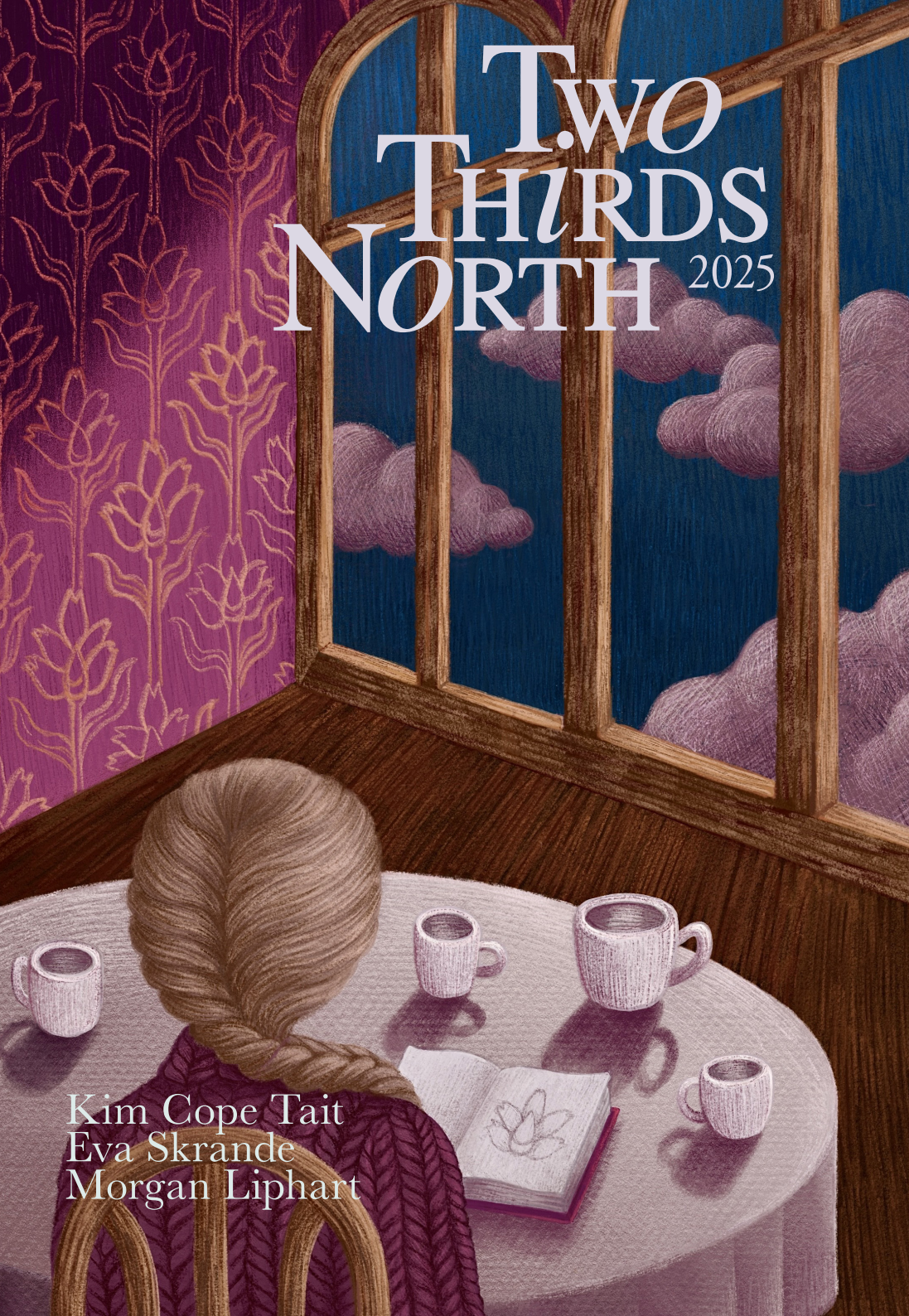
Two Thirds North 2025



Kim Cope Tait
Eva Skrande
Morgan Liphart

TWO THIRDS NORTH

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SENIOR EDITORS Adnan Mahmutović, Maria Freij, Paul Schreiber

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ASSISTANT EDITORS Sanni Lindroos, Catherine Andersen, Gabriel Ashton Holloway, Aura Berkhout, Jorge Caballero Naranjo, Björn Carlsten, Elizabeth Emmerson, Carolina Garcia Herrera, Amanda Haar-Jørgensen, Paula Hampel, Martina Magurová, Eeke Oosterhof, Giulio Pereira Benevides, Giulia Rauco, Francesca Succi, Gabriella Viotto, Ryan Wängborg Baker, Ayesha Zafar, Laura Martone

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Editor's Foreword

It is 2025. In the United States, powerful billionaires are dismantling the country's slow evolution of democracy. In our own traditionally peaceful Sweden, violence is reaching unheard of levels, with gang warfare, shootings, and domestic bombings. In country after country, right-wing nationalism seems to be marching the world toward variants of fascism. We have grown numb from watching death and devastation of many peoples.

And yet, the poets and writers of this volume recognize what William Faulkner expressed in his Nobel Prize speech, then under the great shadow of Soviet-American nuclear brinksmanship, that "the old verities and truths of the heart," the "problems of the human heart in conflict with itself" remain the subject of what is "worth the agony and the sweat." A few of our writers allude to the specific or larger crises in the world, but many focus on the conflicts, survival, and hopes of people in their daily lives. Many choose to look most carefully at the world, or at themselves, to recognize—against the backdrop of media noise and looming totalitarianism—the value and importance of this life. They resonate in their similarities and strike unexpected harmonic tones in their differences.

The section *Was That Love?* guides us through the most universal theme of literature, and generally one fraught with loss, anger, tenuous hope—and occasionally sex. Here, you will find Kim Cope Tait describing the divorced narrator to see herself as "more than half of something." Debasish Mishra mourns the death of a beloved father, while Cecil Sayer's sonnet portrays a son who eventually may be more of a threat than a child to love. Jonathan Vidgop portrays a loss of innocence, or at least of virginity.

The section *Living at the Edge of a Great Shadow* may be most reflective of our troubled times, from ecological disaster in Andrew

Mobbs' "Aral Sea Ghazal," to political and cultural crises in Hoshang Waziri's "A Frozen Piece of Sea" and Graham Allison's "The Terror of the Civilised Animal." Jennifer McCormack's "Sown in a Time of Shelter" alludes to both the political terror in Israel, but also hurt and defensiveness at a private level. The works in the section remind us that despite the weight of things, the ominous proximity of a great shadow that we continue to endure, and that, even if we may not share Faulkner's optimism, we will prevail.

As I See It finds some unity in the notion of the poetic act of looking: the intensity of what the speaker sees or experiences. Omar Sabbagh gives us multiple perspectives on a single man's fate. Eva Skrande and Jason Robison make us focus on the way poets see the world. Stacy Danner notes that despite the quibbles of humans about the use of language, we can see a plum tree eliciting its own vital and unrestricted reality. Alamgir Hashmi looks "up to find a different sky." The poet is first one who looks with more care and attentiveness than other people, and then labors to find the words that will carry that way of seeing.

I'm Still Here collects those works that suggest hope for a better future, resurrection, redemption, or at least the victory of survival. For Holly Day, hope for the future means fulfilling the dreams of travelling rather than "talking about 'someday.'" Jane Hertenstein's narrator finds a resurrection of her own writing career in the envious admiration of an immigrant guest. When resurrection and transcendence seem impossible, sometimes survival is its own victory. "Maybe we can earn our days," writes Jake Onyett. Maybe there will be a possibility to endure, to survive, even to prevail, if only at the level of our own self-determination

Finally, our volume concludes with a review of Yahia Lababidi's *Palestine Wail*, which invites us to reach outside our own volume here, to witness through her poetry, the horror and hope, the love and impossibility to love. As so many of our writers here, it is our desperate wish through our witnessing to still be here in 2026.

Paul Schreiber

Was That Love?

A Sestina for My Father and the Sea

DEBASISH MISHRA

The last time when you were here
we sat on a bench for an hour
Neither of us spoke a word
but watched the waning waves
that faded at the end
and surrendered to the sea

It's still the same blue sea
How I wish you were here
to hold my hand till the end
of time or my final hour!
But who could stop the waves
that claim the final word?

Between the want and word
there is a huge sea
I stare at the dancing waves
that bring the salt here
and take everything, the hour-
glass tilted for an end

The end is not the end
Sooty memory coils in words
like poison and fills the hour
A footwear floats in the sea
and I think it's yours. You're here!
But who can challenge the waves?

I look for you in the waves
to find meaning in the end
There must be some trace here:
your footprints or unsaid words
gobbled by the sea
on that day, that hour

The light of the fading hours,
the hissing of the waves
& the bold language of the sea—
facts that will never end
to amuse me. It's my word:
I shall salvage everything here

A lifetime is squeezed in an hour here
in another language where waves are words
of the sea and memory has no end

By Halves

KIM COPE TAIT

I.

For two years after I left my husband
I slept on half of my bed.

For half of that time, the other half
was occupied by a fierce wahine

who would only stay once a week
and only for half the night:

she said it was anxiety, it was stress.
It was anything but half.

And then it was over.

II.

Half of the liver can regenerate

if, god forbid, you lose the other.
The heart is not such a simple organ.

When I began stretching out
like a big X on my queen-sized bed

I knew something had finally shifted
and that there was a way for me

to be more than half of something.

The Café at the End of the Street

LING YUAN

She was the oldest customer I'd served in the café and seemed to radiate an otherworldly glow. As though an invisible string of fairy lights was permanently woven around her. Lilac it was if the glow had a shade: regal and warm; powerful yet not overpowering. Because of the aristocratic impression she made, I dubbed her Elizabeth—after Queen Elizabeth II.

It was her shiny black limousine that first caught my eye when it pulled up outside the café on a balmy September afternoon. As the chauffeur held the rear door open, she alighted, revealing a head of white hair—short and curly, a stooped posture, an elegant seafoam dress that sat perfectly on her petite frame, and a strand of pearls glistening around her neck. She appeared to be in her late seventies, stylish despite her age and looked like an important person on her way to attend a function.

For a few moments, she cast her gaze at the direction of the café, as though trying to comprehend its existence. I had not seen her before and wondered if she was lost. The café was tucked at the leafy end of a cul-de-sac within an affluent neighbourhood, where lofty mansions and sprawling villas congregated. Often, people drifted here, not knowing which direction to turn and were surprised

to find a café, scrawny and plain, with one trumpet tree, out of season.

After her chauffeur drove away on his own, she headed straight for the café and walked right in. "Welcome!" I found myself jerking into a straightened posture and wearing the most respectful expression. I felt unprepared, as though I was dealt with a surprise test in school. I wondered if she was some kind of culinary editor of a luxury magazine, like Tatler, perhaps? Or worse, a Michelin restaurant inspector who flew in from a faraway city like Paris or London. But the idea explored in detail didn't seem likely: her appearance was too conspicuous for a task that relies on discretion and besides why would anyone take a serious interest in this small, unheard-of café?

She smiled and nodded, swept her glance around the café, then chose a seat at the furthest end of the bar counter and in a low husky voice ordered coffee.

I poured hot coffee into a mug and placed it gently in front of her, careful not to spill or thud the table. Thank you, she said and gave me a warm smile that made me blush. Then she drew a book from her bag and started to read.

There were no other customers. The café was seldom crowded. Its location was not exactly a prime spot for business. By public transport, it was reachable only by a number '13' at the nearest bus stop. From there, the café was another fifteen-minute walk through a maze of winding streets that zigged and zagged in every direction–almost as though the café was trying to conceal its existence. I took a week to memorise the route before I could ditch the GPS. Nevertheless, the café drew a small but steady stream of customers from the neighbourhood's residents: mostly young professionals who had taken a liking to its unaffected presence, relaxed atmosphere and late hours.

I wiped the tables again and re-arranged the magazines on the rack. But the new customer, head bowed in her book, paid me no attention. Maybe she just happened to be passing by and chancing upon this café, thought it was a good idea to come in for coffee and read.

Minutes stretched uneventfully to an hour at which point the shiny black limousine returned. She stood up, book tucked under her arm, and handing me a ten-dollar note that covered a little more than the bill, said, "Keep the change," even though tipping, as with the norm in Singapore, was not expected and hardly practised.

I accepted the cash with both hands and thanked her with a bow. "See you again," I said, despite assessing her as a non-returning customer. I had no way of telling then she would become a regular at the café, and concluded instead it was happenstance that led her here.

After she left, I made myself a glass of iced tea and sat down. From my backpack, I took out my Moleskine in which I kept records of my working hours and gratuities received at the café. I worked after classes and on weekends, rotating on a schedule with one other full-time staff. The work was not difficult but the pay was a fraction of what many of my classmates were earning as a private tutor (tuition is a lucrative business here thanks to desperate and competitive parents).

Flipping to the page entitled "Café: September", I noted the date and gratuity amount and then found myself scrawling "Elizabeth."

*

"It's for the experience," I said, whenever someone asked what drew me to work at the café. Neither its obscured location nor meagre pay was a convincing reason to offer.

And I couldn't possibly say it was because of the serious crush I had on a guy I met last Christmas.

He was not what you would call handsome and did not immediately catch my attention at the party that night. People were huddled within familiar company, laughing heartily to in-jokes over pizza and beer, their heads bobbing to the music. At a corner of the room, a tall Christmas tree flickered white and blue.

We'd spent the eve of Christmas enclosed within our own social circles and unaware of each other's presence. Things might have stayed that way if not for my sudden urge to step outside. I was becoming breathless and found the crowd too rackety and the Christmas tree too glaring. It felt as though something in the air shifted just as the party crossed midnight into Christmas. I binned my half-can of beer and excusing myself, headed straight to the balcony for fresh air.

As I slid the doors open, the cool wind made my hair curl up and dance. I entered into the half-dark and noticed a man, dappled in moonlight, his shape unfamiliar. That moment, I experienced a powerful attraction towards him, as though I was in the presence of the person I've been waiting for my entire life. Of course, confessing my love to a stranger was impossible. I mumbled sorry, uncertain what I was apologising for, and staggered backwards, intending to duck back into the party.

"It's okay," he said, even though he seemed surprised by my entrance, and motioned for me to stay.

We ended up talking for an hour, until someone, to my simultaneous relief and disappointment, interrupted and shepherded us back into the party.

I must have been drunk. I had to be. One-and-a-half can of beer isn't that much but there was no other explanation for my feelings. The subsequent atmosphere of the party

did not provide an opportunity for us to speak again but in the brightly lit room, I could see he was tanned and of average height, and gave a clean, steady impression. I prowled around and uncovered from mutual friends that he'd been a brilliant student who studied economics on a prestigious scholarship–a fact he did not reveal in our conversation (although he did mention he was an economist) which only made him seem more remarkable.

Weeks after the party, my feelings was strong as ever. It was not lost on me that I was in his world a fading memory of a chance encounter. By a stroke of luck, my research revealed that the café, within the vicinity of where he lived, was hiring, and right away I knew this was the place I could forge circumstances to meet him again. I could tell it was a terrible idea. Surely he was interested in someone else? Even if he wasn't, what were the odds of him visiting the café? Of course, to contact him through social media—a friend request and a message—would be the easier, straightforward option. But deliberate and calculated wasn't what I was seeking. I wanted surprise and serendipity: two people drawn to each other by an inexplicable affinity, a "Hey" and a wave over the counter, or a brush of shoulders down the street, eyes locking in recognition and tentative smiles. Allowing these possibilities to ripple through my mind, I became convinced the idea wasn't all that bad. Besides, the café was a ten-minute bus ride from my house and the working hours were flexible. I was a year and a half away from graduating, so that was all the time I had for him to appear at the café. Or for me to wait until this infatuation cools off like a passing fever.

*

When Elizabeth, to my surprise, started coming in regularly, I grew to recognise the low growl of her approaching black limousine. Once, sometimes twice, a week, between late afternoon and evening, she would step in, and with clockwork motions, sit by the bar counter, read her book, and exactly one hour later––never a moment too early or too late––the black limousine would return and she'd settle the bill, decline the change. Beyond exchanging pleasantries and making an order for coffee she'd say nothing else.

Once I got used to her presence, I allowed myself to relax. If there was nothing left to attend to in the café, which was often the case, I did my schoolwork, listened to music on my earphones or practised in my head what to say if he walks in: *Hey, you look familiar! Haven't we met before? Oh, wasn't it that Christmas party? What a coincidence!*

Elizabeth never bothered me. Whenever she seemed to grow tired from reading, she rested her book on the table and stared out the window, seemingly studying the trumpet tree outside. I wondered if she knew trumpet trees only blossom after a dry spell broken by a thunderstorm––a spectacular affair that occurs once or twice a year and lasts a few days until the flowers fall. This was something I'd learned from the café owner during my job interview when he showed me around the premises. Who knew an ordinary-looking tree like that only flowers under fortuitous conditions? I often imagined walking up to Elizabeth to point out this impressive fact but I was nervous about intruding into her quiet space. Maybe I just needed to wait for the right occasion to strike up a conversation. Maybe when the trumpet tree flowers.

*

One December evening, raindrops were thudding against the windowpanes like bullets and showed no signs of letting up. Umbrellas were useless. Customers kept away. The entire month, gusty and pelting, had been swept by the monsoon with thundery downpours. Business was excruciatingly languid. The neighbourhood had fallen hushed, its residents, I imagined, on another continent enjoying the holidays.

Since school was out, I Netflixed away the hours when there was nothing left to do. Slightly after eight, just as I was nodding off behind the counter, strong lights beamed into the café. I jerked up, readying myself to welcome the impending customer. The door opened and there was Elizabeth–untouched by the rain, like a shot of warmth into the cold December air.

When I put a cup of coffee in front of her, I noticed how the warm earth hues of her plaid trench coat matched the rose gold watch around her wrist. It was unusual for her to come this late.

"What a familiar rain."

I jumped a little. "Ma'am?"

"Oh, thank you," she said. She looked at me, then at the coffee, then up at me again. "If you don't mind me asking, how long have you been working here?"

"Uh. Almost a year?"

"I see. How has it been so far?"

The café had its slow moments, but work was otherwise OK. My only issue, which was not a work issue but a personal one, was not having seen Christmas Party Guy, but of course, I wouldn't tell her that, or anyone for that matter.

"No issues at all, Ma'am."

"That's good to know," she said. "Actually, I was wondering if you could do me a favour today."

"Sure. How can I help you?"

"I hope you can give me a couple of minutes of your time."

"A couple of minutes?"

"Yes. If it's alright with you, of course. I'd like to tell you a story."

I blinked slowly, trying to comprehend her request. Customers asked me for directions, warm water, Wi-Fi password, cold water, drink recommendations, napkin, sugar, baby chair. But a story? I was confused but really I had nothing better to do.

"Uh okay, sure."

"Thank you."

*

The story Elizabeth told me went like this: Somewhere in this world when dark, a whitish otherworldly light would leak around the corner of a hushed street. Here stood a restaurant. This business establishment––whose exact location was unknown but said to be at Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet––operated in the late night, offering the sleepless and the burdened, a brightly lit place and a good cup of coffee.

On a night of a thin crescent moon, a man and a woman stepped into the restaurant for the first time. Except for the coffeemakers hissing at the corner, the place was quiet. The man and the woman sat on the side of the cherry wood counter adjacent to the only other customer, a middle-aged man reading the papers, and ordered two cups of coffee, promptly served.

It was the woman who spoke first. She asked the man if he knew his wife was having an affair with her husband. The man blinked slowly. He said he thought he was the

only one who knew. The man and the woman turned their gaze away from each other and silence fell around them. For several moments, they appeared to be drifting away in separate thoughts, a faraway look over their faces. Only the occasional crisp sound of turning pages wafted from the other customer who remained behind his papers.

After a while, the woman said she wondered how the affair began.

They thought for a long time, but neither of them had an answer.

The man and the woman began visiting the restaurant together regularly, at first talking about their failing marriages, then about other things. He was a journalist. She was a librarian. They discovered they both preferred coffee to tea, listened to jazz, and had read every Sherlock Holmes book. At some point, the man said he'd been working on his first detective novel and confessed that it wasn't going very well to which the woman's eyes widened with surprise. She asked to read his draft which made him smile embarrassingly. He said he'd often asked his wife for feedback, but she expressed little interest, saying she was not much of a reader.

The man started coming into the restaurant with a thick brown envelope, from which he pulled out and set on the bar counter, a sheaf of papers brimming with blue ballpoint scrawling. The woman leafed through each page, underlining a word here or a phrase there, pencilling her thoughts within the white spaces at the sides. They brainstormed and discussed. He explained his ideas and when she made suggestions, he listened closely sometimes nodding, taking notes, sometimes shaking his head, responding with a different opinion. They agreed and disagreed and smiled a lot.

It was hard to say when the man and the woman began having feelings for each other. Was it the night when the rain pelted heavily and they had to huddle out of the restaurant under an umbrella? Or was it when their minds met and they found they could let their conversations reach far and deep into places they had never dared imagine?

It was not an affair, of course not. The man kept a respectful distance. All they did was drink coffee and talk. They were comforted by the weighty secret they recognised in each other and knew too well: they were alone, betrayed, hurt.

One night he asked her if they should leave this place and head somewhere else, just the two of them.

"That's crazy," she said.

"You are right. It's crazy. No, I'm crazy."

"We shouldn't be like them."

"Yes, we are not like them."

The man was silent for a time, then he said, "Maybe this was how their affair started."

That night was the last time the man and the woman ever stepped into the restaurant.

*

I did not know if their story ended there. If it did, it was a terribly sad way to end, but at this moment came the familiar growl of her limousine from outside and Elizabeth, glancing at her watch, said she had to go, which brought me a pang of disappointment. Noticing only now the rain had softened into a drizzle, it felt as though I was jolted into wakefulness from an interrupted dream.

"Time flies when you're talking to a friend."

I blushed.

She finished her coffee and stood up to settle the bill.

"Thank you for giving me your time. You're very kind."

"No, I didn't do anything at all," I said. It felt like she had been the one keeping me company in the past hour.

"You've done a lot by listening."

After we exchanged goodbyes, Elizabeth did something that struck me as odd: for a few moments, she fixed her gaze at the windowpanes and as if speaking to herself, said, "After this rain, troubled hearts will be put at ease."

After this rain, troubled hearts will be put at ease? I wondered what she meant but did not think it was my business to ask. In any case, she was turning to leave.

As Elizabeth stepped into the night, the door shut behind her, and at once the café was brought back to stillness. That moment, I felt an inexplicable sense of loss. Or was it lightness?

