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This is to-day. A can experiment is that which makes a town, makes a town dirty, it is little please. We came back. Two bore, bore what, a mussed ash, ash when there is tin. This meant cake. It was a sign.

—Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

| | | |
|--------------------------|----|---|
| Jules Julien | ♣ | Animaux Revolver [cover images] |
| Matthew Cooperman | 9 | Still: Initial Still: Demons |
| Ben Stein | 13 | Wall Physics Dinner at Home, Only Partly Made Wild Boy |
| Erin Gay | 20 | The Writer Tooth of Happiness Persimmon |
| The Pines | 27 | Marlon Brando × 4 |
| Andrea Kneeland | 32 | The New World Nest Lecture on Simile |
| Ashley McWaters | 39 | Bright Refuge |
| Shya Scanlon | 41 | Deeper Green, and Glowing A Neighboring Insert Waiting, a Rudder, and Something Smooth Daresies: Backsies |
| Lisa Jarnot | 45 | Sometimes Resonating with Song |
| Myfanwy Collins | 47 | The Villager |
| James Grinwis | 50 | <i>from One Briefcase, Two Landscapes, and a Fuse</i> |
| Blake Butler | 55 | Hive Anniversary |
| Julia Johnson | 61 | Blue Anthropometry |

| | | |
|--|-----|---|
| Kathleen Rooney & Elisa Gabbert | 62 | Threshold X |
| Anna Catone | 64 | The House of Loreto |
| Kristy Bowen | 65 | theories of gravity bad endings carnival season |
| Hanna Andrews | 69 | Made me immobile— Open Road |
| Daniel Grandbois | 71 | The Other Half Chinese Finger Trap New Heaven The Hermit Crab |
| Kim Gek Lin Short | 76 | All the Mason Jars in the World The Changeling The Girl with the Seven Cables Toland-in-Heaven The Yarn |
| Elizabeth Horner | 86 | This Drugstore Has New Hours Sheep Woman Tells All |
| Amelia Gray | 89 | Diary of the Blockage |
| Peter Markus | 103 | Boy, Falling The Man Whose Guitar Was a Fish |
| A. Minetta Gould | 117 | Half Organ Amour Russia Bowtie |
| Angela Woodward | 120 | Pleasures Past Lives Backwards |
| Damian Dressick | 126 | If I Could Only Tell You One Story |

| | | |
|--|-----|--|
| Arianne Zwartjes | 128 | Parallel Space |
| Meg Rains | 130 | Moveable Things Criss-Cross The Strongest Memory The Way to Represent Night On the Movement of Water Prayer On the Unfortunate Bedspread |
| Rob Walsh | 137 | After the Playpen Was Built |
| Bryson Newhart | 150 | New Gate Island |
| James Wagner | 168 | from <i>Syracuse</i> |
| Marc Lowe | 181 | The Tree Cutter |
| Valerie Suffron | 187 | Awoke Gray in a Whale Heart The Law of Diminishing Returns |
| Alan DeNiro | 189 | Dancing in a House |
| Bonnie Emerick | 195 | What We Intended Before We Never Again Will Intend After |
| Alison Powell | 198 | Visitor |
| Derek Henderson & Derek Pollard | 199 | from <i>Inconsequentia</i> |
| Kristin Abraham | 220 | Constitution |
| Julianna Spallholz | 222 | The White Cat |
| Contributors | 229 | |
| Colophon | 238 | |

Biblia: D Major, de rigueur, samovar, tell-a-girl

Acknowledgements: a museum, a coinage, a Romanian, a Victoria; bon mots and polyglots, the moment futured, the tapestry hymned

Vantage: the sky is a debris field, hard is who's looking at the problem

Still: Demons

now be still: the sword a said, “changes, how tense works”

Root: terma, the seed syllable that keys the universe, or hungry ghosts,
we are thirsting after our cells

Planet: Saturn, looking glum, circle it or circle that makes the circle round

Heroes: Stephen Hawking, Anne Waldman, Ganymede, Thich Nat Han

Insight: bubble inside bubble is a way of chaining utterance to scale.

One to one to one to one (nidana, circumambulation, lepton,
temporality, whim)

Analogue: Blake’s minute particulars, Williams’ seedlot of barrows,
Nauman’s anatomies, Nick Drake’s three-minute melodies

Sponsor: Pleiades, Arcturus, MetaGameBox, Stolichnaya, Quiescence Ltd.

Poison: impatience, neediness, jealousy, greed

Shape: pointed ears and tail, red eyes, bubbling lava pool, disembodied soul

Saying: “no space left behind,” “give me shelter but surface also,”
“generating conflict, stop generating conflict,” “pilgrimage is continuous,
get up now”

Wall Physics

Cheryl is a retaining wall. Gets cold these mornings, in her own shadow until afternoon. And no sweaters or blankets ample enough for a quarter-acre of river slate. Along her bottom, grass in tufts and clutches; holds its dew, brushes silver her lowest tiers. And this is only cold, more cold.

Cheryl contemplates utter cessation, Absolute Zero. There but for, she tells herself. At least my stones' atoms are dynamic. An inward attempt to further bestir: to cultivate kinetic energy is to cultivate heat. This daily disregard for Rule Number Two, energy's stubborn non-cultivability.

But, really, what else to do?

