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MAN ALREADY FALLING

He'd made fists out of his hands. He'd shoved them through the jail-like bars of the railing. He'd thought to wear gloves; the morning was unseasonably cold, after all. He'd put on a windbreaker, as if that would make more efficient his fall.

The bridge was an expansive breath over the ship canal, silvery with dew. Police had blocked off lanes of traffic on its west side, and one negotiator had been there since before first light. They had called out this policeman, who specialized in hostage negotiations, because he lived very close to the bridge, plus it was more or less his job. It was routine, really, he got these sorts of calls now and again. He turned himself out of the warmth of his bed, dressed quickly, zipped up his coat, kissed his wife good-bye. He stepped out into the dark.

It took a while to find the man, because the man was already hanging, his head nearly level with the sidewalk, and the fists, in black gloves, merged into the dark. The negotiator scanned the railing on either side, first by driving, then by walking. The cold wind blew right through him; he thought he'd arrived too late. Finally he saw a skip in the railing, two skips, bites out of the steel. The negotiator stopped, walked backwards several paces so as to be out of hearing range. He called for back-up, called for an ambulance and heavy rescue, then closed his phone with a snap and walked to where the man was hanging.

He looked over the railing, saw the man's head, his dark hair haloed with streetlight. Saw his outstretched arms, the pale skin of his wrists in the gaps between sleeve and glove. The negotiator lay himself down on the sidewalk and entered into negotiations with the man, face to face. He was asking the man to give up his hostage, to set him free, to give him another chance. What he said exactly was not reported, but it was something to this effect, and in any case there was no negotiating to be had. The man twisted his fists in the bars, but otherwise did not respond.

Meanwhile, light had broken clear from the mountains,
revealing an eggshell sky. Not a single cloud, not a drop of rain. Everything was made visible for miles, every peak of the Cascades, each ripple in the water, all the red and yellow leaves clinging to their branches. The skyscrapers of the city shone.

Meanwhile, traffic snagged and knotted. People cursed this Monday morning over any other. The bridge rumbled with the morning commute, and the man twisted his fists, and the negotiator negotiated in all the ways he knew, while scrapping together another plan that involved seizing, securing and clamping the man to the bridge.

The man was not interested in negotiating. And before he could be seized, secured or clamped, he was already falling, one glove caught in the jail-like bars of the railing.

But before he fell, he was here, his hand in the glove. He'd made his hands into fists, and the fists were stuck in the ribs of the railing, disappearing the steel. It were those two small black cuts that tipped off the negotiator, who had then lain his body across the sidewalk to be at the same level, more or less—in any case, not talking down. But the man wouldn't talk in any direction, wouldn't even look at him, always looking at something through and beyond.

This wasn't the best scenario. Most people responded, and often they said terrible things, but the negotiator never took it personally. It was part of the job. Now, the talking was not working, so he inwardly planned to seize the man, and while he went over the plan, he allowed another part of his brain to attempt communication—a sort of telepathy. He bore through with his eyes, putting his own thoughts into the hanging man's head, though not the thoughts that included the plans to seize him.

The man's name was unknown but he looked to be in his mid- to late thirties, that's what reporters reported. He was Caucasian, dark-haired and not shabby, what with the leather gloves and brand-name windbreaker, which reporters were not allowed to name, lest the jacket get a bad rap or inspire others to jump off bridges. In fact, they were not really supposed to report on bridge
jumps at all, and so they were kept behind yellow police tape, not allowed to interview the man or the negotiator, who were both busy anyhow.

More people than not were late that day. Busses were radioed to tread lightly on the bridge, to tip-toe across. Some of the traffic and lateness had to do with the hanging man, some of it didn't, but most of it was blamed on him anyway. People thought out loud that whoever was jumping should jump already, so that lanes could be reopened and everyone could get on with the banalities of the day.

At that moment he was still attached to the bridge, and it wasn't so much about jumping as it was about falling. Light from the east held up the sky, rounded it out. The bridge held up the man. Talks went on, the negotiator negotiating with himself more than with the hanging man, since the hanging man did not respond, meanwhile orchestrating a plan to seize him, something he didn't tell anyone yet, not even heavy rescue, mostly because he was busy inserting thoughts into a certain brain by telepathy—and because there was no time. The man's hands wanted out of the gloves. The negotiator reached for his handcuffs so slowly the man would not notice, if indeed he noticed things. His hand closed on the cold curve of metal but the man was already falling, one empty glove stuck in the jail-like bars of the railing.

When the man's hands were still inside the gloves and wedged into the railing, light broke over the mountains, and if the negotiator believed in signs, which he didn't, he would take this as a good sign. Light breaking over anything is always hopeful, and if the hanging man did not see or hear the negotiator, maybe the light overhead would find him in a way that no one and nothing else could.

He had been hanging for about an hour at that point. His feet had found stability, sort of, on the tiny bit of pipe no more than a few inches wide; in any case, something that is better than nothing in a situation such as this.

The negotiator had lain down on the sidewalk. He felt the cement cold and rough through his layers, through the coat to the
shirt to the skin, down through the ribcage to his heart. He felt the small trembling movements of the bridge. Did the hanging man feel them, too? It didn't seem that the man felt anything, or heard or saw—his eyes were blank as a saint's, always looking through and beyond.

The negotiator tried to put himself in that vacuum where the man existed, which was like nonexistence, tried to edge into that place. He imagined himself hanging from the bridge beside the man, on the other side of the bars. He didn't like it there, not one bit, but he put himself there in his mind so that maybe the man would see him and listen to him, and decide that maybe his bed with or without wife was warm enough. He would see the light breaking overhead and it would mean something, more than the absence of rain, a sign if one believed in signs. Then the hanging man would unscrew his fist and take the offered hand, allow himself to be pulled up—then he would not have slipped out of the glove the way he eventually did; his hands relaxed out of fists, and first one hand slipped and then the other.

It was still dark out. The man had both hands in his gloves. In fact, he was not yet hanging but had put one leg over the railing of the bridge. One leg, and a passing car was able to tell that this was not just another early riser out for exercise, but a man out for death, and so placed the 911 call and drove on.

The call went from operator to dispatcher to police station to the negotiator, who lived close to the bridge and who left his warm bed and warm wife, put on his black coat and zipped it all the way up.

By that time, the man had both legs on the side of nonexistence, then turned his whole body against that darkness, still facing the road, looking out east. If he were looking at all, he would see the lights of the city spread out before him, pulsing toward an abyss that meant water. He tried to grip the top bar of the railing, but it was much too fat for his hands. Instead he gripped the vertical steel ribs that held up the top bar and lowered himself, kicking his feet as though testing the depth, as though he were swimming in a
lake, and he were a child, trying to see if the water was too deep for him. If his toes could touch the sandy floor, he knew he was safe. But he was not in a lake, he was hanging from a bridge, though his foot did graze something solid. He reached toward it again, the tiniest ledge just under the bridge, so his body was slightly angled inward to fully rest one foot upon it.

He wore a windbreaker and gloves because it was cold, and steel was colder on an unseasonably cold morning. Had he not worn gloves, his hands would’ve stiffened, been unable to grip for long and his task would have been accomplished sooner—if he thought it was such a thing, a task on his weekly to-do list, a nagging item which can never be checked off if accomplished.

In the dark of that Monday morning, the negotiator got the call. He did not want to exchange his warm bed for the cold air of the bridge, but this was his job, and so. He pulled on his clothes, kissed his wife, drove through and over the city lights. He could not find the man at first, feared he’d arrived too late, thinking that if he hadn’t kissed his wife or zipped up his coat he could have got there in time; it’s often the fractions of seconds that make all the difference. He felt something like relief when he saw the man hanging on the other side of the bridge, his head sidewalk-level, his gloved hands like black knots.

When back-up and heavy rescue and paramedics and the fire department and policeman after policeman arrived and blocked off lanes of traffic and barred reporters, they assessed where the man would fall if he fell so that they could clear an area, seal it off. If the man thought he was aimed at the water, he was wrong. He was not yet at the apex of the bridge, which would have guaranteed water, though it could’ve also guaranteed houseboat or tugboat or barge. What falling people often do not know is that the effect is about the same; water is hardly more forgiving. Water is like concrete and concrete is like water. The hanging man, if he fell, would hit a parking lot by the ship canal—which he did hit, because he did fall, after nearly four hours of not falling; his hand left one glove and took with him the other glove, and for 2.5 seconds he was in over his head, not touching anything.
Two point five seconds is only an estimate. In any case, less than three. These things are known, quantifiable—these are easily accessible facts. Also a fact: a man weighing 160 pounds who falls 150 feet will reach ground at a rate of 55 miles per hour.

Take a story problem out of a child’s arithmetic book: If a man weighs one hundred sixty pounds and falls one hundred fifty feet, how long will it take him to reach the ground? Time equals distance divided by rate. \( t = \frac{150}{55} \), thus: \( t = \frac{2.7272727272727272727272}{1} \).

You can take the .72 to infinity. It can go on like that forever, skipping over itself, never reaching 2.8 seconds, and certainly never three; the man falling can skip through the air like that, sustaining 2.72, holding, holding, keeping the .72 close to him, the .72 will hold him up, will keep him suspended in the air so that he won’t hit ground or water or houseboat or car or unfortunate pedestrian, the .72 will keep him infinite, alive. But nobody knew how much the man weighed, and whatever it was, it was not 160 pounds, but something slightly more or less, because he cut through the air with a windbreakered body, did not catch’on numbers or infinities, and hit the edge of the parking lot at approximately 9:34 am.

He zipped the jacket up to his chin, pulled on black leather gloves like a criminal. He closed the door on his sleeping wife and sleeping child, sneaked out into the night, though it was technically morning. He put one foot before the other, and soon he was walking the bridge. Against the dark sky it nearly floated, the bridge suspending in the air—though somewhere he must’ve known it was solid steel, supported by concrete and grounded by mounds of earth on either side.

One foot and then the other. One foot. One leg and then the other. One gloved hand and then the other gloved hand. Streetlamps bruising light onto the pavement. One outstretched toe, then the others, one arm downward, then the other, hands through the bars, easier than holding on. This might be like prison, cold steel bars and a gash of darkness at your back, looking out to the world, even if the world is only a potholed road spattered with light, but nevertheless always behind bars and always looking out.
And everyone always looking in. Case in point: A man on his belly on the sidewalk, looking in, chewing up words, spitting them out. The hanging man twists his fists in the bars. Kicks a foot which slips from the little ledge, puts the foot back on the ledge. Why the ledge? Lets it slip off again. To hang or not to hang? Not really hanging, not holding on, hands won't stop making fists and fists don't slip through the bars. Stuck there, then. How to make the hands stop making fists? Body will not obey brain. Stop making fists, yet the body still makes fists. Why fists?

And so on. Stuck in the jail-like bars of the railing, fists turn into hands, and hands slip through the bars, and body slips through the air, and man falls through life.

But he was already falling before he fell. He was falling before he put on his windbreaker and sealed his hands in leather gloves, before he looked at his to-do list, before he left his house, before he put one foot on the sidewalk and then the other, before he walked through his slumbering neighborhood, he was already falling. He was falling when he found himself below the bridge, which looked like a cathedral with the windows blown out. He was falling when he heard a car clunk overhead, when he looked out to the dark abyss that was water, when he climbed up the stairs to the bridge, when he put one foot forward and then the other, when one leg was already over, when the car passed and placed the 911 call, when he found the ledge and rejected the ledge, when the hostage negotiator got the call that took him from his warm bed and wife, when he held on and then did not hold on, when fists made hostages of his hands, when the negotiator was on his belly trying telepathy, when the negotiator was reaching for handcuffs, the man was already falling.

The negotiator saw him fall. It took no time at all; the man was there and then the man was not there. The negotiator's stomach dropped out of him and through the sidewalk, bridge and down.

Cameras clicked and journalists scribbled and someone
cried out. The negotiator felt his own gravity, flattened to the ground, as though the pressure created by the man falling through the air built up inside him, too. He wondered if other people felt it. He wondered if one single falling man could change the pressure in the air throughout the whole city.

He hadn't any time to grab one fist, to grab it with all his strength, handcuff it to the bridge, as though the man and bridge were both guilty. Then to hoist him up and over to this side of the railing, holding the entire man hostage. The negotiator, not negotiating at all, would push the man to the cement. He would hold him there with all his weight and cuff the man to himself.

But time passes so quickly one cannot see it, and before the negotiator knew he was falling, the man was falling, and before he could get that inside his head as a fact and not an unknown, the man was no longer falling, but fallen, because 2.5 or 2.6 or 2.9 seconds had long passed, and everything had already happened.

The negotiator laid his cheek against the cement, rounded out the seconds. He closed his eyes. The noise closed in around him. Reporters yelled questions: What happened? Why did you let him fall? Sir? Why didn't you do something? Sir?

In his mind he was bringing the man back up through the air, piecing him back together, lodging him once again in the railing. He could begin again, there would be another chance. But it was the end, not the beginning, and in the end there was only one black glove caught in the jail-like bars of the railing.
Let's cover you over, he said, and then I woke up. In the garden the sun of your face moves across the wall, oblong and approximate. Aperture in mortar. The doctor drives father's Lincoln. You are always changing on me, I say, linking the larynx to syntax. You withdraw your hand inaccurately from the counter. The surface molders. Sometimes when a glyph catches you are pushing up the stairs. You are here before me and then I am. We are on this landing holding the banister. The stairs push back. I walk up to the roof sink into labor, freshen the sentences so they are maintained. All the irregularities have been sewn together to make a marvelous shard of fleece. So the perpetrator finds his employment. Obsession is internment. The mirror, a rim, the garden's fence. Glint of flowers, brocaded and orange. Warm matter of home is the blouse mother wore.
FUGUE

How enter fence from this precise angle.
Feathers tilted and controlled.
Corymb of flower. The doctor
drives father's Corolla.

If a face approximates,
does a flock of birds bend the fence.
A fence in syllable and bird.
A bird, bending.
Do I bird, bending. Feather
combing the air of its texture your hair freezes
painless needles.

All angles at which the birds are tilted.
Tied to tiles, the birds fly.
Over the margin, occur. To lick the gap
of the wound. What remains.
Light strains carefully over the metal roof
and squints at us. Active in tongue
petrified listen. A helping bird, a bird buttressing.
The fence I make freezes. What garbage
could be made of if it were garble
over the radio in fragments

Certain tinctures.
Become a bird a syllable,
mold on the garden's wall.
A hole I look through
your face.
Suffuse saffron over the grass.

Madsen
Light, grind the bones.
I am always looking over your shoulder I am your pale head.
The aperture of wound the sun induces.
I am tending toward. A bent flower sugarcoat
and glaze the frozen flower
which I wore.

Suddenly the color
of the tongue
smeared over the flower or
suddenly the color
smeared over the flower
a crème blood
a soft and crème blood.
Sting in bone sing loam
the flower's core.
A center stamen.
Affliction

it only staggers this dawn

I am waiting for the dew to break
over my fevers
there is more than one and now twenty
years passing under a foot fall I admit
inside this sad house but it is peripheral
the dawn I mean it is blossoming
and I see two of everything
the voice doubling as a forest the dawn
has already risen there
but water the fevers
one of them is tattooed on my ribs

it is 4am here it is still darkness here
there are some things that refuse to break
what did he tell you of the snowfinches I know
it is still summer but I’ve been preparing
I folded the sheets I stood up
they are pale birds typically fearless
they are simple repetitive songs and I am small
weathered the weather changing the light
suspended below the surface of the lake
the dew that trembles in the grass
and it is nearly fall what does he know
about tattoos about nests
the typical clutch is from 3 to 6 eggs
Apology

I would have liked to keep you
at a fair distance I was not made a forest
by choice you know
these kinds of things are accidents
but the dawn has already risen here

the simple repetitive songs
cling so tightly to the body

and it's all too far abstracted to be truth

it's peripheral it's a fair distance
and there is more than one of everything
ARRHYTHMIA: WAYS TO SEE
THE DISSONANT HEART

I
Fibrous fruit,
heavy hive, soft
cloaker beneath the ribs' dome.

II
Quickening.
Contractions without the pain.
My mother's murmur
(uttered)
utterly benign.

III
A fish in the chest
coolish and unpredictable.
hooked and hauled on board.
Slides back just short
of the blunt club, the bed of ice.

IV
second hand riffing
on its chosen moment.

I feel a surge
of love
toward it
for not (for naught)
killing me.
V

Every life has a number of heartbeats allotted. My heart has a speed-up-race to the finish line habit. After its faith is shaken, flame nearly guttered...

VI

I wear suction-cup halos to encourage an 'event'.

My heart doesn't disappoint, my heart trips up after two sedentary hours facing a window. Leaves unfurl like a baby's fists in sleep. Chickadees stand on splints that hold the broken bones straight. My heart falters, once, twice, then it's out of the gate.
Coltishness and wing span 
are qualities undesirable 
in a heart: erratic 
boarder, 
(blood hoarder!)
sharp fins, my mother’s 
murmur 
emboldened, 
tight springs, iridescent 
scales, songs for different 
seasons, honey filled 
chambers, a wind-up 
wind-down mechanism, 
set of bellows, 
the bellows applied 
to a guttering, 
tiny spine 
cleaving the whole, 
a heart 
of its own 
like a chewed 
off eraser tip.
CHRISTIAN NAGLE

CUBA

"I," said the little leather-winged bat,  
"I'll tell you the reason that,  
the reason that I fly by night,  
is because I've lost my heart's delight."

The Leather-Winged Bat, English, trad.

1. A Dance

The Caribbean felt like the world's end that year of the blockade. Day, cumulus filled our theater, mushrooms of light promising intermission. Closing show. Evenings, my blanket a fleeting shroud, I read until the carrier dissolved in sound and I was back in Bedford-Stuyvesant with malted milk, or sneaking a skin mag from under mattress, dangerous and slick. Nickel cigars would make me puke my guts. Deep in the hull, what could endanger us? Anything. Flyers want their altitude, not a sarcophagus. At thirty knots—full ahead—our engines moaned so hugely I'd swear it was the axial hum of the globe, my sole reminder that we moved at all.

Gagarin's orbit of the earth was stunning page two of the Times. Up through mesosphere I pictured my plane winking—a fruitless pip in waters bluer, greener than myself... Someone had shanghaid my desire, my wife-to-be, some cockamamie Irish prick from uptown. Sometimes I'd see his limousine as a hearse trailing in our stubborn wake.
Half a mile high in a Tracker, S2F, its twin propellers' hypnotizing drone was a kind of opiate lucidity. Night sorties, phantom runways spilling across the gulf, we lost ourselves among the moon-stricken clouds. Our nose would gloss, transform in seraphic floods of light, and I felt as one become the mere idea of himself:

hands automatic at the console; breath indifferent to strange volumes of lung. Gauges dead at zero. Who cared to catch Soviet submarines—anything, then, but some faint whiff of immortality? Drew, Driver, Zoehrer, Stoltz—co-pilots all alike to me, their voices equalized in earphones, distant, fuzzy, monotone.

May 1 at 0100. In the spectral void of the radar, one blip. Minutes before we had a visual, I understood: tropical cruise. Atomic holiday. Approaching low, god of my lonely hour, I aimed the searchlight eye and made a sun. Dancers burned suddenly across the deck. Nine million candles. Instant chandelier.

2. Blockade

Knew my fuel, the distance to Key West in case the Randolph should suddenly appear scuttled by torpedos—an extinguished match, dainty smoke scribbling up the sky.

Our battle group? Snuffed candles on a cake, the wish consigned to hell at the horizon.
For seven miles I'd tracked the merchant marine,
eyes on the hammer and sickle testing its pole,
the aisle of broadening white, rapid surf.
Tongue dry as talcum, I replayed the brief:

snapshots of warheads—whole families—exposed
amidst decoys of pipe and shoes. Behind
the Curtain, that foreign Foreign Minister
thought we were upwind of such master ploys...

In fact, we were all around them. Semaphore
flashing resolutely from the destroyer,
but he wouldn't heave-to: this generally blind
and deaf—this dumb captain stuck to his guns,
his private channel. Dropping, my shadow sprawled.
I buzzed him so close with the tip of my
seventy-two-foot wings, I saw myself
The Reaper reborn in sunlit visor, come
to make the morning eternal where he stood
motionless on the bridge, arms under chin,
relaxed against the coming—a regular
Bikel: full beard and cap like Theodore—
as though the S2's roar were nothing more
than an adoring crowd. Less than a mile
from something bigger than our hemisphere,
I gave an order. Timmy, that godawful
gift-card poet in love with a nutty girl
he'd found in a window on the Reeperbahn,
seized up, his bearings puddled in his seat.
“...the weapons.” Sir? “I said, arm—” He had turned
greenish, the color not of uselessness
but liability, new pinewood boxes
sunk in the ocean. Raising the lip-mike
to spare my crew, I leaned over. “Do not
touch anything, or I'll shoot you.” I broke
the wire, flicked the red peanut switch up
and came around for the opening. So much
depends upon a rudder snapping over.
He'd skid a half mile into death before
his engines could take hold and haul him back.
I radioed the lie: “Skunk 12 is still
approaching the line...” We'd ring in '63—

Theo, all of us, would read about
the bombs, our powers trading Powers for Abel.

3. Manhattan

The Finnish bombshell’s lower Eastside digs
smelled of sandalwood, a fragrance ten
years later I'd start wearing as cologne.
“Fix me my usual,” she said, as though
my months at sea were something she had dreamed
the night before this twilight of Saturday
through which we moved. I measured two martinis,
hers vermouth-heavy, mine three fingers neat.

On the coffee table, December's Vogue
lay open—a shampoo ad, her latest triumph.
For months the city had hung, an ornament, tremulous and hopeful, beneath our wings.

A thousand navy flyers. We came like snow, sparkling in the neon of arcades, eyes blurry from the wind. Never before or since has anyone called me an angel.

The Divine One having sold out Birdland, my dinner whites became our carte blanche—straight to Table One through schools of sharkskin blacks. I couldn't buy a drink to save my life...

And she now seemed already bored with hers. Her lips, a primary red, ran circles around the cocktail's rim, incisors delicately clinking crystal: that mouth was going to save the Western world. At first a musical sigh was all she would allow, but then tears welled, one for each eye. "Is the danger really real?"

A bead of mascara ran to her chin, fell into her glass. A sniff. Her accent flowered. "Vill New York really be the first to go up in a mushroom cloud?" She brushed my ribbons (did anything about me need a polish?) and turned away to console the broken sky. Staring at her back, I wished my tongue could moisten a cleft between two vertebrae. They'll turn uptown into a parking lot...

I rehearsed the words, saw Central Park as rubble. But her skin so near, I gave away the stupid truth—"Never..."—and learned: never tell a girl what she wants to hear.
Suddenly better, she lit a smoke, was all babble and did I know Colonel so-and-so.
“Marines, and such a doll—I’ll call him!” And so she did. He’d be right over. We’d have drinks...

Down on the street, a lousy trumpet tried
I’m Always True to You in My Fashion. Rain, and I’d forgotten my topcoat. Cool drops spattered against my shoes to mar their shine.
CLAUDIA SAVAGE

I WILL TAKE THE RAIN INTO MY MOUTH

as if it were your skin
complicit, I can be a pleasure-bird
seeking the damp seed
the well-oiled wing
in the corner of what explodes

quickly, so as not to wake the evening

I will weave mist into my hair
as if I bore it

when I wade into the Willamette
the barren trees my bridesmaids,
the fog as coat

the fields hush
the highways

for roses to unfurl
a second time
pale, weeping figs
colored as grass
protect their flower
rosemary thickens the
wild persimmons

wash
in the muted
heavens

32
we sleep past the lit wood and poured tea,
a sigh against my shoulder
holds that appled light, cinnamon in my hair
your neck exposing
its honey

when we greet the rain, you seek the soggy roots,
the maiden hair and fir
stomped through this dark
grey lullaby of
beaten maples
triumphant spruce

the salmon are making me an optimist
returning
giant silver fish, dinosaur fish
hook-nosed and wonder-eyed,
stronger than us
sacrificing fish, returning

a blanket of river covers the waterfall
where they leapt 14,000 years
still it seeps, weeps,
falls under water,
falls

as berry leaves, as ivy crowds the corners
of my head
and the city floods
and the feral ring-tailed cat I covet
doesn’t want to get her paws wet

softly, I will court the sun
confide in the February crocus
the solution to our malaise:
rain, rain,
down the drain, drain
the key to the Pacific Northwest is a wool hat and good jacket:
  whiskey helps
  coffee helps
  fucking helps
  there is deeper quiet somewhere, when
  we escape further west
  the churning sea wind scoops at
  my brain like butter and I'm
  lost to the rocks
  as foam

if I say yes to you, your city, fate, yes
  will the volcanoes dream their worried dreams
  the Columbia remember a time before steel
  the blackberry thicket's ardor

when I fly into strange and dark
  salty grasses, nights on fire
  hidden fish glowing at the muscle
  will you follow

to a place where you can throw your lungs into that horn
  and the herbs sacrifice their young
  to a god of your making

sun after days upon nights upon days of water
I warm your mouth with my mouth

we vibrate the air
once more
The fearcatcher of East Hollywood is a tiny, old woman with fat fingers and fatter breasts that dangle between your thighs when she’s working to get the fear out. The fear is located right above your penis and she tells you to stop squirming, for God’s sake, and just let her work. Her breasts swing like church bells and you try to think churchier thoughts so your junk doesn’t embarrass you and out you for the perverted kid you know you are, turned on by some lady gray enough to be your grandma. She’s only doing her job, only trying to stop you from being scared of the neighbor’s dog who bit you last weekend when Mrs. Lopez came over with enchiladas and Rocco on a leash for the birthday party you didn’t invite her son to. Your cousins would’ve kicked his ass for being a beaner and you might’ve been forced to join in, even though he was your friend, and that’s why you didn’t tell Carlos.

The damn dog got you by the ankle and wouldn’t let go so when Mrs. Lopez grabbed the terrier by the ass and pulled, shit, she pulled you with it. You fell flat on your back, your cousins pointing and laughing, short, quick yelps, like they were barking. Surprised, Mrs. Lopez let go of Rocco and he rushed towards your face, scraping your arms and fingers with his terrible yellow teeth. You kept screaming get him off me get him off me, the words garbled because you thought if you opened your mouth up a bit, if you enunciated—something Mrs. Robertson says you have a problem doing, though what the hell does she know, she only speaks English, of course she’s going to speak it right, but you, you’ve got three tongues in your mouth—you worried if you opened your mouth, shit, Rocco would get one of them. It was your mom who finally got the dog off you, grabbing him under his belly and throwing him to the side like he was nothing but a tennis ball. You stopped screaming and your cousins stopped laughing and no one said
nothing and all everyone could hear was Rocco's whimpers. Your mother didn't look but you did when Mrs. Lopez picked up Rocco, cradling him the way your kid sister Vicky does her dolls when she thinks no one is looking, and walked out the door. Your mother threw away the enchiladas and the ceramic plate Mrs. Lopez brought them in before dragging you by the arm into the bathroom where your father kept the alcohol.

Now you're lying on the ground on your back, on the Persian carpet your folks brought over from the old country and still use even though the house you live in came with carpeting—dull and brown, but still, carpeting. There's a towel over your waist while some old fart is all up on you, kneading your skin like she's rolling dough flat enough to make laxmajun, the way your mom does every weekend when your dad is home for dinner and not underneath someone else's car, covered in someone else's motor oil. Your mother is in the same room as you and she's saying she's not looking, that she can't see anything anyway, but you want her gone, you want her out of here, because you know what's going to happen in a few minutes. It's what's happened for the past three days. It's why you're still here, unable to face Rocco, why you're terrified to walk the alleyway behind your house because it seems like everyone in the whole world decided to get a dog last week. It's why you're fat and still growing. No self-control. You're eleven and fat and everything is out of your hands.

And now the fearcatcher's fingers are pressing firmly against you, rubbing the skin above your crotch and below your belly, pinching at the bones of your hips. You just have to close your eyes to get the image of her gray hair and liver spots out, you just have to, and this is when things go wrong, this is when things always go wrong. Without the gray hair and the liver spots, you're thinking it's Armineh from school who's touching you, Armineh with her beautiful black eyes the size of zeytuns, who doesn't play Truth or Dare when everyone else does because she knows only wusses pick Truth and only sluts pick Dare and she's neither. You know this too and you love this about her, but you still wish that one day she plays, picks Truth, tells the
room she likes you, another day picks Dare, kisses you on the mouth. Then you're opening your eyes and the old woman is laughing deeply, winking at your mother and withdrawing her hands while you're scrambling to stand up and cover yourself. Your mom is saying not again, Jesus, she's never going to get the fear out, as you rush to the bathroom before she says something else you're sure will kill you if some damn dog doesn't get you first.

The fearcatcher got the fear out of your mother when she got into that car accident on the way to work six months back. Some asshole slammed into her passenger-side door when she was making a left, claimed his breaks jammed and he couldn't stop at the red light like everyone knows you're supposed to. The police officer confirmed this after a few days and only gave the lobi a ticket for driving without insurance, though he told your folks that they should sue for a settlement. But they didn't, of course, even though your mom was in the hospital for five days and then afraid to get back in a car for a month, and so lost her job as a pastry chef at Garnik's Bakery. The owners of the business were Armenian, so your parents thought they would've understood and sympathized, given her a break, but they didn't.

When your dad comes home that evening, he takes a quick look at you and says boy, you smell like a rabbit and look like a bird. He slaps you on the back, his dirty hand leaving a print on your shirt that you try to rub off but you're too fat for your arm to reach so you end up just tapping your shoulder, a pity-pat that you would've mistaken for congratulations if your father ever did a thing like that. Your dad says things like this, stuff that don't make any sense, and despite all the languages you know, you can never figure out what the hell he's saying.

Your mother sets up the dinner table for the second time that day and you join your father for company, for another
serving of pilaf that your mother calls Chinese food because she adds steamed broccoli to it and little packets of soy sauce she saves from the rare times you guys eat at Panda Express or more often at places with names like Little Fat Panda. Your mom looks at you a little funny, a little angry, stares at your stomach so you turn a strange pink, but your dad laughs and he laughs long enough for you to get your right color back, whatever that is.

You took the Standardized Tests last week and there was a question that asked you what you were, so you had to ask Mrs. Robertson if you were White or Other, which seemed like the only possible choices. But she looked at you mean and hard and said stop fooling around and you wanted to throw your No. 2 pencil at her bigass forehead. Instead, you bubbled Other like it was nobody’s business, your pencil tearing through the sheet so that Josephine, who sat in front of you, shot you a dirty look and mouthed pendejo. You narrowed your eyes and mouthed you are right back, though you don’t know if that’s actually true, or what the heck that means anyway, but you know that ain’t you, alright, you’re no Mexican whatever-that-is.