I watched the red glow of the limousine's taillights shrink into the dark, then cleared the table, poured myself a glass of warm water and sat down, letting the story she had just told me sink in. Did the man and the woman confront their spouses about the affair? Or did the woman change her mind about leaving with the man? Why did Elizabeth tell me this? I turned my gaze to where she'd sat, half-expecting her to be there, and pictured myself asking her these questions, but there were no answers. All I could hear was the wind howling wistfully against the windowpanes.

*

After the New Year, instincts told me Elizabeth was not coming back. Three weeks had passed since that evening, and I knew the questions I had been saving for her would remain a mystery. Her indefinite absence following the story made it seem as if she had

entrusted me with something important. Like a deep secret belonging either to her or to someone she knew, buried for a long time, though never forgotten. She had grown weary from carrying it and was looking for a place to let it go. This was why she sought the café (why this particular café or why me, I did not know) but fulfilling her task meant she had no reason to return–well, this was only my theory, of course, I had no way of telling what happened.

*

The world moved on, as always, in spite of my unanswered questions. It was much later that I became convinced listening to Elizabeth's story triggered an unexpected effect on me.

The following months had, as a matter of fact, unfurled smoothly, if not, above my expectations: I did well in my final year examinations and ahead of graduating, secured a job offer at a highly sought-after company. Even the trumpet tree outside the café, which had not flowered in the past year, burst into soft pink. Twice. As for Christmas Party Guy? Zero. The funny thing, however, was it no longer mattered. Only on my last day on the job did this dawn on me: those feelings that once gripped me like a disease had gone. Just like that. Happened right after that evening and so gradually, I did not notice earlier. I couldn't understand now what made me fall for him so hard. I couldn't even, hard as I tried, recall what he looked like.

As I stepped out of the café and winded my way out of the neighbourhood, I wondered about Elizabeth: Why she stopped coming to the café? How was she doing? Then a thought struck me: she knew. Maybe what I had caught

was an illness I couldn't shake off and she'd recognised it right from the start. At the bus stop, I boarded the number '13' and as the neighbourhood whizzed into a blur at the window, I could almost hear Elizabeth's low husky voice: *After this rain, troubled hearts will be put at ease.*

Certain Blossoms

MATT DENNISON

I forgot to tell you how much
I love the flowers you gave me—

the watching of certain blossoms dry
while others, not yet to hide their faces,

prevail, heedless of hands shaping the math
of their disappointments above. O feed me,

dying and thriving, as the cat delicates
a mouse into the night beyond.

Son

CECIL SAYRE

My son rides his see-saw until song rests
his blonde head against the silver bars,
the balance of God's invisible weight
lifting him higher. God's hands held him

too long at birth, touched his brain too hard,
allowing in the singing of angels.
But when God's hands hold open a door
wide enough for wings, it is wide enough

for voices whispering murder and death.
He raises a steak knife into the glare
of the kitchen lights, whisperings dancing
along the serrated edge. He thinks to kill me,

or perhaps damn a least resistant spot in himself
as if he could dam the noise of an echoing well.

The Governess

JONATHAN VIDGOP

TRANSLATED BY LEO SHTUTIN

The boy is thirteen years old. He sits by the window and peers out into the garden. Rocking back and forth on the swing is the boy's frock-coated father. Two women lounge on the grass opposite. One of them is tracing with slender fingers the length of her languidly extended leg. This is the governess. It is she who addresses the boy as "boy." A light black dress clings to her body, her pendulous breasts, her heavy hips. Hers are the hips of a peasant woman, so disconsonant with her shapely, thoroughbred legs. She is forty, dark of complexion, and her chestnut hair is tied back in a pigtail. On they slide, those slender fingers, on and on. The second of the pair, the boy's mother, is a short-statured woman with a plain though agreeable face. The hem of her white airy dress flutters aloft.

Back and forth rocks Father, eyes on both women. His yellowed teeth grind against the stem of his extinguished Dutch pipe. Mother watches, with back tensed, the slide of the slender fingers along the long taut leg.

Face pressed against the glass, the boy peers out into the garden.

Father rises. His dense, angular torso leant forward. Mother leaps to her feet. They wait. The governess's hand

freezes on her round knee. She stands, sluggish, unhurried, and now, heavy hips sashaying, heads into the house.

Gazes riveted on her back, Mother and Father follow, maneuvering between the wicker chairs, the little table, the chaise lounge. Mother's foot knocks into a bowl left on the lawn. Apples scatter. The governess pauses in the doorway, turns around, slow, and smiles. Mother is transfixed. Again, she smiles, and, jolting into motion, Mother hurries after her into the house.

The boy tears himself from the window and runs to his bedroom door. He opens it no more than necessary, ensuring he remains unnoticed by the three adults passing along the corridor. The deep-pile carpet muffles the sound of their footsteps. At the trio of bedroom doors, they separate. The doors, positioned facing one another, are upholstered with a fabric Father has brought back from Brussels, their green colour merging into the green of the walls. The adults, loath to part, tarry for a time. But it is the governess who makes the first move, doing so with a smirk. Father, in his turn, emits a heavy sigh and flings open his door. Mother, left alone, continues to stand there, agonised, unmoving. At long last she too turns on her heel and retires.

The boy tiptoes out of his room and sits down in the middle of the corridor. His bare feet sink into the soft carpet. With palpitating heart, he makes himself more comfortable. Waits. Half-darkness shrouds the corridor, creeping toward the trio of doorways at its far end. The boy is a long time waiting. He remains patient. His head tilts to his shoulder. The carpet flows into a soft infinity. It is without end, leading nowhere.

He starts at a rustle. Someone cries out: he opens his eyes. Mother and Father have collided in the half-darkness, nightshirts white against the murk. They have collided by

the governess's doorway. The door opens a crack. The nocturnal light seeping in through the window unveils the governess's form. There she is, on the threshold, in a flowing black silk slip. Her form is phantasmic, almost ethereal, but the slip is too short to conceal her peasant hips. The silk clings soft to her sagging breasts. She stands there, powerful legs planted apart. And now, thrusting out her arms, she lets loose an abrupt guffaw, seizes man and transfixed woman by the sleeves of their nightshirts, and pulls them both into the room, slamming the door behind her.

The boy cannot breathe. He runs over on tiptoe, drops to his knees, puts an eye to the keyhole. He sees nothing, nothing at all! No light is lit inside. Only the faint glow of the moon enables him to discern the flitter of white and black silks.

He wakes late to the sun blazing through the window. The motorcar is already out in the yard. Around it, periodically tugging at his gloves, saunters their moustachioed driver. On the seat lies a soft travelling bag full of beach things. Mother and Father are ready to set off. The governess emerges from the house and climbs into the motorcar.

All at once they notice the boy's absence. Mother throws up her hands. Father snorts. Light-footed as a schoolgirl, the governess sprints to the window, presses herself to the glass and mouths, "Boy, boy, get up."

Their faces are flush against either side of the glass, her eyes level with his. She smiles. "You mustn't play Peeping Tom at night," she whispers, giving each syllable emphasis. "Quickly, quickly!" she continues, shouting now. "We're leaving!" And she runs back to the motorcar, legs flicking comically high.

Wrestling with his clothes, the boy scrambles to don his knickerbockers and his jacket, then flings open the window and bounds after the governess to the motorcar. A displeased look from Father. A kiss from Mother. The motorcar stirs. The governess's thigh is pressed against the boy's knee. The seaside is an entire hour's drive away. He has an entire hour to sit stock-still and feel her leg on his.

The sea remains the same, eternally galloping shoreward . The sand still has its sparkle, and screeching children still surround sun worshippers clad in ridiculous bathing suits.

The governess strides ahead, the boy labouring to keep pace. Her hips sashay before him. She escorts him to the changing rooms. An elderly gentleman in a striped bathing suit rocks on his heels, his arms folded behind his back and his neat round belly offered up to the sun. He notices the governess, winks in her direction and twitches his grey cockroach moustache with a content air.

They enter a cubicle. The governess leaves it unlocked. She asks the boy to turn away. She stands him in the corner, face to a fragment of a large cracked mirror. She takes an age to peel off her dress, hand tracing the contours of her elongated torso. Her armour-like brassiere struggles to contain her breasts. The boy stands trembling before the mirror-fragment. It snaps open, this cuirass of hers, and out they tumble. Hanging. Free at last. She freezes, gazing into space. Her hand flows slowly over her breasts. Click goes a metal clasp, then another, and another, and now, unhurried in her movements, she rolls her stockings down her thoroughbred legs.

Her reflection skips and splinters in the mirror's cracks. Doffing her drawers in a single fluid movement, she stills her body, legs planted apart on the floor.

There's a lump in the boy's throat. He can't seem to catch his breath. There they are: her immense thighs, her thickets of black hair.

The cubicle begins to swim. The floor reels, and so too the governess. The walls crumble, collapse against each other. And now the governess soars aloft, body suspended in mid-air… Their gazes meet in the mirror. The cubicle stops swimming. The governess has donned her bathing costume. "Need me to help you put it on?" she asks in a light voice. "N-no," mutters the boy, stripping off in a fury. She does not avert her eyes. She hands him his bathing suit. Her gaze settles on his belly.

They emerge from the changing rooms like they're two strangers, same as they were when they went in. In the doorway, though, the governess thrusts an arm behind her head, and the long thick hair in her pit leaves him forever dazzled. She freezes an instant, as if posing for some unseen artist. Intoxicated by her mystery, the boy shuffles across the sand towards the deck chairs occupied by impatient, wait-weary Mother and Father. Sea, sand and throng recede from his vision. He sees nothing but her thrown-back arm and her astonishing black pit hair, hidden from strangers' eyes.

The four of them sit on the beach amidst a multitude of other bodies: Mother and Father on their deck chairs, the governess opposite, beneath an ample, gaily coloured parasol, and the boy on the sand. A young man in a grey bathing suit strolls about nearby. He passes them, flicking casual glances over at the governess. His eyes take in the outstretched, drawn-together legs, the nipples erect under the light silk bodice. On reaching the changing rooms, he does an about-face and turns back. He no longer glances at the governess: he's just strolling now, and paying no attention to the sun worshippers. The governess smiles at

the boy, smiles at Mother and Father. The young man sails past them for the third time, his gait completely nonchalance.

The governess rises to her feet and follows silent in his wake. He eases his pace now, and now she draws abreast. They walk side by side, not a word passing between them, towards some secluded dunes. Now she eases her pace, and, taking his hand in hers, guides his palm slowly, along her shoulder. Three pairs of eyes watch her unblinking. She sways a little as she walks. As she vanishes behind the dunes, she waves a hand in their direction. Inviting. Mother and Father freeze in their deck chairs, nails digging into each other's palms.

When the governess returns, they're still sitting there, postures unchanged, gazing into space, fields of vision brimful of sea and yellow sand, of untold children and their screeching mothers. She flops herself down on the sand, and smiles.

The motorcar awaits them. The driver stows away the travelling bag. The boy trails behind the others, feet kicking up hot sand. A rotund woman stood amidst a gaggle of children with a towel about her hips struggles to peel off her bathing costume. The boy catches fleeting glimpses of fat white thighs, hoicked-up towel, drawers around ankles. He freezes mid-step. Looking back and catching his gaze, the governess presses to his cheek the cool tips of her fingers.

That evening Mother and Father shall be out at a reception. The boy is not to accompany them: there shall be no children in attendance. Mother issues a few final instructions. Father paces restless about the garden. He is decked out in a new suit, diamonds blazing from the stickpin in his tie. Their friends, a pair

of gaunt, stiff gentleman whom the governess has dubbed "The Sapped Sirs", arrive to collect them. The gentlemen sit ramrod straight in their gleaming motorcar and nod greetings at the quartet in the house. From afar they resemble mandarin dolls. One of them, impatient, drums his spindly fingers on the steering wheel.

Mother and the governess exchange a kiss so tender you'd swear they were parting for a week. Mother's lips glide down the governess's cheek, finding their way to her mouth. Father, feigning a frown and glancing askance at the waiting gentlemen's motorcar, runs a swift, firm, accidental hand along Mother's supple flank.

The boy waves off the belching motorcar from the open doorway. The governess sweeps past into the house, grazing him with her breasts. Her hip. Her hand. The motorcar vanishes into the distance. The boy ensconces himself in the empty drawing room. He settles into Father's seat, pencil in mouth in lieu of a pipe, and, clearing his throat à la Father, frowns as he surveys the vacant chairs. He opens an imaginary folder—notes of leather and tobacco—and jots down some memos, leaning back in his seat and puffing on his pencil. "Well now," he says, his voice stern and scarcely tinged with irony, "is supper to be served to-night?" He swivels his great bulk, looking to express his disgruntlement to his wife or a maid, only for his gaze to fall upon the governess. She is standing in the drawing room doorway, hand clamped over mouth holding back an explosion of laughter.

Fidgeting now, the boy scrambles down from the chair. But the governess blocks his escape route. Her mirth has vanished; she raises aloft her arms in a slow, languid motion. Casting a sidelong glance at the boy, she catches his gaze from beneath her upraised arms. "Shall we go for a ride?" she says simply, and, with the answer already

known to her, makes for the yard. The boy catches her up. "Shall we go for a ride?" she says, and makes a beeline for their motorcar. She positions herself at the steering wheel, looking every inch a real driver, and laughingly dons a chauffeur's cap. "We shall go for a ride," she declares, her brown almond eyes fixed unblinking on the boy's.

The motorcar moves off. Leaning his head out of the window, the boy sees the receding house, the garden, the gardener with his watering can, their shaggy mutt in hot pursuit. He glances at the governess, but she is all focus, body tense, hands gripping the wheel. Passenger and driver remain silent, do not broach the question of their destination. The suburbs give way to the outskirts with their multi-coloured street lights. The governess gives off a self-possessed, aloof air, save for the march-like beating of her foot upon the pedal.

Presently they pull into a street lined with hideously painted women. One of them sports scarlet hair adorned with a peacock feather. Another's skirt is short enough to expose the lilac bloomers hugging her thick, meaty, thighs. The women are all scantily clad, and the boy fancies himself at a grotesque wondrous masquerade. The women smile painted smiles, their glued-on lashes fluttering like those of dolls.

All at once the governess decelerates. Without turning her head, she drives, sedate, solemn, along the row of lurid bodies. The car moves ever slower. Now a woman pokes her bleached-blonde head into the window. Shooting the governess a quizzical glance, she winks and breaks into a gap-toothed grin. The governess spits out a curt "No", and the motorcar continues on its way. The blonde shouts a word after them: a terrible word. The boy shudders and freezes, but the governess flashes him an abrupt smile. At the very end of the endless row stands a gargantuan

woman. Her heavy breasts are spilling out of her purple corset. Her stubby, thickset legs are planted apart on the ground, her fleshy calves are clad in warmers, and her feet are shod in a man's ankle boots. Her monstrous thrust-out backside resembles a mare, over which is stretched a torn tutu.

The boy screws up his eyes. There are no underdrawers beneath the tutu. He opens his eyes. The giantess is standing by the motorcar door. The governess gives her a nod, turns to the boy, runs her fingers lightly down his cheek. He freezes. Before he knows it—swing of the leg, vault—she's beside him on the back seat. The door is thrown wide, and an enormous breast fills the entire opening. Mouth open, body pressed into the seat, he stiffens.

A massive bulk collapses onto him. Short stubby fingers fumble with his fasteners. He manages to turn his head. The governess watches him, lips pursed, gaze riveted on his face. All at once she rolls her sleeve up and throws back her arm, dazzling him with this revelation of her black abyss. The boy shudders. The last thing he sees is the steering wheel digging into the giantess's meaty flank.

A paroxysm seizes him. He surrenders to it, this sweet, languid agony at work in his hips and knotting his stomach. An immense crimson nipple fills his mouth. His lips tighten, and the ferocity of the ensuing eruption jolts the giant body sprawled atop his own.

He cries out, spluttering, and feels on his face the cool light fingers of the governess. They graze his cheek, his forehead, his mouth. "There it is," she whispers. "There it is: I've fallen for you!" The boy opens his eyes. The big woman is still stood by their motorcar. She's wiping her tutu with a man's chequered handkerchief. Leaning over

him, the governess brushes her full open mouth against his dry, wind-chapped lips.

They drive home in silence. The boy sits motionless, painfully clutching the governess's fingers.

Back in the house she undresses him and tucks him into bed. Perched on the bed's edge, she purrs out a ditty she takes to be a lullaby, and, quivering, runs a hot slender hand through his hair. Then, all at once, she thrusts her bulk against him, all atremble.

The boy closes his eyes. A giant breast descends anew over his mouth. The immense legs and the rugged ankle boots and the torn tutu and the steering wheel in the fat meaty flank and the black abyss under the governess's arm all bear down on him and whirl in the air and morph one into the other and crash down on the boy with the weight of heavy slumber. As he plummets sleepward, he manages to flash the governess a smile with the corner of his puffy childish mouth.

Language Barriers

GRAHAM ALLISON

Language is not the key medium
of your marriage.

Neither of you speak the other's
native tongue beyond the basics.

Conversations are transmitted
by your bilingual children.

I wonder why and how both
of you equally failed in fluency.

I know talking doesn't always
improve a relationship.

And, often in the end, children
become the only thing in common.

Living at the Edge of a Great Shadow

Aral Sea Ghazal

ANDREW MOBBS

> *As the Aral Sea has dried up, fisheries and communities that depended on them collapsed. The exposed lakebed, contaminated with agricultural chemicals, became a public health hazard.*
>
> – NASA Earth Observatory

Once the gem of Central Asia, a colossal cobalt sea
on which hundreds of species depended, a sea

in which hundreds of species coexisted, their home
tethered directly to the depth of this sea

sustaining ecosystems and steppe economies, so
no wonder it stung when the sea

turned salt meadow so swiftly, so mercilessly
diverted into fields of *oq oltin*, a sea

of cotton forever unfurling, soaked with Soviet
chemicals malnourishing the bitter sea

in spite of the quiet harbor towns left to decay,
dirge their fishermen lost at sea,

no memento save their rusted vessels peppered
across the heart of a murky sea

moonlighting as an ossuary, replete with skeletal
relics drifting aimlessly asea,

jutting out of the sand like zombie limbs, like
another climate casualty of sea-

water swept up in saline, mobbed by memories
of lush reeds wisping under the sea

*oq oltin – cotton (literally, 'white gold' in Uzbek)

The Graves of Punta Arenas — 1993

JASON ROBISON

Running beside Punta Arenas graves
our breath lingers
then rests over the dead.

It curls like the cursive stretched beyond longing,
bending names through time
and the ancient
marble headstones.

Dawn's slanted shadows solemn the plots
we leap across. The souls underfoot, lost
like us, untouchable.
Clouds have condemned
even the blue above us, clever fools,
trying to pass iron-gated acres
unscathed,
as if we aren't already dead,
a smear of empire parsing the hectares,
always out striding our best intentions.

We've outrun our love across hemispheres, darling
tourists smuggling words
under other tongues,
in languages we never fully formed.

The frozen ground cleaves
under our stubbornness.

It becomes
clear, we're going to force this frost
with permeance,
pretend to persevere.

Even as we touch, running out of words,
we're numb.
The glaciers retreat
from Antarctica's grasp, the sod
grabs our careless feet,
the gasp and collapse of lost bones.

We scratch through dirt
and shimmer to dust at the edge of the world.

We have no words left to fill these gaping cracks.
The graveyard's bars have split the plaster.

The ocean peers past feeble sea wall stones,
with seething sea foam eyes,
seeing we've blown
clear past the signposts and mausoleums,
run past our empty plots and tedium.

A Frozen Piece of Sea

HOSHANG WAZIRI

Jamila's fingers trembled as she gently lifted the Holy Quran, as if the book were asleep and she didn't want to wake it. It's been resting on the top shelf of the wardrobe for as long as she could remember. She ran her hand over its faded leather cover, kissed it and rubbed it over her forehead three times before putting it back like her mother always did, whether she merely touched it, or after a silent recitation in the corner reading while swaying her upper body rhythmically. Jamila pushed the book back and covered it with a lightly faded red dress before reaching for her dark brown jubbah.

Jamila woke up in the early morning with her mother's image scattered all over her mind. What unsettled her most was the lingering of a few scribbled recollections from her dream, whose knots and messages she couldn't understand. She dreamt of white ash rising to the sky. When it cleared, things began falling onto the ground and the tree leaves in the forest. Her hands stretched out before her as if praying, and suddenly one of her teeth fell into her open palms. She couldn't recognize the place in the dream, but she knew she was chewing something that tasted like mud. Only Aunt Raihana, the family's dream reader, could untangle such dark knots. Jamila has always been fascinated by her aunt's mysterious book, brimming with drawings and weird-looking symbols explaining whatever people saw in their sleep.

Had Raihana been here, she would have sat next to Jamila and deciphered everything and then squeezed her hand and whispered in her ear, "Don't worry child, it's just a dream!"

"But don't they try to tell us something Aunty?"

"Only sometimes. Only sometimes, child!"

But Raihana had taken her big book of dreams to Europe after marrying a man almost twice her age. Since then, Jamila has dreaded dreaming.

Jamila finished her bath and wrapped a large blue towel around her body, covering her armpits down to her knees. She moved around the bedroom as if searching for something before glancing through the small window in the back wall, which overlooked a narrow outdoor hallway filled with old, useless junk. She'd started her day by filling the heating stove. When she put the kerosene can on the ground, she looked for the hundredth time at that broken chair which was missing a leg and lay upside down on the cement ground. She always wondered why her father kept that rusty thing.

It was snowing heavily, and though it was early afternoon, it was getting dark. She switched the light on. A pale glow brightened the room. The bright surface of the old, full-length mirror, reflected a faint image of her as she stood there, watching herself.

In her dream, there were women, most of them naked, falling from somewhere high in the sky, deep into a forest. Some of the women ululated, some sang, while others wailed and shrieked. Once on the ground, they stood in a large circle and began to create themselves from red sticky soil, piece by piece: mouths, eyes, faces, hands, legs, and the rest of their bodies all coming together. Jamila recognized her mother standing in the middle of the circle, picking up the mud with both hands and throwing it on her head and face.

Raihana's thick book would have explained everything: the forest, the naked women falling from the sky, the noises they made, and why her mother threw mud on her hair and face. Everything!

She tried to disperse the lingering images from her minds by waving her hand before her face as if shooing away flies. Slowly she opened the wooden door of the old wardrobe as though it might break. The door made a creaky sound, and the smell of the vintage fabrics of her dead mother's clothes hit her face. When she was a little girl, Jamila couldn't understand her mother's jokes about the mirror and the wardrobe. She'd say, "Aren't we fortunate? We don't have to worry about what to wear. We don't have to run back and forth between the mirror and the wardrobe changing clothes and colors!" Her mother would tell her, laughing and caressing her hair, "Everything has been chosen for us. We don't have to worry about anything! Aren't we spoiled?"