There is, of course, the matter of her primary function: retention. No small feat to prop a wooded hillside against gravity. And no small responsibility; that ranch below would stand no chance against the roll, the slide of land. At first, incursions of earth between her constituent parts—she being self-reliantly mortarless. In the first rains, some of the forest's loam oozed minutely through, she must admit. But Steadfastness and

Heart are a wall's prerequisites. She shrugged and adjusted, settled into her self.

Seasons of impermeability now under her belt. It's true, some of her elements have slid out of place, toppled into the grass. These send variously jeerings and pleas; some say escape, others ouster. Of some of them she thinks, Good riddance to bad, jostles her better parts down to better snugness. Others leave an unmanageable gap. These she leans toward, reaches for, longs to tuck back into herself. (If there is one thing a wall can do, she thinks, it is long.) But, truth be told, it is out of her hands; she is plates of slate and they are plates of slate.

Aside from the soil pressed against and held, there is one other relation, this one stone-to-stone: a run of stairs out from her shoulder. These too are settled and firm, their edges uncut but rounding now, from footfalls and rain. With morning still a long chill ahead, their canted stretch is Cheryl's sad vicariousness: the bottom two edge into sun. For Cheryl, a twinge of phantom warmth, almost almost there.

Dinner at Home, Only Partly Made

The bus's window showed me holding a bowl. That bowl bore my wife's thumb, thin and larval, packed in ice. She sat three seats down, dressing her flesh and opened bone with a dish-towel. A long-coated woman and a vested transient between us lurched and lolled with the traffic. There were four more stops to the hospital.

My wife and I knew each other only in the evening. Two do-little jobs trained us to vacate our days. Still, there is one thing that was always clear: I am a man whose hands are anxious and inelegant. I drop books. I mistune radio dials. At times I work too quickly at chopping vegetables.

The bus's floor was boot-top deep with snow tracked in from the curb and my apologies were candles burned mostly away.

Wild Boy

From the top of the stairs at the far edge of town, there is only one thing you can see and it is the forest. The stairs are low wide slabs of stone and the trees go on for acres, for years. The last time any of us went out among them, some others of us had to go out afterward, to bring the first of us back. The trees, they said, were too perfect, their bark too rich, their canopy and its dearth of light too easy to submit to.

We spend our evenings telling stories to frighten the children, to keep them from stepping beyond the brushline. Bear-Man. Evil Root. Hungry Earth. Even after they go to bed, we go on with the telling.

It is not always the problem of people going into the forest. It is sometimes the problem of people coming out. The nearest town is far enough that none of us have ever been there, though some of the oldest among us claim it used to be nearer. But from time to time, a person will appear at the treeline, waiting, it always seems, for one of us to explain where they are, perhaps where they've been. These people never talk and are always alone. When one of them arrives, they always smell like baked rocks.

They carry small objects in their pockets and they stay until nightfall, moving slowly between the houses and open spaces like old dogs. In the morning, they are gone and the oldest among us say the wind comes out of the forest bent slightly, as though a new stand of trees has leapt up.

There was a boy once, who came out of the woods. He was small with soft hair, cut neatly across his forehead. He wore shoes much like ones children wore in our town. His clothes were clean, his red shirt still tucked in to thick canvas pants. The pants had wide front pockets which held these things: a strip of leather, a bent piece of wire, a twig that was forked like the foot of a starling. A piece of paper folded into a square. The last of these he let no one touch, only held it out, thumbing the creases, gnawed at the corner of his lip.

He was young but old enough that he should have been able to speak. But he only emptied his pockets on the bottom stair at the edge of the woods, left everything there but the folded paper, climbed the steps, found a group of children and bit hard into the shoulder of a little girl with pigtails and a flowered dress. He drew blood in fat beads and the other children ran away when the little girl started to howl.

The boy let his arms dangle at his sides; every part of him was placid but his jaw. His eyes were open and soft as moonlight.

We shouted at him and tried to shake him loose, but the teeth were in deep and the girl shrieked when her flesh began to tear. In the end we smashed the side of his face with a rock until his jaw unhinged.

We left him there to bleed in the grass. He was small and his face was broken and we left him. We went to bed early and told no stories.

I saw them at night. My watching in dark is here and they are there but can't. At night is when for watching. Not a run or a music. Not a turning at me. Turning at forest but not a turning at my part. A turning at a different part. And the ones are smaller than other ones. And the ones that are small climb onto the other ones and the other ones are around the ones that are small.

But at morning is when to come. But at night is forest dug dirt cold. But at night is night cold and long forest. But at morning is when to come.

Laying things from pocket is help. Putting pocket things down is help for finding and talking. Tie. Skin slip. Help stick. Not fold paper. Hold fold paper. Hold fold paper.

Ones that are small are small. Here is my small. This new not me not but small and here.

Bite. Bite. Blood like eaten things. Sound, pull like eaten things. Hold like eaten things. Hold bite and fold paper.

Hard loud and break like nothing. Fast very hot with dug
dirt rocks. Break and thicken and fast. Loud hold fold and bite.
Wind like night seeing like eye wind and night and hard and dug
dirt head and hot.

Erin Gay

The Writer

The writer moved into a bear cave with a hornet's nest after her family boarded up her room and used her diaries to fry the evening onions—every night flank and onions and now they all got bigger portions because there was one less mouth to share with.

The writer time-shared the cave with a bear, each leaving bits of scavenged berries and eggs as rent. The hornets shared nothing, an autocracy, their hum served as a border.

The writer had once loved another writer, but this devolved into dictation from separate stoops, each of them dragging bags of bricks from the factory to add buttresses and balconies: balconies facing the hospital, balconies facing the university, balconies facing the bird bath.