The pilaf tastes better the second time around but your dad thinks it’ll taste even better with a shot of tequila so your mom gets him the bottle. Bring the good kind of glass, he tells her and your mom rolls her eyes. She usually knows what your dad wants from her before he even does. For him too, your dad adds and your mom cocks her head, now in doubt, but despite all her smarts, she’s not a man and she’s not your father, so that’s the end of that.

This isn’t the first time you taste alcohol. You have drinks at parties, at baptisms, wakes, at seven, eight, and nine. Your dad will call you from the kid’s table and you’ll march towards him, shooting a smug look behind you at your cousins. This boy is our future, he’ll say. Drink to our future, son. And you do, trying not to make a face, trying not to lose it. You swallow, you smile. My son, the American. You keep smiling.

He doesn’t make a big speech when it’s just you two at the dinner table now, just says them Mexicans are at least good one for thing and winks at you and you don’t know how to re-
spond so you just wink right back. He laughs and you take the shot from his hand and drink it quietly. He downs two more, doesn't offer you any, and you don't ask. The tequila tastes like a thousand razors slicing down your throat. The pilaf is good, kyanks, he tells your mom, slapping her ass when she leans across him to collect the dishes on the table. She blushes. He doesn't. You don't either. You're pretty sure your parents don't have sex, that this flirtation is as far as they get, so you don't mind when they get this far, which isn't very far at all. You're sure that pendeja Josephine must've gotten to second base at least, maybe Carlos even been the one to do it.

Your dad pushes back his chair, goes out for a smoke and your mom guilts you into drying the dishes with those eyes of hers. Ever since the accident, they've been working overtime, making you feel like shit whenever you get in trouble. The eyes are always saying "I almost died and you don't want to clean up your room?" Or "I almost died and you cheated on your goddamn math test?" Even though she says the fear is out of her now, you think some of it is still left, swirling around in the liquidy white part around her pupils, making her look like she's almost about to cry. So you can't help but wonder: how is the fearcatcher going to fix you if she couldn't fix your mom all the way up good first, even though they got the same lady parts?

The fearcatcher first visited your home two weeks after your mom's accident. When she walked through the door, her eyes immediately found yours, sitting at the dining room table eating a bag of chips, and she said in her crackly voice, like there were bumps up and down her throat, I'll be working on you soon enough, boy. She rested her cane against the doorway, wobbled over to the couch, and leaning back with a huge sigh, asked your mother to make her a cup of coffee before they start. No sugar, she called out as your mother hurried to the kitchen to do the ancient woman's bidding. You put down your chips on the table as softly as you could, and holding your breath and staring at the floor, rushed past her toward your bedroom. You shut the door, and then locked it. You knew she was going to do something to your mom but you didn't want to know what.
Now you know. Now, just thinking about how right the old witch was makes you shiver. Only took five months and she was back and you learned firsthand her methods. The fear from your crotch seeping into her fingers, her long laughter at the end of each session, how she looked younger every time you saw her, more terrible. You almost drop the plate in your hand thinking about seeing her again tomorrow. You anxiously look to your mother, but she doesn't notice, lost as she is, often, in her own thoughts. Don't cry, you have the urge to tell her, though she's not. You hate it when girls cry. Vicky doesn't do it often, thank God. You'd never say this to her face but she's tough, tougher than most of your friends, so whenever she lets slip a few, you feel like absolute crap. How were you unable to stop it? Her classmate Bobby from pushing her after a hard game of dodgeball? Or her tears from falling after waking up screaming from a nightmare? What good is it being so damn fat, being so goddamn big, if you can't even protect your little sister?

And how about when Armineh didn't get Student of the Month the first round of the school-year? The whole world knew she was the smartest in the class, but they gave it to that new kid, Ruella, who barely spoke English, but was supergood in Math, like that mattered. But Armineh cried and cried while you all waited in line for Ruella to finish taking pictures with the principal. And when you heard that stupid kid Juan whisper sore-loser, you never wanted to hurt anyone so bad. You were already in trouble, though, for talking when Mrs. Robertson was lecturing that morning so you knew if you tried something, even stuck out your middle finger, Mrs. Robertson would've tried to get you suspended, like you know she's been trying to do ever since school began. You shouldn't have farted during Roll-Call the first day of class, first impressions and all, but you just had to let it go, you had to, there was no way you could've kept it in.

Your mom is now humming to some tune in her head and you're nodding along, wondering what Armineh is doing right now, when your dad comes back in, slamming the door
open and slamming it shut. Eli shuni kak, he says, throwing up his hands. Dog shit again. The fear scrambles from your crotch and settles in your throat. Your mom’s putting down the towel and reaching for her shoes. You hurry after them, where for the third day in a row, they’ll see dog shit in front of the garage door, smack-dab in the center, as if carefully placed there.

Two days ago, when your dad first saw it, he thought it was human shit, it was so big. Homeless, he had reasoned. And yesterday morning, when another reappeared, coincidence, he explained. But you doubt a bum would shit in the same place three days back to back and from the way your folks are looking at each other, you know they don’t think so either. It must be dogs and now, all of a sudden, you’re thinking, you’re sure, it’s Rocco. You tell ‘em just that, but your mom rolls her eyes and walks closer to the evidence. Your dad is squatting by its side, hands on his knees, shaking his head.

But of course it’s Rocco! It’s perfect. A big, brown, F. U. to your family.

It’s not Rocco, your dad finally says, standing up. He’s too small of an animal, he says, and you want to tell him that size means absolute squat, but he’s opening the garage door and unlocking the trunk of his car. He takes a roll of paper towels crammed behind the spare tire and you make a face. Your mom extends her hand to him, asking for the roll with her fingers, but he only shakes his head. Your dad’s old school that way, in many ways. The woman cleans up after his shit, no one else’s.

You watch as he bends down, grabs the stool with several sheets, scooping it into his paper-hands, and walks it over to the black bin, his arms outstretched in front of him. You are reminded of all those Americans carrying plates of casserole on TV when new neighbors move in. But it’s your fucking neighbors who are the problem, aren’t they, these Mexicans and their wild dogs. If it’s not Carlos, you bet it’s another Carlos. Your uncle Armo was right. You guys shouldn’t have moved into this neighborhood. The house was cheap, but the quality of residents was cheaper. Those were his words and there was a certain truth to them that even you could pick up. Why didn’t your dad listen?

Kuzmich 41
Uncle Armo is your father’s brother and last year when you guys started looking for homes to buy, he said take it from him, don’t do it. You want to buy a house? Buy a house in Glendale, not anywhere near here, in East Hollywood, where you guys have lived for the past five years in a crummy apartment building with a cement backyard. It’s not like you could’ve even played outside if you wanted, no wonder you’re such a whale; the moms hung their laundry out-back and they’d whip you good if you got any of their sheets dirty. The tenants in that building were all Armenian when you guys just arrived, but one by one, they moved out, and the manager had no choice but to offer rooms to the lobis. The Armenians were all in Glendale, Uncle Armo had said, in houses they couldn’t afford, but they were with each other.

Your dad didn’t mind East Hollywood too much, you could tell. It is as if it is a badge of honor for him, sticking it out, showing the Mexicans that they couldn’t run him out of town, like the Azeris did him and his parents when he was a kid growing up in Karabakh. But he hated the thought that you guys were left behind, that you were still living in an apartment as if you had just come to this country. Everyone back home thought your family would’ve made it big by this time, at least have your own house—you guys at least had that back there. It was a crumbling stone building but it was yours. Now your dad had to ask permission from some gramps to hang photos on the walls, like he was a chump. No, it was time for a move but your dad couldn’t bring himself to buy a house he knew would be eventually taken from his hands, so he settled on a house that he knew he could keep.

Your dad’s not a risk taker. Though a citizen, he lives in a constant fear of deportation. Until you’re eight, you go shopping with your parents, pointing out the treats you want, knowing you won’t get any of them. You mostly went to steal a few candies. One time, you’re helping your mom load the items onto the black counter. There was a sale for bags of flour at Vons, two for three, with a limit of four bags total per customer so your mom, of course, got all four. The deal is too
good to pass up, she said, especially with the way you eat. Your dad’s embarrassed to carry food stamps so he lets your mom pay the clerk. After loading the groceries inside the car, your mom convinces your dad to go back in, grab four more and pay at a different aisle. No one will know, she says. Besides, no one will care. He gives in, goes inside, and takes you with him. But as he stands ready to hand over the food stamps, with his head up but eyes down, a pretty blonde worker who looked a little familiar walking by tells the clerk at your register that this man was with a customer who already purchased the flour at the limit. The clerk looks at your dad and shrugs her shoulders. Sorry, sir, you can’t, she says, and bends her head down to give you a smile, her sparkling American teeth showing. Everyone in the store is looking at you two, and your dad, for a second, just stands there, just takes it, one hand outstretched, the food stamps in it shaking, and the bills look to you, then more than ever, fake, false, like he was holding onto Monopoly money. Finally, he moves, leaves the store, red and burning. He pulls at your sweaty hand, dragging you towards the car, opening the passenger-side door and yanking your mother out. He says nothing as he gets behind the wheel and drives off. He leaves you two there in the parking lot of the grocery store, miles from home, stranded. Your mom doesn’t say anything, just glances down at you. Well?

You explain the best you can. She cries for most of the walk back. No one ever talks about that day, so you try to forget the color of your mother’s face, your mother wiping her nose with the back of the wrist, wiping it on her dress. Strangers not meeting your eyes, the back of their heads, how they all looked the same.

You dad throws the shit away, looks into the darkness of the bin, then closes the lid. He puts his box of tools over it. Vicky is waiting in the living room when you three come back into the house, your father holding his hands in front of him like a zombie, you breathing out with your mouth, trying to get rid of the dog shit smell in the back of the throat, your mother soundless. Where did you guys go, Vicky asks, though you can
tell from the way she’s holding the book in her hands, thumb between the pages, she doesn’t really care. From the bathroom, your father calls for her. Vicky, he says. Go bring a blank piece of paper and your nicest markers. She hops to it, now alert, pleased she is put to use. You feel a pang of jealousy and confusion, and blame it on the fear not mixing well with the pilaf. Everyone gathers in the living room, your folks sitting on the couch, Vicky on the floor, legs bent under her, and you stand trying to flatten yourself against the wall, peering from the curtained window.

You’re going to post a sign. That’s what your diplomat father decides. A sign. Write on it, my smart girl, he says, in your best English, something about cleaning up after your dogs. Vicky puts a blue marker between her teeth, and thinks. Make sure your handwriting is nice, really neat, your dad continues. You come to stand over her shoulder and inspect. She writes, in big, loopy letters, evenly spaced apart: Help Keep Our Neighborhood Beautiful. Please Clean Up After Your Dogs. You hum your approval and your dad peers across the table at the foreign words. He doesn’t speak English well, but he can read it. Some of the letters you know resemble Russian, some of the words you guess he picked up at the auto-shop.

Looks good, he says and squeezes Vicky’s shoulder. Draw some flowers, your mom adds. Your sister frowns. She’s not an artist. She looks to you and your raise your palms up and back away. No way you’re going to draw some sissyass roses. Your mom gets up with an exaggerated sigh and comes to your sister’s side, picking up the skirt of her housedress and kneeling down gracefully. Give me a green marker.

The sign comes out colorful and convincing, friendly. Vicky holds it up over her head and you all applaud. Your dad touches your mother’s back and she moves a little closer to him. Everyone puts on their shoes and you grab the tape from your backpack. The whole family stands and commands, a little to the left, a little right, higher, lower, perfect, and you stick the sign in the center of the garage door. You walk back towards the rest and admire what you’ve accomplished.
Next morning, you’re up before everyone else, before the alarm goes off in your parents’ bedroom, before your mom has to tap your nose awake. It’s not even seven yet. You put on a sweater over the wife-beater you slept in and your Payless sneakers. There’s no time for socks. You try to be quiet when you unlock the backdoor and close it behind you. You run towards the gate, open that too, and finally you’re there, in the alley, and your eyes immediately go to the ground. Rocks, rocks, a crushed Pepsi bottle, couple of rotten oranges from a neighbor’s tree, but yes, yes, no poop, no shit! You want to dance, you want to whoop, you wish Armineh was there, oh, if only the fearcatcher could see you now. But something catches your eye, the sign, the sign a little darker than you remembered it. You move closer.

In bold and angry black, foreign words that cut through you, making it hard to swallow. Go back to Mexico, you fucking wetbacks.

Wetbacks.

You know this word. This word is not you. This word is not your family.

Take a few steps back. This person has got it all wrong. Tear it down before somebody sees. Tear it down quickly. Crumple it into a ball and throw it far away from here. Wake up before your dad tomorrow and for the rest of your life. Clean the shit outside your house.
RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

SOUTHERN RACER

The slide of a dark vine across orchids prompts the eye to follow toward hibiscus, then a pause, then it uncoils further toward iron and jasmine. Later I will see it by the gardenias and a startle will fire it toward the ficus hedge. Later I will ponder it where I did not see movement or similars. It has taught me to think as it lives, and made the eye prey on fallen branches that might spring or fall upon the long shrivel of long leaves which might, on the cue of yearning, awaken, behold themselves beheld, and outpace thought and wondering.
By bends the river
weighs the ground's merit.
Angling
for a destined south
that now slopes
the other cardinals
to wherever
the dryness tows
calligraphy.

Internal shore,
the mind's pole
for the pumice flat,
it confounds
its predicate role.
The River is the verb
of the verb nation.

Lost it never seems
through arcs that will not
guide the geese chevron
or this plane
mapped and scheduled
between earth and heaven
gulping clouds in rows,
climate's abacus.

A chatty native in the next seat
pulls me to his boyhood "There."
These molten lights
breathed his dense, intended flow.
He's counted all his man days
since this water was his home.
Cradle, speaker, mast
upon which a people
swayed storm into course.

Briefly, as he rambles, I ponder
the landscape as would be mine.
I am fluent yet foreign
to its syllables.
Sibilant formed,
the spinal undulant
shapes the compass
by which a race I know
but will not know me
knows and is known.
Look at these herringbone men dangling long ropes down from the pier, each a dull child waiting for his unspooled yo-yo to return, each dreaming his sunken pot will come up hissing with dungeness—

Bait-brains! I piss on your pots’ polite chicken livers! Oh, you sunned a squeak of reek from them—two days on the fence post? Crabs scramble to matter more noxious: these gutted albacore at the trash bin’s bottom with eyes like smashed watch-faces, smelling thunderous.

Herringbones likes a dry scentless picked-clean neatness, and has a wife with antiseptic smile who forms a smart display cake of his sweet white claw meat. After dinner he feels most man being chewed up and spit out where she is toothless. It’s otherwise with me. I was born with these blunt hard teeth to crack the very clamps that pick at me in dreams. My agile tongue can feather life out of the cracks. Who will say I’m not a lover?

Look at this gashed ling cod making the face we are all about to make. Crabs will place the bone crown on him and send him turning deeper than moonlight reaches.

Herringbones cannot fathom the spectacular waltzes I dream, across death’s wide drowned deck. I have been promoted to Vice-Admiral, and crabs cling to my massive flesh like medals.
COMBING AT THE END OF METAPHOR

1.

This godawful clod of man with eyeglasses warped as sea-relinquished bottleglass,

by which he tracks his blessed dog where the surf shrinks, has turned and waits for me, his hand

juggling free of weed strands a thing he gives to me: That's a rare find—angel wings!

which is a white mussel shell opened, pinioned to him

as the terrible anomalies shrieking down heaven.

It crumbles in the hinge of my outstretched mind. They're usually broken up;

find another if you're lucky.
Picking through strangulated kelp,
I find the buried bulb
at coil’s end.

Stretch the unreal length straight out—
livid scourge!
monstrous sperm!

O unlikeness.

Picking through
the mossy beards stripped
from prophets, washed

ashore here—where
are your microbial lips, Pythagoras?
Pick apart green strands

and find the sand flea’s throne:
*a trail of bubbles going deeper*
my love says,

kissed by unlikeness.
That angel-winged sand-flea Giordano Bruno, that mutation stricken,
no sandgrain glinting has yet escaped his memory, who evaporated
at the stake, now beads a hundredfold on the oils of a tern's lost underdown tuft: image that has nothing to do with Argus, that watches over my life.
Not long from now, people will crowd the street, weeping and scanning the skies. A woman will flail on her bathroom tiles, gripping a bottle of poison, and tomorrow’s newspapers will rail against any mishmash of fiction and fact.

But, for now, despite a drizzle of forecasted rain, everything is swimming along just fine to Ramon Raquello and his Orchestra churning through a moody tango in the Hotel Park Plaza’s Meridian Room. That there is no Meridian Room with a low chandelier laced with faux pearls and a shoe-worn checkerboard dance floor, nor any grinning, tuxedoed Ramon stitching the air with his baton, doesn’t matter. Just now, no one is the wiser, and the show’s few listeners are barely attending to the radio filler this is meant to be.

Even when the announcer interrupts with a weather update again – a slight atmospheric shift above Nova Scotia – it barely warrants a mention. Soon Ramon is back, trotting out that workhorse “La Cumparsita.” And if this melody, too, will give way to the announcement that a streak of hydrogen is racing toward earth “like a jet of blue flame shot from a gun” – no importa. In a few beats, we’re returned yet again, lilting through “a tune that never loses flavor, ‘Star Dust,’” the title’s gag not yet clear.

In Euripides’ play, Pentheus can’t stop thinking about what goes on in those woods. The revels, the rapture, the whipping of hair, his citizens slinking off into thickets. When he says that Bacchus has no place in the law of Thebes, that all the polluted will hang, what he means is that, more than anything in the world, he desires their pleasures, their thickets.

After the perfumed Stranger – Bacchus in disguise – is captured by palace guards and dragged back to Pentheus in order to
answer for his corrupting ways, his chains keep slipping from his wrists with the ease of dripping water: the god of desire, wine, and thrashing in the dark cannot ever be bound.

Nor can he abide insult, and Bacchus will have his revenge. “Bring the torch burning,” the god instructs his followers. “Lady Earthquake,” he commands, intimate enough with Destruction to summon her by name, “come shake the floor of the world.”

• • •

They combed the Kansas malls, on the prowl for ordinary folk willing to become corpses. Or rather, body types that fit the bill they had in mind after wading through declassified Hiroshima footage.

Allow them to hack off your hair in haphazard chunks, and you’d pocket seventy-five dollars. Choose to be merely a mud-splattered, soot-caked heap, and you’d earn thirty-five bucks.

The director — fresh from filming a doomsday, world-evaporating device and the death of an irradiated Spock — knew what he wanted for his on-location shots. Throw in, for instance, a few scrap-heap cars, a few corpse-volunteers, and the wrecking ball-pummeled hospital he knew would be perfect.

• • •

The real hook begins with eyewitness reports: gas eruptions coming from Mars, some kind of striped disk hurtling down.

But even after the meteorite causes earthquake-like shocks, the music pretense continues: a few lilting, incidental measures on the piano; twenty seconds of Bobby Millette’s Orchestra thumping out beats in Brooklyn at the also-nonexistent Hotel Martinet, which now can be read, in a low-ball gag, as a facsimile of “Martian.”

It won’t be long now. Soon, the carefree dancehall swing is scrapped for reports from Grover’s Mill: some kind of flaming weirdness is smoldering there in the wheat.

• • •

Even as he tries to stop the Bacchaic rites, Pentheus feels their pulse. He can’t help it. He can’t shake what he wants beyond all
else, and the need clings to him like the last swill of burgundy coating a glass.

Arrangements, the Stranger suggests, might in fact be made. Perhaps the king could sneak a peak after all.

If Pentheus intends to feign nonchalance – those woods, that unbridled flesh – the charade is not long-lived. Although, he admits, it would cause him distress him to see Thebians wild with frenzy, he would cough up a great deal of gold to watch.

“You’d see with pleasure that which gives you pain?”, the Stranger asks.

“Yes,” he replies, his voice trembling, “sitting beneath the fir trees, without a sound.”

• • •

For months, we’d been chomping to see it, baited by teasers on ABC: one minute, Jack Palance on Ripley’s Believe It or Not preening over a thirty-pound turnip; the next, a coming-soon clip of that tantalizing brick-red mushroom cloud.

“Not a chance,” my mom assured me. “End of story. You won’t be watching that.”

Ah, but I knew that I would. And although I needled, pleaded, pledged nag-free chores, in the end it was Mrs. Jenkins, my fourth-grade teacher, who provided my trump card by assigning the film as homework. She said something about a wake up call, about how – yada-yada – this would change our lives. The rationale didn’t matter: I’d be watching when The Day After arrived.

• • •

Everything was calculated. Those yawning stretches of orchestral fluff not only added veracity, but also bought some time until Ed Bergen and Charlie, his monocled, man-about-town ventriloquist dummy, were done trading jabs on NBC’s Chase and Sanborn Hour. While listeners might be hooked on hammy puns, they were understandably less loyal to the hit-seeking tunes that followed. When Dorothy Lamour began to croon “Two Sleepy People,” itself a lackluster spin-off from “Let’s Put Out the Lights and Go to Sleep,” Orson Welles knew that many listeners, long after his butt-

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covering disclaimers were done, would go fishing around the dial. By the time body counts were broadcast – “At least forty people, including six state troopers... their bodies burned and distorted beyond all possible recognition” – he hoped fewer dupes would suspect the man behind the curtain, or that a curtain existed at all.

Because once the destruction began, there was no room to fudge it: the terror needed to be real or the whole broadcast was a wash. In order to train his actors for the moment when the crowd gathers at the pit in the field and the ship’s hatch rotates off and a slithering, bear-sized thing, glistening like wet leather, takes aim with its heat ray and turns men into flame, he made the cast listen, again and again, to Herbert Morrison’s radio report of the Hindenburg disaster which had taken place the year before. After all, in the broadest strokes, the event they were describing was the same: what begins with the weather – “It’s starting to rain again. The rain had slackened up a little bit.” – ends with someone screaming about carnage, wreckage, the humanity, a sky suddenly in flames.

There was always something to fear.

Dungeons and Dragons puddling our brains, whipping us into Satan-loving louts; razor blades tucked into the gooey goodness of a Trick or Treat brownie; our town’s cat-burglar dubbed Bigfoot; and Iran’s bloodthirsty Ayatollah, who also appeared, for two straight years, stationed between Leatherface and a zombie clown in our town’s annual Haunted House.

Through it all, though, and setting the bar, were the Commies: Jesus-loathing Reds who lived to the left of Alaska, and who were less, it seemed, a fully-bodied people than a single finger hovering over a cherry-red button labeled “Launch.”

In The Day After, following some forgettable formulaic preamble (a machismo, can’t-blink Soviet showdown; a couple loafing in button-down jammies, sure it’ll all work out), after ads for Redenbacher popcorn and Dollar Rent-a-Car, the air sirens were wailing and missiles deployed and our T.V. screen turned entirely white just before a jellyfish-like shape loomed above the Kansas highway and, in the fields, in the homes, in the churches and
schools, all those midstride incinerations - what we had tuned to see - began at long last.

That first kid in overalls, puzzled by the sky; a mother clutching her infant; an entire cross-legged elementary school class; a galloping horse, a lollygagging bride and groom, still wrapping up vows at the altar - for a few wide-eyed, jazzed-up weeks, other than that evaporation montage little else was on our minds. At the bus stop pine, over sporked tatter-tots at lunch, in any class ripe to digress, we couldn't stop rehashing those x-ray bone-flashes, all that here-then-gone.

...Outside of Thebes, beginning to venture into the woods, Pentheus is no longer sure what he's seeing. It's become impossible to know what's real: the stranger seems to be growing horns from his head and there seem to be two Thebes.

For a time, there seems to be two Grover's Mills: one in the thick of apocalypse, one beginning to nuzzle down on a Sunday evening beneath a cloud-smudged half-moon. Wet rag stuffed against his mouth, a man screeches around the block again, unsure where to flee. Someone from Dayton calls The New York Times asking, "What time will it be the end of the world?" Someone fires a shotgun at a windmill, mistaking it for a Martian tripod.

In Lawrence, Kansas, the day after The Day After, some residents drive around town, heaters blaring, making a tour of the landmarks that they had watched, just the night before, be obliterated on ABC. They park, and stay put, for quite a while.

I should admit that the choice to linger on Pentheus is mine. At the House of the Vettii, in addition to seeing a man about to be ripped into pieces, we could gaze upon a fresco of a finch eyeballing some cherries, a monochrome panel of deer. There's a Cupid, rodeo-like, riding a crab; there's a woman riding a man. Here is Leander splashing toward Hero in her tower; elsewhere, an eel-crowded sea.

Except now that we're here, now that we're looking...

In the fresco depicting Pentheus' death, the Maenads have

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only just reached their king, and their work hasn’t started yet. His flesh, however, cracked and faded with age, is already falling apart. It’s as if, even though what’s to come hasn’t yet begun, the ruin was there all along.

What else to expect when the name Pentheus means “Grief”? What chance does Grief have against Bacchus, One-Born-of-Fire, the Thunderer, the Roarer?

• • •

At Camp Manatoc, in a muggy August heat, hopped up on shotgun-chugged Mountain Dew, we were hard at work. Just the week before, all of us had watched, in the first PG-13 movie ever made, Russians parachute into the autumn fields of Colorado, followed by ragtag, heartthrob, Brat Pack kids taking to the hills and becoming The Wolverines, America’s feral last chance. Taking our cues from Red Dawn’s guerrilla whoop-ass, we too wouldn’t rest until we’d stymied the en-route Soviets.

Or at least that was part of it. Did we actually think there were canteen-poisoning Commies on the loose? We weren’t stupid. Try instead an off-the-leash, on-the-loose, primal fest a la Lord of the Flies.

By day, we saluted in our beige Boy Scout shirts and fudged the Lark’s Head knot. By night, long after lights out, we whittled sticks into makeshift spears, dug pits we disguised with a thin crosshatch of kindling, and, best of all, fashioned tree tops with nails and thorns, then bent the slender trunks to the ground, rigging them with hair-trigger fishing line laced across the path.

• • •

In the woods, with the ease of pulling back a bow, Bacchus bends the top of a pine down to the dark earth below. Pentheus, having been told by the god that this is the best place to watch, nestles himself into the branches before the tree straightens again, inch by inch rising into sky.

Despite the care with which the man settles into the tree, the slow way in which the branches allow him to ascend, it’s not long before the god permits his followers to glimpse him and attack on cue.
They see the man in the tree and begin hacking at its trunk, and although soon enough the Messenger in Euripides’ play will be back in Thebes, explaining that after Pentheus was torn to bits, Bacchus made a light of holy fire appear in the sky, no one who is listening to the story will understand what that means.

When Kansas City is destroyed, there’s plenty of flames and tumbling debris. There are crowds swarming streets, blue sky turning black, buildings that simply disappear. And each time the scene slips from color to black and white, it’s footage taken from those Nevada desert tests – actual cookie-cutter homes, water towers, and tanks buckling in a frenzy of metal and timber; pines bending in-synch as the shockwave arrives, their tops arcing down to the earth.

And some of the shrieking mobs are taken from two years before, borrowed from a film about an assassin lurking in the game day stadium. Some of the blasts and rain of metal – how quickly catastrophe can slip into collage – come from the scene in Meteor when a glowing orb plummets down, making New York buildings, against a crimson back-light, crumble like papier-mâché. There are earth-rending rocks from Damnation Alley, and, in a technique borrowed from Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan, some of the mushroom clouds are made from ink plunged into a water tank and then filmed upside down. And some of the ruin is taken from Superman, a film in which the hero cannot bear to lose the woman he loves, and so loops the earth in a counterclockwise streak until time moves in reverse: rocks tumble uphill, a gaping dam seals shut, and Lois Lane’s car rises, resurrected, uncrushed, from a crack in the earth, and everything that day that was broken and rent is no longer broken or rent.

Feigned terror coached by that zeppelin in flames; government footage interwoven with disaster-flick schlock. There’s a plaque on the edge of a Grover’s Mill field, commemorating the Martian’s landing. There’s Jason Robards shuffling back home through flur-
ries of painted cornflakes meant to be nuclear ash, surveying a decimated Kansas City that is, in fact, not Missouri at all, but a spliced-in panorama of Hiroshima.

And still one more from the pre-splice, pre-broadcast world:

Marcus Crassus, aka "Moneybags," hoping to expand his Syrian lands, hoping to be known for battlefield glory as much as his real estate zeal, waded through the Euphrates, and, in an act of reckless chutzpah, attacked. There was much, however, he didn’t anticipate – namely his newly mutinous men and the never-miss archery of the Parthians – and it wasn’t long before the Roman general was negotiating the terms of his surrender. Then, despite the orchestrated cease-fire, Plutarch tells us, there was a scuffle in which Crassus was killed.

Before long, a mock processional was underway. The victorious soldiers dressed one of their own in drag, pretending it was Moneybags himself and – flanked by camels, accompanied by lutes, carrying spear tips heavy with pieces of the hacked-up body – bellowed songs about Romans as cowards and girls.

When the Parthian King, a great fan of Greeks plays, ordered up some celebratory Euripides, he decided he would grant his trophy-corpse a starring role. As the actor playing the mother of Pentheus swaggered onto the stage and spoke his lines – "We bring from the mountain / A tendril fresh-cut to the palace, / A wonderful prey" – he held high the severed head of General Crassus before hurling it, triumphant, across the room.

There is, of course, no turning back, although how often we need to be told.

Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, grandfather to Pentheus, is trying to make clear to Agave what was done in the woods, what now cannot be undone. She hasn’t yet tried to reassemble her son’s severed flesh, and Bacchus hasn’t yet cursed them all, turning some into serpents, some into exiled hordes who, in cycles of war that never end, will be forced to attack cities they love. For now, Cadmus is simply trying to make Agave see what she clasps in her hands.
Please, he asks her, inching her back, look for a moment at the sky.

She glances up, but doesn't see a thing.