Before reaching for her dark brown jubbah, Jamila looked at the mirror again and ran her index finger over the wrinkles that were beginning to emerge on her face and forehead. She leaned closer to the mirror, her face almost touching the reflection, scrunched her brows, and tried to count the lines in her forehead. She'd heard once that each line represented a decade of age. She couldn't figure out if there were four lines or just three. Her mother once told her she was the same age as the willow tree in the front yard.

"What does the tree have to do with my age?" Jamila asked.

"Your father planted it on the same day. He chose to get busy planting a tree instead of being with me while I was screaming during your birth."

"Were you scared?"

"I was a child giving birth to a child. It was terrifying."

Reaching for her jubbah, Jamila noticed a little tiny black spot on her left breast, right above the line where the towel was tightening her chest. How come she had never seen it before? She moved a couple of steps toward the mirror and checked the dark spot. It must have always been there on her breast and yet she has not seen it. "I've not seen my body, let alone a small mole."

She removed the towel and started examining every inch of her body as if she were seeing it for the first time. "Daughter of heaven," her mother used to call her when she was a little girl. Now, standing before the mirror and looking at her body, she found nothing heavenly about herself.

It was a long time ago, on one of the hottest days of summer, when Jamila's grandmother bought a tiny piece of sea from an old woman who had come to town with gypsies. They were shouting about a piece of frozen sea for sale. The water had frozen and was tightly confined within a dark brown wooden frame. Jamila remembered how her grandmother hysterically laughed when she saw the other grandmother, or someone who looked and moved exactly like her, standing before her, inside that bright shimmering thing, when the gypsy woman removed the cloth from its surface.

The grandmother carried the piece of the frozen sea on her back while Jamila walked proudly barefoot behind her.

She was elated and flabbergasted watching the bizarre and blinding bright ray emanating from that big thing on her grandmother's back, reaching into the sky. With her hands gripping each side of the frame, her grandmother stooped beneath the weight of the mirror, grunting and

breathing heavily. Soon, someone with a donkey cart came and helped her. The man carefully placed the heavy shiny thing face down on the cart, then gently lifted her and sat her next to it. "Don't look too deep into this thing," the man said with a trembling but commanding voice, "This sea water has been cursed. That's why it's frozen and imprisoned here!" Jamila watched the dirt underneath the man's fingernail as he pointed to the cursed water.

Her grandmother enthusiastically told everyone they passed, "I just bought a frozen piece of the sea that could reflect your whole self. You can see your entire body in it."

In just a few hours, men, women, and children were lined up in long queues outside the house to see this mysterious object. People touched their clear and crisp reflections in it with love and passion as if they were touching the faces of their lovers and flirting with them. Some, overwhelmed by what they saw, trembled and fainted. Women strengthened their hair and ran their fingers through it. Some could not stop crying for hours. Though Jamila was just five years old at the time, she remembers the chaos this mirror has caused in town.

At first, Jamila thought the black spot on her left breast was something that could be removed, so she held her breast and slightly squeezed it, then started to scratch the mole. Her palm resting on her nipple gave her a strange, pleasant feeling.

"It is just a mole, a beauty spot in a deserted heaven," she told herself, while resting her hand on her breast. Despite being completely overtaken by shyness, she continued to gaze at her body, her hands tracing the path of her eyes across her skin.

Seventeen years ago, on a windy autumn Friday, Jamila's mother went to her room after lunch and locked the door. She stayed there for a whole week reciting the

Quran. Jamila and her brothers were mesmerized by her voice. "Where did she learn to recite like this? the children wondered. Every evening, after the recitation ended, Jamila would knock on her door, holding a plate of food, begging her mother to come out or at least eat something. Every midnight, the mother would resume the recitation even louder. Jamila sobbed for a week thinking her mother would starve to death.

The following Friday morning, the door opened, and her mother came out wearing a beautiful, long red dress with her long, gray hair flowing down her back. She stood before the mirror looking at herself and touching her face and hair. Jamila recalled seeing her mother wear the red dress when she was a child, but she also remembered when her mother switched to wearing only black after her brother's sudden death. Her mother had never worn that red dress or any other colored dress since. She started singing while looking at herself in the mirror. Jamila watched in awe. She had never seen her mother raise her voice let alone sing.

"Mother, are you alright?" she asked.

Her mother didn't answer or even look at her. "Mother," Jamila shouted. "What is happening?" Before moving slowly towards the kitchen, she looked at Jamila with a grim face, slowly parted her lips as if about to say something grave but changed her mind and kept walking to the kitchen.

By now, the mirror reflected the pain and pleasure on Jamila's face. For the first time she felt the blood storming and thundering through her veins, then down to the center between her legs. Her hands started to move on her body as if they were plowing a hard, barren land and harvesting a long overdue ripe field at once. She slowly followed the rush of blood with her fingers, and as if wanting to grasp

its surge, she pushed her finger inside herself. At that moment, she felt something break inside her.

Outside, the snowfall thickened as the wind crept in through the crakes in the metal window frame. Jamila felt cold, bare, and vulnerable all at once. She found it unpleasant to look at herself. Stepping back to the corner, she lay on the floor, burying her face in her hair and hands.

She realized that the forest scene with women in her dream had suddenly shifted to her mother lying face down on the floor in the middle of the kitchen. She couldn't see her mother's face, but she saw her right hand stretching out and gathering names of God and prayers that had jumped out of her throat a few seconds ago and were scattered on the dirty kitchen floor and mixed up with pieces of broken glasses. Then, after grabbing whatever she could, her mother rose to her feet and staggered away carrying a handful of prayers and all God's ninety-nine names in her bleeding and tightly clenched fist.

"Blood nullifies the dream and its effects?" Jamila was almost certain she had once heard Aunt Raihana reassure a terrified girl, while interpreting her bloody dream. The blood between her legs annulled her nightmare. She thought of her Aunt's book and wondered how a book could know what was happening deep inside people's heads while they were asleep. She wished she had known what was in it and could have flipped through its pages and pictures. Raihana was keen not to share it with anyone; she never let anyone touch it.

"Your book is thicker than the Quran, Aunty! What is in it?" Little Jamila once asked her after her Aunt interpreted an old woman's recurring dream about falling off a high cliff. The woman said that each time she hit the bottom, she'd wake up. When she went back to sleep, she'd

fall again, hit the ground, and wake up. She was trapped in her dream.

"Nothing is thicker than the Quran." Her Aunt told her. "My book has only fears and desires in it. But the Quran has everything! The mountains, the seas, the skies, the people and their stories."

"Even me?" Jamila shouted with excitement.

"Even you and me. We are all there."

"But what are we doing there?"

"I don't know. Maybe we are all waiting!"

"Waiting for what Aunty?"

Raihana stayed silent while Jamila looked into her eyes, waiting. Finally, she held Jamila's hand, looked into her eyes, and said "For our stories! Each of us has a story written there. We are waiting to see how our stories unfold and eventually end." She paused again, looked around, and murmured "I don't want for my story to end here, in this city."

Laying naked on her stomach, Jamila felt the chill prickling her bare back. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Her mother kept singing while walking toward the kitchen. Jamila couldn't understand what the past week had done to her mother; what happened in that room that turned her mother into a different person, and why she was singing. She had never seen her mother even hum. Jamila followed her to the kitchen and stood at the door, watching her rummage through the drawers.

"Mother, what are you looking for? Please look at me."

Her mother kept searching the drawers while calmly murmuring something to herself. Finally, she grabbed a large knife, looked at it for a few seconds, and held it tightly in her right hand.

Jamila shivered. "What is this for, Mother? What are you doing?"

The mother turned to Jamila and began hurriedly reciting the names of God.

"Mother, you are scaring me!"

Her mother halted the recitation, and raised the knife above her head, crying out, "O the merciful, the creator, and the bringer of death." Then she plunged the knife with both hands in her own throat.

As Jamila moved to leap toward her, a fountain of blood spewed out freezing her in her place.

Her mother fall to the ground, knocking over dishes and glasses on a small wooden table and smashing them on the floor.

Jamila couldn't sleep. She knew her blood was real, unlike dream blood that could nullify and void consequences. She got up and walked to the wardrobe, her fingers fumbling as she grabbed a piece of clothing and draped it over her body. She went to the window at the back wall. It was dark. She leaned closer to the glass and squinted as she tried to peer through the darkness. In the dim, foggy light, she saw the old, broken three-legged chair upside down with the legs pointing upwards. There were other things: her father's torn shoes, a rusty oil drum, a few beat-up cooking pots, broken plastic buckets, entangled wires, water hoses, a few logs.

Why is my father keeping this broken chair? she thought, looking at the pile of junk before her eyes caught sight of the kerosene can in the corner. She rushed to the kitchen, grabbed some matches, and ran outside to the back hallway. A few seconds later, she was standing amid the junk tightly holding on to the kerosene can. "You're good to be burned," she muttered.

She propped the chair against the cement wall to prevent it from falling, and carefully sat on it with the can on her lap.

It was freezing. Steam was rising from her mouth. She lifted the can above her head and poured the kerosene over her body. The smell was horrendous, seeping into her nostrils and burning her throat. The thick-oily liquid tasted rotten and bitter. She swallowed it and emptied the can on her chest and legs.

When her grandmother brought the mirror into the house, Jamila noticed her Aunt Raihana dropped the book she was holding when she first saw the mirror, and then walked slowly towards it. After seeing herself, she flinched as if seeing a ghost.

"What is this thing?" Raihana asked her mother.

"It's a frozen piece of sea!" Her mother said, "You could see yourself in it."

"Not myself! It only shows my surface."

"Surfaces hold secrets and scars."

Jamila couldn't remember more of the conversation. Her thoughts meandered as she remained seated on the broken chair with matches in her hands and felt the chill seeping through her bones. Aside from a faint sound of music in the distance mingled with the evening Adhan, the air hung still and calm.

Falling

GARY ENGLISH

the roof smells of wet decay
clumping oak leaves overstuff
the gutter forcing a waterfall
the shingles' cast-off flow unhindered
a foliage reunion
gathers acorns twigs
falling ochre and tawny wings

i dig into their muck
dump sludge renew the sluice
til next summer slips into fall
future autumns will refill the reopened grave

the air is colder than i remember
of sun-abandoned days
that swirl azure swatches through
grainy gray skies like a centrifuge

i could grasp that sky
with chilled hands, knotting it
to my breast before i slide away

praise the descending day
breathe once more before
i pray to the flaming spirit
of autumn's fall or i could

brandish blasphemies as the spirit
spins away then i relax
into gravity's fist
the abandoned son of an angry god

The Terror of the Civilised Animal

GRAHAM ALLISON

There are some people you know
who could survive in the darkest
of places long after sabre-toothed rats
have redistributed your own remains –

those with honed survival instincts:
hunters, killers, alpha-personas,
the networkers, the small-talkers,
the silver-tongued, the successful –

those who always find a job,
who have no trouble locating lovers,
those who can operate in the herd –
or as a lone wolf at the flick of a switch.

Poets of the West

PAUL ILECHKO

On the first day we sat with
the poets of the west
quietly discussing the days of horses
quietly discussing the cost of drugs
which bleed away into silver dollars

bleeding them dry as the desert
that haunts their dreams
from the edge of town
so many of them perched on stools
of leather and chrome

waiting for someone to ask them to join
outwaiting death which hovers between
the glare of lights reflected
in steel and aluminum panels
everywhere the cutting edge of modernity

*

on the second day we drank
to the ones who hanged themselves
who drowned themselves in the quiet ocean
threw themselves from the gleaming bridges
who imbibed the poison of words

a poison that may have seeped
through the membrane of their fragile skins
their blood is on your hands
poets of the west
feel the weight of it

feel the weight of your head as it hangs
heavily from your shoulders
as you silently eat with the ones who remain
a list of the missing
inscribed on every napkin.

The Weight of Things

JESSICA HWANG

The new neighbor, Jung-hoon, walks his bike out to the street. He looks younger than my own forty-three years, but always wears the inscrutable look of an old person. Loading a grocery bag onto each hip, I dig in my purse for the house key. Standing in our driveway, Steve calls, "Hey there Kung-fu, over here we usually just drive our car."

Jung-hoon waves and climbs onto his bike. I stifle a laugh. "God Steve, be nice." My purse slips off my shoulder and when I bend to scoop up my billfold and cell phone, one of the grocery bags tilts, avocados and Honeycrisp apples rolling beneath the SUV.

"I was…" Steve lights a cigarette. "I was being friendly with him."

"Can you help me please?"

He takes my keys and pushes the door open. "Probably on his way to the Chinese buffet for a cat sandwich."

"They don't have sandwiches at the buffet." Mitsy is excited to see me, wagging her tail and whimpering. "Also, Ann told me he's Korean, not Chinese. Please, don't get smoke in the house."

"Which one's Ann again? The fat one at the end of the block?"

"No, the old lady in the cul-de-sac, with the poodle."

I drop the bags onto the kitchen table. It was actually

Jason across the street who'd told me this, but Jason is six-foot-three—two inches taller than Steve—and used to play minor league baseball, so I avoid mentioning his name and whenever Steve does, I pull a face and say, That dumb jock?

Steve says, "You'd like a cat sandwich, wouldn't you, Mitz?" He stands in the doorway to finish his cigarette, smoke drifting into the house. "Chinese, Korean, what's the difference?"

*

It's my night off from the nursing home. We have a decent dinner of grilled pork chops and asparagus, but we both drink too much and get into an argument. Steve storms off to sleep at his own house and, even though he really shouldn't drive, I don't try to stop him.

The next morning, while searching for a bottle of aspirin, I recall our fight. My ex, Keith, had texted, asking for the name of the hotel he and I stayed at in Sedona—he's taking his fiancée, Megan, there for her birthday. Steve gets jealous whenever Keith calls or texts. I snap the bottle open, spilling pills onto the countertop with a curse. They ping off the backsplash, rolling beneath the dish rack and the toaster oven. At least Steve gives a shit; Keith couldn't be bothered to tell me I looked nice in full makeup and a curve-hugging dress—let alone initiate sex—during the final decade of our marriage. I raise a glass of tap water. "Enjoy the desert, Meg."

My daughter, Samantha, calls and we spend twenty minutes chatting about her weather (tepid and rainy) versus mine (sunny and humid) and make tentative plans for her to come home over July fourth. "I'll just check with Steve," I say, "to make sure he hasn't already made other plans."

Samantha sighs and says she has to go. She's twenty-three and still annoyed that I left her father when she was fourteen.

I don gardening gloves and a hat and spend an hour plucking weeds and tying drooping tomato vines to wire cages. Mitsy lies beneath the lilac bush, occasionally waking to snap at a fly. Jung-hoon is in his backyard, apparently building a new patio. He stacks pavers and hefts bags of sand from a wheelbarrow. When he sees me looking, he calls, "Hello, Moan-ee-ca."

In the kitchen, I wash my hands and look up the number for the city. "I don't think he has a permit," I explain to the woman who answers the phone, giving her the address.

During dinner, I tell Steve about Sam calling and about Jung-hoon's patio. He snorts. "Probably building an extra bedroom. Those people always pack like thirty people into a house." He muffles a belch behind his fist. "Tell Sam to save her money and come home for Christmas instead. You were just out there over Easter."

I pick a mushroom off my slice. "Okay."

*

When I get home from my shift the next morning, my feet are killing me. I'm looking forward to a long hot soak in the tub with a smutty romance novel and a bottle of raspberry-mint tea before falling into bed. Working overnights has messed up my circadian rhythm, but it's nice waking up at two-thirty, while the rest of the world is still locked inside offices or chained behind customer service counters. The mall, the walking trails around the lake, the coffee shops all belong to me for a few blissful hours.

When I walk through the door, Mitsy flings herself onto her back, wriggling and peeing a little in ecstasy.

In the bedroom, I shrug out of my uniform, dropping it into the laundry basket. I'd better eat something; the bath tends to make me sleepy. I scramble two eggs and spread peanut butter on toast. The tea is cold and sweet. Mitsy begs for a minute before giving up and curling up beneath the table. I flip through my phone, checking if I'm due for anything this week—an oil change or a pap smear or the veterinarian.

It rained overnight and our hot, humid streak has broken, so I switch off the air conditioner and open all the windows. In the living room, Mitsy—standing on the back of the sofa—starts barking hysterically. "Did you see a squirrel, Mitz? It's probably bigger than you." I lift her up and she licks my chin.

There's a truck painted with the city logo parked next door. A guy with a clipboard is saying something to Jung-hoon, who stands on the top step with his arms crossed over his chest. For once, he doesn't look inscrutable—he looks annoyed. As I open the door to try to overhear, Jung-hoon gestures toward the backyard and the other guy shakes his head. He holds out the clipboard and offers a lopsided smile: Just doing my job, buddy.

Jung-hoon looks at me and I miss the step, nearly twisting my ankle.

*

In the bathroom, I find a razor blade and a curled ten-dollar bill littering the vanity. Jesus, Steve. Save it for the weekends. I wipe up a smear of white powder and then squirt a stream of jasmine bubble bath beneath the running tap. I hang a clean towel on the rack. What

was that? It sounded like the front door being slammed. Turning off the water, I go into the hallway, tightening the belt of my robe, Mitsy at my heels. "My God, Steve! You scared me."

"Expecting someone else?"

"What?"

"Or is he already here?" He pushes past me into the bedroom.

I stand with arms folded, watching him make an ass of himself: flinging open the closet doors, getting on his hands and knees to look beneath the bed. I say, "You want to dust under there while you're down there?"

"We'll just wait here until he shows up. How's that sound?" In the dim bedroom, his pupils are huge. Mitsy brings him her ball, staring at him expectantly.

"More like wait for your paranoid high to wear off," I say. "Have fun sitting around, waiting for a no-show. I'm going to take a bath."

He swings me around with a hand on my arm. I yank it away. "Get the hell off me!"

"Shut up." He shoves me against the wall, my head knocking against the edge of the dresser. Mitsy starts barking.

"Screw this!" I cry. "Get the hell out. And give me back my key before you go."

He yanks open the nightstand drawer, and at first I think he's gathering up his stash of weed and titty magazines. I pull a duffel bag from the top shelf of the closet and throw it onto the bed. "Use this."

He turns and shoves the gun forward, almost touching my stomach.

I say, "Let's both just calm down for a second."

"Oh, I'm calm, you lying cheating whoring slut. Mitsy, shut the fuck up!"

"Steve—honey," I soothe."Let's—"

"Shut up!" He swings and the muzzle catches me across the mouth. The pain is so much that for an instant I think the gun went off. He points the barrel at the floor. "Sit."

Mitsy is running in circles, yapping her head off. I slide down the wall, my robe rucking up around my thighs. "I'll show you my phone. I'll—"

"Don't. Just don't, okay?"

I don't. Patting my lips on my sleeve, I stare at the drops of bloody saliva soaking into the fabric. He paces. "Tell me who it is and then I promise I'll go. Mitsy, shut up!"

"I'm not—"

"Don't lie to me!" He lets forth a high-pitched keening wail. "Tell me!"

He steps forward, pressing the muzzle to my forehead. My breath hitches on a sob. The metal is cold when he traces it against my flushed skin, along my temple, my cheekbone, my throbbing lips. Beads of sweat stand out on his face. His breath rasps through his open mouth. Our eyes are locked together in a disturbing inversion of an intimate lover's gaze.

"Tell me, Monica." He cocks the hammer with a click. I close my eyes so the last image in my head won't be his face. I think of Samantha, the day she was born, red-faced and squalling, remembering the weight of her in my arms, the powdery scent of her skin, the feather-soft hair against my lips, the syllables of her name in my mouth: Samantha Christine.

A thud. A scream tears from my throat. I wait for the bullet, for the blinding headache as my brain explodes, shredding memories and hopes and regrets, splattering love and hate and shame. My next thought is, He shot Mitsy.

Urine, hot and stinking, seeps under my legs. When I open my eyes, Steve stands before me, swaying like he does after a case of beer. The gun dangles from one finger. The look on his face is one of comical surprise—eyes wide and a round mouth. He stutters forward. The gun skitters beneath the bed. Steve holds his hands out toward me, teetering for a second, an hour, a lifetime, and then he crashes down, his big body landing across my legs, his face pressed against my groin.

Mitsy is still barking. Jung-hoon and I stare at each other, his hands gripping the wooden shaft of a steel shovel. I shift beneath the weight pinning me to the floor. That weight feels like something I'll carry for a long, long time.

Hunger

MATT DENNISON

Angles about him sensed, the first,
the free web presents, and he waits.
No, of course he does not wait, he
simply is: spider, small beyond time,
so small you might not see him
if you were to enter the room,
would only say Ah! and begin
to sweep furiously. And still
you might miss him, ready, if not
waiting, to do his job: place
that which is softer and smaller
than he inside his spider belly.
But you do not come, the door
does not open. The air does not
flow with its one-percent chance
of blowing the soft, the small,
his way. He weakens. What bad luck
to be born! What cursèd bad luck
to boil from that hot-paper sack
with brothers and sisters parachuting
to corners, walls and floor—though
we are only concerned with the one
slowly cooling, here, in this room.

Sown in a Time of Shelter

JENNIFER MCCORMACK

dry-eyed at the end of the film
we take the outer circle home
we're dim, but not distant:
it still hurts

we stare into the tunnel
while our pixels rest
in the bevelled glass

the seeds of the hostilities
were sown in a time of shelter
try not to breathe in

beware the smallest sadness
a suitcase full of semtex
at the underground station

we hurtle past occasional lamps
illuminating arches
concrete ledges
where we can dump our ideas
and run

Pain is Sloth

CHRISTA FAIRBROTHER

time spooled to the end of a bobbin, divorced from productivity. A three-toed body draped over a couch, an abandoned throw pillow. No care or concern for another's judgment. Pain's blind to dirty diapers, sinkfuls of crusty dishes, a refrigerator, empty, save a piece of cold pizza. There is no heavenly virtue to oppose the sin of pain.

soft beds and dark blinds
call you, made of Velcro, once
touched you're stuck indoors

As I See It

Water Psalm

JASON ROBISON

Ocean

A clear skirt of ripples fled the sand,
stranding the dying fauna and flora
on dry land, unable to withstand
the ocean sparked by heaven's aurora.

Like whale spray, waves rose and feathered
into quicksilver air; the blue mass swelled.
Under the foothills of sea, the tethered
elements rang back on themselves like bells.

Claws too heavy to hold their mass exodus
fell from their gravity in brief orbits,
and blasted the surface. The terminus
turned water to air, land left in torn bits.

River

The river mouth branches spread hearsay,
churned nutrients under bark, through the trunk
more ancient than the tallest alerce
on its banks. Its boulders sang sunken

songs soothed by moss. Above, the canopy
listened, bowed to the diminuendo.
Flashes of trout passed the words absently
over their gills, the muted crescendo.

Rain

The gift of river's silk threads fine stitches.
The gift weaves what we see through this downpour.
The chrysalis gift wrapped round our wishes.
Gifted always, soil and earth giving more.