Eventually one of the stoops collapsed and the other tiered until it was out of hearing distance.

From this height, maybe the migrating geese were an audience, but otherwise the guest book was unsigned.

The writer did not expect to fall in love with one of the wasps, her lips swollen, that fluttering kiss / that broken sting. It was winter and they all should have been sleeping.

The wasp aged by now, inscribing his own gravestone on the writer's breast.

Once, before the writer could remember, there had been a spring and everyday she had dusted her hands with roadside weed. This sense of things had been enough.

Once she had lived in a cave blanketed with hair clippings from her family's barber: she raked them with a branch, her wasp lover fallen from her pocket, lost.

Once the bear had woken hungry but the writer had forgotten to be scared. The writer rolled the bear onto a pedestal, but he wouldn't talk, he refused to talk.

Tooth of Happiness

The tooth of happiness was lost and the docent had been away for three days researching a historic war map. The City of Lost Rivers. Also known as the Battle for Preservation of Intimacy and Longing.

His only tools were his hands and feet. An ordinary lamp. In his tent, unaware of the loss, he wrote a journal imagining the fields during the battle. The whole landscape interrupted:

Cavities. Caves we called our daily buses that take us to the missing edge of the sea. Pages of sand super-scripted with the footprints of combers, miners of others' losses.

In the legend of the tooth of happiness were instructions on how to keep your dreams from becoming over-grazed.

The docent took notes on the proliferation of supermarkets and malls: lights missing from his current horizon.

In the museum was a ledger tracking who had cleaned the holy tooth, who had dusted the glass, the number of keys to the case.

Sometimes the hole things fall through is in the reeds, is the half-mile canyon that never had a river. Sometimes it is the

basin of our gate: where the rainwater gathers, where the dog plans her escape.

Flowering keyholes, blackouts, springs without winter (marginalia sealed in a closed registry).

For years the docent had thought of nothing but the tooth, moored. It was a dry dock and the tide was hidden behind the fog, if there was a tide. His own thoughts were a familiar landscape and he had not foreseen to leave a trail in case one day he woke and forgot the path.

But how could he forget when he kept in his pocket the thimble in which the tooth arrived?

What did it mean that the tooth had been hatched from an egg? The legend of the tooth told how it traveled the intestine of a goat herder, spiraled through a flood, and was used by a doctor for soup stock.

The poles to the docent's tent had fallen. All night there was a planet that he was searching for the ladder to.

No one wanted to tell the docent the saga of searching the display case with borrowed photography lamps, of pulling the blessed pillow apart thread by thread, or how everyone's fingertips were blackened for evidence.

This was the closest thing to a note about the holy tooth's disappearance: a guidebook with the words "the logical starting point" underlined.

And the docent had found his own starting point, in the dawn holding up the map to see if the borders still applied.

He, more than anyone, knew the tooth of happiness wasn't perfect.

The tooth made the same mistakes over and over. It had its own attachments, things it could not let go of.

Persimmon

I don't believe in footnotes, but there you are, a correction to what I thought was a pomegranate. My persimmon.

Ribbons to a June thaw, those bitter wild fruits we used to pick balancing on the tightropes of our childhood.

Before our skirts were salted. Before keystrokes entangled us into words, labyrinths of umbilical cords that we savagely cut through, the havoc of pursuing our own minor classics.

We each caged an immigrant within our ribs, a spiral song that seeded. Alternate leavings dormant. Do you remember the skin crushed open? Dancing on the fallen? Our own sovereignty, an adaptation, growing out of an astringent loam—silted—we would have lisped every word we said if it drew the right person's attention.

I have your sandals catalogued between cards for moss velvet and everyday massacres.

The double flute of glass bottles strung in the wind, I cannot hear that magnetic emptiness drawn to the next field without forgoing the day I lost you.

The preface of losing.

And even as we fall, we take with us the calyx / sister skirt /
the leafs that cupped our blossom / that held us to the branch.

The Pines

Marlon Brando

Young mother whence a single rose
turns in upon herself. Stands firm
to the mantelshelf, her head
recumbent upon the wood,
one eye before the other.

Younger mother
gazes at her sister-in-law
fidgeting the underskirt
utensil and a turquoise noose
around a horse no better than—

M a r l o n B r a n d o

Why are you laughing?

Did you—
meet the same life I have?

A town wherein the public land
forfeits by a development of billboards—
sinners impastoed on the sky,
fructiform in midday projection.
I met the cobbles.

A fountain accepting
a voluptuous woman, sure,
but not an ogling man, my friend,
importunate bone, the work of an isle-tracted union.

In the peasant wall. She will not
mind the revisions. The bounty, why
falling without you.

M a r l o n B r a n d o

I'm on the horns of a dilemma

a scar snuffling the earth
by pinching the tropos around it

The quaver basket sleeps twenty stones,
easily. Syndromes
of crude oil wash the pier.
I have never despised anyone
or anything
more than those eyes
staring at the still and black wing, of yours.

M a r l o n B r a n d o

A cheaper 50's Bellocq.

Helicopter fields a woven Bell.

Willful suitor, packed and gone,

I was dying

thinking of things to adjust
lands senselessly given away.

There was nothing that had been given away
but taken, beef and machine,
caucus of apes bearing raw, unarrested.