Why, she asks, still holding the severed head of her son, would you want me to look at the sky?
Someday I'll be like a prehistoric painter with a crooked finger who left handprints on a rock face; remembered for making a handicap into symbolism, threatened by oblivion every time someone exhales. This is why I'd rather leave you breathless than engage in conversation. This is how a spirit rattles chains. Old gods challenged the imagination, visiting Earth like swans, or else arriving like crepuscular rays, knowing dusk and dawn to be the truest times of day. Lucretius believed all things mattered, that even the least significant ideas were made up of atoms. Great Caesar's Ghost was just a film he sloughed off like dry skin. All your recollections belong to someone else. We know cicadas molt before they get their wings, leaving flightless memories clinging to the trees. Lobsters must feel the urge to come out of their shells. Maybe this is like our need to be re-born. Maybe this is why we say we're new every seven years. But what is it with our interest in scars? What about the impulse to apologize for what we can't erase? Captain Cook spied the sun through a state-of-the-art glass and never discovered the secrets of Venus. But then, his sailors returned from Polynesia with tattoos. Is it love, or the lack, that makes us mark each other? Aeneas bore his father's weight in front of every conquering Greek. A microscope confirms the wolf in every Border collie's DNA. There's a Trojan Horse for you. There's a little chimp in every Borderline personality. Sometimes we channel our ancestors in the dining room and wind up like F. Scott Fitzgerald in the garden eating dirt. An Aborigine touching up ancient art will tell you spirits move his hand. Like once I spoke to a man who said he was my dad on a Ouija board. Once I read Paul's letter to the Ephesians under the influence of psilocybin. Some ghosts are better left unread. Other ghosts are shadows of the most horrific things, like the girl who survived My Lai pretending to be a corpse. We can imagine so many angry ghosts. Maybe that's why
Epicurus wanted us to believe death was the end of our days. Maybe that’s why Yeats used his wife like a rotary phone when he spoke with the dead. He imagined himself in death as a mechanical bird. His readers would be voices speaking his disembodied words. At dawn, I can’t tell the difference between horizon and the sea. Lucretius understood the ocean rose to fill clouds with rain. It always rains in Gothic novels. English ghosts pass through the wainscoting. All the ghosts are haunting future ghosts. Farm hands who listened to voices telling them they’d be better off if they bought the farm are buried in the cemetery with the rest. If you drive at night you might catch a glimpse. There’s a difference between windrows and the woods. There’s a vine wrapping the wrought iron fence. If you appreciate someone’s work, Lucretius said, it really is a part of them that’s gone to your head.
Someday we're going to walk in the ancient, twin footprints found in Chauvet Cave. We're going to follow a boy and his dog deep into darkness, hoping feelings of kinship will illuminate life at the end of the tunnel. I wonder what the Romans meant when they said man is a wolf to man, knowing the she-wolf of Romulus and Remus was kind. Not even the sunrise can clarify. Maybe that's why we say morning has broken, since we refuse to see the light, no matter how many times we learn our lesson. Listen, even the werewolf suffers according to a cycle. Ptolemy saw a bigger moon on the rise than at the zenith. Stories become memorable in moments of transition, like chicks un-shelling, as if they were finished fighting a war. Everything makes a dramatic entrance but even the big stars burn out slow. Toddlers find it funny, walking in their parents' shoes. Things change, Ovid says, and yet, things feel the same. Fiddler crabs play love songs with comically large claws. I'm dying to see your handprint like a bruise around my heart. Every mark is like a sunset throwing the same old shadows around the chiming steeple. Maybe the dusk rings our bells because we want to howl. Dogs can hear the heartbeat of a fetus. Anubis has the ear of a golden jackal. The scale he carries judges our hearts in terms of featherweights. Maybe we need a Greco-Roman boxer, a trainer to wrap our crooked fingers, a left hook mystifying every forehead. It makes no difference how many decisions have been made with knucklebones. What follows is birdsong. We believe this is the sound of sense being knocked into our heads. It makes no difference how many coyotes have been fooled by killdeer playing lame. We often approach each other like we have broken wings. Maybe people are like birds, hatching schemes. Sometimes we just go cuckoo, stealing other people's dreams. How else do you explain birdbrains in our midst? Is it love that dares us
not to fly? We have to see the difference between the falcons and the hounds. Everything I say from now on is in praise of man's best friend. You might say civilization is a complex of fenced-in yards. We're all just dogs making the rounds. From the distance of Canis Major, our world is less trouble than a flea. I don't know if it's worthwhile to remember John Donne. There's leftover pork chops on the countertop. There's the high-pitched frequency of your car when you're on your way home. Nothing really happens until you arrive. Even the television seems determined to play commercials. There's the sentence of our thinking—syntax, which is the muzzle that tempers our emotions. Maybe dogs need us to say what's on their minds, to hold in one hand nothing but an open palm, to know the longing the heart inspires in one who drops the ball, in one who sits by your feet, speechless, waiting for you to give the word.
Someone was fly-fishing the North Platte the day they pulled her body from the water—half-naked, limbs cleaned in the slow current below the Old Government Bridge. They say when you find a woman like that, you know why. Missing eight days, dead two, the blunt force trauma would have killed her, never mind the knife. The case went cold as the river, no facts but a body, all the while the family keening, and the car buried deep in the prairie, and the man jailed in Colorado for something else.

and if they prayed
(I will make you fishers of men) and if they hoped to put a name to what snatched her and all the other Great Basin girls it came right not by god but by the scientific method, praise the police for helix-twists and eyewitnesses—fifteen years later, they dug up what he'd hid in Moneta, Wyoming, population ten. By then there was nothing more to keep coming up but the rayed limbs of her floater's body, the six cuts made into splayed flesh—the imagined all they had—that and his land the judge gave them where they would go and try to understand. And nothing to banish the river but fire. On the day they would have etched twice the years on her
headstone, they lit it up, the reeking shed of his, and shone, themselves, in yellow turnout coats from the County VFD who stood to the side—and if they didn't cry

(where were you
when the daughters sang for joy)
it was that it might burn only half an hour, and if they prayed

(starfish, starfish)
it would have been for every broken thing made to live on again, and hunger.
For romance I like Professor Edward L. Kessel in Systematic Zoology, September 1955 (Volume 4, Issue 3). He writes of Baron Osten-Sacken journaling the nineteenth-century Swiss Alps, mornings—

"...he noticed brilliant, silvery flashes among the sunbeams which penetrated the shadows of the fir forest."

The balloon fly, it seems, summons mysterious energies (the source debated, at least in Kessel's time) to knit his nuptial gift. The silk bag belly-hangs—in black and white he's like a fireless lightning bug (Fig. 1).

"...when he looked into the net, he was at first astonished to see only an inconspicuous dull-colored fly..."

Love and trickery—a way to keep a lady from devouring him whole; the pouch, Kessel takes pains to describe, once would have held food, contained the dead weight of a chitin corpse. But they learned, in the end, that empty silk itself is enough.

"...it was only then that he noticed the white, film-
like packet of sparkling material on the gauze."

In not-the-Alps – under frosting cottonwoods, midnight beyond the mountains – sodium vapor lamps hang brighter than the moon, dazzling pockets of snow-dense air, which at that moment are the swarms of Empididae, little armies, hungry men collecting in waves, jarring the lidded dark.
Men-of-war hang. She fans them away with her arms. But the sting—she goes through with her face. They lift her for treatment on the boat, a steroid shot. She slips under again. Three divers surround, watching for sharks. They see pilot whales ahead. The sky on her back. The network says: inspiring. She markets herself with a rhyming phrase. A peculiar, clear intention. In its blind to swim the straits, Cuba to Florida, she can't hear the dead. They sing to her, tired and stung. Where are you going? She can't ask; she's not perplexed yet. When she loses feeling—her mind says something should be here, off her spine. The doctor or doctors on the boat warn: one more sting and you'll be lost. She drops her purpose. She strokes back in.

• • •

My mother's friend flies down, broken-up. We follow her around the house. She likes to air-dry her body in the morning after a shower or a swim. I have nowhere to put this. So I pedal my legs above my parents' bed.

One night their sound goes wrong. My father's voice. My mother flickers from her laughter—wait, why aren't we laughing? She's a beat behind or ahead. A door closes. Water runs in the kitchen.

I love you unless you lie to me, my father says to us after prayers. My mother smooths this off the bed. In the Ellwood City High School yearbook my father is shorter than his classmates. Involved in groups. In one picture he looks ready to be needed, kneeling by the team. Their mascot is an aching wooden grin.

What happens? My mother's friend doesn't visit again. We still have the hollow fish hanging by the pool. The wind turns it. Yellow jackets nest in its mouth. He ducts this up with tape or sprays—reaching as we stand at the window watching him on the ladder. I know he's stung. I can't see how. I could engage in fiction, make
a conversation about what to do with the fish. Should we spray or tape its mouth. Or take it down. I would be able to hear them, and locate myself again.

...  

North to Zapiquerias. Two women in a doorway, one in an apron and the other looking down at yellow in her palm. An older man on a bicycle sparrows by. Which is the perfect color, a hillside in the distance. I look harder. A real or fake village set up on a side. Cafes like cafes but at night people disappear in cars. Guns at their backs. I’m carrying a book about this near carts selling candy. Do we eat chicken where?

Dogs asleep under trees.

Yellow chimes yellow in the capital. I see my grandmother all in black walking without her easel. A girl cascading against a wall. Disculpe me. The plaza at noon. The Palace of Justice set outside of how it sits in photographs where they talk about the siege. No movement in the stone. No artist standing across the street with her walkie-talkie, watching the roof.

Okay, now. A chair drops from invisible hands and hangs by a wire against the exterior. How many people stop? It was around eleven a.m. More wornwood chairs, their catapult from a kitchen the artist makes. Chairs for the ones shot dead inside, or the living? Passerby watch the building’s wall shift. Now that she’s opened time with them like this.

What is duration? Behind the false door in Candelaria we’re breaking. Paul sleeps across the room. We check out. Everything isn’t better the next day. A dry golden skin is the mealy blanket or dust. And it’s cold. This was one of those searing fights I remember as aftershock and fragment. The beginning of our relationship. The end of first year tendernesses fucking against a wall. My skirt and the language—language raining into language. Writing it is the emptied coast after the first wave has receded. Just taking a look. I
won't be long. Paul leaves his socks in the basin dripping? Will you hold me, my body asks but we're too angry.

I'm not angry, he says first. He has reason to be. The artist's team is researching for her next installation, a crack she wants to construct at home then send through a hall. Its absolute offends her. Find out how cracks start, how they surface, she implores her team in my head-drama about this. We catch up with the wedding in the mountains, a white priest in the nave. Half-meat, half-cloud. He's big, someone says, in the church. Our friends have flown him into the mountain to exchange with him.

• • •

Then I ripped us near his face. Comprehending, he gathered himself. Then changed. What are you doing? my voice from the other side of my head where speaking lived. A shock, the little dog we'd found together pawing at my legs. My hand trying to press his wet face back without pressing him back: stay, no, stay. I shut the door.

The door onstage. The great actress tugs her suitcase across. Items spill across the floor. The actor playing Stanley sticks his hands in, deriding her: flinging pearls, silks, lace. I'm eight months pregnant. Paul is next to me. All I want is the bathroom. Black space under red exit signs. No one can move; she's bones and light. Her faceting self. Her character's disastrous thinking. The actress who played Jane Eyre is seated three rows down. I keep looking for her face. My body doesn't fit. He flutters; he kicks.

All it takes is a flick of the key in the lock. The door will open. It helps to know: this is a difficult door. He was working in enamel then. The door opened onto dots and sticks, implosions, candy slicks of aluminum against the wall. The ice cream truck downstairs—wrenched in singing. I was reading without thinking; he would paint. Good coffee down the street. I liked him. When he stroked through and pressed: welding sounds across the hall. A basin at the end where I would run cold water over my wrists: what are you doing? A party on the roof, the roof next door. My friends
were stuck downstairs. He'd made them chicken. I'd met someone else. A man at another party, twenty-seven, stepped into or fell down the shaft.

... 

It was my turn to be taken apart.

So at recess they sent Katie across the grass. She delivered their message. What do you want to say back? she asked, almost tender. They watched me from the trees.

I tried swimming. They taught me how to turn and breathe. Turn and breathe. But my feet drifted. I couldn't keep them winging. The coach dipped her head in my lane. Something happened; I wrote it down.

I showed her an essay I love. Some people write so well you almost believe, she said knowingly; it's just good writing. She handed the book back. I couldn't shake her view: how right she was, a corner where I crossed the street.

One summer night we ate the Italian cookies in the window. Each one dusted and wrapped. She set fire to a wrapper. It lifted out of my palm, gaining fire, smoldering down the window well where we lived.

I repeat this with someone else. Fire sails through an open window two floors down. Is it out? Oh no. A curtain we're drinking in, calling, some other kitchen. Copper hanging in its green glint. Laughing and yelling across to them: we're sorry, so sorry. No one appears.

... 

No one will see. My mother is paying at the counter. I reach into the vase. They must be valuable. The store is called The Crystal Palace. I slip one under my tongue.

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My mother talks about disappearing. How easy it is. This started at parties her parents threw, watching adults. Their shifts and corners. She wasn't attractive to them yet. Her older sister stood in the foreground, performing. Her younger sister slipped out with boys from town.

In the Crystal River someone films the manatees. Their gray skin, stone flaking into flesh. The world is water and stone, no corners for them, groves where we can drift. They have flats for hands. Pinched, developing faces. The water level looks too low. It's miraculously clear: there are still clear places. Brushing by—my kind of clinging? To be a creature here.

Her creature. She would lie out to complete herself. Now the only way to cure the sun's damage is to sit under a total ray. This will reburn her chest and face. There are too many questions here, the doctor says, reading her skin. Can you imagine if we froze them off, one by one?

... 

She opens to us, would you all like some tea?

Where's your walker, Mom? asks Paul. She takes his arm where she used to take Jack's. In the casket air shattered his chest. She slipped a message inside. But his face was already sealed. This was called the viewing.

Her grandson toddles to her pantry to bring her, one by one, too much. Sugar. Baking powder. Flour. Thank you, Endy, he says. She mirrors him back. Thank you, Endy. She calls me Amy then corrects. Amy is a blonde woman across the canal. Amy says a spoonful of peanut butter will help one sleep. Does it? Yes. There's a next door and a next. Christmas again.

This means untangling then displaying what's inside. She has to tell us how the objects nestle in. Like this? No. She knows how but he's still too flown from her. Year two. What is grief again? Her privacy in us.
Paul looks everywhere. It's just not here Mom. Please tell me you're not going to get on the ladder when we go. Okay, she responds in a smile. Her sole self. My child, I'm my own in this bind, she doesn't say. Where Paul feels her falling, his trying to get her on the phone. The phone going to the machine. Then the machine again. Her hip. I mean it, he says, I need you to promise. I promise.

I go for air.

Across the street is a lot without a family, palm and pine and brush breaking the house tract in front of the canal. There's a humming. The metal box cooling the house next door? An overgrowth crests and dives—they say they've brought down one of our drones. An image on tv with language running on the edge of the frame. A white thing hatching no one. A man with a notebook walks around, peering. Maybe just for human scale. They say they've jammed its brain. It obeyed, turning to them, descending viewless from the clouds.

His casket was black. You couldn't see with him inside, open in the church. I last saw him on the bed. Paul had come in to wake me up. Aunt Maureen was there with Uncle Ed. She had started in telling half-stories, half-images as we waited for them to take his body away. Speeding through him. So handsome as a young man. That butcher asking him to stand in the window to slice the meat. So he had to stand in front of the store for them. He had to stand it. A window where she knew he had to be.

Meanwhile, Ella makes everyone.

When she doesn't get one of us going or when her wave exceeds the wave she marked herself inside, it takes some time to get her back. Maybe we should go up to the house now, Ella. No. All the houses on this island. The best is being her charge, shooting out of the porch onto the jetty. She asks me for the jellyfish story again.

Each one trailed long broken wires. They looked like just what
you want to look at when you’re falling asleep—liquid, motoring. When you’re you and you don’t know how. You try to keep up. You keep up without trying. What are you doing? You know them from somewhere. The ones closest—then a wave.

The past seeps as I pull its stitching out. I was stung. Dawn helped me to the beach. Part of being with her was listing toward her older brother never coming out of his room, making a sandwich next to his mother at the table. She would look up.

No one watched too hard. Dawn and I watched movies I wasn’t allowed to see. Her father made his rounds, surfacing, hello again. His death invisible in his steps. What he would do, how and when. This happened already. Yes says Ella but let’s break the next wave with our butts.

I leave you for the outdoor shower under the house.

If I use this shampoo who will I smell like? The fig tree bracing the yard. Voices attaching in the kitchen above. That’s Fannie—I can’t tell who else. If I have to leave I should leave now. Water sloughs off sand and salt, my sound body pooling. At my right is a rough, home-made opening to the house next door, dry and empty. Kayaks shucked in the parched grass. Their blue cresting life.

Zero clouds. Wind catches someone doing the puzzle alone. Kirsten arranging all the pieces to the marlin on one side? I hear another body. Our steps above, the kids’ bursting steps thinning into ceiling. How wind bends the water into reverie. One black, moldy beam.

We were running across. I had my mother’s bowl. She’d washed the berries like she always did, first thing. We put them down on our neighbors’ step, knocked, screamed, and raced back to our cottage. Later their noise against our kitchen door. The tail of their laughter, those Tomkinson kids.
Our bowl returned to the step. They had crossed the maple-shadowed grass. Cold in the middle where the cloud would sit before it shifted out. The bowl was filled with glass from the lake. Good pieces. To count as good they had to be worn and useless.

A dull, threading light ground in. These were the best. The adults arched over; what is this game? Deer or wind in the edges. Time for bed.

• • •

Sapphire sudden in the sand.

After the kids go down we drift toward the kitchen table, drinking. One of our friends is a clown. He has a story about the stage. Every time he tries to enter the other clowns thwart him. He retreats. He keeps appearing. They bat him down. Then I couldn’t go with it anymore, he says. Everything came out. The other clowns turned then, rolling with laughter, ringing in his wave still simmering on the floor.

This happened once. I opened the library door and saw my residence hall swaying. Some of us weren’t moving on the path to class or Pierce. Then the high window of the fraternity ticked. Others stood closer, further, pointing at the stag. Draining. The next ones coming out of the library behind me looked or pressed past, not seeing or seeing a few steps later. One kid in my class I remember exactly how he walked—loping always hurrying away. The smile baked in. If I remember him I remember his friend then I remember a strand of others from that time. The stone path we used and had to use if we wanted to be there.

• • •

It’s almost too random to bear. How I meet you, how you travel here. Steaming bowls of collards and shrimp, grilled ears of corn. The singed sleeves. This is the boil: Kirsten and Fannie arrange each dish around, obedient to a kitchen the rest of us don’t see. We should do this every year. The beach, Kirsten says, pouring.
beach. She starts in remembering Fannie to us where she was small. They would have to explain to her anything that was happening in the house by not explaining much.

We sit down to eat. Kirsten sets up a story about Fannie’s mom. Then Fannie says no, I’m not going there tonight. Kirsten already lit in the remembering, supernatural off the tongue. An amber shot. Fannie stops her again, not angry, and Kirsten really stops. We do some light work to shift the conversation. Waves in the grass sweep toward the house.

The children sleep.

• • •

We were ignited somewhere else. Not just illusion or memory—the adults arched over. Time for bed.

I couldn’t sleep. What should we fill the bowl with next? What do we most want to give them—it had to be something below money where we most wanted to keep. Petoskey stones on the dresser. They changed in water, darkening, raising a loosening matrix where the coral had lived. Each hexagon opening a moment, blurred and bordered by the next. They were wave-born. The glacier had clipped them off bedrock, folding them in. There was no language or landing. Decade after decade of ice, expanding and contracting. Downstairs, the bowl rinsed and tipped over on the rack. Trees shivering, splitting their shadows on the sink.
MAPS WITH SCRIBBLED LINES (IX)

Violent, measurable distance. We crossed the frozen river in opposite directions & succeeded wildly. We dug holes in the snow & made camp, miles apart. The sound a musket makes when dropped is the sound a cub makes when hungry. We chose not to fear the night's howls, respectively. We had decided to cross that river, & when we wanted to backtrack by morning the ice had melted. The wolves had eaten our toes.
Feathers caught in a long wind. Feathers beached in high grass.

The moon made of feathers, the stars made of feathers. The sun & the clouds & everything worth seeing.

Feathers for drawing shapes on our skin.

We loved the never knowing. The inevitable sunrise.

We loved the sky, but the sky never learned our names.

We wanted it to give us new ones.
When I can’t sleep I go to the post office hours before dawn and sit in its Federalist lobby to listen to the postmistress banging, banging the armored post office box doors one after another shut. It’s like a whole town of sixteen year old girls leaving home in a series block after block after block. The doors bang, their glass rattles. I’m sunk in a war surplus folding chair dying for a Chesterfield. I can feel it in my breast pocket. Bang.

The letters rest in state, unopened. When the cleaning crew arrives with its bleach and polish I take my quiet leave. I light up outside as the glass door whispers CLOSED. The light starts—hut, hut—to turn the stars out.
EINSTEIN'S A LANDMARK, NOT A BEACON

Late, shortcutting through a populous Princeton graveyard—the autumn full

moon's hunchback reactor just coming on-line at the horizon—I sailed across

the narrow, scented wake of a swift undergraduate, her wafting hair a moon-color,

red. Early in the century yet for a coed, the silver-headed squirrel on a limb above

my own head said, or spiraling up like smoke implied. She had a scissor-stride, too, very unlike

the hobble, the swivel, stroll of your mid-fifties Barbie doll. Our Einstein's very

pullover, altmodische gray's a web of singularities, black holes. Hmm. What had he whispered, droll,

to this will-o-the-wisp had he witnessed her hop the cast iron fence there, one-handed? Soon,

rumbled in his broad Swiss cobble of accents, a tangle green moss reaching into the granite

of its deepest-cut carving. Nimm nimm. All right. But what might it mean, Einstein's soon?
her face down, as if nodding asleep, to drink red wine from a glass filled too high. Rising,
hers eyes open and she explains celestial cartography, her tracings of movement through color, spicules, muon passings over a screen and sparks of divination—she is pointing her blue eyes at mine and then to the constant scatterplot at night. Have I lost you? She continues with her research on star birth and interstellar clouds. I now see the haze she is referring to, stenciled from astrological charts, her mind also into arcs of speed and momentum. She stops talking, bows her head and drifts into the soul of the space where the rest are now standing talking over the band, eating crabcakes under a white tent. A segment of sky flashes.

Through lenses of industrial telescope, a man blinks like foil shaking back. A tenured man spills his wine, laughs more and tips forward, stops, tips and falls into the pool. Ripples throw light but for an instant there is nothing then people laugh and a woman says oh, oh, oh! and then it is as if nothing had happened.

So what do you do. I am looking up, the sky is twitching, she is beside me again, carefully unwrapping a piece of bacon from shrimp. So, what do you do? she asks again, then closes her lips tightly. Inorganic synthesis, I say, and then, light-activated molecules. She is studying my face, pupils scrolling back, forth, then upward, filtering a signal from noise to discern a constellation as I stand talking, talking on the grass.
A FORM FOR DAVE

1.

Do you remember the song
it was two lines
I made

I'd sing it in our back-porch-swing
after a visit with Dave

Oh, and by the way
So-o-o are you happy?

2.

Dave has time this week, is going to feel
the glow of God and Heaven
like a red raccoon, eyes white from the sun

He rode his bike all day (hunting again),
has to sow grass now the weeds are dead.

3.

Dave took the feeders down next door.
Mowing and blowing for days,
Dave looks tired, a bit gaunt.

People stare at his flowerboxes
want more for their houses

Dave takes his time alone.

4.

Smoking made Dave's lungs hurt
sanding plaster and such
Dave's cutting back on coffee.
5.
Dave wakes up in the night says, "This sucks" and "I'm thirsty" and "No muscles in my belly."

6.
Dave resigned, built a sunroom in four days, blew the leaves across three lawns.
Dave's bored out of his mind.
He asks when you're coming.

7.
Rained and Dave patched the roof.
Pretending to want more info, Dave asks why you stomp through the house.
He's wearing the patch again,
goes to surgery when the roof caves for pain and a busted gut.

8.
Dave's cutting back on coffee,
takes his time alone, tries not to make it perfect.
Dave knows how: he drives,
mows, and the pain goes.

He builds houses for cats to climb in,
drinks slow so you'll stay in the room.

9.
Dave killed the weeds, so dead patches all over.
Won't get a job now till he's healed.
He goes to hug you once you're gone,
takes all the feeders down. Calls them back too late.
Dave's growing Kentucky blue grass. He won't let the dogs go in his yard so brings them here instead. I said Dave I don't want your dogshit here, but he pretends he can't hear and marks it with a stick and leaves it. He slams the door open and brings the dogs in and says Moot, look at Two-Pup. Those dumb pugs can't make it through the door without tripping each other, but he keeps them on a split leash just the same. They like to be together, Dave says. He can tell I'm disgusted when he says it, so he pops his lips and says Bye Moot and slams the door again.
I watched the baby last week. He's crawling now, so I cleared out the bottom drawers in the kitchen. I left him some plastic things to find, my old measuring cups and such. I don't bake anymore, so it's all right if he beats on them. I pretend to work on my crossword and rock in my chair like I don't know what he's thinking when he looks at me under his eyebrows and crawls backwards out the living room. Then he's banging the cups on the tiles Dave laid and I worry about the scuff marks and whether I'll hear the end of it. He gets mad when I spank him. Like his mama, only Annabee hit back. I'd slap her wrist when she'd reach for a cake I was frosting, and she'd clench her pretty jaw and say Grandma, you bitch! This one's sweeter but stronger. If he ever goes mean, I won't be able to handle him on my own.
A lady across the street planted such beautiful gladiolas. I told her so the other day when she was getting the mail. I tried to shout it across the yard, but I guess she couldn't hear because she crossed the street and said her name was Lillian. She's an older woman, younger than me. She and her husband go to Florida half the year and hire Dave to keep the house up while they're gone. He mows the lawn and blows the leaves out the gutters and checks the pipes when the temperature goes under. She asked me over for tea, but I said No, it was only the flowers.
Dave's working for himself now. He says he's had it with contractors telling him not to do things the way he wants. He bought some shacks to fix up and rent, so we'll see. In the meantime, he's doing odd jobs for the neighbors and mowing just about every lawn in Diamond. He rode his mower past my window every fifteen minutes this morning till I realized he was mowing the whole street's lawn at once. I can't imagine it's quicker that way. He just likes to be a pain in the ass. Pretends there aren't lines to cross till someone has to remind him. Bored out of his mind is what I think. He asks when you're coming. He's blowing leaves across the lawns now.
Muggy, jet-puffed clouds, insects whining, etc. A chapel somewhere between Omaha and nowhere, a dirt road flanked by wildflowers, which someone picked and put in vases by the chapel doors. Fields all around, wooden fences here and there, a row of trees.

But you don’t care about the scenery. No one said anything bad, if that’s what you want to hear. No one said much at all. The minister, an impenetrably fat Lutheran, did the usual reading of verses, I couldn’t say which ones. Your brothers were there, David and Jon and Saul, in from the West Coast looking ancient and stunned. You were the youngest by ten years if I’m remembering right and I don’t think they knew what to make of your latest and last display. I hadn’t seen them since Grandma Ruthie’s funeral, which we recounted fondly a number of times. Everyone agreed it was good she was dead now. As Saul noted, she would’ve found some way to take the blame.

At the service none of us spoke but your wife did. It was mostly her friends anyway, from the university, and your Local Following of Young People, of course, who wore their best blacks for this bona fide tragic event. I was hoping Caroline would say something enlightened, but it was all crap like If Only He Could Have Lived To Finish His Greatest Work and The World Was Too Much For This Burdened Soul and—the worst one, because you made her believe it—He Was A Martyr For Those Who Suffer In The Service Of Their Craft. At this point the story actually gets interesting, because I stood on my pew and said something along the lines of Fuck, Caroline, I Must Have Walked Into The Wrong Chapel Because This Sounds Like A Funeral For Jesus Fucking Christ.
Statement of Purpose

When one's father dies, one goes to the funeral. Even if one has not seen one's father in five years or spoken to him in three. Even if one is in a certain place and one's father, his body, is in another, and even if the two places are 1,200 miles apart and one is very poor, one goes because one thought one's father could be dead already, but then one's father died for real, and one needs to feel the difference.

The Night You Jumped Off the Roof of the First National Bank Tower in Omaha, NE

I was standing at the window in a dark room. Even at that hour the streets weren't empty—a dog lifted a leg, a woman hailed a cab, carrying her shoes. I didn't know but I knew. The streetlamp was hard-bright so I turned away. I saw my shadow on the wall, black body on a white wall. My shaggy-haired head, my monkey limbs like yours.

I couldn't lie down that night, and at 5:30 your wife called and told me what you'd done, the precise way that you'd stopped yourself from living, and I said And Who, Exactly, Are You?

A Story I Might Have Made Up

I was born with hair. Not on my head but down my back, tufted and dark. Baby Bird, you said and you built me a swing under the birch tree. A few months later the fur fell away, and you were sad to see it go. Six years later you left for the city, and were you sad to go? Fifty-two years later you dropped away, and were you glad to go?

Old house, cold house, never-loud house. Winter-white light on wood. The oatmeal is hot in the bowl. Your stamping boots: the dull crunch of weight on snow. The deer came in Spring, sloughing snow off Mom's buds. You took me to the river where the ice was breaking and we saw how it fell away. Chalk on the back porch, us, drawing circles around each other like we could hold
each other in. Then popsicle summers, your damp napkin across my mouth. Into bed before light left the sky. Then stories you told from the floor by my bed, me under a sheet, still sticky from the day. Fall comes again, the house is cold again, and this is how it goes, on and on until.

*In Reverse-Chronological Order, the Top 5 Things You Will Never Know About Marnie Baum, Who is Your Daughter, Who is Me:*

1. I graduated from college and moved to New York, a city I'd only seen with you. You'd left for Nebraska by this point, but the city was still covered in you. In the diner window, the movie theater, a passing bus. I was sixteen again and I was twelve again and nine and six, and New York was still a weekend place. I wanted to call you and say, I Know You Think You Are In Omaha Right Now, Talking To Me On The Phone, But I Had To Let You Know That You Left Yourself Behind. Since you died it's less of a shock to see you on the park bench, the dark street. You could be anywhere now. I scattered the ashes myself.

2. When I was sixteen I asked if you were fucking Diana, the 21 year old, even though I knew you were, and you said no and I let you think that I believed your lie. When my mother asked me if you were fucking Diana, the 21 year old, I said no even though I knew you were, and she believed my lie. When you asked me if my mother thought you were tucking Diana, the 21 year old, I told you yes because I knew you were and I wanted you to say it. In other words, I am not a truthful person but neither are you.

3. When I was fourteen and hated my mother, hated our tiny, cold house in our tiny, cold town, I wanted to move to New York with you. I told people that my father was a novelist, which was nominally true. I'd seen your book on my mother's shelf after all, your name in caps down the spine. My father, the writer. I thought if I could act cosmopolitan enough, you would see that I belonged with you, eating steak dinners and
going to Broadway shows, which I was sure you did every night when I wasn’t there. When I saw you that winter, I wore red lipstick, and I was starving. You told me I looked beautiful, do you remember? But when I thought about asking you the words sounded absurd. So we ordered chicken from Teriyaki Boy and watched the Knicks on TV.

4. I liked your first girlfriend, the one with the big hair and the cigarette chuckle, but the rest I thought were lunatics, especially Harriet, who called you Baby and called me That Girl (e.g., Why Can’t That Girl’s Mother Come Get Her Herself? and Why You Got To Bring That Girl Halfway To Vermont, To The Goddamn Middle Of Nowhere? and That Girl’s Always Giving Me Sulky Eyes Across The Room Like I Went And Killed Her Cat.) Our monthly visits turned into three times a year when Harriet moved in, on account of our feelings toward one another.