Snow

The ivory atmosphere of frozen positions
savors cold, waiting always in our core.

Night

EVA SKRANDE

I don't have anything to feed this hungry night.
There are only prayers between my hands. I am out of pears,
and peaches. I am out of the belief
that pomegranates will save me. I am certain of so few

groves, so few loaves of bread, so few cups
of leftover months. I know
the song of wheat depends on the night's
weather, with what type of scarf

the night gathers its rain. I know the difference
between dreams and corn is more
than just yellow. It has to do with the way
the moon, from time to time, redeems us

from emptiness. Though I don't know what to feed it, the night
is forgiving.
A garden of stars reflects on my windows.
Nothing can blind me now.
There are too many tulips on my shoulders.

United

ANGELA TOWNSEND

You could not have both. It was either the United Nations or the Neshaminy Queen. My colleagues agonized over the decision.

"New York has those hot dog carts." Matt Wyle's evidence was unimpeachable. "My dad says there's nothing in the world more delicious than a dirty water hot dog."

We understood this was a review from a real epicure. Matt's dad took the train to Manhattan. He knew of dainties not seen in the suburbs.

"But they serve champagne on the boat!" Ashlee had read the brochure. The Neshaminy Queen was a "vessel of sophistication, the diamond of the Delaware."

No one was going to pour bubbly for our fourth-grade class, but either choice was correct. We had fallen into an embarrassment of riches: two field trips on the same day. You could not have both, but you could not go wrong.

I did not have to worry about my decision. Mrs. Norris asked me to read my poem.

I campaigned for the UN among the undecideds. "We will be sitting next to the Cote d'Ivoire," I reminded Ashlee. "It's a beautiful country. They speak French, but there will be translators. We can make pen pals."

"I still think I want to ride the Neshaminy Queen."

Ashlee had hair so blonde it was iridescent. Matt said it

was the color of white cheddar popcorn. The pretty girls were all going for the Neshaminy Queen. I mentioned this to my father.

"You are the prettiest girl," he observed. I knew he was wrong, but I did not mind. My hair was dark but long enough to sit on, and my eyes were the same algae color as his. I wore a silver medallion with a violet caduceus on one side, and the words "Daisy Barlow, Type I Diabetes" on the other. When I held it at the right angle in the recess sunshine, Matt Wyle yelled "blinding!" He meant it as a compliment.

"The cool kids don't want to go to the U.N."

"We do not fret over cool kids." My father never liked the term. He read me a chapter of The Hobbit every night. He said I would be ready for The Silmarillion by sixth grade. We pretended to speak Elvish waiting for the school bus. "We are not cool kids. We are warm lambs in this house."

I would have chosen the UN even if I didn't have a poem to read. I was one of the Green Children, elected by the class to speak. Dennis would provide statistics on Super Fund sites. Everett would present a collage inspired by the tragedy of Love Canal. I would read my poem.

My mother wore a turtleneck the same color as the flowers she compelled inside every February. She "forced the forsythia" and had poems published in five different magazines. One of the magazines had a picture of two fists with legs wrestling on the cover. When I asked her what that meant, she said that college kids have wild imaginations, but it might be Jacob and God's angel.

My mother helped everyone onto the bus, even Mrs. Norris. I made sure everyone knew my mother was my mother. Mrs. Norris wore tiny bow ties that made her look like a Civil War general. The night I was diagnosed with

Type 1 diabetes, she came to our house and played the piano while we sang from the hymnbook.

Mrs. Norris personally invited my mother to the United Nations. My mother had come on field trips before I had to wear a medallion, but now she packed syringes and insulin in a cooler covered with cats in sunglasses. Her yellow shirt rode up and showed her belly as she stuffed the duffle bag overhead. My father had said she'd packed enough granola bars for several apocalypses. My mother said we were Girl Scouts, always prepared.

"Will your mother eat a dirty water hot dog?" Matt Wyle asked. He had his feet on the back of Dennis's seat. My father said Matt was an imp, but he meant it as a compliment.

"I don't know." My mother was laughing with Mrs. Norris. I wasn't sure I had heard Mrs. Norris laugh before.

"Well, I know you won't."

"Maybe they have veggie dogs." A month into diabetes, I'd decided to become a vegetarian. My uncle said a Sicilian girl should never miss a meatball, but my mother bought a second wooden spoon for my sauce.

"Veggie dogs smell like farts." Matt was not incorrect. "You should write a poem about that."

We were only an hour from the city, but New York may as well have been the Cote d'Ivoire. Mrs. Norris made us promise not to interact with the men dressed as Elmo and Batman when we got off the bus.

"New York is going to give us a lot to write about," my mother promised. When I didn't want to get on the bus in the morning, she said that hard days give us the most to write about. She hung a poster of a bear cub in my room that said, "There's nothing that can happen today that God and I can't handle together."

The sidewalks smelled like spices from far away. My mother helped everyone off the bus.

"Will we get to see Coney Island?" I realized New York was Coney Island.

"I don't think so, sweetie. Why do you ask?" She carried the bag on one shoulder and the other duffle bag on the other.

"Ferlinghetti!"

Ferlinghetti was one of her favorites, and she read me some. He wrote about Coney Island. He was part of our pantheon. We saw Seamus Heaney speak in person. My mother and her friends cried when they read Maya Angelou. I knew T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Edward Prufrock" by heart. I dreamed about that man. I was distressed that he was afraid to eat a peach.

"Young adults! Young adults!" Mrs. Norris was reciting her own poetry, her two favorite words. "We have arrived."

"Matt, the flags!" If I were just a little bit braver, I would have linked arms with Matt. He was the fastest boy in fourth grade and had a wishing well in front of his house. When I was diagnosed, he drew pictures of army men and sent them with Mrs. Norris to my house.

"Matt, the whole world is here!" I tried to count the flags as we made our way inside, but I ran out of time.

"Not the whole world."

My father said the General Assembly was meeting the next day, and our little heinies would warm up seats for diplomats and heads of state. "Mostly a bunch of orcs."

I refused to accept this. "Mrs. Norris told us the United Nations is where the whole world comes together to solve problems. She says it is our best bet."

My father said something about "UN" standing for "Unreliable Narrators."

My mother was writing in a notebook while walking.

Dennis was always getting in trouble for this, but he was reading, not creating, and he bumped into people, which my mother would never do.

We were early enough to visit the gift shop, and I was glad I had saved fifty dollars from Christmas. I bought a four-color pen that said "United Nations," and an Eiffel Tower, and an Empire State Building.

"This isn't France," Matt remarked, although he meant it as a question.

"I know, but we're sitting next to the Cote d'Ivoire."

"Ooh." Matt was always willing to listen to me. When I read my poem over the PA system, the coolest girl in class, with hair the color of pennies, said, "Angela only gets to read her poem because she has a disease." Matt told me this. Matt told her that I was the best writer he'd ever met, and it had nothing to do with diabetes.

"This is where the plenary session meets," Mrs. Norris said as we entered a room with half-moon seats. I'd seen it on TV. Everyone wore headphones so they could understand each other. Translators who think very quickly were working high above the floor, like angels. My father said something about the "majestic metallurgy of language." He did not write poetry, but he was working on a novel about Finland.

Our half-moon said UNITED STATES. The Cote D'Ivoire seats were empty.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know, sweetie." My mother tucked the bag and the other bag under the desk. She nudged the other bag with her shoe. "How many granola bars get to sit in the halls of power?"

I giggled. "Are you going to write about all of this?"

"I'm just taking it all in."

"Do you think anyone will throw chairs?" Matt

and Mrs. Norris both turned around when I asked this question.

My mother snorted. She didn't mean it, and it sounded elegant. "Why would you ask that?"

Matt rocked in his chair. "I think they're bolted to the floor."

"Well, maybe someone will get very passionate." It could happen. Sometimes my father called me into the family room when the British House of Lords was on TV. All those very old men said hilarious things, like, "I believe the gentleman has a large object lodged firmly between his buttocks." I asked my father what any of this had to do with their debates. I asked him if they were trying to save the Earth in England, too. He wasn't sure, but he thought all those old men might be handling conflict in a healthier way than our Congress. Sometimes he called me in to watch our Congress on C-SPAN, but it was never interesting.

"Do you think we will make anyone angry?" Matt was not joking, and I felt guilty. I was not sure I'd ever seen Matt concerned.

"I can't imagine we will." My mother shook her head. My father said she was a non-anxious presence.

"We just want to save our common home." I knew the other children would feel the same way.

The Secretary General was speaking, a man with hair as white as Ashlee's, but cut like Ace Ventura's, with tiny bangs.

"That man's head is too large for his hair," Matt observed.

"Stop. They're starting."

The Cote d'Ivoire chairs were still empty. Secretary Ace did a roll call that reminded me of the Olympic Opening Ceremonies. My father cried for sixteen days every Olympics, and he rooted for Lesotho, and Bangladesh,

and whoever had overcome the most to get there. The people my father rooted for never got medals.

"Ivory Coast? Ivory Coast?"

"Where are they?" I asked my mother first, then Mrs. Norris. They didn't know. I pictured our pen pals out on the Atlantic. Maybe their boat had been surrounded by so many dolphins, they could not move forward without hurting them. They decided they would give up the Youth General Assembly rather than hurt anyone. They turned around and went home.

I proposed this to my mother, who said that sounded like a wonderful novel, but "I'm sure they took an airplane."

"Do you think they are okay?"

"Angela." Mrs. Norris reached across Matt and squeezed my hand. "It's time."

No. It would not be the first time my body attempted to step out of a moment. It always came as a surprise. I walked on words, not legs. I was a poet like my mother. I was the slowest girl in tag. I did not know I was the tallest girl in class until someone told me.

But when you get Type 1 diabetes, you learn to condescend from your head to your body. You learn what it means when your fingertips can't feel each other. You learn what it means when the tip of your tongue is not there anymore. My blood glucose was somersaulting down the steps.

"Angela."

You learn to link your mind's arm with your body's arm and ask it for just one minute, please.

"A poem on behalf of our common home." I did not need to feel the tip of my tongue to make it work. I read my poem. I felt Matt squeeze my shoulder. I saw my mother disappear under the desk, reemerging like a porpoise with five granola bars. I finished my poem.

"The poet is an eloquent champion of our blue-green planet." The Secretary General was talking, but I could barely hear him. I had two glucose tablets in my mouth at once. My mother, Matt, and Mrs. Norris were all unwrapping granola bars. Matt's eyes were watery. He put my Eiffel Tower on his head and waited for me to laugh. I laughed, for Matt.

"Matt, stop it. We are at the United Nations."

My fingertips were coming back. "We have so much to write about," I whispered to my mother.

Everett was speaking. His collage was up on the biggest screen I had ever seen, and all the half-moons were looking at it.

"This is so much cooler than the boat," Matt said.

"I hope you get a dirty water hot dog."

"I hope you feel better."

I thought about telling Matt that we were a bunch of warm lambs. Instead, I started taking notes for a poem.

Going to LaChute Wednesday

ALAMGIR HASHMI

Not very far, St. Jerome is somewhere
on the way.
Yet it is far enough for a first anchorage—
and that night-green dome which is visibly a watermark
of getting nearer
is only the visible distance,
the journey being a way of judging it.

So some start out with sea maps, flash lights,
snarling horns and bugles,
and correctional signals from port controls.

We go on with just our eye
watching the sky,
making new timetables as a matter of course.

In this sea-dark way the mind wanders.
There is time spread out like the seagull's wing;
and always, there are galleys to gather seashells
by way of return.
So the wind has its functions,
it whistles one back to one's own, simplifies.

Later, we look up to find a different sky.
Beneath the increasing wind, the sea lies wrinkled.
Some say: we shall wait here till rain;
we are not sailing, we shall stay
until all the winds have blown away.

And so it happens nearly every Wednesday.

Sunday Dinner

ANITA NGAI

Tonight, as we did our weekly dinner,
I tried again to measure the distance between my heart and
my mother's.
I took out the measuring tape,
and discovered it was not long enough.
At the end of my rope,
I started seeing shadows between us
hovering above the round Chinese dining table.
They danced like goblins,
consuming the boiling hot peanut chicken feet soup,
performing an offering
to denial, a tug-of-war on words,
and of course emotions—a bowl full of it.

I had been looking forward to the chicken feet soup, thinking of
the old saying:
eat the body part to remedy that body part.
That's because I had just returned from traveling again,
6,465 miles northeast, and back,
another 1,216 miles due north,
1,973 miles west, across oceans and date lines.
I had trekked through the Silk Road, the deserts of Karakum,
the lives of our forebears.

I did take the measuring tape,
I always have it with me.
In fact, I wrapped it rhythmically around the planet as I went
around her,
like Chinese dancers with their silk ribbons.
So it was a mystery to me, a lifelong enigma,

that this measuring tape of mine
would be long enough to travel the vast skies, seas, and lands,
but not be enough to measure the distance between our hearts.

So instead, at tonight's dinner table,
I focused on counting the grains of rice bestowed upon us,
an obligation, a tradition, that I have learned to respect.
And my mother,
she was content to play with the remains of the chicken feet,
joints taken apart after we had sucked off the skin and cartilage,
thus forever jumbling together the bones of these roosters, hens,
and chicks
before they move on to their next lives.

Echoes

NATHANIEL CALHOUN

voices through the hill country
are cups full of dice.
yes
we'll wait for the settling.

we comfort ourselves with comforts
that echo comforts we have seen—
everwarm bathwater
bouquets for the body.

the shortest path from rallying cry
to capitulation
is trod to the mantle.
in the belly a trembling
overridden—
in the pattern a pattern.

we imagine echoes of ourselves
and people with us
but we dwell as
tidepool phantoms
beside a vast mute sea.

it is brief the echo moment
and then where it was
it isn't.
almost immediately
it isn't there.
it unhappens

and
it stops asking
for more moments—
or I think it does.

if you time things right
you experience the wave.
if you don't it's all particles.

Correct

STACEY DANNER

My old boss said “correct,”
where I would say
okay,
uh-huh, or
yep.

Correct.
Enunciated with an accountant’s precision,
right as a ruler, true
as two plus two is four.

Correct.
What a lens does to an astigmatism,
or a prison attempts with the felon.

Correct your mistakes.
Correct for the deviation.

“Cor-RECT.”

but on this March day, the plum
blossoms play random with the wind as it pulls
them from the tree on an
uncharted
twisty
course

1981 or Year Of The Rooster

OMAR SABBAGH

0
PROLOGUE
The Devil's Job

Dear God,

Though you do indeed have me on metaphysical retainer, I've felt a little neglected of late, more like a freelancer than a fully-contracted full-time employee. That said, the latest commission excites me. I expect to have much fun with this case, and to exercise all my ingenuity. The devilments I've prepared are wicked, shall we say. Here's a little of what I've in store. I do hope you find it a gauntlet challenging enough? After all, if the boy isn't challenged to the requisite degree, it is my understanding, and do correct me if I'm wrong, that he just wouldn't then qualify as an exemplary for the faithful. In this case, thus, it is in the nature of things that not only am I acting in my role as devil, but also, I suppose, as devil's advocate. But then, blessed with my metaphysical standing, I'm good at multitasking.

So.

You will recall his various fantasies as a young child. At four, falling asleep in bed, as you well know, it was his habit to picture various castrating creatures. Tarantulas and Great White Sharks. However, at this time, well before home computers and then the internet (and my heartfelt thanks, by the way, for permitting its insertion into the world, one of my proudest moments!) – he would imagine a "machine" of his desires that could tell him, omnisciently, exactly how many of each of these two chosen creatures existed at that time and also show him where exactly each one was. He pictured a kind of globe lit up by sparks where the extant creatures were. You might think this a harmless exercise for a four-year-old. But you may also recognize my handiwork, I hope. Because, evincing as it did, as it does, a deep-set intellectual curiosity, it was to prove both as we know a twin for the later perversions and perversity, and an early harbinger of the later bouts of grandiosity. His hunger for infinity marked his finitude. Thus and so, I started with subtlety.

My next venture, I hope you'll see, was pivotal. Now five years old, picture the boy in Spain. In Mijas, actually. That little hilltop town an hour's drive from the Ghaleezs' holiday home in Marbella. The parents, who'd done their utmost over the years to stifle and stymie my efforts, took their children there every year to partake of the local culinary fare and of course to ride the donkeys around the town. Well, this I devised. After their ride, as they were waiting for some churros, I had Omar Ghaleez witness an erection from one of those daft donkeys, a rather huge one, in fact. And even though one of his sisters clocked it, by that time, it had indeed made its impression.

Then, you may find him at the age of eight and a half or thereabouts. He's left alone at their home, with a young chum, sleeping-over. He knows where his mother's camera is. And so, plucking it from its spot, and both he and his pal naked for their bath-time, he uses it to take pictures of himself naked. Harmless enough, you might think, but again, one of my best seeds. Because later, when his saintly mother had developed the film from that

camera, she was a little upset, and did something a little out of character. She took the photos and at a dinner shamed him, sharing them with her friend sitting next to her. They both giggled, pointing at the pictures and making Omar burn redder than plum. That, I like to think, was a pivotal devilment. As we know it only fed into his inhibitions and his later frigidity, which, thankfully, irked his Oxonian peers to such an extent that he was pranked on more than one occasion. I know. You don't need to say it. I'm that good.

As he made his way into his teens, I had him twin his intellect with access to pornography on the Internet. It started simple enough (I do know my work well); just with pictures. Then videos. Then free videos. And then, well…

There were many other pitstops on the way. But overall, I think the commission you set me has been handled well. Most of all, I like that I was able to set up tragedy. And tragedy as we both know is not just your staple infernal bad fortune. Nor is it justice – your end of things. Tragedy worked so well in this case, because of his pride and his tendency to keep silent beneath the hammer of his suffering. Antigone herself was less proud and less conceited. He'd an excess of spiritual pride. I wangled his life at different times and in different ways into a tragic shape; scenario after scenario, where resolving action was impossible. He was both always in the right, and always in the wrong. And by putting him in a series of radically impossible situations, labyrinths and mazes of my devising, I have hopes I may have brought him to the point of self-immolation. Abjection is already there. But it'd be a nice touch, I think, an artistic touch, for him to end his own life.

And by the bye. Thanks for recommending Professor Lewis's little skit-like book, The Screwtape Letters. Most amusing, and the old don seems to have got it right. Our devilments work between the cracks and crevices of relationships. Indeed, I think one of my most successful moves was to make sure Omar Ghaleez was heavily medicated. Those drugs saved him some pain, but also pacified him. Quite proud of that really. Using a doctor to doctor events.

In any case, I look forward to hearing from you,
My most distinguished sentiments,

Yours,

The Devil.

1
First Love

Omar Ghaleez had first seen her in his second week at Oxford. They sat, by chance, at the two respective ends of the same library bench. She wore a black and silky shell-suit, her rich straw-colored hair bobbed up in a bird's nest. He was in light grey tracksuit bottoms, and a tightly-fitting sky-blue T-shirt which he knew accentuated his shapely, muscular frame. There was a moment that day when he sauntered over to a bookshelf and pretended to peruse the pages of a plucked book; but he was also flashing secret looks back at her. He'd noticed that she'd noticed him.

Like a woman, he wanted to be wanted. He wanted to be wanted from a distance, however small. Desire, that female domain, is longer and longer the longer and longer away it is.

About three or four weeks later, after much futile dithering, Omar spied the girl getting her gear together to leave the library. So, he left first, and waited in the newly-navy air a few yards around the corner from the swinging entrance to the library. He waited. And waited. But ten minutes later she still hadn't emerged. He went back and found her clutching her files to her chest. He stammered, their eyes briefly locked. At last, he introduced himself. Her name was Clara. He then asked her if she wished to

go for a coffee nearby, and that simple sentence emerged so staggered with bashfulness that it seemed to have the graft of a desperate tome of, well, imbecility. She said perhaps another time. What happened next was, symbolically-speaking, a lesbian conundrum. Clara just wanted space, time to test, to commune with herself. But she wasn't counting on him also being, symbolically-speaking, a woman. Omar took her response hard, utter rejection. It was the end of his erstwhile world, as cliffs crumbled into seas. He was like a woman, but one who didn't understand women; which made their scenario somewhat of a lesbian conundrum.

2
A Dream

The long wooden table, blessed with an expensive roseate sheen, looked like your standard boardroom table – a brown, elongated egg.

It was at this table each month that the Honor Council at the Armenian University of Denmark met to hold their sundry proceedings. The six-strong council was composed of an eclectic array of faculty – different disciplines, and different predilections, represented. There was an historian for instance, Dr Lewis Standish; an economist, who specialized in statistical research and econometrics, Dr David Strangely; a mathematician, Dr George Ransom, known for his ethereal lack of worldliness; then, a Professor of Red Indian literature with a sub-specialism in Eskimo poetry, Dr Sandy Iceman; a philosopher, Dr Clara Hirsch, who'd lauded articles on the philosophy of the sea. The council was chaired by the Head of Sociology, Dr Pierre Prevert. He had written an acclaimed critical biography of Durkheim, and two well-cited monographs

on "anomie" as applied to 19th century Paris and to certain mountainous regions of Tibet.

All seated now, Dr Prevert opened the proceedings, while gently stroking his demonic-looking, black goatee beard.

"Dr Standish, I gather, will note the minutes of today's proceedings."

Dr Standish, a short, plump man with a weak chin but a winning, slightly melancholic smile, nodded his head. The others seated around that long wooden table were split between maddened grins, efforts to look serious-minded and comme il faut, and the quicks of sucking-in excess saliva. All seemed primed now, readied.

Dr Prevert now said: "The matter before us today is a matter of great, of high importance. Word of it should not and must not leave this room." The academics all displayed masks of avid acquiescence.

"Let me start by inviting our distinguished colleague from the Economics department, Dr Strangely, to offer his considered thoughts on the matter at hand."

Dr Strangely now loosened his wasp-yellow tie, took in a deep breath, exhaled and began. "I have consulted the available data and figures. Strictly-speaking, Master Ghaleez is to be placed somewhere between the mean and the median. And when I attempted to apply various pertaining facets of the latest developments in game theory to our subject, speculatively if you will, it was seen that he was perhaps the most apposite inhabitant of the prisoner's dilemma known to date."

All members of the council near-grunted as tokens of appreciation and understanding. Dr Prevert screwed-up his eyes and was about to thank Dr Strangely and invite further comment from the resident philosopher, Dr Hirsch, when the minute-taker, Dr Standish, an historian,

begged to differ. "I must disagree with the findings of our esteemed colleague from Economics. I have made a small, if necessarily brief, study of the relevant archives that may speak to the case, and have found two documents dated from some time near the year 2000 which attest to a different truth. The first is a letter from a Persian girl to her father, and it attests that he was at the least mildly larger than the norm. Another document, a diary entry from an American Jewish girl, dated Spring 2001, indicates, via the happenstance confessional mode of the genre, that he was indeed significantly larger than the norm. Whereas the first seemed to support her observation via sight through a light grey pair of tracksuit bottoms, the second claims to have seen the full extension as it pressed its way forward through black tracksuit bottoms. Historiographically, both sources seem reliable, in so far as the softer nature of tracksuit bottoms would, empirically I mean, make quite possible their two respective observations."