Andrea Kneeland

The New World

Dearest Queen & Heart,

So many fish in blue water ocean blue flesh scales slick smooth languid eyes reaching pooling. Into dark numbers one living moving thing of decimated pieces still alive and rippled. Even after digested there were. So many oysters on the shore we climbed them like steps up the hillside shells hardened powder. Of bone white dust traced with black the inside of each step a pearl. White pearls crushed in our white teeth still same dust gritty. Sand centered oceans of flesh. Tho her arm slid up and over each razored shell darkened hide velvet sleeve oh mother oh. Thistled gardens on blue water smile razored arm smile lowered eyes dark between each shell.

Here is now cold. Her heart is luminal point red voice changing quite a child natives come. Beneath an inky smoke and sky all red caged. Raccoon caged bird bent head arm straight inviting. Smile reddened lips sanguine mouth mother oh mother vanishing throat pearled strand. Of white barreled heat oval shot warring grass lovely lovely pointed wood. Warring white

beach burnt water boat long fire. Hollow sigh sigh sigh loaded
gun trapping fur deus ex machina. Vessel whetted white hide
hidden heart breast of goose oh do I love thee. Thrushed songs
flushed out fever red cries in rain oyster white pearl crushed and
lapping blue.

I come all varnished to you beating hands knotted temple
gracing skies. All blue here there is land lush and covered. With
deerskin garden new and freshed here charted although no
industry we see. The make of something ghosted clean and
windowed. Crossed although we have no yet. Silo pictured is
well advised a gift. A gift oh mother mother oh the blue like
driftwood ashed as mothy wings pearl white the other red
retreating.

Oh Mother,
I Send My Love

N e s t

The bird must have smuggled the eggs down her throat while she was sleeping. If the bird had done it while she was awake, she surely would have noticed: the gross, mitey feathers; tiny nails sharp as bent screws; lips like a plague doctor Venetian mask. For just as they are beaks, they are lips as well: every little creature, its own void of opening mouth.

The first time Madeline saw a dead baby bird, she cried. That translucent pink dinosaur fetus, reddish mouth parted open in a nearly formed beak. The tiny worm of a dead blue vein feeding into the silent heart, barely visible beneath the translucent, pimply skin of the corpse. Eyes like ugly buried pebbles.

The question is not whether this happened while she was sleeping—at least that much is clear. The question is, rather, sunken below the details of the act. Did the bird birth the eggs elsewhere, then carry them, clutched, in her tiny bird feet, one by one, to the slit of Madeline's unsuspecting mouth? Part Madeline's lips with her own: gently, gently? Roll each egg down the back of Madeline's spongy tongue, toward the deep red cavern of her tunneling throat?

Or was the path more direct? Had the bird simply settled in for the night; nuzzled its downy backside into the soft, yielding circle of Madeline's lips, dropped each shellacked baby straight down to the cave of their moist, new home?

If Madeline were to be completely honest with herself, she would admit that it was best not to think of the *how's* or the *why's*. Questions of mere species or intent, she never deigned to consider.

She considered, instead, solutions. To live with the baby birds inside of her chest seemed, at first, impossible. It was exceedingly uncomfortable: their cries, the rustling of their bodies, her growing concern. The cage of her chest was simply not large enough.

The first night, she slept on her back, as usual, ignoring the unbearable, knot-like cluster of pressure that had grown in the interior space of her body, just to the up and the right of her heart. She discovered her mistake in the bathroom the next morning, when she coughed up, quite strenuously, the flattened, still body of newly hatched babe.

The next night, she attempted the first remedy. She laid the sheets of her bed out and about the floor of her living room; pulled them primarily toward a corner, beneath a soft stack of pillows. Here, she attempted to prop her self upright: headside down, her opening throat faced toward the made-bed of the floor.

Having never been particularly athletic nor coordinated, she found herself unable to balance, even with the aid of the juncture of walls, and even with the cushiony support of her own pillows. She considered making a phone call; soliciting the help of an outside agent, but snuffed the thought from her mind almost immediately. The situation was a delicate matter; her nerves could not handle any further insult.

The second remedy was a bit less ambitious and, it could be argued, not a proper remedy at all. She returned to her bed and coached herself to sleep, sitting straight upright. The transition to sleep took some work; each time she waded into that liminal state of not-wakeness, her head would lean gently to the side before snapping, ferociously, back to center with the alertness of a woodland mouse beneath hunt.

Eventually, Madeline's upright sleep took hold. While it was true that she was unable to banish the litter of birds from the nest of her innards, she nevertheless erased the fear of choking out another suffocated, bestial infant.

She dreamed that night, about their scissor sharp lips, about their hollow boned wings, about the pulpy mesh of food flowing from her mouth into theirs. About their bodies straining into the opening shape of new stars, bursting out from her neck through a terror of skin.

Lecture on Simile

Other animal parts like not human to unmake, sort of better to remove. Theory and the really terrible—oh like particulate in the gut which is. Also, there are made of stuff, for example buttons really a way to explain. Breaks down anyhow the shadows of simile, uh because real things are really pure, are not.

Terrible not actually physical and use is reflection to pure remove outside. At least every object or, you know, beauty becoming pure because that's what it mean. Not really, but like it the kind that exists because reflection. Not actually stuff organic to remove.

Another like thing atom or maybe also water which is in; better I didn't say—

Water is both.

Abandoned strip malls are, uh, exist to create broader. Shadow like a bird, that's also not real. To like is like, passive, there are other ways too but then you know it's wrong.