5. The summer I turned six, I swung on my swing under the birch tree nearly every day like a pendulum passing time. At the top of each arc I could see the road over Long Grass Hill, and that was how I watched for you. It was fall when you left. Do you remember? The road is a photograph when I think of it now, blinking in and out of view. Swing up, swing down, and this was the rhythm of the season. This was the fall I dove into a pile of leaves, straight down into them, because I thought they would hold me like a pillow but instead they crumbled like old things do and my nose broke from the ground, which froze early that year.

Father, n. [fah-ther]

1.a. One by whom a child is or has been begotten, a male parent, the nearest male ancestor. Infrequently applied to animals.

E.g.: You, a certain sort of animal, pursued a woman, blonde and claimed by a man of a different breed, and one thing begot another, which begot another, until
finally a child, me, Marnie, was begotten, and, thus, you were a father.

1.b. Applied to Christ. (Obs. rare.)
E.g.: You believed you were being persecuted because you said that in the supermarket the cashier would not bag your groceries and at the restaurant the waiter did not say thank you as we left and when you said to me, I, Your Father, Am Being Slowly Crucified, I knew you weren’t doing well.
(See also: Antisocial Personality Disorder, Delusional Disorder, Malignant Narcissism, Megalomania, Messiah Complex, Paranoid Personality Disorder)

1.c. One who institutes, originates, calls into being; a constructor, contriver, designer, framer, originator.
E.g.: Who is the father now, Father?

The Miracle of Air Travel

When the plane took off I was surprised. I’m always surprised by flight; how it’s nothing more than an act of will. I accepted the force against my body, the pushing down that meant This Is Where You Are. I had the feeling that everyone on the plane was someone I’d seen before, even the flight attendants in their make-up masks. The woman next to me had an infant and they were in awe of each other, shocked by their need for each other. Her Daddy’s Waiting For Us In Omaha, the woman said, and I said, So’s Mine.

On the ground the world is a tyranny of details. Go high enough and it eases into geometry: squares and circles, arcs and rays. Shades of brown and green and gray. I took comfort in this view, in how well we’ve ordered our lives. Then came disruptions, rumple across pressed earth. That’s the Missouri River On Our Right, Folks, said the co-pilot, helpfully. Passengers on airplanes are always Folks. The descent was mildly spiritual, a series of drops in which my body fell but something stayed up for a second longer.
A Presumably Incomplete List of Things You Never Told Me (Your Daughter, Marnie Baum) but That I Found Out When I Went to Bury You in Omaha, NE.

1. You were taking eight distinct prescription medications, or at least you should have been, except the eight distinct prescription medication bottles I found were all full and stashed under the sink.

2. You hadn't filed taxes since 1988 when you sold your book, and your debts at present equal $32,6043, which is $10,166 more than the value of your estate, which you bequeathed to Caroline (See Item 3 below). None of that includes the roughly eleven years of child support you never paid, according to my mother's count.

3. You had a wife, another wife, that is, not your ex-wife, who is my mother, and not a girlfriend or a young protégé whom you fucked. Caroline was not pretty. She introduced herself as a Writer Like Your Father and I said So You're A Writer Who Doesn't Write. She said I Teach Undergrads and I said You're A Professor. She looked at me with eyes that said You Are Not Your Father's Daughter, and I thought Oh, But Lady, I Am.

4. You had what the Omaha Daily Record called a Local Following of Young People who referred to you as a Mentor, a Father Figure, no less. I imagine some zit-faced kid, your neighbor, found your novel on the library shelf labeled Old and Out of Print, and he took it home, read it at night and beat off with shame to the parts—you know the ones. And next thing you know they're at your door, those kids, and they want you to tell them about The Way Things Are because they're Angry At Adults but not at you because you Get It, you Get Them. These kids were at the funeral, as I mentioned. They smoked cigarettes outside the chapel and the girls shook out their hair to indicate distress and the boys looked stricken, each wondering whether he too would smash his body into pavement some day.

5. You'd been writing something. I saw the pages stacked in a cardboard box on the floor near your desk, and I tried to look
closer but Caroline was there and she stood in front of the box and pointedly offered me lunch. I could see the type, black and blotted, which means you must have been using your typewriter, the Powder-Blue Beast. When I was eight I thought it was beautiful, and I was nervous when you put the paper in and told me to type. I wanted only beautiful things to come from it, not my labored words, my child scratch. When you left the room I started transcribing your book, filched from the shelf, fingers jabbing slowly, type bars whipping in response, until you came back and I hid it, the book, under my butt. But of course your words were there, typed, and you saw and we both felt the strangeness of that.

*Signs Indicating That I, Marnie Baum, Am My Father’s Daughter*

1. Bears the unmistakable Baum nose.
2. Can be summed up by the equation: Delusions of grandeur + Defeatist outlook = Lousy work ethic and very few friends.
3. Is apparently incapable of biting one’s tongue in situations that most require it.
4. Believes that a mixing bowl is appropriate for preparing any food worth eating, and all foods can be eaten in mixing-bowl-sized portions.
5. Has an unreasonable attachment to schedules, routines, calendars, lists, and plans, but must overthrow entire established system regularly to reassert one’s autonomy.
6. Is a liar.
7. Is susceptible to chronic and paralyzing indecision in grocery stores, department stores, restaurants, shampoo aisles, and relationships.
8. Should not be allowed to have children.

*The Last Time I Saw You*

We walked through Central Park together. I wanted to put my hand in your mess of hair but I stopped myself from reaching out.
My hair is like your hair, not like my mother's at all. When we walked, the sky was gray and there was wind like a reminder. You told me there were people who hated you, but they loved you, but they wanted you to leave. You wanted to go with them. Where, I said. You looked at me as if to say, Irrelevant. Sixteen years old and I listened to you, Daddy. You pulled me from a nonsense dream into a sad knowledge, and I loved you differently after that.

I lay down on the floor of the apartment where you'd arranged your life for a while. It belonged to Diana, the 21 year old you were fucking. We're Not Fucking, you said and I snorted to show I didn't care. When I woke up it was late in the day, the sun had come out for a moment, and dust columns hung in the light. She was lying on the couch, and you were sitting with her. Her hands were folded behind your neck, pulling. I watched you whisper and then kiss her from under my hair.

You put me on a train that night and heavy rain fell on the metal roof the whole way home. I wanted to tell you about that, the sound of the sky rejecting its water. It was like wind through a grove, a big rustle that never stopped.

I Like to Pretend That I Am an Original

Welcome to the Museum of Contemporary Sadness. Along with our Permanent Collection, which spans the last 30 years of grief, we are pleased to invite you to view a special exhibition, Marnie Baum's Father Is Dead, here for its first and only engagement in the Baum Family Room of Mental Disturbances. Located on Level 4, between the Rock n' Roll Suicides Collection and the Grieving Mothers' Retrospective, The Baum Family Room of Mental Disturbances houses exhibits generously donated to the Museum by the Baums over the course of many productive years. This provocative exhibition features over fifty entries including objects (“Baby Hair,” “Birch Tree,” “Typewriter: Powder Blue”), sounds (“Boots on Snow,” “Hard Rain,” “Insect Wail”), and short performance pieces (“Loops,” “The Miracle of Air Travel”). Visitors are asked to keep to the pathways marked in red. Please do not touch, talk to,
or disrupt the exhibition in any way. All items, including words, moods, and times of day, are the sole emotional property of Marnie Baum. No photographs please.

Facts & Figures

1. In Nebraska, suicide is the leading cause of death due to injury for adults ages 25-64. Males are 5.1 times more likely to kill themselves than females, although females are 1.7 times more likely to try and fail.

2. Successful suicides are caused by firearms 55 percent of the time. Unsuccessful suicide attempts are caused by drug overdoses 80 percent of the time. There is no data on jumpers.

3. The first reported suicide in Omaha happened in 1897. Henry Thomas, a Pacific Express Company watchman, stole 6,000 dollars, then, after three guilt-ridden years, went insane and hung himself. In a suicide letter, he wrote, The First Timber In My Barn Has The Money.

4. The First National Bank Tower stands at 634 feet, making it not only the tallest building in Nebraska, but the tallest building between Minneapolis and Denver. It's the 176th tallest skyscraper in the United States and the 467th tallest in the world.

5. Built in 2002, The First National Bank Tower has 45 stories, all of which are commercial offices. An observation deck is currently under construction on the roof.

6. Your footprints were found on some wooden scaffolding that hung over the edge. There were other marks too on the end of the dusty planks. We're Not Sure, said the attractive blond officer, But It Looks Like He Might Have Hung On. I did not believe him. How could I believe him.

Loops

Sometimes I make five, sometimes three. Sometimes I get to the end of my block, turn around, and walk home. Once around is a mile I've decided somewhat arbitrarily. On the first morning you
were not alive, I didn’t count. Quiet streets, dead leaves underfoot. A flock of geese erupted from dark ground. We’d startled each other. I ran faster as they rose into the almost-light, and I forgot the sound of my shoes. I didn’t feel the fabric of my shirt on my skin. I looked down at myself, patterned by new light through trees. Maybe there was no fabric anymore or feet on leaves. Maybe now there were feathers on my chest and back, maybe my face was animal dark. Did I touch my cheeks and feel the tips of wings?

The honk of geese is a language I know, a pain-noise that says Where Is Our Home. On the ground, I was racing, too winded to cry out.

What We Did With You

I left the chapel after my outburst, and I lay in a cornfield while my anger reduced to a simmer, and I stayed there simmering in the corn, the clouds low, the world wavering in the heat. After a long time, I heard car doors then engines then tires going slowly past, and then Caroline was standing above me with you in her arms—the wooden urn I mean—and she said I Could Really Use A Hand, Marnie.

I didn’t realize she wanted us to scatter you, your ashes, until we had walked half a mile past the church to what one could generously call a hill, a bald patch where no crops were planted but a few yellow wildflowers had managed to grow. This Is Where He Wanted To Be, she said, and I thought Are You Joking? But I figured I’d said enough for the day.

The Three Kings had an early flight out so it was just the two of us, Caroline sniffing while I tried to wrestle the top from the urn. They’re like bear cans, those urns. No one warns you about how heavy the ashes are going to be either, or that they’re vacuum-sealed in plastic. There’s no respectful way to rip into a ten-pound bag of ash, I don’t care who’s inside.

You’re probably imagining your remains drifting away as the sun set long and hot across the prairie. In real life, drifting ashes require wind, of which there was none in Nebraska that day. We thought about picking you up in handfuls and tossing you into

Shapiro

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the air but frankly neither of us wanted to touch you that way. So
in the end we just heaved the bag up between us and dumped you
here and there, and that’s how we left you, in piles of various sizes
along the mound.

When the bag was about empty, Caroline stuffed it back in
the urn and gave it to me. His Orders, she said. It’s Made Of Birch
And It Stays With You.

Interjection From the Cabbie Who Drove Me Home

You fly in from Nebraska, I don’t know Nebraska. I’m single you
know but I have one daughter. Alexandra. Want to see? She’s on
my phone. See? See? She’s a cat! You didn’t guess right? We live here
twenty years. Sometimes I hate it, do you? You are so beautiful,
you must have a rich husband and no job. See my name on sign
back there? Raman Pavlin they write but it is Pavlin Raman. At
first I think this is not good but then you know I switch my mind.
Raman Pavlin Pavlin Raman is all the same right? Who needs one
name? Call me whatever you like! I hope you stay away from park
here. Six years before girl is killed under tree. How? Why? I don’t
know but picture on TV you don’t forget. Oh, oh! You should see
her, blue dress under big tree and flowers fall on her and all around.
Decorated by God. I don’t care how this bad thing happens but
don’t go through park okay. I say this like father. I drive you to your
house door because it’s late and you see there is the park besides us.
You have someone to watch out for you okay? She was beautiful, a
little child. Sometimes I find this tree and kiss ground. You should
see picture. Oh the flowers.

Body Building

Fall again and I’m losing my summer skin. In the morning, under
hot water, I rub my arms and the flakes wash away. I pluck my
eyebrows, run a razor up my legs. Black flecks collect on the white
sink. Shaving, smoothing, buffing the surface and my hand never
slips. Never a slice, a nick, too close to the quick. The hair on my
head comes out on its own. I get up from the bed and it stays on the sheets. Strands collect in the corners of my apartment, trapping dust and debris. Next to me a pile of fingernails, bitten. I'm running and I'm walking. I'm in a train, a bus, the back seat of a cab, an airplane to Nebraska and back again. I like to sit on grand steps at certain times of day. Museums, cathedrals, the post office on 34th. I sit where the last light hits them, where stone steps bloom yellow until the shadow slices black. In bed I still wrap the quilt like you showed me once, over my head and tucked under my feet. I press my arms against my chest and try to hold myself together. The skin, the nails, the hair, the gunk from my pores. They all fall away, blown to some unswept corner of the world where whole other beings are born, sweet and misshapen, built from the stuff we've let go.
WHAT YOU LET

Snow up to her hips. Though she wants to be cold, she prefers the sink of her boot before it can flatten.

Frozen lock & metal key.

He wipes a string of snot with his sleeve. His boot strikes the door. Fucking door. His boot strikes the door.

He undresses all of her –

He hangs her wool socks over a chair-back next to the potbelly stove. Her boots still by the door.

His chest this close to her breasts.

Fire sputters. The burning woodpile shifts. He splinters more for tonight.

She shivers. Shakes him. Tucks her legs into herself.

He feels his way to the stove. He adds more wood. Stokes.

Her hair-smell, in smoke, wakes her.

A woman can leave without looking through a window.

Grove of sequoia dipped in white.

On New Year's Eve, she runs, feels her footing, & slides. Her arms outstretched. Too drunk to worry about slipping.

Cold, if you let it.

She uses three fingers to write his name, cursive, in the snow bank. Smokes a joint in the clearing.

The bird hops to the other side of the trunk, out of sight.

It will come around again if she's quiet.

See?
Hemoglobin pouch worms
Leshmania chagasi
Pulsio Gasti
Slantius (bearded, fall type)
AN ALGORITHM

Incompleteness Theorem: For any formal effectively generated theory T including basic arithmetical truths and also certain truths about formal provability, T includes a statement of its own consistency if and only if T is inconsistent. (Gödel)

Axiom:

In 1925, Max Ernst, artist and radical anti-war activist, was inspired by an ancient wooden floor where the grain of the planks had been accentuated by many years of scrubbing. The patterns of the graining suggested strange images to him. He captured these by laying sheets of paper on the floor and then rubbing over them with a soft pencil. The results suggest mysterious forests peopled with bird-like creatures...

These drawings were published in a 1926 collection titled Histoire Naturelle.

- Ronald Alley, Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists, Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet, London 1981

Axiom:

[My brother's boot]
Proof:

If this is your boot, then your hand touched this piece of paper. If your hand touched the paper, then you made this rubbing. If you made the rubbing, then your hand might still grip, your arm might still move. If your hand grips and your arm moves, then you are alive.

You said you need odd and secret tasks to complete so that you can remember who you are. I sent you a stack of paper and two pencils and a magazine-collaged letter like a ransom note. I also sent you leaves and pine needles from up on the mountain. When the package was in the mail, I thought damn it I should have sent a book or something baked or a song we used to sing transcribed for the harmonica.

When I get the rubbings back from you, Afghan soil crumbles out of the envelope and into my hand. It's a lot like the caliche of Tucson, but grayer. The back side of the boot rubbing is streaked with it, as if you'd made the image by grinding your toe into the paper over a graphite plane.

This boot is made for desert combat. I've seen it before, when it was first issued to you, when you were home. I know that it is a light tan color. Camel, you called it. I know the canvas top is thinner that you had expected, but you said, "It will make it easier to run, to squat down and hide." It is the color of soil somewhere, but not there, not where you are now.

But this, of course, is not a boot. It's an image of a boot, a series of thin marks where a pencil came close to the sole of your boot. I think it's the closeness of this that makes me feel alone in a way I did not expect.
Infinite Regress: One of three parts to a theory that purports the impossibility to prove any truth logically or mathematically. An Infinite Regress arises if the truth of proposition $P_1$ requires the support of proposition $P_2$, the truth of proposition $P_2$ requires the support of proposition $P_3$, ..., and the truth of proposition $P_{n-1}$ requires the support of proposition $P_n$ and $n$ approaches infinity. (Albert)

Axiom:

Psychometry is viewed as one's ability to sense or read an object or another person merely by looking, holding or touching. It is a form of scrying, forecasting or predicting the future. The psychometric can hold a letter or a piece of jewelry and tell about the history of the object or the person who owned it - all from what was recorded into the object in the form of eminitions [sic].

I do not ask for belief before experience, so much as for the open mind and patient attention of my readers: that some faith is required in all departments of science is admitted, but all I ask now is a hearing for my suggestions, and that my statements may be put to the test of experiment, before they are rejected or accepted.

- James Coates, Ph.D, M.D., *Seeing the Invisible*, 1906

Axiom:

[the part of a truck that burned your leg while you were asleep]

Pitkin 109
Proof:

If you were asleep while your skin burned, then I imagine you must have been dreaming.
If you were dreaming, then there are parts of you that are not always in that place.
If there are parts of you not always in that place, then those parts can be kept safe.
If those parts are kept safe, you will come home whole.

You said, “Email is easy, but I like getting things in the mail. I like thinking about how the paper is coming from far away and that someone actually touched it.”

I am driving through the desert in New Mexico, passing canals and reservoirs that are the color of the land around them. They stand apart only in their luminosity. The water they hold is separated from the thirsty land by little lips of dust.

You are also in a desert. It is one I cannot imagine, though I’ve held bits of it in my hand. Its soil is smeared here on this paper, too, along with rust and what looks like transfer from a muddy green paint.

During the 1980s, Gregor Schneider rarely left his home in Rheydt, Germany. He spent his time multiplying the structure of the house inside of itself: wall in front of wall, ceiling below ceiling, floor on floor, room in room. Since 1985, the house has been open so that visitors can explore it, entering in between newly constructed sections and the original walls. Those who have seen it describe windows in front of solid walls, narrow passageways, and contorted routes between rooms. They report seeing clothes, trash, letters, family portraits and redundant plumbing smashed between the layers of the house. Artist Ulrich Loock has said of the house, “The repetition of the already existent produces the unknown, not in the foreground, but in the background of the added-on work.”
Schneider says, “The only way now to know what has been added is to measure the hidden spaces... No one can get to the original structure anymore without systematically destroying the house.” And I wonder if any part of him wishes to burn it down. Maybe not the entire house, but one layer of it – the eighth wall, but not the ninth, not the tenth. Going back in time to take away or implant events that then can not be undone.

This is my theory: you joined the Army because of Germany. Because when we were young, Germany was the only distant place you had known anyone in our family to live. Our uncle was in the Army. He was stationed in Mainz with our aunt. You were in preschool when we learned that our cousin was born there. This was the 80s, and they lived on an Army base fewer than eighty miles away from where Schneider was building rooms inside of rooms.

You became fascinated with Germany. You took German in high school. You showed me a picture of the Eastern Alps in a book in the library and said, “Someday I’ll be there.” You showed me where they were on a map; across the ocean, past France, far away.

*Law of Excluded Middle: Of two contradictory propositions, one must be true, the other false: P ∨ ¬P. (Aristotle)*

**Axiom:**

Transference occurs when the patient begins to see another person (the analyst) as the return, the reincarnation, of some important figure out of his childhood or past, and consequently transfers on to him feelings and reactions which undoubtedly applied to this prototype.

— Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 1940
Theories on transference should include a consideration of objects as well as people; objects including spoken words, written symbols, models and diagrams, arithmetic procedures, and structures.


**Axiom:**

![Image]

[Army issue canteen]

**Proof:**

If you have made these images, then you might remember that this was a game we used to play.

If you remember the game, then you might know that birch bark always makes the best pattern.

If you know the pattern of birch bark, then when you close your eyes, you might still see birch leaves falling to the ground like gold coins.

If you can see the leaves, then it's possible that you can smell them, too, and you are home.

Traveling east, there are seven countries, an ocean, and a sea between us. There are mountain ranges: the Rockies, the Smokies, the Atlas, the Aqaba, and the Zagros. And major rivers: the Mississippi, the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Helmand. There are more than twelve thousand miles.

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What else can be quantified about this distance? There are a finite number of farms from here to there. There are a certain number of tire swings, decent swimming holes, dismantled bridges. We could count the number of daughters who live between here and there, the number of brothers, their homes, silos, grains of sand, sea urchins, sharks, waves, trees, dunes, mirages, guns.

Between your first and second deployments, you broke down on my couch. I was home between fights, too. Just strikes though, organizing campaigns. We set up a crib for your baby daughter in the living room. She was finally sleeping through the night. Our plan was to hike in the mountains around Tucson, to relax in the backyard, to drink a lot of beer, to sleep. I was careful not to ask you too much. Excusing myself of the fear of having to know by telling myself that you wouldn't want to say. I put on The Cure because we used to listen to them on the way to school. You smiled first, and then suddenly you were sobbing. Your huge shoulders shook in my arms until your nose started to bleed. Then you got up quickly, wiped your face, and it was over.

Between your second and third deployments, we talked on Sundays. You had a routine; you called when you had just returned from a walk with your daughters, after you had worked in the yard, after your family had eaten a lunch of half sandwiches and carrots, after you had cut your hair.

You used to have a blond streak in your hair on the back of your head, and we teased you about it - that you were going gray at seven, at nine, at fourteen. But with your hair clipped so close to your head, the streak has become invisible. What has become visible in its place is the dent on the crown of your head. When you were nine, you did a backflip off the side of the Pemberville public pool. You landed on the cement instead of in the water. Your blood billowed out into the blue like a thunderhead.
Predicate Calculus: An axiomated form of predicate logic in which formulas contain variables which can be quantified. Two common quantifiers are the existential $\exists$ ("there exists") and universal $\forall$ ("for all") quantifiers. (Boole)

Axiom:

I remember the rush of seeing the bellies of war planes fly across the theater screen. The newsreels during WWII did nothing if not train the young to be excited by fatal situations.


Axiom:

Proof:

If you are enamored by the tools of war, then you have lost hold of my brother.
If you are not my brother, then this remembering means nothing.
If remembering means nothing, then we are unmoored, adrift.
If we have come loose in this way, then there is already no way back.

or (proof as prayer)

If you made the image of this bullet, then the bullet is distinct from your hand.
If it is not your hand, then the boot is not your foot.
If the boot is not your foot, then your body is still somehow separate from at least these implements of war.
If your body is still separate, then it’s possible that the war itself has not seeped through your skin.

Our father says that he remembers the newsreels that played in town during the Korean war. He remembers boys running around the yard at school with their arms outstretched as though they were flying planes. He remembers the sound of pretend gunfire. He says that he prayed he would never have to go to war.

But twelve years later, he got out of bed in the middle of the night. He went into his younger sisters’ room and quietly looted their drawers, stuffing the small change each of them had managed to save into a sock. He walked out the back door, got into his car, and drove away.

He left because he had to. Or this is what he says.

He was still seventeen when he arrived in San Diego, so he lied on the application. Three weeks later, in April of 1961, he was on a Navy ship off the coast of Cuba.

I liked shooting guns more than you did. You were shy about the suddenness of sound and never quite ready for the kickback. You would even pass the BB gun back to me without taking a turn. I liked the loud popping sound the BBs made in the chamber. I liked how it felt to hold my breath before pulling the trigger.

You left because you had to. Or this is what you say. Your hands then were rough and calloused from too many years of working with brick and mortar. I picture you holding a beer in your left hand and the phone receiver in your right the last time we talked before you enlisted. You wanted to go back to school but didn’t have the money. Your voice cracked and then you got quiet. I knew what it was that you weren’t saying. A week later, you called from boot camp, your voice already hoarse. Already too quick to respond to my questions. Already changed.
In the low egg yolk morning she is trying
to dissolve the barlines,
mathematical placements
with which she is told she lives
too much in her mind. She wants this
to feel like song, possibility become
effortless. A field.
The robin's chitter.

But each morning the family's piano-forte
slides further out of tune
(she hears it).
Each morning in the picture window the rhythm of
practice-room, strangle-hold.
(But no—was that me? What she feels,
how to say?) I imagine
an opaque window, sunlight
through waxy paper. Someone says these distinctions
dissolve, but I'm not so sure.

Her brother visits from Vienna. She paints watercolors.
Pale spring hills, the lake valley,
beside her the water jar
clouds over blue, aqua, gold, the brush shaken clean
between colors. It is not a bad life.
Her brother's Songs Without Words,
of which many are hers,
are publishable with his name.

Queen Victoria's favorite, "Italy," is Fanny's own.
She gives concerts at home, notes echoing over marble like neat, heeled footsteps I hear through my college's corridors.

So many writers on hands: *Her small neat hands.*
*Her white hands.*

_Her marble hands._ *He fell out of love because her hands appeared larger* (no lie).

I'm beginning to think the mechanics mean little. I sit in the heat of August watching how hands work. Science of the smallest joints that do or do not do my bidding by rote. In the end it only works when you learn to forget.

And what if not remembered, not written, not graphed on the music staff's bars like those leaps once charting my own heart's beat? (Even as a child I knew something was wrong, lying on the bed while the EKG jolted off rhythm, off kilter, what kept me on edge—)

What if in sleep, in first waking, in those colors of the water jar blurred, the lake's depths and murmurs, its blue eye merging towards grey still swirling around the brush bristles I shake? What if, so worried (then) to get it right, scale after skeleton scale and so far from the flesh of the piece—I only begin to know what it was I heard—

_Donnelly_ 117
I

We’re outside for this image, hugging the hedge—the only green known to dusklight. It’s neither a quick dissolution nor negligible mist when our pictures echo in, echo out: a vague house, a cradle trimmed in signal static. We’re standing among a diaphanous rampart draped indifferently over horizon. Here, after we’ve weighed always and often like deceptively similar river rocks in our palms, discarding the lighter one.

II

I speak “hymn,” and outside the music touched water rings, like a river birch, you think yourself a bold building. This could be called ‘the right to crenellation,’—that shallow, cycloptic glance, how you speak yourself no closer than a stranger, or like an infant’s uninflected babble when they’ve just been fed.
III

You imagine abstractions to be free of figures, but what is the green thinning to a halo if not birth? Midnight water blathers on the causeway; two bodies, confusing their difference, spawn the orange of sunlit organs. A field of leaking color is as naive as blood paled by milk, as the bent figure, turning figure, bare-breasted figure resisting a sitting portrait.

IV

When the eye is first bombarded, how might we delimit our trope to an electric field. Take, for instance, any landscape or botanical visitation in a dream: hovering ice, a canopy of blood oranges ascending, or the canyon's descriptive union with a gash in the skin. A layer of mint on magenta upends Easter's shiny commerce for an open curtain, violet's libidinous invitation.
With a paper napkin, Howard wipes coffee rings and sugar from the tabletop. “This was one of Gary’s favorites,” he says.

He folds a five-dollar bill in half lengthwise, creases it, and sets it on the table. He scoots my glass of iced tea aside to give me a better view. His fingers, hooked like talons, clutch the air above the bill in an affectation of intense effort. Slowly, the folded bill begins to levitate.

I can’t see the fine thread that lifts it from the table. Maybe there is no thread—maybe there is a magnet. Or a weak field of static electricity, manipulated somehow by the old magician. I don’t know how the trick works, but I know that there is a trick, and I am unimpressed.

A child of three or four watches us from the adjacent booth. He gnaws absently on the vinyl upholstery, but his eyes are transfixed by the cash floating in midair. Howard brings his hands together, crushing the bill, then spreads his fingers to show that it has vanished. He lifts his gray bushy eyebrows. “That’s a five-dollar trick,” he says. “Want to see a ten-dollar trick?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Give me a ten-dollar bill.”

He folds my bill meticulously three times, then puts it in his breast pocket and pats it gently. “That was a ten-dollar trick. Want to see a twenty-dollar trick?”

I frown at him admonishingly, but he doesn’t offer to return my money. From our seat near the window in the coffee shop, I can see the Tribune Building across the street. The owners will be coming to the staff meeting today. I am ineligible for the buyout, but I’m curious about who will take the money and volunteer to leave. I’d like to see that prick Waldo Liu pack his spalted maple desk, but I know he’ll stick around, chasing the Pulitzer that has evaded him, unfairly, for decades.

Liu could leave the paper and go directly to a tenured teaching position at Stanford or Columbia or Texas. But he’ll stay. Next week, he’ll finish his series about the four prison inmates—all
lifers—released by the state with apologies after a class of eager law school students dipped into court records and found glaring evidence that the convicts had been railroaded by a racist prosecutor in a racist town with a racist judge. Seamlessly integrated into Liu's professionally dispassionate prose, a nuanced, subtly persuasive lexicon reveals the reporter as more than merely an observer. Liu isn't just recounting the story—he's taken up a cause. And by reading his articles, the reader, too, shares a solidarity with these "unassuming" young people, these "conscientious" law students, these "principled" twenty-two-year-old men and women with perfect teeth and perfect tits and "promising" futures, smiling in self-satisfaction in Tee-shirts and jeans, or DU sweatpants and baseball caps, or blazers and ties, in a multiethnic huddle in front of an anachronistic blackboard in a big color photograph on A1. I suspect that Liu is sleeping with one or more of them, but I'm not sure which. He seems to me simultaneously lascivious and benign—the kind of person who would be an excellent family man, but with more than one family.

"Dude's got a pervy handshake," my girlfriend, Bunny, said after she met Liu at a cocktail party. "He smiled at me like he knows what kind of panties I'm wearing."

The class of law school heroes is Liu's latest, gushy, consequential story. My story is about this turd—a septuagenarian who has just conned me out of ten dollars. I crunch the last ice from my tea. "Ready?"

Howard drives a white, late 90s Crown Victoria with black fenders and a push bumper. It looks like a police cruiser, which is what it used to be.

"I bought it from the university auction," he tells me. "The campus cops retire these things when they hit 200-thousand miles, even if there's nothing wrong with them." He coasts along I-25, only tapping the accelerator occasionally as the cruiser loses momentum. Ahead of him, cars doing sixty slow to fifty-five. The highway seems calmed.

He hasn't shaved in a day or two, and his untied bowtie and unbuttoned shirt collar make him look like the grandfather of a bride, disheveled after a long night at the reception. He is thin.
Loose skin hangs below his chin and in concentric crescents under his eyes. His long ears have been stretched by gravity, and the lobes dangle like earrings.

“I don't usually do kiddie shows,” he says. “I'm only doing this one because they really wanted me—they said they wouldn't take no for an answer.”

He looks at me to confirm that I have understood.