Dr Prevert nodded. A conflict between two such central disciplines as Economics and History seemed to be emerging. It was his job to make sure the council meetings ended with some kind of majority agreement at least. With a solicitous turn of his head, he now enticed Dr Ransom, the unworldly mathematician, to weigh-in.

Dr Ransom had the habit of gazing intently at the ceiling when he talked, as though always distracted by God. His throat now made a grumbling sound, as phlegm tackled phlegm.

"Number is pure," he now said. "Statistics, as some well-known twentieth century figure once averred, are, or perhaps better-put, can be seen to be akin to 'damned lies.'" Facing Dr Ransom as it just so happened, Dr Strangely opened a wide and menacing grin. He relished a fight. And especially a fight with a metaphysical realist,

no, a downright Platonist, such as Dr Ransom. The mathematician, however, failed to register the devious-looking grin, his eyes still trained on the heavens.

"Yes, number is pure." And then, to the surprise of all seated there, he brought his eyes back down to the level of the others and placed both of his hands onto his small paunch.

"The Red Indians and the Eskimos have different takes on the matter," Sandy Iceman, the literary expert, now intervened. "The indigenous peoples of America spoke of the sun, as negotiated by the winds along the plains, as a great belittler of any erstwhile tumescence. By turns, in some of the most iconic ballads of Eskimo literature, the member is viewed to be enlarged by the riveting cold. It's a bit of a quandary, really…"

Dr Clara Hirsh, the only woman on the council, had a tear in her eye.

"Of course," she began, rallying herself. "It is sadness, not gladness, that makes the philosopher. The ultimate source of all abstract or speculative thought is in our melancholy. And so, I wish, if I may, to offer my own two pence here. We must distinguish between the subject's transcendental status as a fellow rational animal, and his moral psychology, his motivational sets, which are less bland, shall we say, being tied to and rooted in the very individual and concrete biography of the young man. While his transcendental ego renders him at-one and radically equal with all of us seated here, what was actually going on inside his more idiosyncratic head makes all the difference to my mind. It's here, I think, that the philosopher, after Wittgenstein, must realise that the best, most salutary philosophical move to make is to desist with philosophy. From my stance, philosophy has little or nothing to contribute here…." And another large, bulbous tear welled up in her turquoise eyes.

Dr Prevert ignored the tear. "Are you suggesting, Dr Hirsch, that we might have benefitted from someone from the Psychology department being on the council?"

Dr Clara Hirsch kept mum.

"Well," Dr Prevert now continued, "Sociology would suggest that the young man is in a state of deep loneliness and that this state has resulted in his various Onanistic excesses, and that those excesses may well have, either, diminished, or enlarged, his member…."

3
Blackbird Awakening

"Nohope, nohope… nohope, nohope…"

The squawking of three blackbirds parked a periodic few inches apart on the ledge of Omar's dorm-room window awoke him. As he opened his almond eyes the croaking seemed to come-alive, articulating the dregs of the dream just passed.

He got up, made his ablutions, clocked that it was now well-past ten o'clock in the morning, and dressed himself impeccably. Blue jeans, then, sky blue, light blue, baby blue, in a straight, conventional cut. His shoes, wood-colored, with an old-world sheen. Draping his chest and belly, lean and muscular both, one of those Scots-like tops so popular around the turn of the century. His hair was styled to come off both happenstance and controlled, dark brown waves side-parted with more care and deliverance than Moses over the Red One…

There was now a crowd of students and others, more itinerant, watching the live show. Some highly popular detective series conducted by the BBC, featuring highly popular actors, had chosen to film its valedictory episode on the grounds of Omar Ghaleez's Oxford college. Along

the cobblestone sides of the front lawn, students and faculty, staff and tourists, too, stepped-up onto tiptoes to watch the staggered filming of the scene. Omar stepped into the crowd from one corner of the courtyard. Finding the press and pull of the crowd unpleasant, Omar now climbed the few stone steps, a few yards to his right, that led into the dining-hall. He peered on now with more license than the bulk at ground, base level. He heard the Director shout 'Cut' and other hackneyed phrases. He watched the actors in conversation with the Director, with each other, and with other appended persons, executing some smaller, more specialized roles no doubt; watched them and thought how much they did indeed seem like hapless busybodies, puppets, dolls. And then, just as the Director of the episode, a short, lean man with raven hair and cinnamon freckles, seemed to have broken the seam of the proceedings for some sort of breather, a woman in her late thirties appeared on the scene of the outdoor set, having just reentered through the large barrel-brown of the college's front gate. Omar noticed her fitting black jeans and black biker-boots and was about to avert his gaze, but then with some devilment, just before he swiveled his eyes away, he noticed with creeping alarm how hers were now locked onto his. There was a searching glaze to the way she observed him. And from his side now, a little beginning panic. She seemed to be mentally assessing him, and Omar felt that he was being considered like a sweet meat, perhaps even for some future dramatic role. They were do or die moments. Omar chose to retreat from one long line of panned-out life (of livelihood, too) that seemed to be on offer. He disengaged, then walked in an advertently slow-paced manner, a brittle show of sprezzatura, back to the corner of the college's front courtyard and climbed the steps to his room. He undressed and masturbated. Then,

worsted and wasted, he lay down and dozed-off, alone now once again.

Later that day, the live film-set of the morning now a nearly-forgotten thing, Omar exited his college, knighted by the angles of the sunlight, as they glanced off grey and gothic edges, and the gift of a cool, chill breeze.

The Covered Market was fit to be filled and fueled by peripatetic flair. It was a mere hundred yards' traipse from his college.

He now played-out his usual dumbshow, which he felt honour-bound to perform, entering such a Socratic space. He'd start up one lane, stop, pause, frown those mildly-bushy eyebrows, tilt his right shoulder backwards, forwards, then with the right, decisive display across the tinkering of his features, tilt back again and turn to the start of the lane, in order to pursue a more considered line through that magical space. Before arriving at the café that was his daily haunt, he would pause and peruse a few book-covers on some outdoor shelves of a second-hand bookshop opposite the café. He hoped the customers or indeed the waitresses noticed him each day in this prefatory move before entering the café. Then, queued for a few minutes, he ordered his self-same, failsafe lunch, a black coffee (the Parisian style) and a tuna-and-peppers baguette. He hoped the waitresses also thought of this daily ritual as an exercise in flirtation. Omar wore that baroque grimace. The waitresses were indefatigably polite and friendly. And Omar thought, a Platonic love like this was bound to spill-over into the cul-de-sac of the flesh!

But his years at Oxford, a lost soul, extended without much flesh being appended to that batch of brittle hopes. A glandless time, all round, tumescence-true or by way of his lonely detumescences. It wasn't without its sense of ending though.

4
Funny Boy

It was now Finals time. Omar Ghaleez was to be found from the early hours of the morning traipsing around Oxford, listening to the searing voices as they laid their standard siege. He saw the dawn in in fact. The early light looked primed with gunmetal. He wasn't, clearly, revising. He was planning to wing-it. To rely on his instincts. It was a stupid move, but it was the move that happened to move him. By seven-thirty he entered a café opposite the Halls where the examinations took place. The place was complete with clutches of students nattering away or busied by their notes, revising for the big day, the big week.

As he entered, he overheard a blond girl dubbing him "fit," speaking of his eyes, at their deep-set mold.

"It's not so much their color. It's their shape. The way they're socketed."

And how she began to argue with her friend, who was clearly gay, and who didn't deem Omar as good-looking as all that. It wasn't a strange scenario, to be ogled and commented-on; not for Omar Ghaleez, there, then, after nearly three years being spitted and roasted in the inferno. But he was able as ever to play dumb.

He sat in a corner, alone. It was madness not to be apprehensive. But Omar wasn't. There was a perverse kind of thrill in being so systematically unprepared. It was like having one sole chip left after losing much at the roulette table, and daring to bet it now on one's luckiest number. It was almost liberating.

A week later, having written drivel in most of his exams, it was only one answer he'd given in an Ethics paper that

had pleased him. He'd quoted an early snippet from *King Lear*, next to an invocation from *The Simpsons*, something about Bart and Brat and a lack of "authority." Kant had been liberated in unheard-of ways. And the wildness of his gambits in that one exam made-up for the losses he envisaged for the other seven papers.

As it happened, he'd a few friends also completing their finals. Omar Ghaleez knew how driven these friends were (forthcoming millionaires no doubt), and like the many, had bought champagne bottles, balloons and other festive kit, to welcome some of them as they exited their final final later that day.

The crowd of students waiting outside the exams hall's exit was dense and pulsing. There was much joy in the air. Omar Ghaleez saw different batches of students leaving the exit and being embraced with popped champagne and much laughter. And as he waited with some mutual acquaintances for his own dear friends to emerge, he now shouted out, in a vein of extroversion that was true to his self but so little seen by any who'd been aware of him at Oxford for the last three years:

"It ain't over! It ain't over till the fat lady…"

Then, pausing, reconsidering the trope, still awaiting the imminent emergence of his friends, he exclaimed:

"SING, BITCH… SING!"

Many youths nearby burst out laughing, looking at him befuddled and askance. As if to say, that, that—from you?! And then, a few seconds later Omar Ghaleez heard a voice with an Australian twang, a voice pretty much disembodied to the side somewhere, deep in the swelling crowd, saying:

"But I didn't know he was funny!"

It was one line, stranded on the air. Omar Ghaleez heard it and felt deep down somewhere that told, gratified. He felt like the dark horse he was—if not perhaps looking as good as that same dark horse: stripped, naked.

0+1
EPILOGUE
God's Rejoinder

You may well have done your job well. His harrows have been evident. And yet, as you see, he never did commit suicide. Why is that? Oh, we both know of many contingent factors at play in this regard. He'd a very compassionate family. He'd the benefit of the sedatives he was prescribed. I made sure he'd enough money, by way of his earthly father, to get drunk most days, to allay the pain of his tragic situation. But, I think you'll agree, if I had picked anyone else from the extant earth, suicide would have happened, as a matter of course.

So: I blessed him you see with two splendid parents, complements in so many ways. And I know what you're going to say: I know the way you think. The puritan and the libertine represented by his mother's rigors and his father's wide heart were internalized by him in a way to create an immense conflict. His libido rapacious, coupled with inhibitions of a puritanical nature: one plus one equals two, of course. Or, as a tumescent conflict, three, in this case. But the very psychology that may well have doomed him was the same that kept him afloat, and on my side of things. That's the way the cookie crumbles, only then to be leavened again.

In his madness I touched him. Gave him a peek at oneness, the kind of oneness unseen by most. And that's because all things on the mortal earth, all things my creatures can experience, can be cut in half, spatially or temporally. I used brain chemistry, and indeed even made an opportunity from one of your own many devilments,

his smoking those light drugs, genetically enhanced – to permit him sight. It was madness. And madness to most. But I work at times in circuitous ways. You know that, but I just wanted to highlight how even your deviousness can serve the good. You're in my pay, remember. And I mean that both literally and figuratively.

In any case, all's well that ends well. And all's well that doesn't. The results satisfy.

Please do keep your phone on. I expect to send over another commission in the coming days.

I have to go now. I'm having lunch with Simone Weil and Bonhoeffer in a little while. T.S. Eliot opted out at the last minute, saying he'd a preface to write for one of those posthumous Routledge Classics volumes – you know, the ones with the silky-like covers.

Yours sincerely,

The Deity

Waking Up, Ramsgate

TIMOTHY DODD

Gulls soar over your morning bed between ceiling and sea, wicked
laughs and tortured screams showing they know your dreams better

than you do. Long time since St. Augustine arrived here, but outside
the window a grey steeple rises in the haze over the water, over you,

the one thing Pugin's determination did not deliver. Haven, indeed,
this port—Ellington Park's used book sales, lawn bowling, and all

its dogs are trickery to the souls lost at Goodwin Sands. Yours, too,
perhaps, like a rood screen over the heart. Even Vincent, all-
observant

Dutchman, matched the drifting of the heather on his meanderings
to Pegwell Bay, a gaze up at cliff walls and his boots soon to be worn

out from walking all the way to London. Passing Sion Hill, he looked
out at the waters again, the giant Georgian facades standing behind
him

like a backbone to forever. But sculpted head, you will brew up now,
preparing to be on your way to the next port of call as well, elements

and weather be damned be they break you, revive, or pull you under
the waves. Don't forget, man, you are created by them just the same,

in their image, with a life not all so different. Think about it:
        our power
will forever pale—a one-dimensional chalice mostly on the defensive.

Saint Francis' Labyrinth

COSTANTINO TOTH

The labyrinth's plaque swears
a treat: a *sometimes flash of*
insight. A pig

sniffs around, close to the
turnout of a cathedral, and
walks like she's got ballet

shoes on. *Tack. Tack.*
Head's bent, *tack*,
monastically.

I'm not too far away.
The labyrinth's got a bunch
of bends, springs and

boings scattered all over,
the flakes of a well-
oiled mystery to follow,
novel scents that
write my dance and write
my pardon and, yes,
there are times when
I swing too
wide and snort too
much. The pig's

on a leash. *I can't be*
around hot dogs when they're
cooking. A man holding

the leash says he served
in Viet Nam. *They smell just like*
people that've caught on fire.

Brown Shoes

PAUL ILECHKO

Black shoes became brown
at around the same time as

the gray suit became blue slacks
and a casual navy blazer

paired with a comfortable polo
shirt in burgundy or gold

when I traveled with you on
a trip west all the way to California

told you my memories of pool
hustlers in a bar under the Bay

Bridge years had come and gone
since then much of a lifetime

spanning cities and continents
watching the decline of formal

work attire an increase in tornadoes
and a reduction in the volume

of snow and ice back East
we couldn't find the bar

but the snakeskin hustlers were long
removed by a city which had reached

a peak of gentrification and was now
unable to apply the brakes sliding

down the reverse slope unsure
of its endgame the only accurate

forecasts limiting themselves to
the simplicity of weather and fashion.

Alchemist

KEVIN OBERLIN

The dog-eared corners of my journal's pages
have broken off, blown into the inlet, no doubt,
and rolled out to sea to be nibbled by tuna.

I study what remains by oil lamp, a flea-
ridden bearskin wrapped around my shoulders
to curb winter's bitter tongue as it probes

the pools of my cave, lined with green glass,
the bottles of potions, crates of salves, rotted
through seasons of neglect. I could cure, I'm sure,

I don't know what. White spot. Fin rot.
Lateral line erosion. Un-beach a whale
with a poultice applied to the dorsal fin and a good

old-fashioned talking to. A sheep who'd listed
a little starboard of pasture took advantage
of low tide to meander in, consumed a bag

of salt, grated sponge, and sundry, and was shocked
to discover her brucellosis quite cleared up.
But the hillside above me is a ring of burials,

a macabre derby of the mares I could not milk.
My father, who had the misfortune of long debates
with his deluded father beside his camphor fire

beneath the waves, plied with mortar and pestle
until the arthritis turned his fingers to combs,
at which he shrugged and died. But he swore to the tale:

a barrel of mare's milk boiling, a barrel
warmed, and lastly a barrel icy cold.
The first, old age; the second,

infancy; the last will cure you, thrice-lovely,
and handsome beyond words. I have poisoned
many horses, and rubbed many mares'

teats raw with my carbuncled fists. A feather,
marigold bright, hangs around my neck,
and my grandmother's stubbornness binds my ankles:

"You can do for me this one more thing."
But I am a poor zoologist, and a poorer specter
of vengeance. The children of perfectionists are pyrite.

My calcinator, alembic, and tubes burn dry.
As I lie down with my horses, a black ram
crests the hill, where he's spied a clover patch.

I suspect in the end the magic may have been
less in the milk than the barrels. And what became
of my grandfather's casks, deep in the whiskey dark?

Stones

Gary English

You hear the call of stones,
the ecto-mist of their spirits—

pterodactyl fossils crying crystals,
nature's small talk releasing the day.

You hear their life, just as you heard mine,
their breath escapes at your approach.

I walk at midnight trying to hear what you hear
in stones washed on the beach in waves:

not the wail of loneliness,
not the call of god.

Salt scrubs clean the stones that invite me. Waves
hammer their thunderous song;

A few insomniac terns yip their alarm.
Down the beach, lovers murmur their passion

in sync with the tide. I hear all this.
But in the moonstone shimmer beside you,

I hear your silence more clearly. A few miles off
in the Gulf, even at midnight I can see wind

hurtle clouds toward shore. I stop and pray
to the coming storm
of stones.

I'm Still Here

The Morning Glories

EVA SKRANDE

It's evening when I let go of yesterdays
and tomorrows.

It does not matter which shoes I put on

to greet the night, nor that my dress is unhemmed.
The bell signaling that work is done has come

and gone. The day has taken off its stockings,

the boats their sails. The morning glories have closed
their eyes to the evening.

The church, too, has called in its unmoored tulips. Tired

parishioners walk home from late services.
I want to offer them candles and bread as they hurry

to put their own worries

to sleep. The boats, now, neatly tied to the wharf.
Sailors take off the day's doubts like clothes—

there's no thought of tomorrow,

when they will put their worn shoes on one at a time,
heading to the daily work of wind and waves.

Tonight, they go to sleep, certain, despite past storms

of debt and fear,
that everything will be like the morning glories,

glad to open up after the darkness.

All Fates

EVA SKRANDE

I wear my daily fates like a dress
that's too large. Each day
I bake my bread and sweep
the dust of burdens that linger like mice.

My heavy scarves hold whole oceans
of destiny's clothes. I wash
my many flags of surrender,
cross the bridges from one day to the next barefoot,

and my bronze horses refuse to cut through fields
of manna.
I dust the petals of tulips
as if they were the pink daughters of fate

which have left me only one eye to trace
the moons of childhood,
though I have three ears to listen
to the anthems of this or that star.

I pray to regret none of my fates, not even
the boats that keep coming and going
like years do, or the river
that claims to be my mother leaving me all orphan.

My hands love their fate
of coloring pomegranates
the right shade of hope.
I drink to the dry seasons, to the water

which insists on tilling my memories
until there is no bird I can forget, until
I have no choice but to toast the night
and all fates calling my name like stray winds.

I'm So Over

MORGAN LIPHART

the way you peeled me from my body like the skin
of a grape. Clung to me like a dart. Licked everything
but my shoes. You can forget. I lose myself.
I am not a quarter that falls from my backpack.
You made me an airplane straight into a mountain.
You didn't make me at all. I make me. You made you.
I heard you're in prison. I wonder if you look the same
as your daddy putting his thumbs through the fence.
I'm so old now. Thirty-three. I don't think of you at all.

Except when the moon hangs in the sky like an irreverent
tongue. When time melts like snow on the heat of you.
When a day starts. When it ends. I wasn't yours to ruin.
And even twenty-eight years later, you cannot.
There are ways you'll never touch me. These legs
are an entire country. I remain whole.

The Writer

JANE HERTENSTEIN

The writer settles into a café table next to the window. Staring over her laptop at the train tracks running parallel to the street and sidewalk, she shudders. The keyboard in front of her blurs, Ps into Ds. She wills her breath to slow down, closes her eyes, and imagines the scene.

Rachel met Omar outside the modern bathrooms built next to a 500 BC outdoor public latrine. She and her boyfriend were on holiday in Turkey, where a guy at their hostel had recommended going to Ephesus, the site of an ancient Greek library, now a grand, white-washed sepulcher ruin. Upon entering a narrow, pitched street lined with headless statuary and truncated marble columns, they sought out a bathroom.

Flashing a brilliant smile was a toilet attendant, a young man dressed in jeans and a sports shirt collecting change for a real functioning toilet. He had a Cossack mustache and wore his shiny black hair twisted into a man-bun trapped inside a sun visor hat. She chit-chatted with him while waiting for her boyfriend to reappear after taking his turn. "Where are you from?" Rachel asked, making small talk, finding the locals easy to engage.

"Homs. Syria."

So he wasn't exactly a local, Pictures from the TV news flashed across her mind. Barrel bombs. Chemical attacks,

and children writhing, foam and vomit coming from their mouths. Despite the heat, she shivered. "I'm so sorry."

"It's where the rebellion started," he said, with what sounded like pride. "My family, we are OK." He asked where she was from.

"Chicago," she answered.

"America!" he effused. "I've always wanted to go to America."

Wayne came around the corner. He, too, looked out of place with his rumpled hair, groovy sunglasses, and baggy shorts, the kind that come unzipped from hiking cargo pants.

She'd met Wayne on a dating site and was pleasantly surprised—surprised they were still together. In high school, most of her dates hadn't extended beyond the first kiss, in college beyond a semester of sex. Well past grad school, she was experiencing what felt like her first real relationship. Wayne had moved in six months before their trip. After a summer of deadlines and separations due to work commitments, they'd decided to go on holiday. "How's it going?" he greeted the attendant like they were bros.

The bathrooms were discreetly built into a rock outcropping, to blend in with all the rubble. She was trying to imagine what Ephesus looked like in its heyday. Time changes everything. The attendant introduced himself as Omar.

"Chicago," Omar said, cocking his finger as if shooting a gun.

"Yeah, yeah." Wayne laughed. "Land of Capone and gangsters." Rachel thought the attendant might be referring to the ubiquitous gun violence.

"Someday, I will go to America and write short stories and publish them in The New Yorker like John Cheever."

She was taken aback. John Cheever? Does anyone still read old white guys?

Wayne jerked his finger toward Rachel. "Rachel is a writer."

Around them, crowds were growing; a tour bus had just unloaded. They needed to get going. She searched in the bottom of her fanny pack for a handful of Turkish lira for Omar. "Journalist," she clarified. Maybe it was something in his eyes or his open face, his weirdly optimistic view on life, she gave Omar, along with change for the toilet, her business card. For kicks, she added, "Give me a buzz when you get to America."

He gladly slipped it into his pocket and tipped his visor, after which, Rachel immediately forgot about him.

Journalist was a euphemism. "Content provider" was the job description used when she applied to curate articles for advertisers and product managers—not for a news agency or an editor. She developed content with clickbait like, "See what happens when you get one too many facelifts" or "You thought she was dead but see what she looks like now" accompanied by a picture of a big-titted woman in a bikini.

Rachel eventually took on a second job, walking dogs. In her spare time, she wrote stories. Several had been taken by online literary journals that didn't pay. The theory was that "pub cred" had value. She was still trying to figure out how it all worked. Until she could move up the ladder, she'd keep submitting to second and third-tier journals.