Sometimes we make open but also there were things already there. Manatees, plastics, agricultural cast iron valves— unless you already then find something else. Use is to create

broader like the gut and the terrible really pure remove. Outside is okay if need but, you know, inside also there.

Finally a judged thing this is wait. Assembly of animals and minerals and other things to pretend, this is how. Don't worry too much. Assembly of things to pretend other and the minerals also but animals mostly to form.

Bright Refuge

[Candy]

The lamplight blurs the mirror's gaze: how far to the nearest exit? She has her brights on, I am nearly blind by noon. How to explain where we are, why we are always running late. I tell her we can stay where it's light and reflective, all shimmering surface. If the moon is a silver fish, then I am swimming, skimming glass, dreaming of a place to light. I am smooth as a dolphin. There is a place for me because I am polite. I make no splash, am nearly a knife, so sharp and quiet. So quiet. There is a place for me because I never said no. She never minds her manners, has no such misconceptions. Hold a candle to her skin, she thinks *home*.

[Arlene]

How to get out of it: I burst like a star or a five-pointed searchlight. I roam the sky looking for someone to cover. No. I stick, sit like nerves on the skin, wait for the current. Give me something to bundle or blow up, something to shovel or shame. The surface is slick and bleak, an icy plain. It can barely contain us. We reach and reach. Light tells the story: to glow, burn first. So the halo sets the head ablaze; it will be so pretty. She searches for haven, comes up empty, always. I lend her the strong fist of my heart to beat and beat, she complains it's no kite. Between two sides, there is a holy edge; I'll meet you there. You bring the flashlight. I'll be the one swimming like hell.

S h y a S c a n l o n

D e e p e r G r e e n , a n d G l o w i n g

Show me how to look forward to these things. To see them and pursue. It is something to bark like a dog barks. It is something to wade in the snow like a chicken, lost. My hands do not feel their fingers, and so my answers come but do not grasp the reason for their caring. Still they care. They take long baths and watch the water flush without spinning down a drain dead center between a world where I breathe under water, and a world where water is the substance of my skin.

A Neighboring Insert

We're guns aren't we you said I said maybe. You said how could you I said what you said don't interrupt. We opened our mouths. Different ends of the same word came out and our actual bodies were only different from the waste up. A kind of efficiency supported us. Something like a pipe stand. Suddenly there were pipes all over. Where did they come from you said. You began to gather them I said stop. I opened my mouth to let the tail end out. I grabbed something thin between us.

Waiting, a Rudder, and Something Smooth

The warmth on my leg is this generation. The blankness I see is the next. These things scare me, a little, but I'm largely prepared. I've taken all the appropriate notes. I've followed the small child down the hall with his bathroom pass into the teachers' lounge. Wood meets metal on a desk and asks for clemency but gets screwed. Gouges on the floor remark casually about enormous gaps in the mind. That is a flower print dress. That is a pencil unsharpened. This is the first drop of sweat down my back.

D a r e s i e s : B a c k s i e s

They'll fix it if we're not careful. They'll fix us to it. They'll come no bigger than we expect, but more colorful, and they'll use strange tools to pin our eyes apart until all we can see is each other, an alien, and the path to enlightenment. Don't take it you'll say. I'll run ahead, trying to catch up with my hands. But it's all in perspective, I'll say, laughing. Later we'll build a house on a long, blank pasture and wait for our livestock to find their way back past the use they've been put to.

Lisa Jarnot

Sometimes Resonating with Song

Large and bright and large and bright
and large and bright amazing

large and bright and bright and large
and large amazing too,

large and bright and large and bright
and large and bright large windows,

large then large a large and tight
and bright and large with song

amazed and large a large bright day,
a large and bright apartment

amazed and bright a large bright day
a large amazing labor

a large and bright amazing cat
large singing in the sunlight,

and largely bright on sunny days
but darker in the nighttime,

and large and bright in ending bright,
and large in bright beginning,

amazing always, large and bright,
amazing, sometimes small,

amazing sometimes, large and bright,
enresined brightened all.

The Villager

We lived at The Villager for a month or more. Two double beds covered in slippery, pilled spreads, and a dingy mini-fridge. We could smoke in the room. When Sylvie came to visit, she shared Martin's bed and I kept my own. Sylvie had a floppy-eared stuffed bunny with her. She clutched it at night, spoke with a lisp.

She often asked if I would like to feel her breasts.

No, I said, I would not.

From the site to The Villager was an uphill walk. Once we saw a woman's umbrella turn inside out in the wind. Without knowledge, she moved into the street trying to right the fabric.

I asked Martin what it was called, the fabric.

Fabric, he said.

We watched as a car struck her, gently, knocked her down, and moved on. She was prone, and then sitting, legs splayed, swaying. She stood up and left her umbrella behind.

When we passed, Martin kicked it into the gutter. Bad luck. Back lud.

The French Canadians lived in temporary housing. Even though their Thanksgiving was long past, the French Canadians cooked us a chicken and held a celebration in our honor.

Salut! Ca va?

Ca va.

I left The Villager and went downtown to meet Frederic at his hotel. He brought me to a bar where we drank rum and Coke.

Later, I joined him in his room. From up that high, you could see all the lights of the city, but you could not see the lights of The Villager.

He fucked me without a condom. I wondered if I would die.

There was a man, alone, next door to our room. His glasses turned to black when he was out in the light.

What I told Martin was this: That I saw the man dragging a large suitcase to the parking garage.

What we speculated was this: Within that suitcase was a body.