“Kids just want to figure out the trick,” he says. “They'll rush up and grab your stuff, try to see how it works. They'll break it. They don't know how to just enjoy the show. Kids' shows are terrible. Universally terrible.” Reconsidering, he corrects himself. “This one will be good, though. I brought some special things. Some classic illusions.”

This sort of fluff story is all I'm trusted with, now that I've been banished from features and entertainment reviews. In the whole country, I am the only critic at a major newspaper to have said anything positive about *Evil Mummies II*. I gave the movie a C+, but the DVD box cover now boasts, “in the tradition of *Cleopatra* and *The Ten Commandments*, *Evil Mummies II* capitalizes on a romantic fantasy of Old Testament Egypt. —*Denver Tribune*.”

Howard isn't the primary subject of my article. I'm spending the day with him to get his stories about his late partner, Gary Martinez (“The Great Kel-Mec”). Howard and Gary had a casino show together in Vegas for a decade. They split up when PBS offered Gary a hosting gig for an after-school show about science and pseudoscience. He debunked quacks and psychics by duplicating their seemingly supernatural feats and then revealing the tricks he'd used to create the illusion. A group of magicians attacked him for spilling secrets of the trade. They banned him from several societies and filed a class action lawsuit. He filed his own countersuit, claiming some of his critics had harassed him with racial epithets and threats of violence. Mortified by the controversy, the network cancelled his show.

“When you and Gary got back together, what kind of venues did you work? Private parties?”

“Trade shows. Birthday shows. We did the governor's
birthday. We did a mobster's birthday once. Big fat Italian guy. He said he could make us disappear."

"Jeez," I say.

"When we get there," Howard says, "We better tell them you're my son. The parents will get nervous if we tell them you're a reporter. If we tell them you're my assistant, they'll think we're a couple of queers."

The house is way out in Castle Pines. It's a new construction behemoth with three levels of composite decking wrapped around the back, and ten-foot tall windows with a view of the Rockies. A twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl runs across the yard and past our car, pursued by a boy shooting video of her with a cell phone. She stops short, momentarily confused by the ersatz police cruiser, and while she grins at us, embarrassed, the boy grabs her by the waist, flings her over his shoulder, and carries her back to the party. She flails her arms and legs, squealing gleefully.

"Here we go," Howard sighs. "Rich little shit punks."

Round banquet tables with centerpieces of cut flowers have been arranged in a U-shape in the lawn around a small stage. Yellow balloons, each printed with the name of a different child, are tied to the back of every chair in lieu of a place card. A DJ in a silver zoot suit bobs enthusiastically to the beat of resampled pop. Ignoring the assigned seating, the forty or fifty kids in attendance have clustered at the distant corner of the property, away from the decorations and music. There are no parents.

I help myself to a tumbler of lemonade from the buffet while Howard sets up his props. From the trunk of the Crown Victoria, he unloads two cardboard boxes overflowing with silks and feathers and polished chrome spheres. He digs through these, looking for something that he doesn't find. Stepping behind a tree, he unzips his pants to tuck in his tuxedo shirt. He runs a cordless electric razor over his face.

A nervous-looking woman in a black skirt asks me how long until he's ready. She's holding a clipboard and a pen and has a cell phone on a lanyard around her neck.

"Pretty soon, I think."

"I'm Stephanie, the event coordinator," she says. "I know I
told him on the phone that this would be a party for children eight
to ten—the birthday boy is nine, but most of the guests here are his
brother's classmates and they're older. So he might need to—I don't
know—*modify* his act for an older audience. Make it hipper."


She waits for me to say something more, and when I don't,
she asks. "Are you...his assistant?"

"I'm his boyfriend."

"Right," she says. She looks at her clipboard, as if there
might be a note there about the magician's companion. "Will you
need a plate for dinner?"

I shake my head and wink at her. She pauses, confused,
and then gives me a professional smile.

Howard joins us. He has somehow transformed himself
from a tottering old bum into a foppish gentleman. His beaver top
hat glints blue in the fading sunlight. "A rose for the lady," he says,
affecting a mid-Atlantic accent. He brushes the tip of his magic
wand across Stephanie's silk lapel and a blossom of dyed-red feather­
ers appears there. He bows deeply at the waist.

"Oh!" Stephanie chortles politely. "How lovely." She pokes
at the fake flower. "How is this...attached? Is this a *fishhook*? How
do I get this off?"

"You may *keep* your rose—a token of my appreciation,"
Howard says magnanimously.

For a moment, Stephanie seems about to lose her temper.
Exasperated, she says "we really need to start the show soon. I was
explaining to your friend that the boys and girls in attendance are
somewhat *older* than I had expected. Will that be a problem?"

"The situation is *completely under my control.*" He says, as
if implanting a hypnotic suggestion.

"Wonderful," she says. "I'll ask the DJ to announce you
now."

I take a seat at an empty table as the DJ fades up the theme
music from *Rocky."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls! We are in the pres­
ence of an extraordinary guest! Impervious to fire and invulnerable
to bullets, with hands faster than human vision! Possibly immortal!"
A direct descendant of—" Here the DJ pauses, struggling with pronunciation, "Virgilius the Sorcerer! He’s performed in New York, Las Vegas, and Paris, France! He’s performed for European royalty! The one! The only! Howard the Magnificent!"

Howard steps onto the stage, his giant cape billowing loudly over a smattering of applause.

"Watch!" he commands. With thumb and index finger, he plucks an invisible hair from his own head, then pantomimes stretching it into a long rope and tying it into a complex knot. He twirls it like a lasso, then casts it high above his head. He tugs on the imaginary rope, as if he’s snagged a grappling hook to the ledge of a tall building.

"Oh my god lame," one of the kids says.

He tugs again, and something seems to fall suddenly from the sky. Howard catches it and holds it cupped in his gloved hands—a live dove. He reaches into his coat, and in a movement too fast to see, he produces an impossibly large brass birdcage. He places the dove gently inside.

"Holy shit," one of the kids says. "That’s effing sick." They are stoned and giggling, but they watch Howard with rapt attention.

"Watch!" Howard thunders. "Watch. Watch." He points to his wristwatch and whispers, "watch." He unbuckles the wristwatch and lays it on a small table. He covers the watch with a handkerchief. He removes his top hat, reaches into it, and produces a small hammer, with which he pulverizes the watch. Reaching again into the hat, he retrieves a tumbler filled with water—he spills a little to show us it’s real. He brushes the broken bits into the tumbler and swirls the cloudy cocktail. We can see the shiny scraps of gold and we can almost hear the tinkling of the crystal shards. He throws his head back and gulps it all down.

"Fake," one of the kids says, "That’s so fake."

Howard swallows dramatically, his Adam’s apple bobbing. He contorts his body like a belly dancer, then opens his mouth. He reaches in with thumb and forefinger, and slowly pulls out his wristwatch, intact and—he holds it to his ear to confirm—still ticking.
The show declines. His card trick is too complex to understand—at the conclusion, he produces a King of Diamonds that has some significance I’ve missed. Kids begin texting on their cell phones, and gradually they wander away or talk to each other over Howard’s patter. The show ends when Howard throws several props into his hat, waves a wand over it, and then turns it upside down to demonstrate that everything has disappeared. He bows to the few people remaining in the audience, then bows to his bird. He picks up the birdcage, which disappears with a clatter and a puff of smoke between his hands. I clap for him, enthusiastically, and a few of the kids join me in applause.

While we’re loading his gear into the trunk, Stephanie tells us how much she enjoyed the show. There is a small ragged hole in her lapel.

“You know where to send the invoice?” she says, handing me a business card.

“I thought—" Howard begins. “I thought you would pay me today.”

“We pay net thirty,” Stephanie says. I hand Howard the card.

“We pay within thirty days of receiving an invoice,” she explains.

“I see,” Howard says. “No problem.” He smiles at me like a priest at a funeral, then slaps the roof of the car. “Let’s get lunch!” he says with exaggerated enthusiasm.

At McGill’s bar, Howard parks in a handicapped space and fumbles in his door pocket for the blue mirror hanger.

“Arthritis,” he says.

I look at the sun, still blazing in the West. “It’s okay to leave your bird in the car?” I say. “In this heat?”

Howard reaches into his coat. “He won’t mind,” he says, tossing the tiny collapsed birdcage into my lap. Feathers and gore poke out between the bars. Howard touches a finger to his lips in a gesture of secrecy. “Tricks of the trade.”

McGill’s is dead empty at 5 p.m., with only one other patron, inert at the bar. The whole place is paneled in dark wood,
with dull brass accents and dim sconces in each booth along the wall. I’ve driven past the bar for years but this is my first time inside. I’m surprised they have a kitchen and table service. The waitress brings Howard a baroque cocktail—his usual, evidently.

“I’ll have the senior special,” Howard says. “Chopped steak.”

“And for your friend?” The waitress asks.

“The same,” I say.

“A full portion?”

“You can charge me full price.”

Howard sips his drink, which is the color of butterscotch and garnished with a skewer of tropical fruit. “What did you think of the show?” he asks. “I put a couple of special things in there for you—stuff I used to do at the Sands.”

“You were great,” I say. “The thing with the watch was great.”

“When we did that in Vegas, I would ask somebody in the audience to let me borrow their watch. Then Gary would smash it while I was explaining the setup for the trick, and I’d pretend to be mortified—not yet Gary! I haven’t swapped it yet! Of course everything would work out fine and the guy would get his watch back.”

“So you were Abbot and Gary was Costello?”

“I was the straight man,” Howard says. “I did all the talking. I was the brains of the operation.” He smiles broadly, revealing a partial denture stuck like white candy between his yellow teeth. “Gary grew up in Colorado, but he was born in Monterey. His parents spoke Spanish at home. Gary was always afraid that he’d say something that sounded a little too Spanish.”

“He didn’t want people to know he was Hispanic?”

“He wasn’t dark. He had a little color. Sometimes we would say he was a gypsy. People liked that—gypsies are supposed to be good at magic and curses and mind reading. But who ever heard of a Mexican magician?”

In my web search on Gary Martinez, I’d found some scans of the oldest posters from the Vegas years: *Tommy’s Steakhouse at Algier’s Casino, featuring tableside psychic tricks by the devilish duo, Howdeeni and Kel-Mec!* Discounting the yellowing paper, Gary’s complexion in the illustration was as pale as his tuxedo shirt. He
wore a thick Teutonic mustache and combed his hair straight back
to emphasize a sharp widow’s peak.

“My grandmother says my beard makes me look Arab,” I
say. “She wants me to get rid of it so I don’t look like a terrorist. I
told her it’s not the beard that makes me look Arab. It’s the genes I
inherited from her. She’s one-hundred-percent Lebanese.

“You’re half Arab?” Howard asks, incredulous.

“A quarter.”

Howard scrutinizes me, deciding whether or not he be­
lieves this genealogy. “I like the beard. What do the ladies think?”

“My girlfriend thinks it makes me look Jewish.”

“So why don’t you shave?”

“No—that’s a good thing. Bunny says that’s why she went
out with me in the first place.”

“That’s what turns her on? How long have you been seeing
this girl?”

“Two years.”

Howard shakes his head and shrugs.

I try to segue back to the interview. “It must have been a
big deal to split up the act with Gary. After sixteen years together.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you must have been close,” I say.

Something about Howard changes, just at this moment. His mood sourns. “What kind of question is that? Is that what you’re
going to write in your newspaper story? ‘They were close’ Come
on.” He regards me contemptuously while the waitress sets out our
meals. I devote my attention to the food for several long seconds.

When he can see that I’m not going to defend or retract my
question, Howard says, “Eventualities precipitate.” He saws off a
big bite of steak and slathers it with mashed potatoes. “That means
’shit happens.’” He continues talking with his mouth full. “He got
his show. Then he got married.”

At the mention of marriage my mind skips to a lurid vision
of Bunny. A few nights earlier, she had commanded me to sit on
the bed while she disappeared into the closet with a shopping bag.
From behind the closed door, she prattled off the details of a plan
she’d hatched for our future: I would abandon my failing career
in journalism and apply to law school. It would be okay for us to marry, she said, before I finished my JD, but we'd wait to start a family until I had secured a position at a firm—preferably in the south, because she didn't like winter weather. She said she'd help me study for the LSAT, and reward good scores on practice tests with blowjobs. She stepped out of the closet wearing nothing but white garters and stockings, white heels and a bridal veil. "Spectacular blow jobs," she said. "Let me demonstrate."

I don't love Bunny. I don't like that she leaves her marijuana in my freezer; I don't like that men stop her on the street or in the grocery store or in lobbies or parking lots or on the bus to ask how she's been, and to suggest, affably, that they should catch up soon. Mostly, though, what I feel toward Bunny is a dull resentment, because she's cheerful most of the time without any reason or right to be so happy. I had been happy earlier in life—justifiably happy—but the circumstances of that happiness had seemed, for a long time now, irretrievable. I cannot imagine myself as a lawyer. But Bunny's plan, in comparison to my own unarticulated plan (which is to continue writing for the Tribune until I am laid off or the paper is shuttered) seems the more prudent option. That night I lifted her veil and kissed her deeply as I pulled her onto the bed.

I watch Howard eat for several minutes, fascinated by the mess he's making on the table. "What were you up to?" I ask. "While Gary's show was on the air? What did you do?"

"I did our act," Howard says. "Solo."

"Where? In Vegas?"

"Here," he says. "I came home. Mother was sick."

Howard gestures with his empty glass to the waitress across the room. "I'm dry," he says. "You should have one, too."

"I guess I was confused about that. It's not a big deal. But you were both in Vegas, and then he got the TV show, which filmed in Denver. So he moved out here. And then you moved out here, too."

"I'm from Denver," Howard says, a little sharply. "This is my hometown."

The waitress arrives with the drink and leans over me to reach across the large table. Her cleavage presses pleasantly against Valentine 129
my shoulder for a moment while she sets the fresh cocktail on a napkin and collects the empty glass and empty plates.

“You want one?” Howard asks.

“What is it?”

“Sprite and scotch with some sugar.”

“We call it the Fabulous Howard,” the waitress offers.

“I’d better not,” I say.

“Did you know, miss,” Howard asks the waitress, “That this place has an infestation of fleas?”

She takes a minute step backward, as if Howard himself might be infested.

“They’re quite harmless,” he says. “Domesticated. I’ve been training them, in fact.”

He nods down at the tabletop and beckons with one hand. His other hand, I notice, is out of sight under the table. The saltshaker wobbles, then haltingly advances toward him. “Thank you,” he says to the invisible fleas. He holds up the saltshaker. “Table service. They might be after your job.”

The waitress smiles obligingly. “Leave them a big tip,” she says.

I catch Howard peeling the stick-on magnet from the bottom of the saltshaker, but I don’t say anything. “How would you describe your relationship with Gary?” I ask.

“We worked together a long time.”

“Did he talk to you about the lawsuits?”

“No.”

Howard produces a deck of cards and begins to shuffle them in elaborate cascades, riffling them on the table and between his hands.

“How did he feel about the show getting cancelled? Was he angry at the network?”

“We didn’t talk about that.” He fans the cards face down on the table. “Pick one,” he says.

My cell phone chirps. I glance at the text from Bunny: Where the F R U? I tap one of the cards with my finger and Howard flips it over. The three of clubs.

“I mean later, after you were partnered up again.”

“We didn’t talk about it.” Howard buries my card in the
deck and shuffles, reshuffles. He deals me one card from the top of the deck. The three of clubs. He deals me a hand: four of clubs, five of clubs, six of clubs, seven of clubs.

The waitress brings the check. "Dessert?" she asks.

"I think we're done," I say, reaching for my wallet.

"Perhaps you can make some change for me," Howard says. "I have a hundred dollar bill that's been burning a hole in my pocket." He opens his wallet, and foot-high flames jump out of it, capped by one puff of dark black smoke.

The intense bleating of the fire alarm is so overwhelming that I can barely hear the waitress shouting and cursing as she steps over me onto the upholstered bench. I turn away from her tight gray skirt, which is pressed into my shoulder. She climbs onto the table, shielding one ear with her free hand and waving her notepad in front of a sprinkler head, trying to dissipate the smoke that has already cleared.

"Can I help?" I shout. "Should we call somebody?"

"Just go," she screams.

"That's—I don't think that's it!" I shout at her. "That's not the smoke detector!"

She tries to twist the sprinkler head like a faucet knob. Instantly there's a deluge of high-pressure spray covering our little corner of the restaurant. Howard's eyes are tightly closed and he is covering both ears with his hands, his face in anguish. He snatches up his cards and his wallet as I usher him toward the exit.

Standing in the parking lot with a puddle forming around us, I can tell that something is wrong with him. He looks diminished—physically smaller, like a wooly dog after a bath. I ask him if he's okay but he doesn't make eye contact with me. He's shivering.

"Should I take you to the doctor?" I say. "Do you need an ambulance?"

I feel for the keys in his pocket, touching him for the first time. There seems to be no body beneath his jacket, just wet clothes twisted around more wet clothes, like a wad of laundry from the washer. I help him into the passenger seat of the car.

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" I ask him. I can hear the siren of a fire truck approaching. "I think we should get out of here."
Howard is still holding the trick wallet. He opens it, and I detect a powerful whiff of kerosene. He examines the striker, the saturated wad of cotton clipped to a metal shield inside the wallet. “Would you please take me home?” he says finally. I watch in the rearview mirror as the fire truck arrives at McGills.

A few blocks away, I ask him for directions. “Get on the highway,” he says. “What’s your address?”

When he doesn’t respond, I glance at him and see his face turned away, his forehead pressed into the window. His hands are balled into fists on his thighs. “Are you okay?” I ask.

For several minutes he says nothing. I drive along at the same lugubrious pace he’d established earlier. “That was my favorite restaurant,” he says. “Now I can’t ever go back there.” “Yeah,” I say. “That sucks.” “It’s your fault,” he says. “Do you realize that? This whole fucked up day started with you.”

One of the things I learned at Northwestern is that sometimes it’s better to just let people talk, rather than to interrupt with questions. I fiddle with the air conditioning vents and the cruise control on the big sedan while Howard berates me. For the first time I feel like I’m hearing from the real person, rather than one of his affected personas. He tells me that he knows I don’t care about him, that I’m only interested in Gary, and that it was an insult to be interviewed only in that context. Gary was his apprentice; Howard was the master magician. He shouldn’t have to impress me. Gary had been nothing but a busboy in a Vegas restaurant when Howard met him. “He was a skinny Mexican faggot washing dishes and sucking dicks for rent money,” Howard says. “I taught him how to handle cards and coins. I taught him the French Drop and the Hindu Shuffle. I taught him how to use a rubber. And when I got a show—my show—at the Sands, I told them they had to put Gary on the playbill.” Howard taps his knuckle on the window and points. “This is our exit.”

Howard’s apartment is on the “terrace level” of a large complex populated mostly by community college students. I offer
to help him carry his boxes of props down the stairs, and he nods sharply but says nothing.

As soon as he opens the door to his apartment, an acidic odor rolls into the hallway. I imagine a spilled bottle of cologne somewhere, turning to vinegar. Howard slumps into a yellow sofa, unbalancing a tall stack of paperwork that collapses and slides onto the floor. Water drips from the cuffs of his tuxedo jacket, and thin wisps of wet hair are plastered to his forehead. His ruffled shirt is saturated and nearly transparent, revealing hidden pockets and the outline of a long spring across his chest.

“What a bitch of a day,” he says. He fumbles in his pocket for a pillbox. “Get me a glass of water?”

His tiny kitchen is barely navigable. The dishwasher and oven doors are open, and stacks of dirty dishes cover the countertops. The cupboards, also open, are empty. “Where are your glasses?” I say—loudly—but he doesn’t respond. I pick through the dirty coffee mugs and find one that looks relatively clean. One side of the sink is full of gray water, and the other is overflowing with dirty dishes. I don’t see any sponges or dish soap or scrub brushes, so I rinse the cup under the tap, fill it, and bring it to him, only to find him asleep on the couch. I watch for a moment to confirm that he’s breathing, and then I call Bunny.

“There you are!” she says, chipper. “Guess what? The doctor said everything checked out, so I’m starting hormones Wednesday.”

“That’s good,” I say.

“I’m gonna get a buttload of money when they harvest my eggs,” she says. “I could buy a new car. But I’ll probably put most of it into your tuition so we don’t have so much debt when you finish law school. I’ve got to buy something for myself, though. Something gold, like maybe a gold necklace or—Oh!—A gold toe ring! But we should definitely celebrate. What do you want? Sushi? Shushi and shexy? If you want sex—like, ordinary sex—tonight’s gonna be your last chance for a while, because if I accidentally get pregnant while I’m taking the hormones I’d have a litter. I mean, I could literally have like ten babies. And then we’d be fucked. Where are you anyway? You were supposed to call me when you were done interviewing the birthday clown.”
“He’s a magician,” I say.
“Whatever. Are you at the Trib?”
“I’m in Centennial. Howard had sort of an accident and I had to drive him home.”
“Who’s Howard? The clown guy? Did he shit his pants?”
“I’m gonna need a ride,” I say.
“What, from Centennial?” she says, aggrieved. “You know where I am right now? I’m at Celia’s having a margarita. She got a margarita machine. It’s awesome. I’m not driving all the way to fucking Centennial.”
“Well, my car’s back at the Tribune.”
“Well, that sucks to be you,” she says. “You got yourself over there; you can get yourself home.”
“I’ll call a cab.”
“I hope they take food stamps.”
“I’ll be fine,” I say. “Tell Celia I said hello.”
“He says hello,” Bunny says. I can’t hear Celia’s response, but Bunny cackles into the receiver.
“No, seriously,” she says. “A cab from Centennial is gonna be like a hundred bucks. Give me the address. I’ll come get you.”

When I return from the kitchen, Howard is standing in the middle of the room, wearing only his wet boxer shorts and translucent wet undershirt, through which I can see the curls of his dark gray chest hair and the hollow contours of his bony frame. He has carefully laid out his tuxedo to dry on some towels on the floor.
“I’m sorry,” he says, “for causing so much trouble. I made a mistake.” He peels a long strip of surgical tape from his forearm, releasing an almost invisible monofilament that had been anchored there. “Please don’t write this story.”
“You don’t have anything to worry about,” I say. “The story is only going to be twelve inches or so, and it’s about Gary Martinez, not about you and me getting kicked out of a bar.”
“Look at me,” he says, spreading his arms in a gesture of humility. “Don’t do this to me. It’s nobody’s business.”
“You mean about you and Gary?” I ask, surprised. “That’s really not news. I mean, it’s not newsworthy.”
“I’ve heard that people don’t care anymore about these
things. But they do care. Gary cared. His family cares.”

“Gary was your apprentice,” I say. “That’s kind of a big deal, right? Among magicians?”

Howard shrugs. “That’s the idea,” he says. “I told him all my secrets. And some of them he kept secret.” He looks past me, to the door, and I’m not sure if he wants me to leave or if he’s merely avoiding eye contact, trying not to reveal too much of the sadness and embarrassment that is still roiling inside him, flushing his cheeks. He smiles at me again, apologetically. “That’s all I’ve got left—a couple of secrets. Let me keep them.”

“Seriously,” I say. “This has been a shitty day for both of us, Howard. You gotta give me a break. I really don’t care about your sex life. Neither does anybody else. This is just a story to fill the space between advertisements—it’s a decoration.” I feel for the digital recorder in my pocket. “Here. Tell me whatever you want me to write about Gary. That’s what I’ll write. I swear to god.” Switching on the expensive little device, I am relieved to see that it still works. “All right. What do you want to say about Gary Martinez, for the record?”

Howard scowls at me, but I push the tiny recorder toward him, just inches from his chest. The red recording light reflects from his undershirt like the laser sight of a sniper rifle. “For the record—” Howard begins. He looks at me, incredulous, and sees that I will not relent. “For the record,” he says, acquiescing, “Gary
Martinez was the finest magician I ever met. He really understood what magic was all about.

I can see that he wants to say something significant and genuine—some antidote to the day’s flimflam and polemics. But there’s no specific idea behind his vague intention. His lips are open, waiting for something lucid and sincere to take shape in his mouth.

“And what’s that?” I ask. “What’s magic all about?”

“It’s about putting on a show. It’s about acting. It’s not about fooling the audience—they know you don’t really have magical powers.” He stops, considering his platitudes like a man examining his own fingernail, noticing something new. “They know you’re just some guy in a penguin suit. But for a night, they’re willing to play along. Magicians—the good ones—they’re playing along too. Gary knew that the illusion... the illusion is not the prop on the stage. The illusion is the stage and the theater and the audience and whole show. Everybody making this big illusion together.” Howard’s eyes dart around the room, perhaps imagining the rows of seats in a darkened hall. “It’s like religion,” he says. “It’s all horseshit, and most people—sane people—know that it’s all horseshit. But they go into the church and they all share the fantasy together and the priest blesses the fantasy and everybody kind of believes it and feels good about it. And everybody believing the same thing together, imagining the same thing at the same time—that’s as good as reality. That’s better.”

My phone starts ringing again, somehow more insistent. “I’ll be right out,” I say to Bunny, jabbing the “end” button before she can respond.

“Your Jewish girlfriend?” he asks.

“She’s not Jewish. She just likes to picture herself with a Jewish husband.”

Howard snorts. “Good luck to both of you,” he says.

The phone call has interrupted Howard’s monologue, and I know we won’t get back to that moment of fluency. But I’m sure I have a good quote. There has to be something there—the kind of sparkling, sharp-edged gem Waldo Liu seemed to elicit from every person he interviewed. I switch off the recorder.
“You know the bitch of it?” Howard asks. “I think Gary really loved his wife.”

When I emerge from the building, I have just missed the sunset. Bunny is waiting for me in the parking lot, grinning behind her huge round sunglasses. She looks like a housefly, the bulging lenses reflecting an iridescent blue-green sky. She has forced the top down on her old convertible Toyota. The canopy doesn’t fold away like it’s supposed to. I’ve told her not to drive with the top down; I worry it will catch the wind like a sail when she gets on the highway, and maybe rip free and kill somebody driving behind her. “Don’t be such a pessimist,” she always says.

“Here I am in BF Centennial,” she beams. “Who loves you?”

Her toothy smile is blue in the fading light, and her black hair is a glossy raven. A breeze passes over my damp clothes and raises gooseflesh across my arms and stomach. Bunny lowers her sunglasses and regards me with an arched eyebrow—what the hell happened to you? It’s a playful scrutiny, and in this moment, from this angle, she is intensely beautiful.
BEFORE THE TRIBULATIONS

You can’t breathe our air,
a tasteless, invisible mix,
so you wear a pressurized suit, a helmet
like a fishbowl

over your head. For once
your beard’s combed and trimmed;
your greenish-gray eyes
reflect

the sky like wet sand
after a wave recedes.

You’ve come back for me after
two millennia, the Fifth
and Sixth Crusades,
a plague that hardly kept me chaste,
so I can escape the hour,

the centuries of trial.
I’m frustrated,
I can’t kiss you, I can’t bring any books,
my gloomy

gratitude giving me
the shivers. “This world,” you mouth, “is just a dream.”
I’ll never smell a forest again.

Never feel a lemur’s
nose. What’s the use
of running from calamity? (So many silently,
loudly in pain.)
We gotta go soon,
you say in your muffled telepathy.
I rush to mist my succulents,
murmur babytalk to them.
Lock my dirty cell.
Shake out my welcome mat.

I run to grip your glove—
Eunoia, this is not a new aesthetic or epistemology about beauty, what ends undergird Wittgenstein’s wit, pronouncements of logic, any subject under Novalis and this noonday sky, of the theory of symbolism trumping names, of the theory of types being categorical squares, pointy corners overlapping, inward spiral into an nth number of trapezoids colliding, more intoned inside, artifice as objects seen sub specie aeternitatis, happy despite eulogies and euphemisms, or toasting revisioned lives, what possibility got shored up and unraveled, red mountain of origami tigers dissolved in acid rain, timed to end November, feast days from St. Martin’s to the long road home, warm inside over Rudolf Stingel’s oil and enamel, forever untitled, clean, pristine under Isaac and flammable evergreens, and fathers simplifying things, hands over an old hangar where theory died, muted mirrors of the same, buoyed names easing into veins, a new tractate, of artists talking to artists, about renaming us as Orsini did, as if tapping Austen on her rough crinoline, lily skin and naked shoulders to shimmer her politics, scabs hidden, layered hem over oval pouches, old coins strapped to the shin, knobs for knees, tassels ending in a ring around her ankles, tattoos of rock pigeons peeping through, under Ancona’s bridge of dreams, where Angelo Ferretti sits forlorn, waits inside empty-handed, pensive, open to meet halfway, across twin stairwells inside, undercroft covered in linen, soft folds, each floral motif inscribed, named, never pointing somewhere else, like our lost hours, or puzzled faces under orange whorls, of No. 2, Pollock redrawing its setting sun, million bulbs and intensely, light of coals from kilns, length of the Cardo finding a dead end as if it needed to rest, Gerhard Richter’s Antelio glass as definitive, over everybody’s outstretched arms, big palms beckoning or begging for leftover Ungers and Unwin blueprints, their umbrella vault, Indic relics housed inside, numinous in their backlit shapes, awkward form, edges, shards, sharp ends,
overhang of raw emotion, like Luy Tuymans’ pink ballroom reddening, and
in relief, a dollhouse and a fortalice falling into Noguchi’s garden of names,
an allegorical portrait, Alessandro Allori as Mercury slaying Argus under

eleven of Jupiter’s orbits, his hundred oracular eyes a sea of blue under
unused panels of basswood and sheet metal, on which we stand, hover over
Narcissus, himself over a loveless lake, an opaque pond by his side, and
our prayers too, that no one is left behind, to die, limits and regret inside,
in a labyrinth of rivers, the closing of our eyes to forget history, as named
as every mural and painting here, like Juno surrounded and alone, the end

like backdrops dropped in, under Wittgenstein’s solidity, doors bookending
our afternoon, where faith and hope sit side by side, over us returning and
wondering what being in love looks like, inside this sun terrace unnamed.

* The epigraph to this acrostic sestina is an excerpt from the poem “Chapter E”
by Christian Bök. The author’s 2001 book, Eunoia, is a “univocal lipogram, in
which each chapter restricts itself to the use of a single vowel”, the title itself being
the shortest word in English to include all five vowels. Eunoia means “beautiful
thinking”. Within Wittgenstein’s philosophy are indications of an aesthetic theory,
with the idea that “ethics and aesthetics are one”. The Latin phrase “sub specie
aeternitatis” translates as “under the aspect of eternity”.