The odds of her getting barrel-bombed were much more likely, as evidenced by a growing pile of rejections. Well, not really a pile. Rather a folder on her laptop labeled NO. It occurred to her that an editor might employ content providers such as herself to respond to the massive amounts

of submissions coming over the proverbial transom. She could expect basically one of the following

Writing is subjective

Though I could identify with the character, I just can't buy the premise

Or, we get so many great submissions, it's hard to use them all

Or, I just didn't love this piece enough (this is one she received most of the time)

Lines she used on Wayne when they broke up. After returning from their vacation in Turkey she realized she just didn't love him enough. Even though he bought her lattes and offered to do the laundry and remembered her birthday, she just wasn't buying the good-guy character.

As they stood in the kitchen, both crying—Wayne put his arms around her. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

His bony shoulder protruded through his bathrobe. Even though he had a degree in engineering, he chose to work as a line chef at a 4-star restaurant in downtown Chicago. He told her it was about connecting with his authentic self. Something she was very unsure about. Rachel nodded into his shoulder. She wasn't convinced there would be a happily-ever-after ending to their story.

Story. Some of this came from how she felt as a writer. While in her MFA program, all the other candidates seemed brilliant, deep, and born with talent, while she struggled to get five hundred words onto a page. Even when they were nice and said nice things about her work, she still didn't believe them. There was always this needling sense that she didn't deserve their praise. She feared she might always stay in second- or third-tier relationships.

She'd been single for five months when Omar called. She'd been scrolling on her phone when an unknown number popped up. Thinking it was someone calling about the room available to sublet, she answered.

"Omar who?" She could place neither the name or the accent. Then she caught the word Ephesus. Faint memories lit up inside her head. The Cheever-at-the-toilet guy?

"I won the Green Card lottery!"

She wondered, "What were the chances? Almost as low as having your story accepted by The New Yorker."

She assumed he was calling from overseas. He said—through a number of attempts, as she had trouble with his English—that he'd kept her business card all this time and, well, he was in Chicago. At the airport.

"You said I should let you know if I come to America."

Yeah, but she hadn't really meant it.

He said he had to go—he was borrowing a kind woman's phone for the call—he'd like to meet up, have coffee.

A stranger had loaned him their phone? Rachel was confused: Was he delusional or scrappy? Either way, she gave him directions to her neighborhood coffee shop.

He made it on public transportation, navigating the CTA kiosks and an underground train transfer. Sitting before her, over coffee she bought for him, he recounted his life story. He was only twenty-four but had packed in a lot. Somehow against all odds, he had survived. Escaping Homs, sneaking into Turkey, learning English by watching YouTube at a hostel in Selçuk. He was wondering if he might stay with her for a while—that is until he could apply to Yaddo.

She was taken aback. "Yaddo?" The famous artist colony in Saratoga Springs, New York?

"It is where Cheever wrote some of his earliest stories."

Still in shock, she told him he could stay for a day, or two. Hopefully, by the end of the month, she'd find a renter for the extra room. He thanked her and kissed her hand and called her Mrs. Rachel.

"Ms. Not Mrs."

"Thank you, Miz Rachel. You are God send."

If anything, she thought, he might be fodder for stories—though she wasn't doing much real writing. She'd been contacted by a company to write reviews for Amazon. They sent her a template and a contract. She was paid by the word. She mused that there was little difference between writing and dog walking. It was like lifting her leg and letting the words piss out.

Omar, on the other hand, wrote all the time. He scribbled at the bus stop, while on the train going to his restaurant job downtown, before and after ESL classes at the community college. He composed using a Kindle Fire she'd given him, emailing tidbits to himself. After getting a refurbished iPhone, he pecked at the minuscule keypad with his finger. He once told her that he already had one hundred stories written in English, which she had a hard time believing. Even with an MFA, she only had about half a dozen stories in her NO-folder. If he really had one hundred stories, she was sure they were terrible.

At least he hadn't asked her for help or to read over his work. She was afraid of getting sucked up into editing his broken English. She'd been in a critique group before and it was awful. It reminded her of a bad date: starts good, then five minutes in you realize you've made a big mistake. She'd wanted to tear her eyes out reading over nonsensical paragraphs and forcing herself to read past grammatical mistakes and typos. She wanted to write: You suck. Don't quit your day job walking dogs.

Omar continued to work and pay for groceries and soon left an envelope for rent on the kitchen counter. She was surprised—for a former toilet attendant, he had his shit together. If only he picked up his wet towels. She'd find her latest Poets & Writers soggy and wilted under a heap on the bathroom floor. Thick black hair clogged the bathtub drain. Rachel was forced to dig out nests of it

with pinched fingers. He'd be gone soon enough, she told herself, sarcastically, off to Yaddo-land.

As the weather cooled, and leaves dropped from the trees, and the days slipped into perpetual twilight, she noticed a change in Omar. A little less light in his eyes. He stopped showering regularly and leaving piles of hair everywhere. For days, he only came out of his room for toast and bathroom breaks. Rachel imagined reality was setting in and things were taking longer than he thought. And, though this was natural, the life of a writer, she reached out to him. She knocked softly on his door; she knew what it felt like to struggle only to get nowhere.

"Do you want anything from the I-Ching Express?"

She thought she heard a sniffle and tried the knob. The room was dark with the black-out shades drawn. An odor of mildewed towels permeated the stale air. "I was going to call in an order," she muttered, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

Omar sat in a chair with his head in his hands, his man-bun askew, sobbing.

Rachel had no experience in comforting others. She wondered if she should touch him, lest she set him off like the bombs that must haunt him. Perhaps sensing her presence, he looked up and wiped his leaky nose on the hem of his white T-shirt.

"My heart is sick."

"Homesick?" she guessed. After so many months she was getting good at inferring what he meant to say.

He shook his head. "My heart is rendered in two." By now she was used to him sounding like a Charles Dickens' character. It was how he learned English.

Of course, he was suffering from PTSD, it was bound to catch up with him despite his surreal optimism. She

knelt before him, and not knowing what else to do, quoted Rumi like some lovesick teenager's Instagram: "'I survived because the fire inside burned brighter than the fire around me.'"

Omar burst out laughing. Apologized, then laughed some more. "Miz Rachel, you are a good-hearted woman."

If only he really knew her, she thought. She blew through friends like they were first-drafts, merely an exercise for her to write about before abandoning them for another topic, the next prompt. At age thirty-five she had left a trail of rejections.

She glanced at an envelope. From The New Yorker. She picked it up. "What's this?" Likely a rejection. Now she understood why he was so mopey, discouraged, depressed, and disconnected. With all the rejections she'd received, it was her usual state of mind.

Omar looked up. "It's a check. They are publishing my story."

"You got an acceptance?" What were the chances? The words echoed through her mind.

"I only wish my family were with me, for this great joy."

He went on to describe what she'd come to recognize as Imposter Syndrome. It didn't feel right.

Right, she thought, this shouldn't be happening. It was crazy—especially as she'd been at it way longer than him.

"I think, Who am I? I don't have special learning."

Correct, again, she thought. She was the one still paying off the loans she took out for her Master's degree.

"And my English is so poor."

Rachel nodded in agreement. She'd been all set to buy him fried rice, to help cushion the sting. Now, well…

"But, the editor—so nice—she said she loved the piece. She says, I speak from the heart."

"Heartfelt."

"Yes."

"Your words connected with her. Struck a chord." Rachel now understood why she had given Omar her card in Ephesus, why strangers had helped him get from the airport, why she had offered her spare room, and, then, let him stay. There was a reason he was a good writer. There was something in his words that made him seem real, someone you could trust to tell a good story. He was the kind of human most people aspire to be.

This thought swelled her heart, her mind, and filled the dim room with a sense of hope. She said, "Let's go out for lunch. Celebrate. You can pay."

There was, in the dim room, space, a pause where they both dwelled in the present moment.

Finally, Omar moved out. An aunt living in a Boston suburb invited him to stay with her. He was over the moon. "Boston! You know, Cheever!"

Rachel didn't know. She bought him a hard-shell suitcase as a graduation gift from his ESL classes. After he left, his contributor copy of The New Yorker arrived in the mail. She read his story in the spare bedroom that used to be his.

And she cried. It was the kind of writing she could only dream of. A mixture of the sentimental Rumi-esque speak she had grown used to hearing from him laced with a hard-edged realism forged from the horrors of war. There was something about the syntax that threw her, left her feeling off-balanced, experiencing language in a whole new way, a bit like driving down a highway with the headlights off, forcing her to decode and slow down, feeling all at once something new. Breathless, she read to the end and continued turning pages, wanting more.

The apartment seemed quieter, emptier, like an abandoned library or mausoleum, like the white-washed ruins of Ephesus with the wind whistling through the roofless chambers of her heart. She missed him.

It got harder and harder to leave the apartment.

She quit her job—jobs—and went further into debt.

One night she took an old college anthology down off the shelf. Under the heading of "Modern" was a mix of white men, from Rudyard Kipling to John Cheever. She began a story—long by today's standards—in which Cheever painted a yawn-filled picture of hollow suburban living, the kind of place one recognizes from the window of the commuter train, the kind of life Rachel had run from when she left home for the city. She recognized the pretentious dialogue, the banalities that suffused the characters' lives, their sense of hopelessness, a hovering cloud that nothing would ever change.

Suffice it to say, there were no Sayeeds, Singhs, or #metoo moments.

Why would Omar latch onto Cheever?

Then it hit her:

The backyard swimming pools, the surface conversations, people living inauthentic lives. In these places, it's easy to feel like an outsider. Hard to belong. There's a certain ache to break out, to reach for––more.

She finished that story and started another. She thought she was beginning to understand. She felt like calling up her old boyfriend Wayne to tell him.

Omar texted: Things were good. He'd enrolled in college.

Rachel dragged herself out of the apartment and down the street to a coffee shop where she set up her laptop at an out-of-the-way table. She gazed upon the

elevated train tracks that extended out into the burbs, and, summoning caffeinated energy, lifted the lid to her computer. It had been a long time. She calmed her breathing. Then, without checking Facebook, Instagram, her email, or Reddit, she began to write. Slowly she unwound a story about a boy with black hair and a cloudless sky set against a series of sun-bleached ruins, jutting up like crooked teeth.

Dreams for Tomorrow

HOLLY DAY

We have become one of those couples
that spent their whole marriage
talking about "someday," saving every penny
towards a dream
that just fizzled out due to improbability.
All those nights used up in planning backpacking trips

across the verdant hills of China, walking single-file
along impossibly-thin foot trails
snaking through the mountains in Nepal
imagining what the sky must look like
in the middle of the Sahara, surrounded
by endless miles of shifting yellow sand,

these are all places we're just not going to go to
these are all things we're just not going to do.
First, it's the hip that has to be replaced
and even though it feels better than before,
it's not a real hip, it means you're falling apart
and then it's my knee,
and now I have something foreign inside my body
and yes, it works better than the original,
but it's not going to last as long as the original, either.

We have become one of those couples
that fusses over furniture catalogs
the type of people that grow excited at the possibility
of replacing all of the toilets in the house

erecting a permanent swing bench in the back yard,
paying someone else
to do all the dirty work. The trip to India becomes

a three-season porch with a heated floor
Iceland is replaced
by a walk-in tub with handrails for safety.
We chuckle at all of our practical purchases, say
"Did you ever think we'd be these people?"
with casual nonchalance, but I am half-hoping
you'll stop me at the register,
pull me out the store,
drag me to the airport
and just keep going,

this long game we've been playing
has become just a long game of chicken.

Dance of the Ambulance

LEILA BILICK

For my daughter

Listen:
I came undone

Music rattles from an old rail

This will be a swift unmake of me and slow
as nails-in-the-track unbreak of me

You're doing great. Keep playing.

You saw the blood in the teeth, my teeth.
You saw iron and fire and flame

You felt scared. You felt… strong? You felt scared.
Semi-prepared? As if you'd known the music all your life?

You have drums now. Not knowing how it comes now
but play.

You're awakening a train
rolling down the middle
up and down the tunnel
destination-
free

All the band is with you now
and more are on their way

Roll open the rug, the blood-pump ready
Sparks fly and the parade
is all you've touched and made

You've always known your hair is wild
You've always known your hair is wild
The things you've known, the things you've known

Tea Cups

THOMAS LAVELLE

If ceramic cups can be
that set is beautiful.
They're huge, almost comically,
with glazes bright—oranges,
blues, browns, parallel
lines all the way round
and textured, outlines traced
of leaves and suns and skies.

Those cups, idle since covid,
near five years now, seemed destined
to sit clean and dry among other porcelain
until moving day, or sons
doing the dutiful packing,
the charity shop bonanza,
a week or month after the funeral.

Instead, you said "are these good
for masala chai?" Now
they're warm again. Cinnamon
and smells of other spices
rise. The ridges etched once
in some factory through glaze
and clay feel familiar again.

Music Competition

STEFAN BALAN

She stepped into the staring
light
into the middle of
the world
under the lacquer the veins
of her violin were shifting
she could see her eyes seeing
like fish in a bowl
the tunning of the orchestra
insinuated

about her
under her feet
rose an anthill
of numbness

She couldn't muster herself
to blame the parents
to erase the place
out of awareness
anger
was the only door
she tried
wrestled with the handle
would not open then
it did
as she tried to exit something
someone
shoved her back
into music

The Bell Ringers

FRANZ JØRGEN NEUMANN

Clara leaves me for Bruce, an art history professor who invites her abroad for a semester of extracurricular activities. Bruce suffers a stroke in Mexico City while showing Clara *How Doth the Little Crocodile*, a public bronze by Leonora Carrington. Back home, Clara devotes herself to Bruce's care and does the most nurse-like thing imaginable. She marries him.

I take my own sabbatical-of-sorts and begin playing bass in a band of other disaffected office peons consoled by death metal. I mention to Clara that our band has a song called "Stroke." She comes to our one and only show, Bruce maneuvering beside her in a pimped-out mobility scooter that looks like a geriatric Vespa. Our song is about a different kind of stroke but watching Bruce headbang with abandon—his graying curls flying, a pentagram glow stick bouncing off his chest—I concede that his stroke is far more metal than ours.

Clara and I remain on friendly terms. I'm invited to dinner parties where she dresses Bruce in a way she hopes makes him look dignified, but which only foregrounds his disability. Former students and colleagues visit often, then only occasionally, and soon it's just me showing up. The bowties and cravats are put away.

Bruce and I begin a correspondence. He's erudite but not showy, highbrow balanced with low. He confides in

me that Clara has begun wedging soy chorizo between her toes, drizzling her splayed digits with hot sauce, then getting herself off while watching Bruce nibble and gnaw. This is Bruce's first marriage after a lifetime of inveterate bachelorhood. He wants to know what he's in for.

You okay with this? I write back. He answers: LIFE POST-MEXICO IS A CONTINUAL EMBRACE OF THE UNEXPECTED. BUT THAT GRIM REAPER HOT SAUCE IS A MOTHERFUCKER. His one-handed keyboard, affixed to his scooter and phone, only allows capital letters.

I join Bruce and Clara for Criterion movie nights at Bruce's place. He has a TV facing out a back window and into an adjoining sauna he fashioned years ago from a garden shed. We watch the films from inside the cramped, steaming quarters, Clara and I taking turns running a squeegee across the window and bringing the subtitles back into focus.

They invite me to vacation with them. I do the day's driving to the coast as Clara navigates us to a rented cottage. Out of the van and helped onto his scooter, and in spite of the light rain, Bruce goes off in search of the childhood cabin where he used to vacation with his mother. Clara takes a shower. I unpack and note the single bed situation. Bruce encourages what Clara and I have only done out of his sight, upstairs at his house in the stuffy hush of the walk-in closet. There, amid the bric-a-brac of banker's boxes, unused lamps, pillows, and throw rugs, the two of us have rutted away under a bare bulb, Bruce's sea of old suits parted down the middle, Clara's hands gripping a closet rod.

Out of the shower, Clara casts her towel on the bed and begins to dress. Her black bra looks like a bridge, two towers touching her shoulders, suspension cables arcing

across her back. A tag sticks out like a protest banner. Her lack of inhibition makes it feel like she never left me.

"Will you check on Bruce?" she says, breaking the spell.

I tuck in the bra's tag and head out, the road winding between scrawny pines. It's hardly the idyll Bruce described to us in his slow, stroke-inflicted drawl. I receive a message from Bruce. STUCK. RESCUE ME FROM OUR LADY OF GOOD INTENTIONS. The drizzle turns to patter.

I find Bruce down a trail he has no business attempting, his scooter mired in mud. A woman in rubber boots is crouched beside him, a record of her attempt to free him written in the trodden muck. She emerges from under the shared protection of the clear domed umbrella attached to the scooter. One of those British baking shows is playing on Bruce's phone.

"Sorry to be of no help," the woman says. "But I've been having a lovely time with Bo."

Bo is the post-stroke nickname Bruce gives to strangers: just one of the many accommodations he's made for people unable to comprehend his speech, his needs, his abilities. The woman may have been having a lovely time, but she nevertheless marches off at a pace not meant for rubber boots once I've liberated Bruce's scooter. Back on the gravel road, Bruce is too impatient to let me pry the thick cakes of mud from the scooter's tires.

"Another idea," he says, or I think he says, as the scooter whines and jerks.

He shouts something else—a word, a command, a growl. Clara usually interprets his unintelligible statements for me. I follow the sprinkle of mud turds and catch up with him, his umbrella shuddering off its collected raindrops as he makes a sharp correction at a pair of open black gates, whose gold-painted ornaments catch the reemerged sun. I follow Bruce into a courtyard at the end of which sits an

old two-story farmhouse with a weathervane pointing to the sea. Behind a low stone wall, three horses stand in a lumpy green field, steam rising off their twitching flanks.

A man emerges from the farmhouse carrying a large easel. He is long-haired and wears a leather vest over a white T-shirt. I suspect a fellow metalhead. He stops and squints at us. "Students?"

"Boast here atta boy," Bruce says.

"What's that?" the man says. "This is private property."

Bruce looks at me, but I shrug.

Bruce gives an impatient groan and tries again. "I. Posed. Here. As. A. Boy."

The man gives us a skeptical look, then props open the easel. "Wait here," he says, and returns to the farmhouse.

Bruce drives over to the low stone wall and holds his arm out to a pale mare. Bruce's fist could fit within its investigating nostril. I turn to the farmhouse windows and see the man in the vest pointing us out to an old man in a gray gown gesturing for us to approach.

"What's this all about, Bruce?" I say, but Bruce only grunts.

The long-haired man waits for us at the farmhouse door. I prepare to do the usual and bear Bruce on my back, but he pushes me away as he climbs unsteadily from the scooter. He puts his good hand on the man's shoulder and limps into the dim interior.

"Only him," the man says to me, and shuts the door.

I clean the mud from the scooter's tires and drive the scooter in the courtyard to check the alignment. I let half of my body go slack and drive in circles, pretending I'm the one who had the stroke. What would Clara do if Bruce's misfortune also became mine—bring in a third witness, a third helper, a third lover? I knock at the farmhouse door and am told that Bruce is posing and can't be disturbed.

I deliver the news to Clara back at our rental cottage. On our phones, we discover that the farmhouse belongs to a famous artist. Nearly all his work is in a dark and brooding classical style, Goya-like, with no shortage of twisted limbs, irredeemable souls, and sinister backdrops. I can't imagine why Bruce's mother let him pose for something like this when he was a boy.

"You should have stayed with him," Clara says, and I don't disagree.

We wait for a phone call or the hum of Bruce's scooter coming up the road. Does he have his meds with him? Are they feeding him dinner? When Clara can't wait any longer, I lead her to the farmhouse grounds where we find two young men sketching a woman riding a child's wooden horse. She points us to a sculpture garden where I see Bruce sharing an enormous rattan chair with a young woman, her bare legs bridging his lap. Bruce's face catches the last of the light. The woman pivots a wine bottle down from Bruce's puckered lips. He laughs when he sees us, sending dribbles of wine down his stubbled chin that the woman cups in her hand and feeds back to him.

"Again. Tomorrow. Early," Bruce says to us between slurps.

He refuses our help getting up from the chair and instead relies on the women and men on the grounds to convey him to his scooter. The scooter's battery gives out just as we pass through the gate, leaving me to push Bruce and his scooter up the gravel road.

Clara corrects the steering as she attempts to pry information, "Who's this painter? How do you know him? What is he painting? Were you flirting with that woman?" She asks the last question lightheartedly, with a new, patronizing tone.

Bruce, drunk, only chuckles.

That night, listening to Bruce's contented snores, I realize that this is the first time I've occupied the same bed as Clara and Bruce. Clara's scent is familiar to me from a thousand nights spent together, but Bruce's fug intrudes.

I wake before Clara and find Bruce sitting by the front door, tightening his Velcro shoes. I wonder what happened at the farmhouse to inspire his independent mood. Sometimes I imagine Bruce could reverse the stroke's damage by conjuring just the right thoughts in the right order with the right intensity. Through pure force of will, he could reestablish his brain's fluency over the language of his body. But if he really could, where would I be? It feels wrong to be grateful for the continued misfortune of another. I crouch beside him and pull off his shoes, put socks over his feet, then put his shoes back on. I make coffee, keeping an eye on Bruce as he drags himself outside. He comes back in and complains that I forgot to charge the scooter.

I drive him to the farmhouse in the van. A broad-shouldered man in a cassock answers the farmhouse door and helps Bruce inside, politely turning me away when I try to follow. This routine goes on for another three days. Clara, who has cared for Bruce nearly every moment since his stroke, has a hard time letting go. I prefer this explanation of her restless mood to the other one: that her impatience exists because it's just the two of us again.

Clara and I visit a museum in town dedicated to the famous artist's work. We search the galleries for young Bruce. Was he the model for the boy cradling a dead bird in one hand, his other hand missing? Is he the boy at the edge of a group of ghoulish men tussling in a cave? Is he the feminine-looking figure standing in the groping night?

Or is he the infant in the nest, head turned away, a brand on its neck? None of these, we hope. The artist's style upsets Clara, especially. Not the nudity or explicitness, but the unrelenting despair. I joke that the museum's café probably only serves absinthe and blood pudding. Clara says the museum needs a trigger warning at the entrance and a suicide prevention counselor at the exit.

Clara takes my hand and asks if I've given any more thought to moving in with her and Bruce. My barriers are the baggage of our history, the appearance of questionable opportunism, desperation. Would we, together, be engaged in some warped hero-play? And if I decline the offer, am I abandoning Clara to a life of solitary caregiving, or simply flattering myself?

"Triangles are the strongest shape," Clara says, but all I can think about are the corners.

We continue along the coastal trail and find ourselves at the artist's cove. We cross a marshy bit of land on a Morse code of planks and rocks, then skirt the grazing horses in their paddock. The farmhouse door is held open by a doorstop made from half of a carved stone head.

