its way sunward. Weeds break through the basepaths and dangle flamboyant, like wrists. Then one day I show up to practice and the stalks

have been clipped, and everything is back to glistening, clean.

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If there's one thing Chuck Doswell despises as much as irresponsible storm chasers, it's what he calls "disaster porn." "It seems the public has an insatiable appetite for disasters," he laments. "Crock-umentary" producers are constantly inventing terms for unprecedented events—s*uper-tornado, hyper-canes*—but by focusing our attention on the extraordinary, we neglect to take seriously the dangerous usual.

"Isn't a plain old devastating F5 tornado dramatic enough?" he asks. "Why does an event need to be 'off the charts' to be considered worth mentioning in a documentary?"

•••

When I live in Providence I trick myself into believing I've found balance. I write about how I've reconciled with my concussion's aftereffects. I write about blue herons, snowy owls, and in doing so I learn that I'm patient enough to wait around and watch for blue herons and snowy owls. I can twirl from porch to porch, drinking Gansetts with my friends into the early hours, alight on a boy's cheap comforter, and wake up in the still dark to pull on jeans and a hoodie and catch dawn at the bay. I can have it all.

But also? I'm doing quite a bit of lying about what my version of "it all" looks like. Everything that would leave a mark is swept away by the next weekend. There's no room for shame to pick up and range over the land, but there's not quite room for honesty to breathe, either, in all its fullness. And so for the first time I write about the moment with L at that party in high school, but I put it in an essay about roller derby and girl-on-girl violence. I write it as a moment of threat, of violation, and it was. I'm praised for being vulnerable, for *going there*. As if by whisking the reader into that basement, close enough for them to smell danger, I have absolved myself of

the responsibility of holding the moment's riskier parts in my hands.

What I do not write or say: at seventeen, when I feel myself float away from under L's hands and mouth, before I crash land back to my body and throw her off me, I drift to hover somewhere above the couch, above us. And from that remove I can see that inside this moment there is a room, and inside the room lives any breath of this that I might ever want. And then I remember where we live and all that can tear apart in a breath, and I watch myself close the door.

•••

In Providence, I confuse power for control; I confuse myself with the storm. I thought the newness would shake something loose in me, but I'm still feeling pent up, explosive. In Cleveland, I could never shake the feeling that if I stood with Lake Erie at my back and howled, there would be nothing stopping the tiniest particle of that sound from rolling its way to Iowa or Kansas. And now, here, Rhode Island is one tiny, fragile area code. I feel like I could erode it all by myself. Who doesn't know that anxiety, of an offhand remark or a joke laced with truth careening away from your grasp, gathering steam and grime, turning destructive? The fear of any complicated emotion barreling into someone else keeps me straitjacketed. But it's a long time to twist into yourself. I want swell and recession, dissipation, resolution. I want the ocean.

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The waves at Narragansett Town Beach are rolling in at 3-4 feet—none of that blood-red seaweed, spit up in stillness onto the sand. The water surging and then dissolving, a bothness, depths beckoning. I go in up to my waist, up to my neck. And then, when a wave arrives, I jump to welcome it, catch its crest, twist back toward the beach. The wave flares, and I arch my back to see over its peak. We are soaring toward the shore, the salt and the scup and

I, and I'm home, and then the wave breaks and slams me into a somersault. Water where the sky belongs. My chin scrapes shell, and I wash up on the sand like ragged driftwood, bleeding, throat raw with brine, water pooling in one ear, a spray of seaweed caught in my swimsuit top.

I kneel, coughing ferociously, and then a trembling laugh sputters out: one wave, and I'm thirty yards north of my pile of stuff on the beach. There's a freedom in allowing yourself to be moved. There's a joy in realizing you already are. And relief, too, that this is not a place you have to leave all at once. That in fact, no place is. You can expand and recede at will. Come out splashing, go back in. The safety and the thrill all tangled together, ready when you are.

K.S. Dyal

Small and Smooth and Warm

— Big Sky, Small Prose Winner —

Our first time in the tent, a storm was coming, but we didn't know. It wasn't one of those storms you could smell thick in your nose from a county over, warning thunderheads weighing down the sky. The horizon was empty, so we set up the tent in your parents' backyard. Lilac shade and a blossom-sweet breeze. Our bare feet whistling through the grass. We were done with middle school, with cursive and the dirt path to the playground. Tent poles clacked in our hands like geese beaks and we drove them into the ground, hard. When we finished, it looked like a sleeping animal that might take us inside it. A dragon belly, taut and emerald green from jewel-eating. We went in. Zipped the air out. Poured rum in our Coke cans, hid the bottle under our sleeping bags in case somebody came out to check on us. Nobody did. They left us to our own devices: ghost stories, *Marry Fuck Kill,* nails digging crescent divots into skin. Your wet teeth like eggs in the dark. *Truth or Dare:* always truth, so we could learn everything about ourselves. Each secret coming out was like a crocus in spring. Even dares were truths: once you did something, it became true. Flashlight shadows leapt on dragon-belly skin and I imagined our silhouettes from outside: two heads bent close, two hearts lifting out of their bodies. When the storm arrived and still no one came for us, we knew we were alone in the world. The rain so loud we couldn't speak. In the morning, the belly-tent full of our hot breath, I watched your face slack in sleep, wanting to put myself in your mouth.