Zhicheng-Mingde 141
HEARING IS A TALENT THAT MUST BE HONED

We've always been listeners, our ears pricked like dogs' at a high-pitched whistle or the word treat, but we lower our eyes in public to avoid being called eavesdroppers—though we are, of course. We are indiscriminate listeners. Our ears have been trained to filter conflicting sounds—the conversations in a crowded room, the cacophony downtown—and reassemble them logically, contiguously. In this way, we become, perhaps, multiple—some might say many-eared. To do this, we practice: one will whisper into a windstorm, and the other will discern the language from the squall, translating both. Our next challenge: to understand a foreign language simply by listening hard enough. We imagine this.
will be difficult, but eventually meaning will emerge like the blurred figure of a man—a man slowly broadening into a group of men—from the haze of desert horizon, suddenly coming into focus.
For the third time this month, we are awakened by cannon fire. The dog barks, and I can hear him clattering on the linoleum in the kitchen, scrabbling after a sound deafening, everywhere, and then gone. Carla hasn't stirred. But that, she tells me, is because she is not sleeping.

"I was almost expecting it tonight," she says.

"Why?"

She cracks all the fingers on one hand and then says, "Don't know. I just was."

She sits up and flings her legs over the bed. One move, athletic. Everything she does is a dismount, and I'm almost always still amazed by it.

"Do you want me to go?" I ask.

"No, Hal. Don't be ridiculous," she says. Then she thrusts out her boobs. "He'll listen to me."

What should be a playful line is instead grim, business-like. I stand and look out the window. I can't see him along the battlements facing us, nor do any of the turrets on our side show any light. Atop a lone brazier on the spire above the keep, last logs smolder, and a few pennants snap and then curl down along their standards. There's not even any smoke; last time, the smoke lingered near our house, filled everything with its smell, even my car, secured in a garage on the side away from the castle, but not tonight.

"I don't see him," I say.

"He'll come out. I'll stand on the damned drawbridge and scream til he shows himself, if I have to—but he'll come out."

And so she goes, yoga pants, sports bra, her only weapon her considerable will.

After a moment, I follow her.

I pet Snook for a minute, give him a thorough and calming head scratch, trying to calm myself. And then, even though I know better, I look for a weapon. Carla's tennis rackets seem all wrong, so
I grab a ten-pound bright green dumbbell, which only seems right until I'm outside, hanging back in the shadows, with a dumbbell in my hand, watching my wife sidle up to a castle.

"Show yourself!" she yells. I doubt she'd see him if he did. The castle walls are about thirty feet high, and the only windows in front are over the portcullis and the murder holes, where there is neither light nor movement.

"You fuckhead—come out!"

Across the street, the Davies' light turns on. I step farther back, out of its cast, behind the minivan.

"NOW. Come out NOW."

Then out into the light from his house steps Glenn himself, long and loping, looking even scrawnier than usual in a shabby terry robe. He lights a cigarette, sees me, and it's too late to hide.

"She after him about the cannon?" Glenn's one of those guys who looks away when he talks to you.

"Yeah. Did you guys hear it?"

"Oh yeah, we heard it," he says. After a drag, he adds, "Sheila nearly pissed the bed." He laughs, all smoke and hiss.

As I imagine him stripping sheets and cursing, I hear the clanging and squeak of the portcullis rising, and there's Reg, in Bermudas and a KISS t-shirt, big dumb grin on his face and his moustache tips waxed pin-straight, sticking out to either side of his fat face.

To Carla, he says, "What bothereth thou? Thee? Whatever?"

Even from here, I can see his eyes are glued to Carla's boobs.

"The fucking cannon. You know, once? Funny. Twice? Okay, a new toy. Three times? All in the middle of the night?"

He drops the smile, crosses his arms. He becomes the quintessential Nerd, Cornered. "Sue me. I keep my hours."

Carla jabs her finger at his face, and starts into a rant we have all wanted to deliver, about how we'd love to sue him, love to do anything to turn all this back, but that we wanted to try the neighborly thing first, however much he didn't deserve it, however much he abused the privilege of his wealth, and on and on. Glenn and I watch her, and Glenn grunts every now and again, and I
grip the dumbbell, even curl it a few times. My adrenaline flashes through me to the point where I feel sick and twitchy, but Carla and I have been through this. I am to let her work. That's how it's done. Let her work, keep my mouth shut, keep out of the way, keep out of trouble. And while it isn't exactly new to me anymore, it has not gotten much easier.

Reg knows how to goad us. We had tried to sue him, had wanted to very badly. When the neighborhood first got wind of the plans to put a castle at the end of the cul-de-sac, we explored our legal options. The township stepped in that time and made sure the neighborhood kids at least would not have to worry about a moat. My paper covered the controversy, and I got the scoop on what happened in town meetings from the other reporters. We had no ordinances or statutes that anticipated Reg, that fit his situation, and his lawyer was very good at pointing that out repeatedly, something we knew Reg paid him well to do.

In the end, there would still be a castle. And to his credit, following the little township showdown, he was actually pretty great for a long time. He paid the contractors extra to ensure that they kept the dust down not only during excavation, but also as they cut and placed the stones that, over the course of a summer and fall, built the massive walls surrounding the keep. At various points of the construction, he invited the neighborhood to tour the site, to ask questions, and he was pretty good natured with his answers.

He even hosted the block party for two years, as the finishing touches were put on the place. The second time, he told us to bring any old appliances, ratty furniture, ugly clothes, and old luggage, and everybody was pretty jolly when he let us load up the catapult a few times and fire everyone's junk into the power company right-of-way. I even took the ribbing of people who said it would be funny to fire my old Mustang off the roof of the castle. Reg was even gracious in coming to my defense, pointing out that we would never get it to the roof. Still, the size of things we did
fling was noteworthy. We cleaned the mess up later, but the line-
men had to wonder about the huge divots made by (respectively) a
washing machine, an old hide-a-bed, a chest freezer, and a flake-
board computer table from the eighties.

Of course, he might have wanted to play nice while his defenses still had clear weak points. But then, what did he worry about? We weren’t Mongol hordes, we were not Tamerlane taking a Moor army into his empire. We were neighbors. We drove mini-
vans. We fished the daily papers out of our hedges. We scooped our pets’ poop. We stopped watering our lawns when the township told us to (except for the occasional scofflaw who watered at night). Still, looking back, his attitude changed once the ironworkers got the portcullis going. It clanged into place, and Reg started growing that silly moustache.

And now, the cannon has us all on edge. The cannon feels like he’s testing us, grandstanding, proclaiming how his windfall has put him above the law, and above all of us. It makes us angry at little things. We mow the lawn and have to look at it. In fact, I have to make sure I mow my lawn in the morning, before the sun shifts and the entire side yard is in shadow and I can’t see whether the mower is cutting everything or not. Glenn and Sheila Davies can’t hang laundry out anymore, because the castle either blocks the wind or makes the wind tear around it so powerfully that all the clothes are blown onto the lawn in minutes. When snow falls off the turrets or the battlements, it’s a thirty foot drop before it makes an earth-shaking whump. Mothers of old would have had a field day warning children of the icicles that hung off of the damned thing.

In fact, all of us in the neighborhood are peeved that every kid in the subdivision comes to our cul-de-sac (you can’t blame them, if you were a kid, and there were a freaking castle in your neighborhood, where would you be?), and they stay there, and they make noise, and they also make us all feel responsible for them, and so we worry. And every time I walk into Vernon’s for coffee, I hate how I see Reg’s face, big smug grin, and him holding up that big fake check, his name printed in huge script by someone probably paid a few hundred dollars to do it, and some guy in a tie grinning at us,
telling us all to play Powerball at Vernon's, cause you just never know!

Well, as Carla says when she sees it, "Now we know. And it sucks."

Reg backs away as Carla continues, until he is just inside the arch, standing a few feet in from the drawbridge. He pulls a remote out of his pocket and the portcullis starts descending.

Carla stops, then says, "Oh, real mature. Just close the door and hide in your big fucking castle. This isn't the end."

“Oh,” Reg says. “I believeth it is.”

Glenn looks at me as if to say you just gonna let him do that to your wife? The dumbbell gets heavier.

“If I went over there, Glenn—” I start, and then I stop. He is looking away again, and it is clear he won't push me about it.

Reg is gone. I imagine him returning to some tower to flop in front of the X-box. On the rare occasions he speaks to any of us, the X-box is overwhelmingly the subject. I've never even seen an X-box, much less held a control. But that never stops him. He just goes on and on.

Carla strides back across the dust patch that constitutes Reg’s front lawn.

Glenn says, “What are you going to do? What are we going to do? He can't just keep firing off that goddamned cannon.”

Carla is close enough that she hears him.

“We'll call the cops again. It's a noise thing. They gotta respond.”

“It's like dogs,” Glenn says without irony. “There has to be ten-minutes or more of sustained noise, and they gotta come while it’s happening.” Glenn knows this because we got to know him, a few years ago, when he called them because Snook, then a rambunctious puppy from the SPCA, had barked quite a bit until we had him trained.

“Maybe they can be creative, since it's a firearm and it's one in the morning.”

“I doubt it,” I say. “I don't think we're going to find the answer by going through the local cops.”
Carla's lips tighten before she says, "There are avenues, and we need to exhaust them."

"Whatever. Knock yourself out," I say, and immediately regret it.

Then Glenn says, "Use my name, too. In fact, I can call after you do, if you want."

They keep strategizing, but I don't really hear what they are saying. I have moved the dumbbell behind my back, and am waiting until I can walk to the house. We are about to have a fight. And neither of us will get much sleep tonight.

Carla hangs up with the police and calls Glenn. As she speaks with Glenn, she does not once look in my direction. I putter through the kitchen, putting dry dishes away, hanging tea towels to dry. When Carla finishes with Glenn, she puts down the phone and straightens.

"Thanks for all your help," she says.

"Look—"

"No, really. Thanks for, you know, making this all a little easier. And the dumbbell. Nice touch. What exactly were you going to do with that?"

"Bad idea," I say. "Old habits die hard."

She steps closer to me, the look on her face a mix of affection and weariness. "You have to make them die or we're screwed. You have to accept it. When shit like this happens now, I have to deal with it. You can be around, you can help me in all kinds of different ways, but when there is someone to be dealt with directly, I will do it."

"I know that."

"I know you do, but it doesn't help when you don't act like you do."

"I stood back. I waited. I did the whole happy eunuch thing. I celebrated my powerlessness."

"Yeah, you did. But then you were a complete bitch when I got back. And now you have this attitude. I mean, I know you're not happy with it, but that's the way it is. That's the way you made it."

"I didn't make this," I say. "I didn't make it like this. I am
just fed up with the shit, have been for a long time—"

“And I’m not? Come on, you know better. Tell me you
know better.”

After a moment, I said, “It just gets to me.”

“Always has,” she said. I think she is turning conciliatory,
I think this might be going down, and then she says, “You have to
let it go you know, let me handle things. You know this, but then
you got pissy, you acted like I was ineffective, like I had no sense of
how to go about this—”

“Aw, c’mon. You know as well as I do that the cops are use­
less with this.”

“Yes, I do, but we can’t just come in swinging either.”

Neither of us talk. I am shaking and ashamed and too an­
gry and volatile to say anything, and I don’t know what I would
say anyway. She holds my gaze for a moment, no doubt containing
any of a number of further remarks herself, before she breaks and
goes to the fridge. At the pop of the fridge door gasket, Snook rises
and scrabbles into the kitchen. Carla feeds him cheese when I am
not around, and thinks I don’t know about it. I settle when I see
her hand reach from behind the fridge door to find his head. Her
fingers move through the fur. She reappears with a yogurt smoothie
bottle in her hand.

“That poor dog is freaked,” I say.

“Your poor wife is freaked,” she says.

I nod.

“I need to know you are not going to flip out again,” she says.

I nod again. I feel like a bobblehead in these conversations.

She moves in then, to hug me maybe, but before she gets
close enough, cannon fire thunders and her body stiffens.

“Call them again,” I say. “Call them now.”

As she starts to dial, I decide that it is almost one hundred
percent that Reg will fire that cannon again.

Reg is the kind of guy that believes in reacting big, the kind of guy
that in grade school, if you had punched him in the arm, he’d turn
and kick you in the face, then a few times in the ribs if you fell
down. Then he might find a way to spit on your mom and tell you about it later, weeks after you'd forgotten the whole thing.

The first time we ever called the cops, and not even for anything terribly un-neighborly, Reg went ape shit. This was after the catapult-the-appliances party. He had lit a bunch of his braziers on the fourth of July, to light the place up. It was kind of nice, kind of cool. Kids drove down the street to see the way the battlements lit up. He even had torches going in some of the arrow slits, and a massive fire on top of the keep. It was a little smoky, but the high school was across the large flat fields, beyond the right-of-way behind our subdivision, and since they shot off the fireworks there, we could see them bursting over the top of the castle and all its fire and shadows. If it weren't for the water tower actually also being in view, it would have been almost like the fireworks at Cinderella's castle at Disneyland.

Reg had invited some of his buddies over. We never saw that he had buddies, but that is apparently what happened. They drank Jaegermeister and played X-box out on the balcony at the back end of the keep, all while watching the fireworks, until Reg, in a drunken tirade, threw them all out. He passed out not long afterward—and did not douse any of the braziers. It had been a dry July. Some torches burned down and started to drop stuff. Little grass fires were starting at the base of his towers.

I think Glenn actually called the cops. But we were all outside when they came, and Carla and I were unspooling garden hose to have at some of the blazes. There were too many for just us, though.

Reg woke to sirens, the honk of a tanker truck, and a bullhorn calling him out of his inebriated sleep. He was fined. At one point, he shouted, "Thou shalt to fucking hell go! With you all! Shit!"

A cop said, "Calm down, Lancelot."

Shortly after that, Reg sprayed Round-Up on all the lawn on his property. By the end of August, bare, hard tan dirt was all that was left. He hung a sign from his tallest tower that said, "Dirt doth not burn, thou assholes." It looked like he painted it on a bedsheet. It had drips and smears all through it. Then, for a few weeks, our newspapers disappeared from our stoops and driveways, and
at the end of the string of newspaper thefts, Reg built a towering bonfire atop the brazier over the keep, fueled by our newspapers, burning at the height of the hot, dry August, all night long. Carla marches out into the front yard while I get the ladder from the garage. We have had An Idea. Glenn’s thing about the noise ordinance got me thinking about proving that a noise was made, and then that a firearm was discharged, and it hit me. A cannon will flash. When I used to talk with vets about the horror of the battlefield, or when I read different historical accounts, there was always the flash, the fire, whatever. Always light and smoke, the telltale signs. And so I climb to the roof with a digital video recorder. The roof because it is the only way I can see over the wall of Reg’s castle, and the video camera because there is no way I can time a regular camera to catch a shot. I have two hours of battery, a big roll of duct tape, and the conviction of a husband on the outs with his wife and looking to make good. I cannot lose.

I tape the camera to the chimney, and then sight it and adjust the lens. I find the cannon, sitting on the balcony at the rear of the keep. I focus to take in as much of the area in front of the cannon as I can. Then, I start wrapping duct tape around the camera, making a wide gray asterisk on the side of my chimney. Once I think it’s basically secure, I wrap long bands all around the chimney several times, covering the asterisk, reinforcing the camera. I check the lens, and with all set to go, I hit REC and sit back, perched on the rough crown of the roof, feeling the shingles abrasive through my shorts.

Carla is down below, and Glenn has joined her. I can hear them talking, but not what they’re saying. He is dressed now, his hands clasped behind his back, his head angled toward Carla, his feet shoulder width apart. He has the pleasure of waiting down there next to my wife. His own wife is inside, sleeping.

Fatigue hits me. I have not been tired during all of this, and then it is like all the tired feelings that I should have felt converge at once and my body is a stone. The low whir of the camera and the muttering between Glenn and Carla are all I can hear, and it is putting me to sleep. Then, the cannon goes off again. Jolted awake, I scramble over to the camera and press stop, the booming
echoing around the neighborhood. From the roof, I can see one or two lights go on in the neighborhood.

I hit REV, then view the last few seconds of tape in the little view finder window. It's there, a bright white flash that grows to fill the screen, driving the light sensor mad, before it dissipates in a grainy swirl of darkness. And the camera provides a bonus I hadn't thought of: the boom is caught as well, sounding tinny and distorted in the camera's miniaturized world. I tear the camera out of the duct tape.

"Carla! We got it," I holler, and when I turn to give her a thumbs-up, a ridiculous, juvenile move, my foot slips on the roof. For a second, I know everything that will follow, the slide, the mad grapple at the gutter, her and Glenn running toward the house. And then I am falling.

A few months after Reg started construction on the castle, I got laid off. The paper for which I had worked as a reporter, features writer, and eventually columnist for almost a decade was purchased and the staff shaved down basically to ad staff, a few of the younger (and thus less expensive) reporters, and someone to edit the copy from the wire services. I was given hours to leave the building, as were most of the other people in the newsroom. Just about everybody decided to go tie one on and consider their options, but I drove out to try and find Carla.

It was a Thursday, and it was June, so it meant she was working with individuals all day long, hour-long clinics during which members worked on their serve, their backhand, their coverage of the net. I seldom watched Carla at work, but looked forward to any opportunity to do so. Her body was long, but the control she had over it and the strength she could tease out of it made watching her engaging. I would find myself tensing, or feeling breathless—not out of desire. Just out of awe at her physical capability.

I ran, ate well generally, and stayed in shape, but it wasn't my job. My job was to sit and write, try not to overthink it. Try to make it clear. But mostly to sit. I would go and sit in bus stations, in courtrooms, in waiting rooms, in banks, in school au-
ditoriums. I would listen to people in far less control and grow impatient at their inability to string together even simple words to get across what they meant. And I would grow especially impatient when two people would talk at one another, stopping only when they ran out of ideas or the other person shouted them down, and rather than listen, they would prepare their next tirade. And so often, they just said the same thing but didn't hear it.

Carla had eloquence in movement. She could take control of a person's body with a touch here or a word there, and they would do it. I mentioned this to her once, and she said, "Everyone thinks they can speak. No one thinks they can just play tennis." She didn't elaborate.

I drove down the club's shaded drive, in a car that, anymore, had to be coaxed into movement, that had a guttural and reluctant growl from its engine, and that smelled as though constantly burning somewhere. In this noisy offender, I drove under sycamores planted by someone so noteworthy that each end of the drive had a plaque describing the achievement. On the tennis court, a half dozen women the same age as Carla gathered around her, all in yoga pants and pony tails, all trim and aggressive about their fitness. She was busy, and I suddenly didn't know what I would say. I hadn't slept much the night before, working to meet a deadline for a column, and had opted not to shave that morning in order to spend a little extra time in bed. I had spilled coffee in my lap. I drove the automotive equivalent of a derelict with a nasty cold. In short, I came off like Falstaff or some angry hobo come to molest the rich women, and that made me suddenly feel like an angry hobo.

Driving home, I calculated what they were paying the club, what the club paid my wife, how little we had in savings, what our monthly needs were, and the numbers got bad. As these numbers formed taunting columns in my imagination, I arrived home to the now familiar cloud of dust moving in a lazy swirl about the cul de sac. It fit: as the jobless angry hobo back from soiling the lawn of the country club, I was now arriving in the fiefdom where the local lord's construction covered the peasants in a dust made more pricey for the cost of the labor to produce it.

His contractors had started a little garbage pile—stone
chips, empty mortar bags, scrap wood, coffee cups—the edge of which now pushed onto my lawn. I knew before going in the house that everything would be coated in a tallow-gray film, the stone dust having worked in through every less-than-perfect seal in the house. We dusted every night, and every afternoon the stone masons worked, we saw the return of the dust. I walked inside, unsure of what I would do for the rest of the day, and too angry to remain outside, where I would simply cough and hack and make it worse anyway.

The dust: I blew it out of the computer keyboard. When I pet Snook, the stuff puffed out from his fur. I ate a pear and tasted it. I ate a few cookies and tasted it again. I swore I could even taste in the water. The lawn was grey, the house, once yellow, was now more brown. The kids who came to watch the construction also liked to write things in the dust coating windows of the garage doors, a double insult. That morning, I noticed, they wrote, for some reason, and what any other day would be nonsensical, GET A JOB. And while in the middle of trying to salvage the day by making a sandwich, I answered a knock at the door to discover the guy who reads the water meter taking the time to tell me that, due to build up of debris that worked into the meter housing, the reader would have to be replaced. The township would cover the meter and so forth, but there would be a charge for the installation itself. I tersely dismissed him, despite his assertion that he was just letting me know.

I ate the sandwich. I watched *The Kids in the Hall* and didn't laugh once. I didn't even finish the sandwich. And then I felt bad because it was a waste of money to eat part of a sandwich and feed the rest to the dog, who got way too much food from me anyway. Despite the sandwich, despite my mood, I was determined to simply sit and watch TV, to wallow in distraction, to let a few hours pass before I did anything dumb. But I looked out the window. I should have known that would be bad to do. The world was out there, Reg was out there, there were things out there beyond my control, beyond the influence of a remote control—things that would not rest just because I so desperately thought I should.

I recognized the car parked in the cul de sac, a little Geo
sport jeep thing covered in anti-Bush stickers and a Parrothead decal: Brent, the guy who covered human interest stuff for the Lifestyle section. He enjoyed stories about plucky residents of nursing homes and rotund women who baked for craft fairs. He liked snappy leads.

It took me a minute to realize he wasn't coming to offer me some consolation. He had come to write about Reg.

At first, it is nearly impossible to draw a full breath, and my arms tingle. I try to draw in, and while I want to thrash to get unstuck, I can't move. I am next to the driveway, having bounced off the hood of the Mustang. While the car probably kept me from breaking any bones, the impact also knocked the wind out of me and seriously strained parts of my skeleton, I'm sure.

Carla keeps stroking my head, asking if I am okay, and when I can finally draw a full breath, I tell her to stop.

"What should we do?" she says.

I try to sit up, but my vision swims as I do, so I lay back down. Glenn says, "Woah, buddy."

"Find the camera. Can you find the camera?"

They both start in on variations of Jesus, Hal, you just fell. For Christ's sake.

"I know that," I say. "Just find the goddamn camera so the fall will be worth it."

Glenn looks meaningfully at Carla, and then goes off in search of the camera.

"He called 911," she says.

"That's no good without the evidence, so maybe you should help him."

"For you, dumbass," she says. "He called so they would send an ambulance."

I laugh and it hurts.

Carla sits with me as I concentrate simply on breathing. First things first. She asks again if she can help but I tell her it doesn't feel like she can do anything. Then Glenn hollers that he found the camera. It landed in the shrubs, and those scraggly things
must have helped break its fall, because it is intact, and still on.

“That camera and the evidence does not make it worth it that you fell off the roof, you know,” Carla says. “This is a problem.”

“It’s all a problem,” I say, grunting. “Our lives are about problems. Problems are what we do—what we’ve been doing for a while. This just rounds things out nicely.”

After a moment she says, “I think it’s very sad that you feel that way.”

Then, the neighborhood is rocked once again by cannon fire. I jolt from the sound, and it hurts—but since I am already in pain, I wrench myself up, so I am sitting. The world keels to the side, but then rights itself, as a monster headache blooms fully behind my eyes. The pain shudders in waves, so much that I grow instantly nauseous. Carla wipes at her eyes, and Glenn is moving toward us, his face is illuminated by the LED screen on the side of the video camera.

“We have him, buddy,” he says. “I hope he enjoys firing that thing now, because pretty soon he’s gonna be paying for it.”

Carla says to me, “Do you really think our lives are problems?”

“It’s really not the best time to ask me that.”

Glenn yells to the castle, “I called the cops, Reg! The cops are ON. THEIR. WAY. REG.”

I think I hear Reg yell back, *fucketh you!* Then I wonder if I am imagining it. I say to Carla, “Let’s just get through this now, okay?”

I never did read the story Brent wrote about Reg, though I could imagine it. Particularly the part where he wrote about the psychotic neighbors living in the shadow of the castle who opposed the rugged individualist’s bold outlook on suburban living. That was just the kind of asshole philosophy that cornpone-prone Brent just lived for.

I did give him some ammo for the psychotic thing. When I realized what Brent had come to do, I ran out into the front yard and found him snapping photos of the portcullis. Reg was nowhere in sight. I cannot now remember what I said to him, but it made
him spin around fast. It was already very clear from the newsroom that he and I were never to be buds, but I knew he then understood a whole other level of hostility was being directed at him.

I told him to go away. I said he was just encouraging someone who didn't give a shit about any of his neighbors. I told him that when people were losing their jobs, writing about some jackass who built a castle because of a lucky lottery ticket was, and I actually said this, actually remember uttering the words, "the zenith of tacky, the apogee of poor taste," as if attacking a guy like Brent with fancy words was going to do anything.

"You know, let it go," he said, holding up a hand and pushing it at me. "I'm sorry for you that things turned out how they did, but dude, I am just here to do a job."

"You can't just write about him. He is ruining this neighborhood, he is a slob, he is human fucking garbage that happened to get lucky."

Brent rolled his eyes and positioned himself for photographs. "Well, if you're gonna take pictures, at least get a few good shots of the fucking gate, so people can know where to knock on the door for tours. Or where to drive through the fucking thing."

He just said, "Whatever," and started snapping randomly.

I stood there, waiting for him to say something else. I couldn't understand why he wasn't in the argument. I remember telling the shrink how the rest of the world fell away, how I didn't notice anything else, became focused on Brent. The court shenanigans, such as they were, later revealed to me that there had actually been kids out on their bikes in the cul de sac, that a few workers had stopped to watch the crazy guy yell at the reporter, that I had in fact created a spectacle. That everyone had watched me go back to the house and knew that I was going to be back. And so I wondered for months, where was I? Why can I only remember him and me in that moment? Why did I get so lost?

I returned to the yard moments later. I walked up to Brent, gave him a little shove, and said, "Leave. You're not writing this story." He turned toward me and I poked him in the chest, hard enough that he had to step back. "I said leave, or I will smack your fucking brains out."
He stared at me still, and then I started punching him. Even when he fell, I punched him. Straddled him and punched him more. I don't remember when or why I stopped. I don't remember what he looked like when he left. I don't remember what I did in the moments afterward.

I later learned that when he ran to his Geo and drove off with a little spray of gravel, he only drove down the street a bit. Then he called the police, who swiftly came and booked me for assault, terroristic threats, all kinds of things.

An ambulance arrives and two paramedics step out. One of the paramedics is a woman with a curvy figure, and so she is suffering Glenn. He asks her if the cops are on the way, if she wants to see the tape, as he describes the history of Reg. She tries to support the guy she came with, who is now handling me and trying to determine whether or not I have a concussion. Carla is not saying much, but is looking pointedly at the man checking me, as if her force of will can make things better than they are.

They decide they need something else. He tells me to wait and looks at Carla as if to say, Make sure he doesn't attempt to rise and jog around the house.

"I don't fucking believe we are in this position," I say. "He had built that goddamned castle, without a care for anyone else, without a thought to what his actions have done, with no thought at all, really. He is a moron run by his immediate whims. A little self-control, a little forethought, and we wouldn't be here suffering because of him."

"I couldn't have said it better," she says. It takes me a moment before I realize she is not just talking about Reg.

"Yeah, well, fine. So then why is no one arresting his fat ass for it?"

"He simply violated a noise ordinance, that's all, you know. He's not out to get you. This is not some poetic moment."

My head throbs, and a new pain stabs in my side for me worry about.

Glenn tears himself away from the paramedics and walks
over to us. Snook has started to bark inside, aware of the noise and tumult outside. "I’ll go see to him," he says.

"Where the hell are the cops," I say.

Carla sighs heavily. She’s making an effort to hold back. If I hadn’t just fallen off a roof, she might be less gentle. I am momentarily proud for having figured that out.

I hear the paramedics telling a dispatcher somewhere that, essentially, they have come upon a tempest in a teapot. I will be alright. I hear them say I could get up a walk right now if I weren’t being coddled by my wife. Everybody seems to have an opinion on how I’m doing.

Reg’s cannon crashes again and the sound echoes through the neighborhood.

Carla stands and peers toward the paramedics. All of them are turned toward the castle. Carla jogs off toward them. Glenn is helping Snook out the front door, holding the screen door so it won’t hit him, and Snook’s tail thwacks it three time before he is out in the yard. My keys dig into my side as I lean and hoist myself to my feet.

The world spins for a moment, then rights itself. The first step is wobbly, the second tentative, but after a few more, I am jogging in a light hobble, and then I am in the Mustang. It starts after only a little cough, and snickers as I back it up. I think I hear my name, but once I put it in gear and let the pistons flood with fuel, let the engine do what it so wants to do, I can’t hear anything except the dirt of Reg’s ersatz lawn kicked up and pummeling the back wheel wells, the rods shuddering against the uneven expanse.

The engine screams suddenly, as if the muffler took a hit and a hole has let the engine’s real noise come out—louder then the cannon, louder than anyone who might be yelling to me, loud like applause. I wait, then, let the engine drown out everything else, and I wish I had a lance. That fat ass wants a castle? Let him fight a knight. Let him fight an invasion. I close my eyes, laugh at the image, then feel nausea wash over me, so I open them again. When I do, his castle is spangled in blue and red. During the reverie, the police arrived, their lights like heralds, their voices loud like the taunts of marauders, and when Reg arrives in the arch behind the
portcullis, awash in the flood lights of the cop cars, I am thrilled
to see he is small and ridiculous, his moustache waxed tight as a
psychopathic scribble on the face of a clown.

I turn off the car. I see Carla in the rearview, her face wet
and red from the lights, her arms crossed. In a moment I will let
her sit with me in the car, and I will try to get her to believe what I
will say, that things will be okay. But I will need a moment myself
to believe it, to absorb that in the next few minutes, Reg will get
a fine. Maybe more. They might take away the cannon, as it is an
unlicensed firearm—and as the thought occurs to me, I hear a cop
say almost that somewhere behind me.

I'm parked at the edge of my lawn, at the edge of the few
things left that make up my life, about to storm a castle, and I have
stopped. I have actually stopped. I bet somewhere the damned dog
is even laying down, not pissing on something. I can't wait to tell
Carla how grand life can be sometimes.
These mountains, somehow, they play at hide-and-seek, and all before one’s eyes.

— Herman Melville

1.

Still life with rocks that write.

Acorns laying into an aluminum shed.

I saw the yellows first to turn—hickory, ferns, drought-addled birch.

A tacit concession,

measuring a door in winter only to find it swollen in summer.

“The challenge of drawing an ellipse is that it must be done with enough speed to engage the natural ‘roundingness’ of our reflexes.”

Poetry to silence as bouldering is to tether.

2.

Roadsides littered with empties.

A hornet under the clapboards of a house about to trill.

The author who treated sentences like chapters sat at the north window,
while the author who treated chapters like clauses wrote looking past him at the mountain.

3. The things that take me back the most hologram.

Blue eyes in a charcoal portrait.

Passport photos when travelers were asked to simply describe themselves.

Imagine the prodigal son, at odds with whom he thought he was.

Faint calling of an auction down the street.

Willowware decorated with story.
In another story over coffee, a mountain lion acquires
a taste for geese,
would eat only geese, terrorizing winter corn fields.