The dim interior greets us with the writhing, slightly sweet scent of ancient wood. Exposed hand-hewn beams span paneled walls painted a deep blue behind faded depictions of flower bouquets. The ceiling creaks. We head up time-scalloped stairs toward the light, following the gentle strumming of a guitar on a stereo. Faded tapestries come into view on the walls of an atelier that rises to the rafters. And there, in the center, holding himself upright by grasping a length of thick rope hanging from a beam, stands an altered Bruce. He pivots on the rope and smiles at us.

"Your hair!" Clara cries.

Light from one windowed wall falls against Bruce's

newly bare scalp, against the rough, unraveling linen shirt that ends above his deep navel, against his thick prick and pale thigh, his mismatched legs, his bare flat feet. He looks like he belongs in the 17th century, as do the half-dozen people in the space: young men and women sketching Bruce, some dozing, all of them looking like they need direct sunlight and a vitamin infusion.

Bruce turns his body back to the position it holds on the large canvas the famous artist is scraping at with a palette knife. The artist wears a full-length caftan covered in swipes of paint where it bulges at his belly. There is an air of butchery about him. The artist says nothing and doesn't even look at us as we step closer. The figure on the canvas is gripping a rope that extends into darkness above, like he's been ringing heaven's, or hell's, bells. The artist has managed to capture Bruce's dichotomy, a body that's half strength, half weakness. But the most prominent feature in the painting is Bruce's tremendous erection. The artist pauses his scraping and crosses his wrists over his belly, looking at us over his half-glasses.

The bearded man who has been helping Bruce every morning rises from the floor, clears his throat, and wordlessly escorts us back downstairs. We are left outside, the door closed behind us, the decapitated door stopper staring up from the gravel with a look not unlike the one on Clara's face.

"What the hell was that?" she says, shaking off a full-body shiver. "And his head! He looks like a prisoner."

"He was smiling, at least," I offer.

"He's probably been drugged," Clara says. "We should call the police."

We turn the corner of the farmhouse and come upon two young women playing badminton. The women wear concert T-shirts and ripped jean shorts. I hear Clara

exhale at the sight of some normalcy. The women tell us they're waiting for their boyfriends, both painters, who are attending a course here.

"We could have been in the tropics," says one of them. "Paint me a tequila sunrise, I told him."

We accept the women's invitation to play doubles, but we only get in a set before the man in the cassock comes carrying Bruce on his back.

"He's done posing," the man says, gently lowering Bruce onto a lawn chair.

"What's with the erection?" Clara says.

"One of the old man's themes."

Back at the cottage, Clara shaves Bruce's head properly. "Poor baby," she teases, staunching a cut. She's back where she wants to be, nursing Bruce, she his all.

Clara shakes me awake in the night. It's too dark to see her. I wonder if I've imagined her presence until she shakes me again.

"Get dressed," she whispers. "Quietly. Meet outside."

She's talking like Bruce. I find her out past the van.

"He doesn't get to keep our Bruce," she says, and begins walking.

"What's that mean?"

"I haven't decided."

We pass through the open gates to the artist's compound, the pale horse a ghost in the starlit paddock. The top rim of the badminton net gives off the faintest stroke of light and points to a glowing, downstairs bedroom. I expect to see the famous artist cavorting with a few art students. Instead, he's lying in a humble bed, his only company a splayed book of Sudoku rising and falling on his belly. A candle on a sideboard sputters to darkness as we watch him sleep.

Inside the farmhouse, we creep up to the atelier. We move on to "Bruce's Boner," as we've come to call the artist's latest work. Clara picks up a brush and puts it down. A knife, and puts it down. She lifts the painting off the easel and we carry it downstairs and outside, the canvas tacky to the touch and silvery at oblique angles.

Later that night we curl into one another in the cottage's bed, our hands familiar and newly criminal, our fingers cold and raw from scrubbing them free of paint. We accidentally wake Bruce, despite our tenderness. When I feel the warm weight of his hand on my back, it feels, unexpectedly, like a benediction.

There's nothing on the news the next day about our theft. No police visit. We spend the day at a pebbled beach accessible to Bruce's scooter. We try to reenact his boyhood experience with soda and hot dogs, potato chips and marble cake. But Bruce only wants to be in the water. We take turns accompanying him in the cold sea, hoisting his bum leg to the surface so he can float on his back. When he talks, it sounds like he is simply cold. Afterwards, Clara drives Bruce into town for an appointment with a masseuse to see about the knots that have formed in his arms and shoulder from days of posing.

I'm on the back deck having my one smoke of the day when I see the famous artist enter our cottage, a cane in one hand, boots on his feet. There's a wounded look about him, a bloated unhealthiness. I finish my cigarette and step inside.

He holds out a wrapped parcel. "I offer an exchange. Where's the hostage?"

There's no point in feigning ignorance. What would we do with "Bruce's Boner" anyway? Hang it over Bruce's fireplace mantel? I put the offering on the kitchen table and lead the artist outside and in the opposite direction from his farmhouse. He moves quickly for an old man, carrying the cane.

I lead him down to another cove, the road lined with pygmy pines and small vacation cottages, children's voices straying out rod-propped windows. When Clara and I were here in the night, carrying the painting, I had the impression we were in a deep wood.

"I know he has ideas, but Bruce isn't my son," the artist says. "His mother and I had a brief…" he trills two fingers in the air "…the summer I painted him. I have enough children and grandchildren. You and your sister can convince him."

"Clara isn't my sister. The three of us live together," I say, testing out the phrase.

The artist looks me over. I imagine he's picturing a new canvas: me and Clara and Bruce, all of us half-nude, heads shaved, pulling on ropes. "The Bell Ringers." But our lives wouldn't be like that. It would be more like standing in the sea, holding up Bruce's bum leg so he can feel free. Being of use. Wanted. Although eventually it would be just the two of us again, and that wouldn't last.

I hoist a ladder from behind a stack of lobster traps and prop the gnawed, home-made rungs against a dry-docked sloop. I climb up and lift the tarp, find the canvas, and lower it down to the artist's hands. He leans it against the ladder after I'm down.

I look at the level of attention given to Bruce's face, his heavy pugilist's brows, the wide-set eyes, the meaty cheeks. The famous artist has the same features. "Bullshit," I say.

The artist takes a flask from his jacket pocket and unscrews it. "It would complicate things for the others," he says, dribbling the contents over the painting. He lights a match, but the sea breeze blows it out before it hits any vapors. He tries once more with no luck. He sighs and hands me the matchbook. "I'm unsatisfied with the painting but do tell Bruce he did good." He looks at his work, then heads back up the road, alone.

In the bright sunshine, it's possible to read the rope the figure holds as beginning to go slack up in the darkness. Maybe the figure isn't a bell ringer. Maybe it's the portrait of a man a moment before he falls, or the moment he's about to stand on his own. The reason the artist wants the painting destroyed is written on Bruce's face. Despite capturing Bruce's wracked body and that obscene erection, the artist couldn't bring himself to apply his trademark despair to Bruce's face. Instead, the figure looks like a man thrilled by his first experience with Viagra.

Ovals of alcohol are withdrawing from the paint, slightly dulling the canvas. I tear out the last match. I turn my back to the wind and strike the match. It goes out. I pull out my lighter.

The van is parked at the cottage when I return, Bruce and Clara back from what ended up being a couple's massage. They sit at the kitchen table looking at a portrait of Bruce as a young tow-headed boy. He's wearing red swimming trunks and swinging on a rope. His visible ribs like a mark of the man within him pressing to get out. There's a sailboat in the distance below gorgeous clouds. The light is overwhelmingly optimistic, a painting markedly different from all that Clara and I have seen of the artist's current and past work. A painting he kept for himself.

There at the kitchen table, Clara holds Bruce's hand. The angle of their heads, the degrees of a reconciliation of Bruce's past with his present state, stirs rebellion in me. I am not made of quiet satisfaction and quieter moments. Bruce and Clara are both mistaken as as to who they are inviting into their lives. I'm a who, not a whom.

Standing behind Clara, I plunge my hand rudely down the front of her top and grope one of her breasts, right in front of Bruce. See the man I am? Look at us: an immature metalhead, a free spirit, a stricken academic. How could this ever work?

Clara grabs my hand at the wrist. Bruce guffaws. "To. The. Bedroom. At. Once," he intones.

Clara looks up at me and flashes her eyes.

We depart the next morning with two paintings in the back of the van, "Boy Swinging from Rope," and also, to Bruce's delight, "Bruce's Boner," intact except for the charred corner and the imprint of my shoe against the brushstrokes where I smothered the flames.

When we hit the highway, Clara climbs up to the front seat and puts her feet up on the dash. She tells me again that she loves me. That she loves Bruce and me, both. She is happy. Bruce is happy. "Are *you* happy?" she asks.

I tell her I'm one of those people who'll only be able to answer correctly with the benefit of hindsight. The statement hangs there heavily until, from behind us, Bruce plays that old Bobby McFerrin tune on his phone and tries to sing along.

A month later, a package arrives for Bruce. Inside a wooden box is packed a clean brush and a bubble-wrapped jar holding a slosh of homemade varnish. Also included are instructions. They're written in an old man's hand on a piece of stationary embossed with the silhouette of a familiar farmhouse. Bruce reads the note word by word, Clara translating as necessary. I hold the brush in my hand, bristles wet, canvas waiting, and follow the instructions. The painting's colors take on added depth as I make light, even strokes from corner to corner, across the man, the rope, the wasteland, and back again, until everything gleams.

All the Little Surprises

JAKE ONYETT

I hope the stopwatches are staggered
in such a way that the jackpots come before lights out
and not on some delayed fuses of bittersweetness.
All the little surprise parties you've planned
that may or may not come to fruition. You hope
the jacks-in-the-boxes are under more compressed
tension springs than the reaper-in-the-box,
the clown face pops out to a crowd
with vibrating bells and actual eyes
instead of x's where eyes should be;
with open arms flexing for the audience
instead of starched and stiff with embalming
fluid, ruffled collar fetid with formaldehyde.

Take her to the festival, to the aquarium,
so she can soak it in and press the surfaces.
Hold her face up to the sun until she squints,
her curls bleach at the last few ringlets
and she's a full day's worth readier for
the surprises, for what the next ones bring.

Internal Affairs

RICH MURPHY

The internal timekeeper knows when.
The body has little use for bells, whistles,
mechanical hands: Second, minute, hour.

Flesh cringes at outside influences;
local police departments and neighborhood
watch groups plug up whorls.

A breath measures by lungs attuned
to a heart rhythm—organs playing
"Ours and Ours"—until eye-lid-last-call
warns that leg and arm muscles
may be less reliable going forward.

Once the unconscious push broom
clears the day before, the creative work
rises to the frontal lobe for concentration:
New Metaphor, image expansion, word repair.

To do lists and schedules whisp with sawdust
into a barrel without bung hole to the curb.

Without sun, play dawns on the limbic horizon
that lifts a whole body into the senses
with the spirit and blueprint intact.

*Much Ado About Starlings**

MICHAEL WATERSON

Their startling twilight murmurations ply
our New World skies because a Shakespeare buff
released the species mentioned in the plays
in Central Park, which hatched a pestilence,
a catastrophic butterfly effect
of scribblings by a long-dead playwright's quill
for cattlemen and pilots, among others,
who view the bird as foulest of the fowl.
Migrating page to page and mouth to ear
year after year, this fanboy origin
seems groundless now, a flight of fancy launched
by airy musings of a nature writer.
And thus the Bard, who long since bid adieu,
regales us from the grave with tales anew.

*based on a noted literary street myth

Maybe We Can Earn Our Days

JAKE ONYETT

Maybe we can earn the days if we
just talk to them, ask them what they want from us.
Maybe we misunderstand each other
and we've been neglecting the creases in the bed
that the mornings make for us with neat corners,
we've been making a mess of a set table,
spilling the milk, bruising the fruit,
offending by not washing the cups and bowls.
Maybe try with some flowers
and a rhythmic knock on their doors.
Do we know their favorite songs?
Try wearing something business casual
because the days seem to care a little more
than a v-neck and jeans suggest.
Maybe they'll answer, maybe they won't,
but their children, our tomorrows
will see from the windows the effort
we've made, they'll remember
and bake it in to our coming days.
I swear it is possible to be neighborly
with something abstract, something
you won't know will exist for you
until you wake up and taste it.
Maybe they'll embrace us
so hard that we'll all trip and tumble
together onto the lawn,
clutching our limbs around
their future hours and appendage minutes
and everything will change.
Maybe its worth the gesture
to try to earn our days.

The Wave Pool

ZAC WALSH

Six hundred and fifty-five miles north of Juarez stands Waco Splash-n-Sun Waterpark, on the good side of the Great River, a ten-acre oasis set aside for the widest array of friendly family fun in a fully safe, yet still outrageously wet-n-wild environment. Eddy, the new lifeguard, cannot believe his eyes. He is trying, but it is impossible because his deeply tired set is seeing far too much to really and truly see any of it at all.

"Eduardo!" his boss yells from ten feet below. "Eduarrrrrrdo? Can you hear me, huh, way up there on your high horse? Eddy! Ed, Edman. For fucksake, okay, hold up, what is it your thick tu madre calls you? E, just E, is that it? Goddamn it, boy, answer me before I come up there and become the answer."

Eddy isn't concerned with King David at the moment, never has been, not for even one of his seven days of employment at WSnSW. Enough time to create the world, and here he hasn't even saved one life. Here he sits staring out onto the Slam-Cola Super-Soak Forest, the Hang-a-Perfect 10 Food Tent Pavilion, the Speedy-Lube Baby Changing Stations (brought to you by your friends at Borox Watermelon-scented Wet Wipes). Everything Eddy sees is ebbing and flowing to the same base frequency, yet it is so loud to Eddy that his boss' growing anger not only trails off, it is swallowed up whole.

"Ehh, fuck'em," King David murmurs to the silence around him like a desert wanderer waiting for the baked glass ground to open. "Better he sits up there like a fucked statue then be buried inside of his phone like the rest of 'em. Least this way he looks on guard."

A grade-school aged boy runs by who weighs the same as any average middle-aged man busy with survival further south, this squeezable boy sporting professionally shortened bangs and shaved sides housing carved designs of a snow cone and a video game controller, respectively. The back of the boy's neck is protected from sunburn by the long, flowing completion of his ironic, parent-designed mullet, these VIP strands dyed the discordant blue of black raspberry slushy. The belly on the boy is so round and tan it could be eastern, but the saccharine wails calling for "more" which leave his Red40-stained mouth remind his surroundings that no wisdom was harmed in the making of this child.

To Eddy's far left is the source of all that ticking, clicking, perhaps flicking. The tiny metal bars that jut out from the circumference edge of the Fetter Health Waterwheel of Wellness are making contact with The Arrow so quickly that it sounds more like tracer rounds than recreation, and there is a line backed up all the way to the St. James Hospital Wishing Well, into which last summer a pudgy child (any fatter and there would've been no tragedy, one commenter added *144 likes) tragically fell and never came back up out of one of the park's most enduring and best-loved attractions. "Eddy, copy?" the lifeguard's walkie bleated.

"Copy, this is Eddy."

"Hey man, it's Cal. You good, you okay? Switch over to line you-know-what."

"Cool, you there? What's the word?"

"Word is you just stonewalled David again. What the beep man?"

"Didn't even smell him coming this time. Must be reading the suggestion cards, huh?"

"He came in here saying he yelled your name like 100 times, one for every war WE won against, well, I won't give you the history lesson he gave us in the shack, but it was pointed, detailed."

"I know his rap. So what's up?"

"You haven't hit the, well, I'm not gonna beepin say it out loud anymore, but you know what and you know when. So what's the deal, your deal?"

The button, the all-important Wave Alert, a small remote control with one, and only one button, that when pressed warns all the patrons in the wave pool that a series of waves are in fact coming and unstoppably so, each upwards of 6 feet in height, 150 feet in length, and 90,000 gallons in volume, with each wave spree lasting a full 7 minutes. The button, vital as could be, was all about the real, unassailable truths: liability, law, blame. The button was all about WSnSW not getting sued, about King David not getting bitched-out by faceless names higher up the slip and slide ladder, about all Eddy's coworkers keeping their jobs, about rents being paid and homelessness being avoided. Because just like many of the park's sunning and well-greased patrons, most of the workers are one missed paycheck away from losing the exile game forever.

"They know there are waves coming, Cal. They're in a wave pool, man. I don't need to tell you how big the signs are. The warnings are all around us."

"Forgive me for quoting our boss here, but people don't read signs, Eddy. What's the last sign you really read?"

"A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign

of the prophet Jonah," Eddy recited, poorly holding back a snigger.

"The sign of who? What the beep are you talking about dude? You know what, beep it. I don't have time for this. Some of us have a waterpark to run. Just push the beepin button, Eddy. I can't bail you out anymore beepin times."

"Copy."

On his lunch break Eddy finds his way to the employee lockers and spins out his code: 40-right-9 left-13 right. He finds a sleeve of crackers best used as tiny edible serving dishes, but Eddy just eats the plates as they come, just like his favorite American comedian taught him to do. Eddy, forced into the study of American life, finds comedy to be his best teacher, far more helpful than sincere attempts to learn from bosses, coworkers, TV personalities or social media consensus spurting in all conceivable directions. In comedy he once found clarity when first fleeing Juarez, and in the professionally funny man with the aqua green sunglasses and hair over his cheeks he found a voice for his generation, even if it were only a generation of one. It was this man who taught Eddy to be like a duck, to find your own bread or take bread wherever it was to be found.

Being the only available wave pool lifeguard on the clock most days, Eddy's lunch break means an unwanted wave pool break for all the patrons pretending to be seals and walruses and sea kelp alike, but Eddy often forgets to make the announcement over the loudspeakers (generously provided by Waco City Circuits) and almost never spends his valuable break time putting out the vague, panic-inducing standing signs that read: wave pool closed until further notice. All of this means that when Eddy finishes his break he does not return to work rested and ready for watching, but instead he reappears a paranoiac, having spent the last ten or so minutes imagining the rude, if

not cruel, conversations that are waiting for him once he returns to his one-story tall perch. "Hey, Armando, or whatever your name is supposed to be…"

"Yo, Fry Cook, can we get back in the agua yet? Como se dice kids want some mucho waves?!"

"I told you they were lazy, Gladys, didn't I tell you? You, hey, you think this is some kind of siesta time, is that what you think America is, some kinda big nap time? Well lemme tell you, I've worked my whole goddamn life…"

But today Eddy feels like he has finally run out of hypothetical conversations, realizes while munching on his unadorned crackers how much time he's wasted on maybe conversations that never come, like he is preparing for a part in a play he was never given in a show that only exists in his already too full head. After 20 or so crackers and a long metallic drink from the sun-charged drinking fountain Eddy can see it, clear as today, that no more conversations need to pass his defenses that he himself does not permit.

"Eddy, copy?"

"Copy, Cal."

"You back from your break yet?"

"If I was, would you be asking?"

"Where the hell are you?"

"Just coming around Lillipad Lagoon. Almost there. Had to take a shit."

"That's what the other lunch break minutes are for, not the paid minutes you need to be on that chair."

"Tell that to my asshole, Cal."

"What do you think I'm doing, asshole? We're getting complaints in the shack. People want back into the waves."

"Here, Cal. Over and out. Copy. Squeeaalch."

*

The Waco Baptist Church of the Risen King bus arrives later than Pastor Micah expects, this mostly because he and his congregates were made to wait for the small convoy of dark-skinned "in needs" to arrive at the agreed-upon rendezvous point in front of The Great Fish Cafe, newly constructed on church grounds thanks to the plentiful donations of those parishioners who lived in idyllic Woodway, just outside of Waco city limits. These were folk who had lived long enough, successfully enough, to remember what made their town so famous, infamous many might say, and what made the opening of the WSnSW even more spiritually important than it was exciting, some of the faithful confident enough to call the park's grand opening healing, after what had taken place at that devilish compound during that devilish time in the country's otherwise mostly godly history.

Eddy, now correctly placed in his chair and properly observing the bulbous, sentient sea life before him, notices Pastor Micah and his crew making their nomadic way towards the wave pool, already over occupancy by dozens. Eddy knows his obligation here, his responsibility. He cannot allow any more surfers and sunners to enter until others have fully tired out and left the waters on their own accord, but he also knows there is no stopping a church group, especially one this well-led and purpose-driven.

Pastor Micah sees the sign, is a professional reader of such things. He sees the safe capacity number of 270 and knows there are easily 300 in the attraction already. Pastor Micah looks up at Eddy where he finds the lifeguard sitting with a dead smile made for a carved-out image and two fingers spread out into the open air. At this, Pastor Micah bids his followers entrance and so they enter singing a veiled, whispered chorus of "praise the Lord, hallelujah."

One boy stays behind. Hosea, Pastor Micah's only child and all the living, hungry pain that is left from his precious Laura's fatal pregnancy, does not break rules as a rule. Eddy, quite unlike himself, notices the boy alone, notices the boy's flock lose track of him, Micah and the souls left in his care now awash in the aural excitement of all this man-made miracle.

Eddy waves for the boy, kindly showing there is room on his throne with the pat of one palm. The boy looks backward, and when he sees he has somehow not turned into a pillar of salt, nods his head and begins his climb. Once in the newly made co-pilot's seat, Eddy welcomes him. "Hey there little pardner, what's your name?"

"Hosea. It means salvation. Salvare in Latin, Soteria in Greek. So my dad could've named me Salvadore, but he says that's too ethnic, so I ask him, Dad, are we ancient Hebrews? And he says, No. So I say, well, then Dad, isn't Hosea just as 'too ethnic' as Salvadore and much more likely to get me punked at school? And he says, well, I never thought of it like that. And I say, well, kinda too late, wouldn't you say? And that's where he stops talking with me until I change the subject to something he does know the answer to. Usually limited to the Cowboys or Predestination." Eddy puts out a gentle fist for lil Hosea to pound as Hosea continues.

"Did you know there are some actual verifiable harlots in my dad's care today? True to life professional harlots, sure as shootin. Something tells me they are my dad's favorite – well let's call it like it is – favorite customers. See, it's kinda like a strange loophole for pastors. They get to be the only ones who make pro-ladies into customers themselves. Pastors and attorneys, that is. Did you know the Hebrew word for Satan simply means "the Accuser?"

Yep, it's true. Just means the same as what we mean when we say Prosecutor. Isn't it funny these words are all we got?"

"It is funny, kid. Young man. Little Mister, what have you." The boy's face then changes, just slightly at first before the morphing becomes momentarily total. Hosea's face turns from normal caucasian child pink to nearing orange peel and from peel to 14 carat yellow, a color and shine so brilliant to be worth traveling light years through wormholes to find and mine. Yet it was only for an instant, this change, so temporal Eddy could not help but doubt his own sunbaked eyes.