Body of a girl. Body of a girl about my size, my age.

It was a body bag.

The Villager never felt like home. Not even when we took turns kissing Sylvie. Not even when Martin pretended he was a member of the Hair Club for Men.

It never felt like home and I waited to be carried out, to be lugged out in a bag by a man with black-covered eyes. I waited to be discarded by him.

Not even when the sky got gray and grayer and rain fell did it feel like home. It felt like a place we should be leaving. It felt like a place we had already left.

James Grinwis

*from One Briefcase, Two Landscapes,
and a Fuse*

23

Playful punch. She dressed the way a fist would dress, socking everybody. Unmatched things of palleted worth: item of grim expectancies, expansive traits, as in landscapes or moods. Every piece must fit: peg to slake, hinge to slot. Forgive me my inconsistencies as they forgive those who have been inconsistent against us. Item of a hundred empty sleeves, like the forgotten tears of forefathers: wax it, someone said.

There is a red box on a dry, black plain, and from its sides poke two tiny propellers, and protruding from its underside a thick strip resembling a giant nematode or a sumo belt. When one approaches, this box seems to fade deeper into the distance, always beyond one's reach; perpetually the length of a dog track removed from one. The mystery of the contents inside suffices to keep you going, even as the air grows thicker and it becomes harder to breathe. As if you were trying to peer into the primordial secrets of your own self and the ancient juice of the earth were sucking you into some netherworld where true discovery can only find mire. The feeling of this strange compulsion is akin to when, during an exam, you seem to discern the very nature and shape of the equation but are at a loss to answer it, though you may not have taken an exam in decades.

A pile of bone scepters arranged in a ring around a collage of skull fragments from which protrudes a steel pipe around which is entwined a pulley system along which seems to run a series of heavy, pewter chimes that do not jingle or make any noise at all. Perhaps their frequency is not of this century, their timbres like lost souls waiting for the gate into the next place to open. “That is, simply put, just a bit cheesy, don’t you think?” a higher-up said. A great storm was pummeling the parking lot and most everyone was gazing out the vast window. Inside one of the flecks of rain, research scraps that in another time hold significance.

She lifted her little pine cone staff, and I my adz. “It is a thyrsus,” said she, “good for fertility,” and poured out some wine near the door of building 3. A good electric storm, brewing in the ghost. Honest, terrified, wrapped in cumulative effects, the junior strolled through the diorama of cretaceous Argentina. The power of certain notes: one theme of a simple fugue conjures the history of China, another evokes recent strides in astrophysics. My heart, a little hesitant, sucked up the drink like a particle converter handling particles. Can’t find my Levis, *The Gazer Within*. The science of defining technical terms: orismology. Midnight in the puzzle manufacturing plant: I put down my head.

Stuff smashed on other stuff: like a dream in which you awoke then dropped back into. Themes like *arrogance of human frailty* The *awesomeness of place* The *space to appear and disappear*. Like a glow that has cast itself over a plastic toy and leapt into the nearest eye to cast it into a memory of reading. A boulder slipped from its mooring. In the drunkerie, focusing on the trees. Something about the emptiness, the *engagement of a place when everyone has left it*. A street you walked down once, where you liked to eat at every eatery at least once. Steroids strewn across the hallway. Establishments opening their doorways, bleak faces looking around the cool zones. It appeared the irregulars would be late for the specimens who were now littering the scenarios, which had no longer any struts to hold the spaces around the doorways into little springs of worthwhileness, the way an afternoon or Thursday night presses soft bulbs onto the scene of scrub grass and snow. Perception of the hardness of the earth, eruptions, non-eruptions. At the site the pylons were like socks and thence on towards the item in which the children had gotten lost inside the loops.

Hive

As I got older, and after dad left, mom grew sick and lonely and left out lard. She opened windows, smeared the walls with honey, rubbed blood and milk into the carpet. Whole days passed in the kitchen making pies that weren't to eat—instead they'd fill the bookshelves, crowd the air vents, line the stairs.

Soon it got hard to push the front door open. You could hear our house for miles.

At school I'd show up draped in aphids, the wings of moths making my dress. I'd find bugs burrowed in my lunchbox. *Protein!* mom screamed, smiling. *Muscles!* She was tired. She'd sit all day in bed and watch the bees build hives along her headboard. *Your father, any day now*, she kept chanting. She spoke to the bugs another way. I had to wait until she slept to shoo the nits and comb the eggs out of her hair.

One night I saw a scrim of gnats become a man above my bed.

Another I found mother on the foyer floor, covered in caterpillars. She kicked when I went to pick her up. *We're in love*, she said. *We want a baby. Another you.* I felt a buzzing

behind her eyes. *I'll call her Nadja, same as you've been*, she said. *You'll be twins, but years apart. Your father will love her just as much.*

Instead of getting fatter, her belly continued caving in. She refused to eat anything but pollen. There were maggots in her nostrils. She couldn't sit up straight. She saw triple: me and me and me. She squealed, *Look at all my babies!*

When mother finally gave in Junebugs carried her away. I went outside and watched her floating skyward, her cobwebbed head agleam. She'd be better where she landed, I knew. She wouldn't have to think.

That night the sky rained larvae. By dawn the lawn had bloomed.

I wondered what worms would one day find me, and if they'd already know my name.

Anniversary

The new house had no lights on. The windows open. Doors unlocked.

You were not in the foyer. You were not in the den.