Instinct as a habit comparable to origin, the cuckoo lays its eggs
in the nest of a warbler,
a plot squaring off in eaves, in grocery bags, the green kind,
forgotten

or merely inopportune, hanging on a doorknob until the checker
makes sure
you know which hand handles the carton.

Eventually I'm going to grow and peddle flowers just to learn
their exchange.
Elapsed shelf-life somehow the mnemonic to beauty,
as when we went to buy a cigar for the dad who got us a room
at the casino
and found charming strip malls where dusty baseball caps
had failed to sell

across two unveiled logos. In this state, memory turns left
by following a jughandle.
Our first glimpse of the ocean was always only the bay. We fed
ice cubes to the tide,
brought the gulls closer, light signaling off limbs, neon
like a tennis ball stuck in a fence
which bends backward to guard an overpass.

You would have to really climb to commit suicide.
Yet to drift is to be locked in,
to feel at least some ease in this gimbal lantern,
land cleared by landlord,

where the harsher the light, the more aromatic our hair and skin.
Spring passes go.
Fields of alfalfa cured, thus occasioning breath.

The man from the shelter they call pomegranate hands—
not a nod to his pickpocketing,
but the iodine with which he treats his water—

proves there are sweeter drinks to be cut
with something bitter.
They say he owns one share Berkshire Hathaway
but won’t sell,

would rather pass on, over, as everything salvageable
in the park next to the shelter,
every powerline insulator its original cobalt.

Remember the birdseye from choir? The one note held
to your discretion.
Church muting through a blanket pinched between pews
to form a tent.

In the actual woods someone has thrown a stopwatch and snorkel.
Not going back.
New to someone. New to denature.
Or, as the locksmith warns:

keep the receipt, new keys can be fussy.
The wise don’t have eyes in their head.
They plant their feet

and proceed by blocking: a dramatic monologue,
stage bereft

Downey 165
of the world, how the Quakers have long chosen thee and thou over you,

feeling its blurred singularity unsuited to spiritual address.

To smile at an old head of garlic in the fruit bowl sprouting
or an infant in the roadhouse kitchen,

the line cook’s child, whom no one minds,
who appears a vanishing point.
The first night he took one of us, the Challenger disintegrated over the Atlantic Ocean. We’d watched that day from our second-grade classroom at Rosewood Elementary, from the huddled space of the magic carpet where Mrs. Levy read to us during story time, where she pulled the television close to the carpet’s edge and dimmed the lights, like the movies, the launch as magic as the storybooks she read to us. We watched for all of them, especially for the teacher up there in space, and when the shuttle exploded only 73 seconds into flight, when Mrs. Levy held a hand to her mouth and shut off the television, we knew only that something had gone wrong, that the light bursting onscreen was not the same heart-fluttered spark of fireworks, the only other flare we knew.

At home, our parents watched the coverage. We watched with them, over TV dinners, over glasses of milk. We knew something terrible had happened, though we weren’t sure what, and we felt sad and somehow empty until our parents tucked us into bed, into blankets soft and warm, and then we were safe again until we woke and heard the news while our parents poured our cereal and listened, a disaster of another kind, a tragedy far closer to home.

Craig Davenport, who’d sat next to us on the magic carpet, who’d played hopscotch and kickball on the playground with us, who at lunch had traded his juice box for our fruit snacks — gone, taken in the night from his own bedroom, the window still open when his parents came to wake him and found his empty bed.

There were speculations, notice of a vehicle, a number to call if any information was found. There were our parents, holding us close, dropping us off at the doors to school, watching us walk inside.

But we knew, as sure as we knew the shape of letters to spell our names, that at last he’d come for us. That what we’d done those few months before, the last innocent months of our lives, had brought all of this on.

We’d conjured him on the playground, bright blue October, our sweaters soft as fleece, a downy barrier between our skin and the
cold metal of rungs and bars. We crowded inside the rocket, a tall structure painted the colors of our American flag, its diameter large enough to encase all of us, all clustered around a discarded piece of mirror that Tom Davies found in the woodchips nestling the swing set. Tom looked at each of us, fear scratched into the soft creases of his face, and told us of the Rosewood Phantom, the first time we’d heard the name, the first time the words stained the ridges of our tongues.

Tom told us Rosewood had a killer, many years ago, a man who stole the town’s children one by one, any child who dared to step outside beyond nightfall and at times, even children tucked soundly in their beds. Tom told us the townpeople finally caught him, tortured him, wrapped him in a winding sheet, then they buried him alive beneath the hills of Stillwater Park, a death as terrible as the grief of all those parents.

Tom paused, shifted his gaze around the perimeter of the rocket, said the story never ended there. He told us the Rosewood Phantom would appear if we said his name three times into a mirror, even into a broken shard neglected among woodchips. He said the Phantom would emerge in rags, bloodied remnants of the winding sheet, to take the souls of more children, to exact revenge on our town. When Rachel Vasquez said That’s a lie, that sounds just like Bloody Mary, a game her sister played that never worked, Tom flashed a glare across all of us, told us he’d tried summoning the Rosewood Phantom once with his babysitter, in the bathroom of his basement. He said they’d never even made it to three, that upon the second summon the mirror began to shake, an eerie wobbling that forced the babysitter to turn on the lights, to make him promise he’d never tell his parents. Weeks later, when Tom lost a tooth and spat red into the bathroom sink, he left a dark stain across the porcelain, a stain that regardless of his mother’s scrubbing never lightened, its crimson a harrowing reminder of the Phantom’s blood-stained rags.

I don’t believe you, Nick Dorsey said. Nick, who never believed anything, who’d shouted that pigs and spiders couldn’t talk when Mrs. Levy tried to read us Charlotte’s Web, who’d told us all last year that Santa wasn’t real, though most of us still believed. Nick
reached into the huddle and grabbed the shard of mirror. Before Tom or any of us thought to stop him, he chanted the name of the Rosewood Phantom three times.

We waited, our breath all held as one. The wind picked up, blew yellowed leaves across the playground. We could have been angry with Nick, but none of us were, those few moments of waiting as delicious as sugar. And then nothing happened but the sound of a faint scream, carried across the blacktop on autumn wind, one lone call of triumph from the four-square grids.

Nick threw the mirror down, called Tom’s bluff, told us ghost stories were for babies. Then we heard the whistle blown from the school doors, the end of recess, and we climbed down from the rocket, disbanded our summit, left the mirror shard abandoned inside the rocket’s cage. And then three months later Craig Davenport disappeared, and a real rocket broke apart.

These were links, impossible to discard, as we’d so carelessly done with the mirror.

Spring arrived early, melted the icicles from the tree limbs beyond our windows, pushed a space between us and our nation’s lost rocket, and even helped us forget the empty desk in Mrs. Levy’s classroom, Craig’s pencil box still inside, a sign of hope to all of us that he’d come back someday for its contents, that he’d sit beside us again. We moved through Valentine’s Day, the first real reminder that Craig was gone, our shoeboxes papered and glittered as mailboxes for valentines, for the cards we brought each member of the class, even Craig, a puffy-painted box Misty Jones had made for him that sat atop his desk, its mail slot overflowing with notes. But then an early wave of warmth drove the snow to recede, drove the weight of Craig from our consciences, occupied instead by lighter coats, by splashed puddles and mud until the thaw brought forth police, as readily as it drew small crocuses and ants.

On our broadcasts, new searches – a new thirst for clues, hidden all those weeks beneath hard-packed snow, new locations to inspect, new community volunteers prepared to slug through sodden forests, to dig beneath softened ground. Our
parents asked us, at times, if we remembered anything particular about Craig, if we’d seen anything unusual that day. We shook our heads no, avoided our parents’ eyes, and on the playground avoided the rocket, avoided each other altogether.

Mr. Tillman, one of Craig’s neighbors, had reported seeing a strange vehicle on their street that day, 1979 Buick LeSabre Estate, a brown station wagon he’d never seen before, parked along the mailboxes that afternoon while he watched daytime game shows. The police followed that lead, though that was all we knew, though no other clues presented themselves under layers of snow, finally melted. While our town picked up searching we receded, kept our mouths shut, and at night locked our windows tight, crouched beneath covers, waited for the turn of doorknobs, the creak of panes slowly rising.

But nothing came, no telltale sounds, not even brief glimmers in mirrors though we held our breath every time we brushed our teeth. And then March melted to April, and no more clues were found or pursued, and early spring slid into full bloom, tulips and hyacinth lightening us, relaxing the tight cores of our chests, settling us into sleep as their growing bulbs guarded our yards.

And then in late April, the day after the Chernobyl disaster, after we learned that over 4,000 people had been killed, a radioactive bloom above two continents, we awoke to a world tilted even further off its axis, a world that allowed Rachel Vasquez to disappear.

As the police swarmed our school and streets in droves, as our parents spread their hearts between the Ukraine and Rosewood, disasters separated by seas, we knew for sure that there were no misgivings, no coincidences. We knew what we’d done, and we knew the scope now, unfathomable.

We’d brought these disasters upon us, and upon the world as well. By our own imprudence, born of curiosity and nothing else, we’d summoned a monster that took two of our peers from their parents, an insatiable fiend that stretched its claws across the Ukraine as well, that pulled a failed rocket from the sky. We knew the stakes had risen beyond the height charts lining our closet.
doors, with the deaths of more people than we knew to name.

Our parents installed security systems, new technology, Rachel taken from her bedroom just like Craig. They bought us personal alarms, tucked mace inside our pockets, an arsenal of protections that we knew, even as we accepted them, could never save us, neither siren nor latch, not the tightest of bolts hugging our windows shut. We were not safe, none of us, and we curled into ourselves, grew quieter as the police descended upon our streets and tried relentlessly to determine what links connected Craig and Rachel, why Rosewood, why this class and these kids?

Tom Davies began collecting meteors, though we all recognized their shapes as shale. We watched him scour the playground, line space rock along his desk, where he'd watch them for hours, ignoring Mrs. Levy and imagining, we were sure, another world beyond this one, a planet of gentler tilt. Karen Kettleman stood at the edge of the swingset, during recess, stared at the sun long enough to brand an afterimage into her brain, some vision that flashed long after she closed her eyes, something bright and captured and burning. And Nick Dorsey pored over Two-Minute Mysteries, as if solving them might open a portal, some solution, as if knowing how Mr. Deeds died could disolve the impossible specter of death.

When Trina Johnson's personal alarm went off in her backpack, a blaring sound that interrupted Mrs. Levy's story time and took over five minutes to find while the siren blasted louder, splitting our ears, Tom at last signaled to us, every one of us across the magic carpet, somehow less magical now, with a flicker of eyes we knew not to ignore. In the library, when we should have been finding books for our annual readathon, we met by the card catalogue instead, flipped through musty entries until we found the Rs, then Rosewood, then the Rosewood Phantom at last. We holed away in a deserted corner, behind young adult stacks where the windows leaked in faint light, and scanned our books, only two on all of Rosewood, until we found the paragraphs we needed, the Phantom himself.

What we found sank our hearts, so little information for so much hurt. His name, unknown. Lost over time, like every name in the Ukraine that we didn't know and never would. All those par-
ents, also lost, not even brief mention of a winding sheet, not the rags Tom promised would appear. The only fact we could find was of a killer, that he'd existed, that he'd been buried in Stillwater Park like Tom said. But the legend – just a story, a tale to keep children from wandering off after dark, with no warning or word of perfect sunshine, of the shade we'd brought in light.

Tom sat back on his heels, rested his palms against his jeans. I told you there'd be nothing, said Nick, not believing, even still, though his voice cracked against its syllables, opened a wavering gap of doubt. He waited, hovering with the rest of us, over books that told us nothing though we lingered, as if the black text below us might rearrange itself into solution, into an absolution we craved.

The police trekked through our neighborhoods, made maps and diagrams. They graphed every similarity they knew between Craig and Rachel, a series of questions for their parents that we imagined offered hope, small ember, but also some heaving and winded burden, a stretched-open book of not knowing, of perhaps never knowing, of ceaseless, crushing wait.

They tracked every Buick LeSabre Estate, every color, year, every driver. They scanned yards and forests, swollen by rain and spring, scoured sodden landscapes for footprints, for hairs and blanket fibers and clothes. In early May, our local broadcasts erupted for several days when the media leaked too early that Officer Franks found a bloodied rag in Craig's yard, discarded beneath Mrs. Davenport's rosebushes. We lay hiding in our beds, not sleeping, strange roil of shame and hope and fear, that the rags were what we'd waited for, that this proof meant the Phantom had been stopped, but also that one of us would have to confess, that we'd known all along how he'd reappeared.

We hoped for an end as much as we feared it. That blood meant our classmates were not simply elsewhere, but gone. We imagined limbs, broken or worse. We imagined teeth, sharp nails, rags to cloak and suffocate. We imagined the crushing sensation of hands, clamped down on our chests while we slept, to grip and pull us away, beyond windows, beyond the walls of our rooms, and
though some of us had never known religion we prayed, beside our beds at night after we heard our parents settle into sleep, that the Phantom was found, that he'd never find us.

But then, we awoke to the morning news. Only animal blood, a clue that might have still signaled a lead if not connected immediately to Jericho, Mrs. Feinberg's cat, a neighboring, pregnant feline who'd birthed her kittens beneath the Davenports' porch. The police had found one dead kitten near Mrs. Feinberg's sycamore tree, wrapped loosely in the rest of the bloodied rag, an attempt at burial by claw and teeth and Jericho still hiding beneath the porch, refusing to come out.

We imagined Craig's parents, in their home above this feline mother, equally sequestered, equally heartbroken. We felt the compression against our own ribcages, as those astronauts must have felt before they ever reached orbit, mistook for gravity, and as every heart in the Ukraine must have felt as the blast erupted, a weight as unimaginable as a phantom's pale hands, gripping the cylinders of our necks.

And then, a lull. Though the police maintained their presence, though our alarms stayed in our backpacks. The trees thickened above us, leaves shot from their branches, a canopy of green light that grew steadily darker through May. We walked to school in pairs, or threes, or our families drove us, or we took the bus door to door, drivers paid by our parents to wait, to watch us dash inside. We warmed gradually again to our classroom, a space that felt safe despite holes, despite the gaping absence of two desks, Rachel's pencil box keeping vigil alongside Craig's. Mandy Newman braided friendship bracelets for Rachel, one for every week she'd been gone. Misty Jones kept watch over Craig's Valentine box, still atop his desk, a scattering of new notes left for his birthday, announced on the intercom as Rosewood's birthdays were but without the fanfare of cupcakes, of a trip to the principal's office for celebratory pencils and erasers.

Our classroom, a small cocoon, and even daylight itself, some solace. But at dusk, when our neighborhood lights flooded
on, we whipped home on our bikes, spokes whirring with wind, or we stayed home altogether, watched from our windows as the streetlamps flickered on and pooled light. We could see them, from our beds, illumined circles that at any moment we expected to break with the flash of a shadow, a flutter of torn rags.

Yet even still, the pulse of summer approaching soothed us, the days growing warmer, then warmer still until our final days of class had come and gone, celebrated with kickball and popsicles, with an outdoor field day and with lingering last looks at our classroom, as we waved Mrs. Levy goodbye. Then we were on our own, no classmates and no carpet, and no pencil boxes to remind us of what we’d lost, of what we’d cast away with a chant, a summoning.

We spent our days splashing at the pool, guarding lemonade stands, thumbing through our summer reading lists, full sun beating above us, a light bright enough to erase the shade we’d shared. We felt our parents relax, calmed by sun, by warmth and no news on our television screens, and we stayed up late, had sleepovers, watched Cujo and Carrie, films we were still too young to see, films we couldn’t help but watch. The thrill felt illicit, a transgression all the same but one that felt honest, and our guilt slid away, our worry, on the unending calm of each day. We had picnics with our families, chased ice cream trucks, helped our parents make sun tea, left on the back porch to steep in sunshine. We even marveled at fireworks on July Fourth, letting ourselves fall silent and hushed beneath the glare of their splendor, and for only a moment thought of the space shuttle’s sparks, an unbearable trail of light now faded.

We knew the police still searched. We watched their cars patrol past the pool, saw them stationed on our streets. But the long days, that lack of dark, let us forget the things we’d done, let us off the hook by keeping us from one another, no collective conscience, no reminders in the glances we shared, in looks we now avoided.

And then in August, when our class lists posted, we walked with our parents to the school doors and felt our dread return. We saw our names listed together, heard our parents exclaim joy, tell us we’d move through third grade with our friends, Mr. Jeffries’s class, no longer Mrs. Levy’s magic carpet but together all the same. The sun felt strange above us as we walked home, and as we lay awake at

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night and felt summer receding, even in restless heat, in the stretch of weeks we still had until Labor Day.

Then in late August, full sun overhead, we awoke to an explosion of carbon dioxide in Cameroon, the unimaginable deaths of thousands of people, so many livestock, and to the disappearance of Nick Dorsey, gone before school ever began.

We sat before televisions, forgot our bicycles, our books and swimsuits. The Rosewood pool closed, off limits for safety until further notice. Police crowded our streets, flash of blue and red lights artificial beneath sun, a heat that bore down heavily and simmered against blacktop. We watched FBI agents fan through our community and saw reporters question our neighbors, interviews we watched on local broadcast and beyond, disappearances swelled to national news now as well.

We watched our televisions for Nick Dorsey, and for Rachel and Craig, but also for Cameroon, all those people, all those animals, a cloud of asphyxiation over Lake Nyos that we felt enclose our own throats as well, a constriction of lung and air sac and cell that made some of us wake in the night screaming, the flooded relief of gasped oxygen at once a reprieve, a requiem. That we could breathe, that we were alive. But that we awoke at all, to this world, a world no longer ours. We imagined suffocation, what that lack of breath might mean. We feared the shape of our own organs, that our lungs could fail us, that our hearts could ever sputter and cease, and that we held things beating inside of us, things we’d never fully understand or see, things we couldn’t trust.

Our parents held us, close. They made our beds, washed our dishes, sang us lullabies and read us bedtime stories, though we knew as well as them that we were too old now, too matured. We felt them watching us, at times, while we pretended to sleep, never knowing if they watched us breathe out of love, or if they watched the windows beyond our beds, standing guard for the threats pressed like palmprints against our panes.

Craig’s parents began to see Rachel’s, beyond pleasanteries they’d once exchanged at parent-teacher nights, a communal,
shared grief that lessened their own. And Nick's mother appeared on television, his father long gone from divorce, made pleas for her son to return home, to stop these jokes and this sneaking out, her skepticism the same as Nick's, that his open window meant he left on his own. But then five days passed, and her pleas turned to prayers, soft supplication feathering her voice though a hard anger broadened beneath it, her eyes leveled at the camera, telling whoever took her son to just bring him home, now.

These entreaties broke us, split deep cracks through a summer ending, a stretch of months we knew was never carefree, never everlasting, only brief amnesty from the weight of ourselves. We considered the gravity of an exploding lake, its lack of coincidence, how danger lurked beneath the surface of all things and how the earth held so many secrets, in Cameroon, in Stillwater Park. We felt the rupture beneath us, nearby park, an unknown cemetery disturbed and heaving its shadow across our town, across the Atlantic as well, an ocean that separated us from radiation, from poisonous bloom, that swallowed shards of rocket as they disintegrated.

The school year came, without our wanting, beyond sobered Labor Day celebrations, no barbecues or last swims. The pool remained closed, water draining slowly, a murky pond of stilled glass that caught leaves shaken from trees. Our neighborhoods and parks kept curfew past dusk, no cookouts or bike rides, the streets deserted and silent. The FBI remained in Rosewood, stood guard outside our school, alongside police and parents and community volunteers, a wall of protection to keep us safe. But our classroom no longer was, not cocoon nor nest, not a place that felt sound with so many gone, so many missing. Mr. Jeffries welcomed us, had us glitter new nametags, arranged us in desk pods that were full, no missing desks, no vigiled pencil boxes. But we knew, as well as he knew, a misgiving we heard beneath his voice, bright but clear as he began his first lesson on life sciences that we were those kids, from Mrs. Levy's class, those kids who were connected by inexplicable lines, by irrevocable bounds.

Misty Jones was the first to act out. During story time, no magic carpet but a nook of the room, she stayed at her desk as we all moved to the corner, her face crumpled and red before she smashed
her pencil box against her desk, its contents splintered and rattling. Mr. Jeffries looked up, rose from his rocking chair in the nook, but Misty was already gone, ran from the room, and hid in the last bathroom stall until her father picked her up early. Then there was Karen Kettleman, who never came inside from recess, who already had police tracking the perimeters of school for her before they found her, curled up inside the rocket, awake but unmoving, and shivering though September sun still bore down bright above.

We all felt unhinged, though Mr. Jeffries tried his hardest to calm us, an effort that broke our hearts as much as our parents' concern for us did, their worried glances we saw and ignored. We got into first fistfights, slammed each other against corridor walls, a solidity that felt satisfying. We remembered the sensation of fist against skin as we tried to fall asleep, held the feeling close against our fingertips, a memory of tangibility to beat back, to drown out the windowpanes beyond the foot of our beds.

We struggled together inside the confines of a classroom, that first week a preliminary taste, some terrible foreshadowing of what the year would bring, what we would force ourselves to endure. We longed for Nick's distrust, a trait we'd once hated but ached for in earnest, some checked rationality, a voice to tell us this wasn't ours, this wasn't what we'd done. We ran our hands over cavernous absence, indelible as ink in the wooden swirls of our desks, lines we traced during lessons that never led back to Rachel, to Craig, though we peeked sometimes into Mrs. Levy's classroom, at their once-full desks, at the magic carpet of what we'd been.

And yet we still held hope, sputtering flame, a tiny spark held captive inside hollowed marrow to protect from wind, extinguishing gusts, that there was more for us than this. At night, we watched the glowing stars glued against our ceilings and imagined life beyond this, somewhere older, a place where this would end, where we would unfurl like crocuses and begin anew.

But at the end of that first week, just four days into the school year, we learned that terrorists grounded a plane in Pakistan, hijacked with 360 people on board, that twenty of those people had been killed. We also learned that Trina Johnson had disappeared overnight, and our sputtering flame blew out.

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We watched an anger erupt in Rosewood, a rage kept bottled for months. We watched Trina's father collapse on his porch, during a press conference not unlike the ones Nick's mother had endured, watched the contours of his face bend with fury and with sorrow. We watched community volunteers become vigilantes and grab their guns dusted off from cellar gun cases, meant for hunting and shooting cans, pulled forth from storage to kill. We felt any flame we'd sheltered burn slowly down to cinder, an ash carried off on drafts. What horrors blew through town seeped inside us, no airtight seals, our membranes as permeable as our windows.

Beyond culpability, beyond hope, we felt something change, something imminent and menacing. A space shuttle, radioactive cloud, an explosion of lake and gas — these were things no one had rendered, disasters without intent, all terrible, terrible accidents. But this, a violent siege, a disaster more deliberate, more calculated, and so much closer in proximity, only two weeks between Nick and Trina's disappearances. We felt a heaviness span the Atlantic, blanket our chests, the fear of all those families, so much brutality, a mirror held against our own. We felt the gravity of our own violence, of a chain set in motion and now of inertia, a gravity as crushing as a phantom's hovering presence, his shadow cast long across our homes, our bedrooms, as the September sun sank under its own heavy weight.

We couldn't avoid each other, not anymore. We couldn't ignore the shared burden of our actions and inactions, with our classmates missing and the world around us collapsing, as much as we couldn't ignore our collective hope burned down, gasped away on a train of unfathomable loss.

So when during recess Tom Davies caught our eyes, each of us watching the other, we allowed ourselves to move wordlessly to the rocket, pulled by common, magnetic force. We crowded inside the structure's cage, our separate shadows pooled beneath sun, melded darkly into one.

A familiar summit, an anniversary, where nearly a year ago we'd brought this on ourselves. The enclosed space of the rocket felt wistful, as if we were young again, as if we had a chance to take this back, to decide against speaking and summoning. But there was no
Nick, no Rachel, a profound lack that cast everything in true light. There was no Trina, no Craig hovered over mirror shards, friends we'd heedlessly traded for novelty, fleeting thrill. Tom looked at us, waiting, and Misty Jones blurted out, We could dig him up, we could set him free. We held our breath, a thought we'd all shared, our brains gravitating without cease toward the grave of Stillwater Park. But Tom said no, we'd be too obvious, with the police and FBI, volunteers swarming the streets. And Stillwater Park was closed, he said, at dusk due to curfew, and where would we find shovels? Would we have the strength to dig?

Tom watched us a moment, and we knew then that he'd formed a plan. I will have a party, he said. His birthday, two weeks away. We would all be invited, would share cake and ice cream, but when his parents went back upstairs, time alone he knew they'd grant us, we would gather in the basement bathroom. We would summon the Rosewood Phantom, just as he and his babysitter had done before, away from the rocket and the playground, from the watchful eyes of teachers. We would at last close this portal. We would send him home and away from us forever.

When Tom finished speaking, none of us said a word. We felt relief, to finally sense closure, some schematic of structure to reign in this chaos. We felt emboldened by solidity, a plan of action to eradicate all uncertainty, to place power back in our hands, every power we'd lost. But we were frightened, wordless in terror, of a specter we'd only imagined, one we'd seen in no more than fluttering curtains, in shapeshifting circles of pooled streetlight, a phantom that had trespassed our borders, that had haunted us all these months and would now be brought into the realm of real, an inevitability we flinched to face.

We have to do this, Tom said, and we knew how right he was. We knew the word right, as well as we'd known it then, though knowing cleared no path for us, no well-worn route to mercy. On the day of Tom's birthday party, our parents drove us willingly. A distraction, some flash of joy amid weeks of panic, and supervised, all of us in one place, all of us safe in celebration beneath the watch of Tom's parents. We wore party hats, festive cones. We brought gifts, ate cake, not caring whether we garnered a corner
piece or the middle, the amount of icing so trivial in the wake of our task. We pinned tails on a donkey, we watched Tom open his gifts. We wondered whether his parents knew, Tom's lack of zeal for each gift opened, or if they assumed only the heavy shade of our missing classmates, shared celebrations no longer shared, our sanctuary fractured and broken. When Tom finished opening gifts and asked if we could watch cartoons by ourselves, they didn't hesitate, moved upstairs, offered us the allocated solitude they must have guessed we needed.

When Tom heard the door to the basement shut, he raised the volume on the television, gathered us into the bathroom, lit a candle and turned off the lights. The pitch-dark startled us, no windows, no light and no sun, but only a flame casting our faces in ethereal glow, and illumining the outlines of the mirror and sink, Tom's bloodstain still darkening its edge.

We've come to summon you, Tom began, to drive you back from where you came. His introduction felt forced, even to us, and some of us laughed, giggled into our hands, out of nervousness, we knew, not humor. Tom stepped in front, before all of us, leaned his face close to the mirror, above flame. The candle lit his face from beneath, like flashlights held beneath chins before campfires, for ghost stories, a terror we longed for, something foreign and lost. Then Tom turned to us. Say it with me, he said. And though our hearts drummed anthems inside our chests, though our temples broke small beads of sweat, we stood as tall as we knew how, straightened our backs, like we'd learned to do before scoliosis tests, like we'd done against height charts.

Karen Kettleman, the quietest, said it first. Rosewood Phantom. The words on her tongue ripped chills across our skin, prickled follicles. But we said it with her, Rosewood Phantom, and thought of Craig, of Rachel, of Trina. We let go of their pencil boxes, their friendships bracelets, handed over our need of vigil, of memory. We thought of Nick and yearned for him the most, to tell us this legend was for children, that there was nothing to fear.

And then, as we watched, the mirror began to tremble. We watched Tom wince, for only a moment, and then he said it first, the second chant, the fugue of our voices all waterfalling behind
him. We heard ourselves speak as the mirror vibrated and shook, and for once we felt weightless, our guilt floated and hovering, even among terror, the greatest we’d known, every fear we’d held secret escaped and at hand.

The mirror rattled against the wall, a noise drowned by cartoons beyond the bathroom, a muted blare that spiked an ache inside our bones, to be there watching and not here. But we felt right, a right Tom had prepared us for, we felt so feathered and light, not just for our classmates but for everyone, those astronauts, each plane passenger, every voice choked silent by poison cloud or bloom that we pushed the last summon from ourselves, for them and for all of us, Rosewood Phantom, Rosewood Phantom, Rosewood Phantom. We screamed it for what we’d done, for what we’d stayed silent not doing and for every life ahead of us, every disaster averted, for everyone we imagined, every moment big and beautiful and rolled before us, unscripted. And as we spoke, the mirror stopped shaking, and a fogged swirl appeared in the center of the mirror. And then the candle blew out, quick eclipse, and Tom flicked on the lights and we stood together, all of us there, every one of us wild-eyed and breathless and still.

After the New Year, after we watched the ball drop with our parents, wishing the year goodbye in the quiet privacy of our hearts, a year we wished to never see again, the FBI caught a man in Illinois, 1979 Buick LeSabre Estate, his vehicle linked to Rosewood. They caught him in a motel with a nine-year-old girl, still alive, returned her to her parents, spread the news across Rosewood and across the whole nation, Rosewood killer caught, Rosewood terror laid to rest.

We grew up, in spite of ourselves. We never knew the stain of kidnap or murder again, not after that year, had classroom birthdays and Halloween costume parades, the same as every other kid. We graduated into junior high, then high school, bloomed inside the softness of first kisses, first dances, held each other awkwardly beneath banners and before photographers, made aching steps to connect. We never spoke of the Rosewood Phantom again, grew apart gradually, beyond initially comparing what we saw, what we might never have seen. Tom Davies swore he saw torn rags. Misty
Jones, the bloodied shape of a face. But we stopped talking altogether when the killer was caught, our fear still unsettled, a dread that we'd endure this once again someday. Because even though our town celebrated, though the FBI, the police and volunteers disbanded, we wondered what no one else addressed, what our parents hushed us for, when we raised the question unasked.

Why wasn't that girl from Rosewood?

Every other child gone missing, all of our friends, every anguish we bore, all here. But not her, a question we knew our parents wondered too, at times, and the parents of Trina, of Craig, a closure they'd never find.

We grew up anyway. We left ourselves behind. We built homecoming floats, earned our driver's licenses, attended proms though we held hidden, somewhere inside marrow, a flame of another kind, the burn of our classmates, who never grew with us, never bought their first cigarette packs, never held someone close inside a car, a kiss goodnight, never unpacked their suitcases in front of their college dorm, never waved their parents goodbye.

We see it from the other side, now. We hold that heartbreak as close as our children, those of us who have them, who didn't turn away from the possibility of a grief so vast, who understand now what all those parents lost. We've survived the collapse of regimes, the collapse of buildings, shootings inside schools, disaster after disaster that we couldn't have prevented, couldn't have caused. We watch the news with feigned disinterest, and we tell no one of the dull ache that hides, always, beneath the bones that hold our hearts.