•••

Our second time in the tent, it was clearer we were hiding. By then, we both had boyfriends who were tall and pushy. We fumbled the tent up and crawled in, pretended we were alone in the world. Slid our phones under our sleeping bags. Drank the rum straight and left it out. Kept the tent flap open, fence-facing, needing all the air we could get. By then, we knew there was no green beast-belly, no jewel-eating teeth. Just worn canvas strung on sticks. One of us threw up in the grass, spine curved white under the moon and heaving. I cut your hair and watched the strands fall into mulch for birds' nests later. Was anything the same, that second time? Our heads still bent close, our silhouettes coming to a point like steepled fingers. Dares were still truths. *Could we leave?* we asked. *How far could we go?* With the hair-cutting scissors, you snipped a lilac bloom and pressed it to your face, hiding from me. The stem inside was bright green. No storm crept up; the air dry as insect husks. Dawn came and I slept through it.

•••

The third time, you had a husband and child in the house, looking out at us like we were wild animals. The lilac bush was a ragged stump. We set the tent up, cursing at poles, and went in. Zipped the air out. Poured rum in our Coke cans, hid the bottle under our sleeping bags in case somebody came out. Nobody did. The tent was still just worn canvas strung on sticks, but years shone through the thin spots. Not a dragon belly, we knew, but maybe a selkie skin, setting us free in the water. We waited for rain but none came. You had a little wisp of hair sticking up and I wanted to reach out and smooth it. I didn't. No dares. Our ghost stories resembled our own lives. I was alone, how I'd always feared, and you weren't, how you'd always feared. Your husband had thick fingers, a thick gold band on one of them. The word was clumsy in your mouth: *husband, husband.* We both tripped over it. At some point, he texted you: *Do you need anything?* You slid your phone under your sleeping bag. In my ear you whispered words that scraped me raw, skinned my knees: *When they were tired / Night rained her / thick dark*

sleep / upon their eyes.[1] Something you'd studied in school, you said, but still it made my face wet and my heart hot. At dawn we were both awake, unable to sleep on the hard ground, but I felt your hand tucked in mine, small and smooth and warm.

[1] *Sappho,* trans. Mary Barnard (University of California Press, 2012).

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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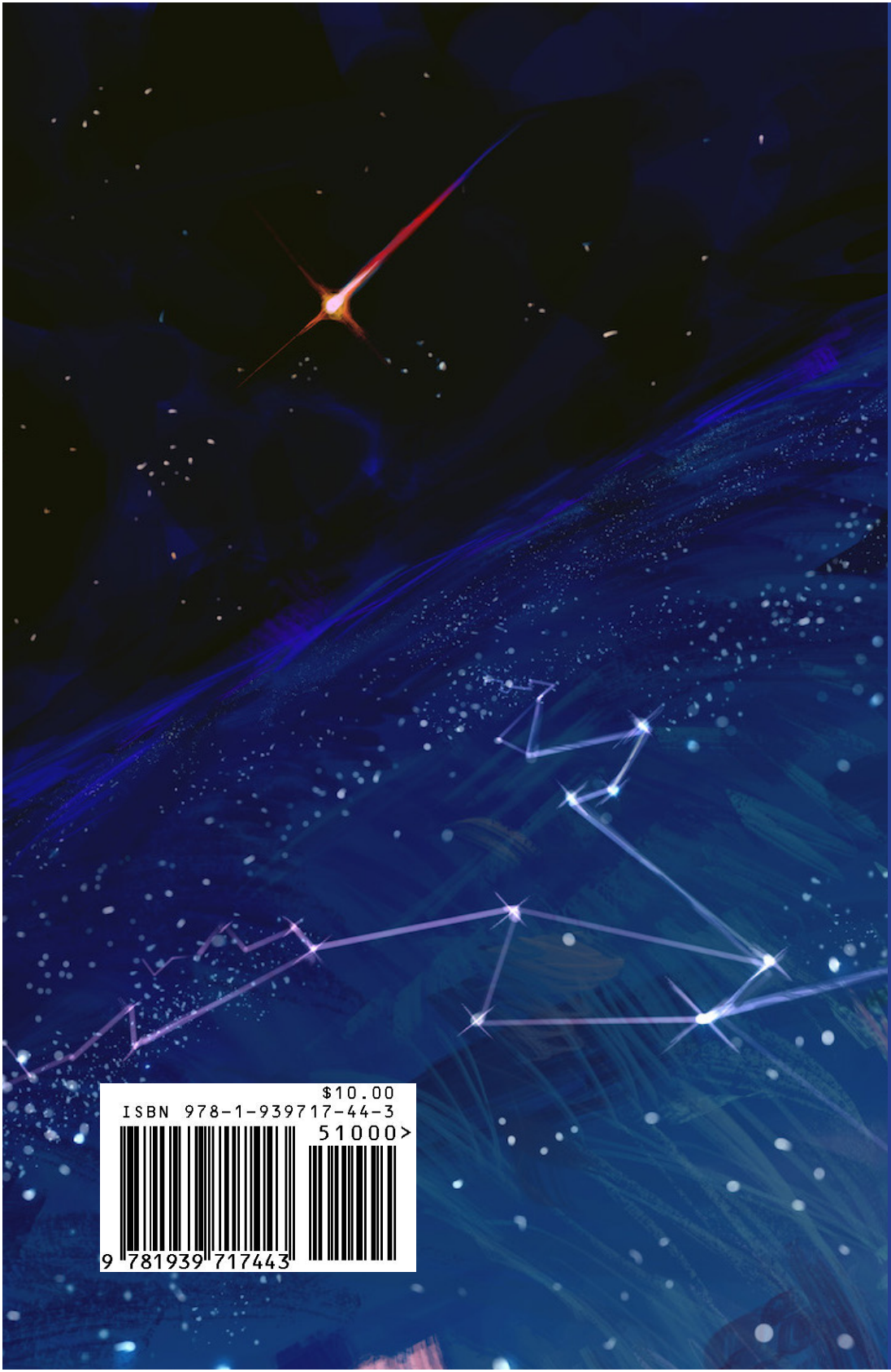
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