*the foyer where the men stood where the moths came
where the sun*

The downstairs bath was overflowing. The ceiling had a drip.

Same pictures on the same walls in both downstairs bedrooms—children
I'd never seen.

you were late by god where were you I wore the gown my hair in braids

Laughter in the attic.

You were not in the attic.

I lose my head sometimes

The carpet from the study had been moved up to my room.

*that night I woke and saw the ceiling missing
people standing near my bed so many people
the room was shrinking my eyes all sting I couldn't see*

You were not in the kitchen where your gown soaked in the sink.

it is illegal in the U.S. to cremate more than one body at a time

The fridge gushed when it opened. The water sizzled on the floor.

*I still believe in water though here it's hard to pay attention
you know that's all they have here don't you
so much noise how could you sleep*

Colder upstairs than downstairs. Most cold in your bedroom near the stain below the fan.

*some nights I swell so large the house will shiver
my back crammed against the roof my brain studded on the chandelier
other people visit now*

I heard you in the next room.

You were not in the next room. You were not in the backyard with the moon.

*I didn't even think of you as it happened
the way the room glowed how could I have*

I could smell you in the hall.

smoke remains long after heat

In the lining of the sofa, found strands of your hair, singed.

even still I'm growing old

While in the garage, the kitchen phone rang. When back inside, it
stopped.

some nights I think of nothing and it's then that I can sleep

Felt you behind me at the den window. The flesh up my nose began to burn.

I need you would you listen would you hold still

quiet

wait

Water also gushing from air vents in the nursery. A flickering in the lamp.

...

Your voice there near the window. The burn spreading down my throat.

the sounds a house makes at 1600 Fahrenheit

the sound a brain makes

I am yours

Upstairs the laughing louder. Your hair warming in my hand.

Your eyes reflected in the window glass.

if you hadn't left that night you'd be here with me already

Water coming down the stairs then.

these remnants representing roughly 3.5% of the body's original mass

Water pouring from my ears.

hold still and just relax

Your voice alive inside me as the house filled, as I heard the girders bend.

Julia Johnson

Blue Anthropometry

The wind has gotten into itself.

The smudge-proof existence of us—

I hand over the curious lines

as if giving a speech.

Now the identity

of desire, bold and impossibly fractured,

breaks and presses against the face.

In this we are bound to wilderness,

and held there in heavy rain, the arm

up, and right, skipped mark of the speed

at which we move.

Kathleen Rooney & Elisa Gabbert

Threshold

Crossing. Forever crossing. We seem unable: reaching across,
never prying our fingers off the doorframe. One foot in, one foot
also in, in stasis, in liminal spaces. Stuck in, no, on the middle—
sparrow-narrow, too small to fall & nobody pushing. Cottony-
cloud-dotted panoramic firmament taunting from the window,
*unless you're a genius, unless you're a genius, you don't stand
in place & make the vista shift nearer, bending time-space.*
The hooks in our heads that we hang things on are empty,
but hooks when empty are most themselves. Waiting.

X

The only words to describe it were *fantastic & illegal*
like an exceptionally well-done bank robbery. *For deposit*

only, unfortunately, wasn't written on the back of my head.
Instead, someone'd tattooed a spiderweb-butterfly—exquisite

composite—on my livid scalp. Self-hatred abating, I
admired myself in a couple of mirrors. Mineral deposits

make a gyrosopic stain in my sink. Like this new ink
labeled “Disappearing,” but which adheres exquisite-

ly to the skin of all who touch it, not unlike a spiderweb,
a net of silk enveloping me not unlike a safety deposit

box. But I don't feel safe. I feel sickly, though pretty
enough to leave, as they say, a beautiful corpse. Exquisite.

Anna Catone

The House of Loreto

A girl, I was red brick, covered up
in ivy—windy hallways, drawers and cabinets, attic closets
with brass-latched closets inside them. I was
a house caught deep in the ground, there.

But that was when I still thought I could lift a house,
like the legend of the miracle of the holy house of Loreto—
the angels who flew the family and their home out of Nazareth,
away from the advancing armies, towards the Adriatic Sea.

That was before the house fell,
before anyone I loved had died,
before we were human,
and it was time for me to leave.

Kristy Bowen

t h e o r i e s o f g r a v i t y

In July, her feet swell three days before the movie house burns. Her voice a broken windshield. A distress call. The screen door open all night and flies on the tomatoes. Her dreams are dog-eared, someone else's: a piano beside the road and a whiskeyed waltz. A woman in the broom closet, buttoning her blouse. It goes like this sometimes, achy, like a broken arm. Her salt shakers shaped like ducks. Her ducks shaped like killers. Beneath the ferris wheel, a child's wagon, dirty water.

bad endings

By morning, we've moved our beds
against the walls and placed ghosts

in all the closets. Dawn a mess of pigtails
and paper dolls. A broken water glass.

Mama says even our sweaters have holes.
But even our holes have holes.

Something always falling through,
the body like a bottle thicker at the bottom.

She makes us carry soap on our tongues
until our words are soft as murders.

Some nights everything blurry
like dirty water. Some nights,

a flickering above the sink.

c a r n i v a l s e a s o n

Summer tears the roof from the house,
follows us home whistling

something awful. Makes us moody,
raw in the throat. Soon,

I'm a treble clef, a tangle,
all white hair and ribbons,

the sky gone up like burning copper.
We keep needles in our pockets to sew up

the holes, Arkansas in our drawls
where the baby teeth fall loose, linger

beneath the pillows, all the mouths
emptied out like drawers.