Because we are waiting, all of us, though we never speak to one another, though we never go home to Rosewood. We are waiting for our shadows to claim us, as we tuck in our children, as we watch the evening news, for a killer never caught, for a closure that we, too, have never found. We are waiting for a phantom to come for us at last, to pry open our windows, to kill this immeasurable guilt.
**Dawn Poem**

I.

Night has no more line, 
it hangs.

In fields around 
the Shenandoah, 

new snow will lay 
just as it has fallen 
until the horses are led out.

II.

The first sliver of sun 
so small it seems only 
a molten grain 

of abyssal sand, 
stone worn over 
eons to a tiny flick 

of grit, not by water's 
movement but by its weight.

III.

Slowly, the hills 
declare themselves.
IV.

An old man 
walks rows 
of vines. He bites 
a little bud of green grape, 
tastes the overnight frost 
and remembers 
clearing this slope.

If I never had, he thinks, 
the fieldstone now 
would all be edged in pink.
Letter to your old address
in Boston, Early October

Already it may have frosted there.
Or soon will—every winter early

everywhere, this year. I won’t reference
the birches, the slick roof

of the fishermen’s church. In Virginia
too the sky is low, wet wool.

There must still be a window
behind which you lie

reading, though looking through
it would be like looking through

a fly’s wing. When I close
my eyes to imagine those front steps,

I only see a man standing before a door,
folding his coat over his arm.

He must be waiting for an answer.
Perhaps his daughter lives

in the room where we slept,
naked and cool, under the small print

of Long Grass with Butterflies
while the rain ticked outside.

He walks back through the courtyard
to the street, surprised at the defiant flowers
around the iron railings. Two tiny yellow leaves cling to his collar. He has not seen his daughter in years, does not know the woman she is now. As he turns from number 72,

we share a thought: *if I die before you, you will live forever.*
I AM A CYMBALIST

... 

I am decoupaged in trillium petals though patterns of four for the sake of divination. I get my job done, categorizing tissue samples. Filing, really. Tedium, Times Square in the 70s. I smell like meat all the time. Dogs follow in sorry spectacle. Invite them in and tell them the future, you say. I keep losing my mouth, but rhyming from windows, a cluttered emulsion of cloudspace and leaf litter. We keep the water heater off, crumble only outward. A sequence is spreading, a diamond light. Spin me a pretty story and I'll pour you the strongest daiquiri we make around here.

... 

Sometimes by tissue samples I mean biopsied tumors, sometimes extremities. I keep on the T.V. while sorting, tell everyone I never get hungry at work though that's not true. Sometimes I'll make myself a B.L.T. but I always make an effort to eat quickly. The windows glow with a light that can't be from outdoors. It scuttles around the panes. I work by it.

... 

In the museum I watch the whale and how its deadness slowly overtakes the blue space as evening limps forward, swells, closing approaching. Cavernous as enclosure. Cavernous as sealed in incandescent nightdark. Cavernous as carnivorous, hungry to distraction. Once I hid with the impalas. Their hides gave off comfortable musty dust, but you found me and coaxed me out. Is this boring you? The puffins the next wing over all shuddered their beaks against the glass in solidarity.
Every day we burn our collected garbage and go to sleep. The aquarium heat lamp flicks on and off. The lionfish treads in a corner. We named him, but misremember the happening. A cracked spell to movement, a frame. An enclosure. The citizenry trumpets its success, new saplings along the boulevard. We admire them. And the municipal confetti streams like clockwork.
THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

after the triptych by Hieronymus Bosch

1. Paradise

Fowl & beast skirt our feet.
I float sexless—

porcelain doll
with eyes that open

& close. Please,
no half-swallowed frog,

legs pitch-forked
& helpless

in some bird's unnatural
mouth, no

feral cat's
dangle-jawed mouse.

This hunger, his gift to us—
the animal appetites

as yet unnamed, our own
still unacknowledged.

Songbirds spiral
& swarm like bees

smoked from a honeyed
hive. A warning.
2. Fallen

Rose-bellied finches
larger than man.
Eyes like a dansom stone.

Stripped bare
& plumed emergency-
bright, my lips

feather & fledge.

The egg's open skull a bed
wide enough for all.

Rinse my palate
– mouth-deep in red –

strawberries
swollen to the exact
size of my desire.

Hip to hip,
be it fish or fowl, be it
man or beast –

the body
does not discriminate.
3. *Hell*

strung & luted spread your legs
what goes in must come out

the banquet table en flambé

stomach plattered & pink

a knife a rattle a long, hard hiss

consumption a torso carved

the bird-man takes another

– ah, the slings & arrows –

canapé: you & your frog-legs

beneath the throne – the pit
EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE

There are two seasons: day and night. Both arrive like a man who knows he’s too old to decide to live forever. If he is afraid, remind him how to get home.

• • •

During wartime, only ghosts intuit better than dogs. A ghost goes out for milk and never comes home. An attempt to escape paralysis, stone under tanning moon. The frequency of natural disasters is a private algorithm. He does not always hear you through the radio.

• • •

Immortal jellyfish are capable of returning to polyp stage after maturation, but rarely reach this phase due to predation. To the gods he has offered marrow, string, an antenna. The rules of captivity apply. His hands are the talismans in his hands. Even though he is kept alive, he will not look me in the eye.
I am an equation balancing heat loss with gain, and two legs on skis. In both cases the outcome is barely net positive. The darker shade of blizzard next to me is my expedition mate Riley, leaning blunt-faced and shivering into the wind. Snow riots and seethes over a land incoherent with ice. The sun, beaten and fugitive, beams with all the wattage of a firefly. Riley and I ski side by side and on different planets, each alone in a privacy of storm. Warmth is a hypothesis, a taunt, a rumor, a god we no longer believe in but still yearn for, banished as we are to this cold weld of ice to rock to sky.

Despite appearances, this is a chosen exile, a pilgrimage rather than a penance. I have long been partial to high latitudes and altitudes, regions of difficult beauty and prodigal light. For me going to the mountains is compulsive as breathing, arterial to existence as a pulse. All life abides by tropisms, the tug and heave of unseen physics: roots delve into dirt, shoots stalk the sun, and creatures like me muscle in the vague direction of cold and white. In this case north, to Norway, to the Hardangervidda, an alpine desert plateau whose very name, however incidental to English etymology, contains danger.

And for good reason. Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen won the ski race to the South Pole, but not before training on the Hardangervidda almost ended him. He and his brother attempted the first winter traverse of the plateau in 1896, but they were forced to abort after losing their food, their only map, and very nearly their fingers and toes in constant blizzards. An earlier Norwegian explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, also ski traversed the Hardangervidda as a warm-up for other polar expeditions, but he sensibly crossed it in April. By then weather conditions are far more clement, and in springtime in this age, the plateau is stitched with designated ski trails that safely guide weekend warriors from hut
to heated hut. Which begs the question why Riley and I are here, like Amundsen, in the cold dead dark of winter, when huts are locked and buried, routes are unflagged, and the plateau is a trackless desolation roamed only by wind, snow and reindeer. And now us.

We have come to the Hardangervidda for all the usual reasons, all glib, all genuine. Because it’s here. Because we crave the kind of fun that is only really fun two weeks after the fact. Because we require contours more congruent with wild needs and reckless nerves than civilized life provides. Because we seek enrollment in the unleashed school of life.

Like Nansen, who more than a century ago sought relief from laboratory science in polar exploration, this trip is my antidote to academia. For two years I was a graduate student in geobiology at a top research university, the kind of place where truths only count once isolated in test tubes, preferably in triplicate. I went into science because I wanted to be an explorer, to live constantly in the open air, and I naively thought studying the natural world would lead me there. As a young man in the mid-1800s, Nansen chose to study zoology at university for similar reasons, but he ended up squinting through a microscope, charting the central nervous systems of jawless hagfish and other tiny marine organisms. A few centuries later, I found myself in the same situation, cooped indoors while mapping, in my case, the molecular fats of microbes. But after a few years of containment, when he was my age exactly, Nansen abandoned his promising career in science to satisfy a craving for wider horizons. He was pulled like a magnet to the poles, those silent and inhuman expanses, and desperate for adventure.

Just graduated from the world of test tubes and petri dishes myself, I am wild with longing for what is boundless and proximate to the stars. The Hardangervidda, so constellated with ice and rock, so many light years from the laboratory, seems as promising a place to seek it as any. There is nothing practical whatsoever about this expedition: we have no ambitions to make history, plant flags, claim territory, collect specimens, chart maps, win fame, or curry the favors of kings and queens. We are simply here to study the
contours of cold, and apprentice ourselves to wildness along the way. The goal is something like sublimation, ice loosed straight to sky.

2. Launch

All night the tent flutters like a flock of birds startled into flight. I dream I am lost in the midst of a vast migration. Skiing the next day, I long for feathers and miss wings like phantom limbs. Around us mountains welt the white skin of land, humped and glossy as blisters. After a week of whiteout blizzards, today the Hardangervidda is a paralysis of ice, so catatonic with cold even the wind has frozen in place. The only turbulent air moving across the land is me, a flight path still looking for its bird, to paraphrase the poet Don McKay.

Two ravens, furtive and keen-eyed, seem to be tracking us across the plateau. At first we confused the black beads on the snow for stones, but they pursued us like footprints, or rocks endowed with curiosity, mobility, and appetite. To these scavengers we are the cold desert’s bloom and harvest: at each camp they feast on our spilled scraps of pasta and oatmeal, while we feast on the solace of other living, breathing creatures for company. To each their own hungers on the Hardangervidda.

The leviathan appetite of this land, in turn, has swallowed all silences but its own. For days, or weeks, possibly years, we ski in dead quiet in a dead straight line through a seemingly dead world—except for the ravens—while my mind flaps all over the place. I remember reading somewhere that birds expel all the air from their lungs and hollow bones with each exhalation, unlike humans, who always hold back a reserve. To test this, I breathe out with gusto, generating a blizzard of condensation around me. Riley, concerned, asks if I’m OK. I reassure him that I’m just striving for a life of total avian trust. This involves maximizing the potential of every oxygen molecule I breathe in, I explain, and having faith that more air will be there to inhale once I’ve used all mine up.

But though I breathe out and out and out until I’m blue in the face and Riley questions my sanity, I can’t rid myself of a
reserve. A wisp of air, smoggy with doubt, clings to the tuck of my lungs, skulks in the bend of my bones. This is the biological blessing and curse that keeps me conscious but grounded. Light as a shadow, a reserve still hampers the unhesitating commitment that flight demands. I can feel its weight pressing down the wings I don’t have.

There is hope, though. According to philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the verbs ‘I want’ and ‘I fly’ share the same Latin root: volo. “There is no way to investigate the psychology of will,” he explains, “without going to the very root of imaginary flight.” With fierce determination, then, perhaps I can learn how to exhale absolutely, commit totally, soar. This involves a willful override of cautions built into human physiology, but precedents have proven such things possible. Consider Nansen crossing Greenland.

Starting in 1751, eight expeditions tried and failed to traverse this wedge of ice the size of a small moon. All expeditions began on the west coast of Greenland, where an Inuit settlement made for a convenient launch – and an easy retreat. Nansen, against all orthodoxy and advice, opted to start on the desolate east coast and ski toward the populated west, reasoning that this way his men would have more incentive to reach the other side. Nansen was barely thirty at the time and therefore believed himself immortal. But call him crazy or canny, he knew how to harness the instinct for self-preservation. Turning back for his team was not an option: refuge was only reachable on the far side. No reserve.

Nansen soared by ski across Greenland and landed back in Norway a hero. Before the voyage he had reassured family and friends, in words that rang hollow even then, that he planned to return to the lab bench following his polar “holiday.” Instead he began scheming his next expedition. The vision was characteristically preposterous: he would design and build a ship capable of surviving the crushing pressures of pack ice. Then he would freeze the vessel into the ice, drift east to west on Arctic ocean currents through the Northwest Passage, and tag the North Pole by ski along the way. The flow direction of the Arctic circumpolar current, I should say, was at this point just a hypothesis. Once again, no reserve.

In 1893, Nansen’s dream ship, the Fram, which means
"forward" in Norwegian, sailed out of its harbor and into a fastness of ice. From here Nansen and his crew were more isolated than the first men on the moon who, as historian Roland Huntford points out, still maintained daily contact with earthbound friends nearly a quarter of a million miles away. But just a few thousand miles from home and the Fram was effectively extragalactic. Suspended between stars and ice, the vessel drifted through a near-total renunciation of warmth and light. It was a world of desolation, but also exultation. "Anything more wonderfully beautiful than the polar night does not exist," raved Nansen. "It is a light poem of all the finest and most delicate tones of the soul." The poem lasted three years. Nansen was ultimately forced to scrap the North Pole, but he set a farthest north record in the attempt, and meanwhile the Fram survived the Northwest Passage, proving that Arctic currents really do churn east to west.

Back on the plateau, daydreaming of the polar night, I imagine myself as a fixed coordinate in time with space streaming past me. What shall I see and learn, frozen as the Fram into the Hardangervidda, the world a glacier flowing by under the gravity of enchantment? So far I have seen slabs of turquoise ice, crevassed by dreams and uncertainties, in a land so frigidly beautiful it cracks the heart wide the way water expands when frozen. So far I have learned that, like Nansen, there is no going back to the laboratory, not ever, and going forward is not only about active movement, but about letting yourself drift. For what is drifting but another way to soar? On currents of ice and water and air, on wings of purest resolve, breathless on two skis across an infinity of white.

3. Flight

Hell is a synonym for ski boots. But so is heaven, and outside it's getting brighter. Riley and I rise early and shiver in the snow, coffee mugs in mitted hands, ready for the return of light. Eventually the apocalyptic absence of color dawns a hued and shining world, as though rubbed out of a magic lamp. If only all days began this way, with sleep seduced conscious by mountains, caffeine, and sun-
beams. No criminal act or cruel gesture, no war or human rights indignity, could possibly epilogue such a sunrise. The sublime, magnified like silence by a severe temperature inversion, and swilled down with strong coffee, could offer a viable path to world peace. “Or a painful path,” Riley suggests when I share my theory. “How are your feet doing?” Still there, unfortunately. Wearing these boots is like donning hairsocks, rasping skin and soul raw for the sake of atonement. Or for the sake of adventure, an equally humbling and holy pursuit in my personal cosmology. We’re halfway across the Hardangervidda now, and the only direction is fram.

Once on the move I ignore my feet. They’ve got their job, which is to keep moving, and I’ve got mine, which is to be astonished, and most of the time we each mind our own business. Plus after so many stormbound days, this immensity of light and ice sets me soaring. I am uplifted without effort, as if on a thermal plume, or a gust of solar wind. The plateau is a rolling waste of white, mountains like rough seas flash frozen in liquid nitrogen, steaming and hissing with a brittle beauty. The sunlight icing the land tastes sour and taut as a lemon, a precise lively buzz on the tongue. Cold air fizzes in my lungs like champagne. With each exhalation I breathe nearly all of it out, if only to gulp in more.

Never is the inadequacy of English so exposed as when trying to fit “snow” to the gamut of shapes water assumes in its solid state. The texture of the plateau is protean and kinetic, morphing form within feet. Here snow rasps and grits, sand in all but substance. Here it bubbles and froths, a soap so caustic with cold it will scour your bones clean, if you’re not careful. Now snow assumes the texture of fish scales, incense ash, porcelain, knife blades, slabs of fat, pockmarks, laugh or possibly frown lines wrinkled into skin over a lifetime, a bed of moss, peeling paint, eyelashes frozen mid-bat, a sidewalk riddled with cracks, and waves, vast bucking tireless waves, sloshing from here to the moon.

This riot of ice is flint to my kindling; I shine even as I shiver. Combustion, which is ignition without incineration, is after all a kind of internal engine, a motive force, capable of propelling flight. I remember reading about the Inuit practice of walking out frustration on the tundra. They would stride until their anger sputtered out, then plant a rock on the ground to mark how far the
flush of rage had propelled them. Instead of walking out rage, I
decide to ski out rapture. How far will this exhilaration, this blaz­
ing, this wildness take me? From the Hardangervidda to the ends
of the earth, tracing Amundsen’s ski tracks to the South Pole. From
the Hardangervidda to the Hardangervidda, over and over again,
looping the planet in rapt and perpetual orbit. Or from the Har­
dangervidda to the paved streets of the nearest city.

Wildness, so I hear, is capable of surviving a context of
concrete and neon, but staying wild in a tame place is tougher by
far than traversing the Hardangervidda in mid-winter. Still, Bud­
dhist philosopher Dogen contends that a mountain practices in
every place. By such logic, wildness is neither here nor there, but an
ungoverned state of wonder mazed somewhere in the mind. Moun­
tains of the Hardangerviddan variety are simply the signposts that
help locate it, the contours that draw the map. With enough prac­
tice in perception, then, even city streets can be seen as river valleys
between peaks: skyscrapers as just another upsweep and coherence
of minerals, people on sidewalks as cells of water streaming by.
In turn, the kilter of the Hardangervidda’s harsh enchantment is
poised somewhere between extravagance and restraint, rapture and
a kind of cold rage. Which means it aligns precisely with the axis of
the planet, and the inclinations of we the people who populate it. I
place a rock on my hat to mark the origin and end of all wildness,
and keep skiing.

Late afternoon on the plateau is a time of tense negotia­
tion between light and ice. The outcome, whether energy or ele­
ment prevails, is an unwavering blaze of white. By the end of the
day the scorching wonder of this world is almost unbearable. Our
senses are enflamed, our nerves sting like something skinned, our
eyes seep and freeze shut, our throats smolder from swallowing so
much shine. This cold heaven or this burning hell: it all depends
on the slant of light. Finally the sun cools behind the mountains.
The world fades into a soothing absence of color and we are washed
with relief. You can only absorb so much of the sublime, and Riley
and I are saturated to our hollow bones. Time to pitch the tent,
cook food, catch our breath. Time to take off my boots.
The far edge of the Hardangervidda is ahead. It looks exactly like the center of the plateau, and the side of the plateau we started from, and all spaces between: vast, undifferentiated, achingly white. The only clue we are on the verge comes from wild reindeer who call the Hardangervidda home. In winter the herds stick to the plateau's southern fringe, where by quirk of climate the snow piles thinner, making it easier for them to forage for lichen. Though we haven't seen so much as an antler yet, today we've found proof of the reindeer herd's proximity: a four-lane highway freshly paved in hoofprints.

The urge to follow this trail, the first we have encountered on the Hardangervidda, is primal and overwhelming. How simple to swerve the way of the herd, to pursue that track pummeled flat of any possibility of floundering, whether through deep snow or even deeper confusions. To join that caravan of fur and instinct, and run wild. At this point it wouldn't take much to tempt us astray. Riley and I are in no hurry to return to so-called civilization, with its ticking clocks and traffic jams. Lichen would probably taste better than the mush we've been eating on this expedition, though at least the ravens enjoy our scraps. Riley could even improvise us antlers from ski poles, because he's handy like that.

But despite the appeal of mob mentality, we know this is not our path. Reindeer have their own lives to lead, we have ours, and each is inscrutable to the other. Besides, who can resist peering over an edge? As we ski off in search of it, not without the pang of those lost from the herd, I console myself by thinking that Nansen would approve us breaking our own trail. In a commencement speech to university students, he outlined the guiding principle of his life: "Let it be impressed upon the young never, when there is a choice, to do anything which can be done equally well or better by someone else. How many wasted lives would then be spared if each individual tried to find his own line."

By Nansen's geometry, a line is not straight and fixed but sinuous and ever-evolving, a path that unfurls by the dictates of fresh devotions. After the Fram expedition, for example, Nansen
veered into humanitarian work. Maybe he too recognized the potential for world peace in the sublime, and having absorbed so much of it during his Arctic sojourns, felt compelled to put it to good use. Whatever his impetus, Nansen devoted himself to diplomatic work on behalf of refugees from the first World War, and was eventually awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. If you read Nansen's line through the rugged lands of politics and the poles as a kind of runic script, it would translate to "no reserve."

Though Riley and I ski together, we carve our own lines across the Hardangervidda. Riley's is a smooth calligraphy, the signature of grace, intent, and competence. Mine is a messy scrawl of sudden whims, like the flits of a bird, and punctuated with snow angels I crash into creation. Somehow we end up in the same place, but from there to here, our singular journeys are scribed onto the plateau. What my line spells out is quite fortunately lost in translation.

Even better, the slate is wiped clean every night. Every morning dawns a different Hardangervidda, variations on a theme of ice, rock, and sky. Today the plateau is cracked wide and glinting as a geode. Ice comprises the ore, crystals forged under minimal temperatures of air and maximal pressures of light. After weeks in this same kiln, I am carbon crushed to coal, and coal crushed to diamond. This is what wilderness does to land and life: it exposes interiors, the world's and ours, and in the right light reveals each as rough and many-faceted gems.

Exactly how wilderness exerts this metamorphosis is an enigma. Ask a scientist what wilderness is and they might define it—possibly with equations, certainly using a graph—as a number of hectares absent of human influence. Ask a politician and they might describe it as a national park converting tax dollars into paved hiking paths that tamely guide the masses through the bonafide wild. But ask a polar explorer or some other species of poet, like Don McKay, and they will muse that wilderness is "not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations."

What places like the Hardangervidda offer is proximity to the unimagined. Eloquent as a poem, evasive as a koan, wilderness
is a frontier beginning precisely where our most cherished certainties are perplexed. It is the school where intellect receives instruction in bewilderment. It is the paradox of beauty fanged with frost, ecstatic movement wincing with blisters. It is also a dwelling in wonder.

Occasionally in life I feel like a glacial erratic, deposited from a crush of ice into a land not my own. But on the Hardangervidda I am returned to the bedrock from which I was born. This is not to sentimentalize wilderness, or tame it into a place picket-fenced and habitable. Neither does it mean I am kin to reindeer, and should have taken that path when I had the chance. But if home is a matter of inner soul settling out, like an oyster exuding its own abode, then my soaring aliveness here is a most authentic lodging. The desire to feel intensely alive, and therefore home, is a biological impulse that unlike my reserve I have no wish to override. So mountains magnetize nearly all my movements, as the poles did Nansen’s, obliging me to live out geography as biography. With surrender, with joy.

Our journey, like the Hardangervidda, ends abruptly. We fall off the edge of the world. With a sudden plunge we find ourselves deep below treeline in a fiord bristling with pine and buzzing with snowmobiles. The plateau’s mute roar of space is just a nostalgia on the far side of noise. While the ravens opt to stay high and join the reindeer, Riley and I ski to the nearest road, hitch a ride to town, and catch a bus back to civilization. My mangled feet testify to the severity of the distance we have traveled, over a hundred miles as the bird flies, many more as the mountains fold. Now with ski boots off for good, the effortless locomotion of the bus lacks the exhilaration of flight but offers its own and warmer bliss.

Yet even as I return to hot showers, food more solid than mush, and other perks of civilization, some true and rebel part of me keeps on skiing. Once unleashed, the only possible way is fram, in all its desolation and exultation. One foot in front of the other, step by step, the left studying the contours of cold, the right probing the full sweep of life’s pain and possibility. And so I soar through storms of ice and light, a rock on my hat and feathers on my back. And so I drift through a poem the tone and duration
of the polar night, in the company of heroes and ravens. Across mountains and deserts, through suburbs and cities, I am turned inside out and in strangely familiar territory. Heaven or hell, it's hard to say, but wildness knows the place well and it has no borders.

Find your own line, urged Nansen, and now I understand why. It's the only way to get home.
CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

JOHN M. ANDERSON teaches at Boston College. He has new poems in *Poetry Northwest*, *Salamander*, and *The Seattle Review*. His manuscript *Alamos: A Chain Reaction* is a ghost story in verse about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Southwest.

EVAN BEATY is a native of San Antonio, Texas, who now divides his time between Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, and Brooklyn, New York.

ELAINE BLEAKNEY has selections from her book-length manuscript *For Another Writing Back* appearing or forthcoming in *At Length, Evening Will Come*, and *Thermos*.

CHELSEA BOLAN attended the University of Washington and the University of British Columbia, where she completed her MFA in Creative Writing. In 2011, she was awarded a GAP grant from Artist Trust for work on short stories. She lives in Seattle.

THEA BROWN is originally from the Hudson Valley in New York, and has recently published or forthcoming poems in *TriQuarterly, American Letters & Commentary, Super Arrow, H_NGM_N*, and *Forklift, Ohio*. She lives and teaches in Iowa City.

ASHLEY COLLEY is an M.F.A. candidate in poetry at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She lives in Iowa City with her rabbit, Judy.

JESSE DAMIANI is an MFA candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he is the Reviews Editor for *Devil's Lake*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Colorado Review, Indiana Review, Ninth Letter, Pleiades*, and *Washington Square Review*, among others.

ALI DOERSCHER is both young and small. A poet and maker of things, she is an undergraduate studying sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Her poetry has also recently appeared in the *Columbia Poetry Review*.

MATT DONOVAN is the author of *Vellum* (Mariner 2007). His poems and lyric essays have appeared in numerous journals, including *AGNI*, *Kenyon Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. He is the recipient of a Rome Prize and a Whiting Award, and teaches at Santa Fe University of Art and Design.

JEFF DOWNEY's recent poems have appeared in *Thermos Magazine*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Seattle Review*, *The Offending Adam*, and *spce book: the love issue*. He lives with this wife in Colorado Springs and teaches at Pikes Peak Community College.

REBECCA DUNHAM is the author of two collections of poetry, *The Flight Cage* and *The Miniature Room*. She is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

JOSHUA ECK grew up in the Midwest. He currently is pursuing a MFA in Art from the University of Montana. His artwork explores the nature of communication through technological means. He is a Director of FrontierSpace Missoula, a gallery alternative located in downtown Missoula.

CAIT FINLEY currently lives in Missoula MT and graduated in 2010 with a Bachelors of Fine Arts from The University of Montana. Her work examines the melding of man's detritus with the natural living world. Finley is fascinated with the ways in which plants and animals adapt to fill niche environments. She enjoys searching for species that optimize this ingenuity, adapting to a planet that is controlled by man's constant states of flux. Aesthetically she is very drawn to scientific models and natural science exhibitions, enjoying the matter-of-fact presentation of visual and literary information. Finley has intense love and admiration for the natural world, and hopes that her viewer can not only share in that love, but become enlivened by what she sees as some serious magic.

ANDREA K. FRANCIS is an MFA candidate in poetry at The University of Arizona. She recently attended the eight-week summer graduate poetry workshop with The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She lives and teaches in Tucson, Arizona, but left her heart in San Francisco. She also writes travel stories for the Matador Network.
KRISTEN GUNTHER recently completed her MFA at the University of Wyoming. Her work has appeared in High Country News and on Wyoming Public Radio. She lives in Laramie, WY.

KATE HARRIS is a writer and adventurer with a passion for wild places and a genius for getting lost. The winner of the 2012 Ellen Meloy Fund Desert Writers Award, she is now working on a book about wilderness and borders.

JOHN WESLEY HORTON teaches writing in Seattle and in Rome, Italy. He's recently published poems in Poetry Northwest, Notre Dame Review, Malpais Review, Fourteen Hills, Willow Springs, and City of the Big Shoulders: An Anthology of Chicago Poetry (U. of Iowa Press). He is currently sending out his first book manuscript which was a finalist in the 2011 National Poetry Series.

BRANDON KRIEG is a founding editor of The Winter Anthology: www.winteranthology.com

NAIRA KUZMICH was born in Yerevan, Armenia. She's currently an M.F.A. candidate at Arizona State University and the International Editor for Hayden's Ferry Review. Her stories have been published in Cream City Review, Necessary Fiction and the anthology New California Writing 2011.

JULIA MADSEN lives in Providence and is attending Brown University's Literary Arts MFA program for poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Versal, Caketrain, Black Warrior Review, and Devil's Lake.

SARA RENEE MARSHALL works on Timber and THE VOLTA. She's currently a graduate student and teacher at University of Colorado. Sara lives and writes in Denver.

CHRISTIAN NAGLE has published or has forthcoming poetry, essays, translations, and interviews in Esquire, Raritan, The Paris Review, Kyoto Journal, and many other magazines. He lived for eleven years in Japan, translating the early modernist Chuya Nakahara.
OLANA KHOI NGUYEN received an MFA from Columbia University where she was the poetry editor of *Columbia: A Journal*. She's received awards or scholarships from the Key West Literary Seminar, Academy of American Poets, and Bread Loaf Writers Conference.

BRIANNA NOLL is a doctoral candidate in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blackbird, Salamander, The Pinch, Redivider, Cimarron Review*, and elsewhere.


DAISY PITKN grew up in rural Ohio with her three brothers on a piece of farmland that stands on a poorly drained swamp. For 10 years she worked as a rebel rouser and writer in support of the organizing efforts of garment and industrial laundry workers around the world. She makes sculptural books, letterpress art, and video installations, and she holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Arizona.

SEAN M. RUMSCHIK has an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and his poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Iowa Review, American Letters & Commentary, RHINO Poetry, Denver Quarterly, Fourteen Hills, Asheville Poetry Review, Poet Lore*, and elsewhere.

CLAUDIA FLORENCE SAVAGE has been awarded residencies at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, Jentel, and Ucross, and published *The Last One Eaten: A Maligned Vegetable's History*. She is a finalist for the 2012 New Issues Poetry Prize.

AMANDA SHAPIRO lives in Durham, North Carolina. She has an M.F.A. from Columbia University, and her work has been published in *Porchlight, Two Serious Ladies*, and Ben Marcus' *Smallwork*.
SARAH SOUSA's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Cimarron Review*, *Smartish Pace*, and *Water-Stone Review*, among others. Her poetry manuscript was a finalist for the Kinereth Gensler Award and the Kathryn Morton Prize. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her husband and sons.

ANNE VALENTE's fiction appears or is forthcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Camera Obscura*, *Soutwester* and *Bellevue Literary Review*, among other journals, and her short story collection, *By Light We Knew Our Names*, is forthcoming from Dzanc Books in 2014. Originally from St. Louis, she is currently pursuing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Utah.

MATT VALENTINE is a lecturer for the Plan II Honors Program at University of Texas at Austin, where he also coordinates a visiting writers series. He completed an MFA in Creative Writing at NYU, where he was fiction editor of *Washington Square*.

GABRIEL WELSch is the author of *The Death of Flying Things* and two other poetry collections. Recent stories appear in *Southern Review*, *New Letters*, and *The Collagist*. He lives in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, and is a vice president at Juniata College.

GREG WRENN's first book of poems, *Centaur*, was recently awarded the Brittingham Prize and will be published by the University of Wisconsin Press in Spring 2013. In the fall he will be a Jones Lecturer in Poetry at Stanford University.

DESMOND KON ZHICHENG-MINGDÉ has edited more than ten books and co-produced three audio books. An interdisciplinary artist, Desmond also works in clay, his ceramic works housed in collections in India, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States.