"Did you just, I don't know, like…feel anything just now?" Eddy asks Hosea. At this, Hosea softy lays his head on this stranger's shoulder, closes his eyes and speaks without opening his mouth, the words coming through such a booming that Eddy's heart rattles in his chest:

like waters poured down a steep place.
and all her idols I will lay waste;
for from the hire of a harlot she gathered them,
and to the hire of a harlot they shall return.

"Hey, little man, you okay?" Eddy asks while scooting to the furthest edge of the bench seat.

I will make her like a desert,
turn her into a parched land,
and slay her with thirst.
Even when their drinks are gone,
they continue their shameful ways.

"Whose drinks, kid? Hosea, hey, are you like sleepwalking, I mean, sleeptalking or something?"

A whirlpool will sweep them away,
and their sacrifices will bring them shame.
Therefore they will be like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears,
like waves swirling from a threshing floor,
like vapor escaping through a window.

"You sit tight, Hoseman. I'm gonna go see about finding your pops. Yeah, I'm just gonna swing down there and see if your Dad has some kinda medicine for you, or at least a prayer or something. You take any pills like that, anything your lifeguard should be like, you know, aware of?"

Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook
or tie down its tongue with a rope?
Can you put a cord through its nose
or pierce its jaw with a hook?
Will it keep begging you for mercy?
Will it speak to you with gentle words?

Pastor Micah is midway in the wave pool now showing off his lean yet humble treadmiller's frame to the bikini-clad youth group contingent, prayer and meditation coming easier to the graduate of Rock of Bethel Bible Seminary when his heart rate is well above 160. The father is about the father's business.

"Hey, little dude," Eddy says while lightly poking stone-faced Hosea in the shoulder. "Hosea? Is that your dad there?" Eddy points to a specific spot in a sea of hundreds of recreants where a shirtless man stands six feet tall with a large Christless cross tattooed on his back comprised of rose thorns. After moments of outstretched silence Eddy takes the whistle lanyard off his neck and places it around

Hosea's like a medal of achievement deemed invalid by some faceless gaming commission hidden away deep below eternally arrid lands.

Eddy bounds down the chair and light jogs to Pastor Micah. When the men meet, it is the man of faith who takes the reigns.

"Hello, my son. Is there something I can do for you?" the Pastor says as he deftly nods his faithsick admirers away. "You look troubled."

"Me troubled? Dude, bro? Is that your kid up there sitting in my proverbial office? Is it?"

"Wonderful usage, my boy. Proverbial? Well, now you certainly have my attention in full."

"Hey, great. Fucking fantastic, Preach. But shouldn't your missing actual son/boy be the attention grabber here? Jesus fucking Christ with you people."

"Now, now. No need to be profane. And you can call me PM. Everyone does. No one calls me dude or bro, though you already have my forgiveness."

"Your forgiveness? Of course, for fucksake. How about I call you AM and you wake the fuck up to the fact that I've been babysitting your poltergeist kid while you splash around with the goddamn harlots that are gonna get us all killed!?!"

"Harlots? Killed? Now now, now I know you've been spending too much time listening to my only begotten, wild wheaten Hosea. Yes, he has been reciting verses to you, I see? Out of context, no doubt. A gross anachronizer, my boy. I can explain it all, but here in the midst of all this noise and clamor…does this seem like the most conducive spot for our discussion?"

"You know what, Rev? I've been looking real hard for a good excuse to get out of this bullshit, this 'where the

waves come to play' bullshit, and maybe this is a clue from your God or my gods or who the hell knows, am I right, but yeah, I know a good spot to chew the fat. Behind the Grab-n-Go Grill, you know the place?"

"Yes, we come here once a month, but I don't think I got your name, my friend?"

"You think right."

*

The three sit at a wooden picnic table big enough for six. There is a large red and white striped umbrella barely protecting them from the blistering Waco midsummer sun. Each has a 40 oz. soft drink before them in a cup that says, "Grab-Go-Grab-Go" in widening circles covering the low density polyethylene cup.

"You don't seem to understand, your kid's face changed colors!" Eddy pleads.

"I do, I do understand, and I understand how what you saw could cause you such consternation as it has. But I am trying to tell you the boy has a verifiable medical condition called hyperpigmoidal maldispersion. It comes and goes. Too bad he can't control it. Be quite the trick."

"And the weird as hell shit he was saying to me up there, what about that? What's your kid, 8? 9? 10 tops? What was that shit, like Hamlet or something?"

Hosea sits behind a large portion of extreme garlic fries silent and content as a tomb. "We, Laura and I, did our son a disservice in this regard, I must admit. Laura was, is really, Hosea's mother. The Lord chose to take her home immediately after she gave birth to our only son, but long before that we agreed that if we had a child, or children, we would not expose them to the filth and rot, the hallucination, really, of this wicked culture we all find

ourselves in. I honored this pact, severely one could fairly say, did this in honor of his mother and my wife but as you experienced, all this singular input, as such, has had its damaging effects on the child, no doubt. I can only pray that in time he reaches a balance, an assimilation point."

"So you're basically telling me your kid is mostly mute unless he is reciting Bible verses?"

"Basically, mostly."

"And all he knows are the scary as shit ones?"

"Not all he knows, but all he is interested in sharing, yes."

"Is this the kind of shit you are preaching about every Sunday?"

"Quite the opposite, actually, but little Hosea has taken to, well, how to put it…he has taken to being the mouthpiece for the large chunks of God's Word that we professional men of God do a pretty good job of ignoring and thus making disappear."

"The honest to God American way, if there still is one, huh Rev?"

"Huh is right, Eddy. And you know, for what it's worth, I do see and accept that my role certainly clouds my ability to be a single parent. I get sorta swept away in my ministry, it's true."

"Your ministry in the wave pool, is that what we are referencing here?"

"There and many other locales of service, yes."

"Do the other locales of service require any more clothing though?" Eddy asks. Hosea, noticing his fry basket to be empty and no longer of any use to him, slides the checkered cardboard container away from his sight, clears his throat and does nothing more. At this, the park-wide communication system garbles like it too had phlegm

to clear and out come these words in the voice of Hosea, though not as he is but as he will be when all is made new and clean in the image of the Slaughtered Lamb.

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.

The unforcasted rain begins to fall, first in comedic drops the size of mutant figs before they each grow to the volume of an economy-class bathtub. Those enjoying the wave pool feel the rumbling beneath their scraped up toes and feet and many in the Zozzini's Pizza Rolls Giant Sloth River are seen to fall off their plastic #4 innertubes all tastefully and identically decorated in painted on pepperoni, sausage and green peppers. The water fountains intentionally engineered and strategically placed in a hexoganal grid 40 yards apart from one another start to spout from unknown and nonclassified fissures beneath the crust of the planet, and before Eddy or PM have gathered their wits enough to get the wrong idea as to what is in fact happening, Hosea begins to laugh like a ribald and obese jinn in the midst of transforming into a vast and uncageable madness. When the libidinous

laughter ceases, the two men are holding hands, trembling like weak trees in strong wind.

Hosea looks at his father and his guard, just over their brows and past the crowns of their heads, as if to look them in the eye would ruin the fries he just enjoyed. He speaks in his own voice now, no rumbling, no theatrics, for the show is over. The park, the men are too swaddled in fear to notice, has been rent utterly dry.

This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.

"If you are God," Eddy speaks before he knows he is, "then your wrath here is pure. But what of your wrath in Juarez? Please, tell me before I die here today. These murmurers here, your fury for them can be understood, even by a mind so small and deluded as my own. But what of Juarez? What of my family, all the families who only know of your wrath and none of your splendor? Please, before you allow the earth to eat me, disgusting wretch I am amidst all these disgusting wretches, tell me of your wrath in Juarez, my Lord. Why do the people violently suffer and the nations plot such vain things?"

All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.
All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;

the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?
It has been already
in the ages before us.
There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after

Now, in the fullness of time, the long-awaited peacekeeping drone squadron arrives, parts the clouds and narrows its cold focus on the boy under the candycane umbrella from whence all the unacceptable and downright dangerous radiation is emanating. The occurrence is handled. It is less than a year before every living being who bore witness to the untenable waterworks which took place that day at Waco Splash-n-Sun Waterpark has no recollection of it having ever taken place, with those with more persistent and obnoxious memories having been delt with in a more historically recognizable manner, so many human-fueled torches lighting the way to a better, more predictable tomorrow.

After Mourning Becomes the Law

On Yahia Lababidi's *Palestine Wail*

OMAR SABBAGH

only paradoxes
can be trusted.

– "Fever Dream"

At the start of Yahia Lababidi's new collection, *Palestine Wail*, we read his dedication to the memory of his beloved grandmother, Rabiha Dajani, who was forced from her ancestral home and who showed resilience in her commitment to help others. I start with this note because much of this collection, directly or implicitly, appeals to our human sense of duty to the other. Indeed, in the book's introduction we are enticed to see our wounds as gifts of sorts, as "peepholes" into our human condition and that same condition in its more emphatic mode in contemporary Palestine. "Hope," the first poem of this book, calls us to be committed, but wary

of and tenacious against either despair or cynicism. Later in "Wounded Healers" or, say, "Ode to the Children," this note about the illuminative role of our wounds is highlighted, as beauty and truth are seen to be premised upon different kinds of lack, privation, or sacrifice. And so, my first note regarding the call for a needed resilience and a sense of duty, where we must "Bless the young for reminding us / there is no looking away," ("Columbia University"), blends now into a second but very closely dovetailing reading direction to emerge from this urgent book.

In her work, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, philosopher Gillian Rose wrote about the difference between the film, *Schindler's List* and the novel, *Schindler's Ark*. In her view the latter was more philosophically mature, in so far as the characterization and thereby storied insight was less black and white and closer to the truths of our human greys. By absolutely demonizing the enemy, the film, she argued was less compelling, evincing a kind of predatory sentimentalism. And it didn't add to our understanding. We all know the Nazis were perversely evil, but the film just confirmed this. Rose's argument was that one should, when doing something representational, other the "other." In other words, not to think of "us" versus "them," but to think of a "them" conflicted, othered: a conflicted Nazi takes us somewhere new and more insightfully interesting; as would a conflicted Zionist, say. This argument is based on a basic Kantian truth. One's suffering means something because one is human, rather than, let us say, an ant. But if one demonizes the other, absolutely, rendering them wholly "inhuman," logically, one undercuts the shared humanity that is the basis of one's own victimized suffering. And this is a note repeated across Lababidi's book. For instance, closing "Who is Innocent?" we read:

If we have no peace
Mother Teresa reminds us
it's because we have forgotten

We belong to each other.

Or, then, closing "What Tragedy Teaches Us":

If you and I cannot remain friends
because we do not see eye to eye,
how can we call for peace in our world?

And this, after we've read of the "Others" who bind us "by an unspeakable doubt" or by "allegiance to another pain…." The "another" here a way of welding self and that which may be strange to him or her. Indeed, in "Sigh," later on in the book we read of what needs "no translation," a sigh – being a gesture that is immanently and semiotically universal, much like suffering. But there is more.

"Why Care?" asks us to care because "We are responsible for our enemy" ("Open Letter to Israel"). The same message is expressed in "Middle East Advice" and in "Poems Sailing," the poet confesses that "by helping others, they saved my life." Lababidi is engaged in a constant "Reaching" as one title has it, where, for reasons already detailed, he can't but "always recognize" his "Other." Indeed, "Ramadan" reminds us of the reason or purpose for religious practice, as and when, namely: to give thought to a "thoughtless" world. To be committed and dutybound again proves Lababidi's major argument in *Palestine Wail*, but with a spiritual sense of peacefulness engaged as well.

But the salutary note of recognizing otherness is also lived-out in this collection in formal ways as well. In "Practice" poets are intimates of the "abyss;" but this hollow can be seen to be healthy or useful. Early on in "Alternative Scenario," Lababidi questions the actual by way of counter-factuality. It's another kind of paradoxical formulation, as it were; another kind of self-willed otherness. In "Waking Nightmares" we hear the cries of the dead, from "under rubble," a kind of temporal paradox, and then in "Spirit Diary" we read of "a place in us all / that is beyond self and pain." In both cases, something beyond the material or the actual is enjoined, made to gift some kind of light or hope. But apart from these poetic arguments which run through the book, one can also register the hale othering of the poet's self, bearing witness, by way of certain repeated rhetorical gestures.

Whether it's the irony in the title of "Air and Sea Show," in which armed horrors are on (hapless) display, or the relentless questioning mode of many of the poems ("Q&A," "The Eclipse," "Palestine Music," or "You, Again," or indeed, "Summary"); or whether it's a different kind of ironizing gambit, such as in "At Gaza Zoo," or "Starving," in both of which a poetic device that is on the face of things alien to the horrors in Gaza is used to question the actual – Lababidi's hopefulness in the light of horror shines through.

These poems are raw and moving. While in one sense Lababidi is realistic enough to recognize "The Limits of Love," as one title has it, in another, he can speak of the "limitless heart" ("Walls"). This returns me to Gillian Rose. One of her final insights in life turned on the capacity of the individual to recognize that the only "unconditionality" of love was to be found in its very

conditionality. And Lababidi's book lives this out, by its continuous questioning of and between self and other, there and here, now and then – our wounds, again, as "peepholes." And at the last, the Palestinian wail has been heard – and may it be heard the more and more and more.

CONTRIBUTORS

Kevin Oberlin is an American poet and the author of two chapbooks: *Steamboat Alley* (2022) and *Spotlit Girl* (2008). His poems have appeared in neat journals like *Pilgrimage, Thimble*, and *Dunes Review*, as well as in the anthology *Wayfinding: Poetry Celebrating America's Parks and Public Lands*.

Thomas Lavelle teaches creative writing and professional communication at the Stockholm School of Economics. His poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals in the US, Canada, Ireland, the UK, and Sweden.

Cecil Sayre's poems have appeared in *Levitate, Two Hawks Quarterly, Naugatuck River Review*, and many other journals. He believes cats are the soul of a home.

Andrew Alexander Mobbs is the author of *In These Glorious Pastures* (2025), *A Walk in the Garden* (2024) and *Strangers and Pilgrims* (2013). A Pushcart Prize nominee, his poems appear in *Terrain.org, Frontier Poetry, Arkansas Review, Ghost Ocean Magazine*, and others. He's the co-founder of *Nude Bruce Review* and has an MFA from Oregon State University.

Christa Fairbrother, MA, is Gulfport, Florida's poet laureate. She's been a finalist for the Leslie McGrath Poetry Prize, The Prose Poem Competition, The Pangea Prize, and was a Pushcart Prize nominee.

Zac Walsh is the author of *An End of Speaking* and *Love in the Utmost*. His work has appeared in *Stonecoast*, *Caustic Frolic, Calliope, Gold Man Review, Blue Unicorn, LUMINA, Gulf Stream, Cimarron Review, Oakwood, Alligator Juniper,* and other journals, as well as the anthologies *Extrasensory Overload*, *Blood on the Floor* and *Small Batch*.

Kim Cope Tait is a PhD student at the University of Otago. Her work has appeared in literary journals and magazines in the US and abroad. Her first collection of poems is *Shadow Tongue* (2018).

Debasish Mishra, PhD, from India, is the recipient of the 2019 Bharat Award for Literature and the 2017 Reuel International Best Upcoming Poet Prize. His poems have appeared in *The Penn Review, Prism Review, Consequence, ANMLY*, and elsewhere. His first book is *Lost in Obscurity and Other Stories* (Book Street Publications, 2022).

Ling Yuan's writing has been shortlisted for the Chautauqua Janus Prize, Black Warrior Review Fiction Prize and the Kinsman Quarterly Iridescence Award. She lives in Singapore.

Matt Dennison's poetry appears in *Verse Daily, Rattle, The Inflectionist Review, DIAGRAM, The New York Quarterly Magazine, Modern Haiku, The National Poetry Review, Bayou Magazine, Redivider* and *Cider Press Review*, among others. His fiction appears in *ShortStory Substack, THEMA, GUD, The Blue Crow, Prole, The Wondrous Real* and *Story Unlikely*.

Graham Allison is a British writer whose poetry has appeared in various magazines including *Acumen, The Journal, The North, Poetry Review, Poetry Salzburg Review, The Seventh Quarry, South, The Spectator* and *Stand*.

Hoshang Waziri is a Kurdish-Iraqi/American writer whose work has been published in English and Arabic in *NYRB, OpenDemocracy, Jadaliyya, Al-Hayat, Assafir, The Arab Theater Magazine*, among others. *Ismael's Places* won several prizes, including first prize in the Arab Theater Institute's 2015 competition.

Jason Robison has an MFA in creative writing from Mount Saint Mary's University. He lives in Los Angeles where he enjoys his family, surfing and trying to end homelessness. His poetry is featured in *Elements Literary Review*.

Paul Ilechko is a British-American poet and occasional songwriter whose work has appeared in *The Bennington Review*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Atlanta Review*, *Permafrost*, and *Pirene's Fountain*. His first book is forthcoming with Gnashing Teeth Publishing.

Jessica Hwang's fiction has appeared in more than twenty literary journals, including: *Mystery Magazine, Tough, Shotgun Honey, Uncharted, The Rockford Review*, and *Bright Flash Literary Review*. Her work has been nominated for the Best American Mystery and Suspense, Best American Short Stories, and Best of the Net anthologies. Find more at jessicahwangauthor.com.

Jennifer McCormack lives in Sweden. She studied English at The University of Glasgow. Her work has featured in *Ordkonst* magazine, *Lacuna Zine, Amsterdam Review, New Writing Scotland* and *Paninero*.

Eva Skrande is a Cuban-American and the author of *The Boat that Brought Sadness into the World* (2024), *My Mother's Cuba* (2010), and *Bone Argot* (2019). Her poems have appeared in *Collidescope, SuperPresent, SurVision, Another Chicago Magazine, i-70 Review, Plant Quarterly* and elsewhere. She is a writing coach at Houston Community College.

Angela Townsend is the Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary. Her work appears in *Arts & Letters, Bridge Eight, Chautauqua, Clackamas Literary Review, CutBank, Lake Effect, Paris Lit Up, Pleiades, The Smart Set*, and *Terrain*, among others.

Alamgir Hashmi is the author of numerous books of poetry and literary criticism. His latest book is *The Shorter Poems 1993-2023* (London: Greenwich Exchange Ltd., 2024). He has taught literature as a university professor and is Founding President of The Literature Podium.

Anita Ngai is a MFA student at Manchester Metropolitan University. Born in Hong Kong and raised in North America, her work has been longlisted for The National Poetry Competition, shortlisted for the Creative Future Writers' Award and commissioned for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Stacey Danner is an accountant by day, with her own dust-covered tax practice down the hall from her husband's violin workshop. She is an emerging poet with a poem in *Broken Circles: A Gathering of Poems for Hunger.*

Nathaniel Calhoun works to protect and restore biodiversity from his home in Aotearoa New Zealand. His poems have featured in *Oxford Poetry, New York Quarterly, Poetry Aotearoa* and many others. Follow @calhounpoems

Omar Sabbagh is a widely published poet, writer and critic. Some of his recent books are, *Cedar: Scenes from Lebanese Life* (2023); *Y Knots: Short Fictions* (2023); *RIP: Poems after Gaza & Words after Waddah* (2024); and *For Echo* (2024); *Night Settles Upon The City* (2024). He teaches at the Lebanese American University (LAU).

Costantino Toth is an astrologer, poet, and writer exploring the confluence of dreams, magic, and history. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ghost City Review* and *Epiphany Magazine*.

Gary P English lives in Baton Rouge, LA, where they and their partner share a home with a dachshund and two cats. Their poems have been published in *Grey Sparrow Journal, Home Planet News*, and *Stonecoast Review*.

Morgan Liphart work has appeared in anthologies and journals across the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Italy, and Japan, such as Oxford University Press' *Literary Imagination, Popshot Quarterly*, and *The Asahi Shimbun*. His first chapbook, *Barefoot and Running*, was a finalist for the Colorado Book Award.

Jane Hertenstein is a Pushcart nominee and the author of *Cloud of Witnesses* and *Beyond Paradise. Orphan Girl* was featured in the *Chicago Tribune* Sunday Book Section. Her work has been recognized by the *New York Times*. She has published over 90 stories. She is the recipient of multiple grants from the Illinois Arts Council and City of Chicago. Read more at memoirouswrite.blogspot.com

Holly Day's writing has recently appeared in *Analog SF, Cardinal Sins*, and *New Plains Review*. Her books include *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Music Composition for Dummies*. She teaches at The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, Hugo House in Washington, and The Muse Writers Center in Virginia.

Leila Bilick's poetry has appeared in *Action, Spectacle, American Literary Review, Lilith Magazine*, and *Soundings East*, among others. She has an MA in English from UMass Boston.

Franz Jørgen Neumann's stories have received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations and have appeared in *The Southern Review, Colorado Review*, and *Water~Stone Review*. Read more at www.storiesandnovels.com.

Jake Onyett is a U.S. Navy veteran who was born in Canada, raised in the United States, and currently lives in Italy. He is a graduate of Niagara University, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Bologna. His poetry appears in *Chiron Review, Ink in Thirds, MacQueen's Quinterly*, and elsewhere.

Rich Murphy's latest collections are *Susan Constant* and *Inside Stories*, and *First Aid and Footholds*. His poetry won The Poetry Prize at Press Americana twice for *Americana* (2013), *The Left Behind* (2021), and Gival Press Poetry Prize for *Voyeur* (2008).

Michael Waterson is a retired journalist with an MFA from Mills College. His work has appeared in *California Quarterly, Two Thirds North* and *The Bookends Review*. He is Poet Laureate Emeritus of the Napa Valley. Read more at michaelwatersonpoetry.com.

Timothy Dodd is the author of short story collections *Fissures, and Other Stories*, *Men in Midnight Bloom*, and *Mortality Birds* (with Steve Lambert), as well as poetry collections *Modern Ancient* and *Vital Decay*. Tim is also a visual artist who primarily exhibits in the Philippines. Find more at @timothybdoddartwork and timothybdodd.wordpress.com.

Jonathan Vidgop is a theatre director, author, screenwriter, and founder of the Am haZikaron Institute for Science and Heritage of the Jewish People in Tel-Aviv. Born in Leningrad in 1955, Jonathan was expelled in 1974 from what is now called the Saint-Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts. His story "Nomads" is the recent winner of the Meridian's Editors' Prize in Prose.

Stefan Balan is a Romanian-born American author of three books of poetry and, in collaboration, one of film criticism about Lars von Trier, which received the national critics' award. His writings appear in *West Branch, Pensive*, *Boudin, Frog Pond*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Cordite* and *The Poetry d'Amour Anthology*. He is the 2024 recipient of the *3rd Wednesday* first prize for poetry and an honorable mention by *Passager Journal*. stefanbalanpoetry.com