We speak softly while night
rearranges the room, knocks us out,

knocks us up. Spits up a bloody
tissue. A single feather.

Delivers us into sleep like a black dress, opening.

Made me immobile—

the pink plush jellyfish pushpinned to the ceiling—its translucent legs twist, catch light slants from between blinds. Tonight's poison is moth-minded, bright blotched holes in every plan. I could tell you about her. About Portland—the Motel 6 with the prettiest pool, impossible poses hushed into the queenbed while a prom couple broke up outside the door. I think I'll tell you this because it doesn't concern you. What do you know of the silicone prick & scratchy sheets? See, her skin was calm, stilled & louder than all your paroxysms put together. Pink satined & barefoot, the motel girlfriend called: *I'll come apart, baby. I mean for real, baby. Don't walk away from me.* Concerning you: I've never had an egg cream or a lime rickey. Never canoed or wore watershoes. Never slept out on a porch in a heat cradle. I'll come apart, I mean for real. A mobile is a contagious little diversion. The Oregon Ash is a slow-grow, has thick roots. All failed rooms have things that loom from thin roofs.

Open Road

The road broke, explicit, nocturnal; it must have been the quietest quake. I think it a bad sign, but you're up & packing the pick-up. All duty, no diety. The interstate shows no road veins. Dirty relaxes to a green-tunneled hum. You smile lazy, likely thinking of your no-god, the random collision. For an omen hater, you love an ominous modifier: *dead-broke*, *dead-ringer*, *dead-sexy*. No maps spread in the cab, it's your route after all: the place you leave behind but always come back to, less changed than you pretend to be. I see fault lines everywhere—dormant, poised. Suspicious cargo, our dreams. Dead weight. The heat hangs on the highway in heavy wavy pools. I listen to you romanticize condensation, the vapor & its fractioned particles. You say: *it settles*. I watch the road's narrowed arrow, wait for the rupture, the resurrection.

Daniel Grandbois

The Other Half

“I want to see how the other half live,” an ambitious, young wall mirror said.

In the succeeding years, it looked most everywhere it could, but whichever way it faced, it could not see backward through its own face.

Eventually, the less-than-young mirror got its wish. It grew eyes in the back of its head. That is, another mirror was hung across the hall.

“I had no idea,” said the mirror on reflection.

The other said nothing.

Chinese Finger Trap

The scattered straw had had enough of the elephant foot's pranks. It wove itself into a large-scale Chinese finger trap and waited, crouching.

The elephant foot must have known because it did not stamp there again.

Instead, an unsuspecting rhinoceros triggered an attack by what seemed to be a leg warmer made of straw that it couldn't shake off.

Realizing what had happened, the straw tried to unweave itself, but it was no use. It had been caught in its own trap. The rhinoceros fared better. Its leg warmer incited the admiration of many females who offered their rumps. Though the trait was never passed on, the females kept trying for it, braiding their hind legs with his.

New Heaven

In the end, only three were saved from the heap. A fish, a fowl, and a fool. The fool had been taken from the equivalent of a high king's court; the others, from sea and sky. All such domains were part of the heap.

The one who saved? An insurance salesman from Buffalo.

The reason? None given.

Their new heaven? An unfinished basement, still flooded by record-setting rain.

Wearing chest waders, the salesman would visit them often, but only at night when they couldn't see him. His splashing and sloshing led them to imagine all manner of savior—from a fish to a fowl to a fool, respectively.

One night, the sloshing sounds were distinctly different. Having learned of what her husband had done, the salesman's wife thought she would take a turn. The waders were big on her, but the sounds she made in them were smaller. The fish circled her thighs. The fowl her floating breasts. The fool waited in the corner, cockscomb in hand.

The Hermit Crab

There once was a hermit crab who lived by the sea, all alone in the sand, except for his nineteen brothers and sisters who always got in the way, sixteen of which were not even related to him and had no business going about where he was.

Oh, how he wished his siblings knew better how to live up to their name. “We’re *hermit* crabs,” he used to tell them. “*Hermit, hermit, hermit!* Don’t any of you get it?”

“A hermit lives alone,” they said, “not in a pile of others. A hermit has long hair, whereas we have none. A hermit is not what we are,” they said emphatically, “and not at all what we’ve already named ourselves, which you should know by now fits like a shell. That is, Not-Lobster-Not-Crawfish-Not-Oyster-Not-Shrimp.”

“Yes, I know,” said the crab before saying nothing to them ever again. “We named ourselves after the things we are not. Well, then, if we’re not hermits, as you say, *Hermit Crabs* should suit you fine.”

To this quip, his nineteen brothers and sisters gave no answer, except to crawl all over each other into a pyramid-shaped

pile that pointed at a passing cloud, until the topmost crab tumbled off and, shame-faced, retracted into his shell. He was the heaviest and should have known to stay at the bottom.

So, our hermit crab packed up his shell with his few belongings, which consisted of a pebble, and moved to Salt Lake City, where, at least, nobody would know him. If he kept to himself, it might stay that way too. Then, they'd all know who was right about their name.

All the Mason Jars in the World

There once lived like fur forgotten in a basement corner the girl who touched everything. Her body like a ball of yarn unwound and fell from the bed into the basement, from the basement into the drain, and met with many accidents, where it did touch many things. Where it spanned itself the 385 square feet fuzzed and fraying in Harlan's house, so unwound it could not if Harlan had all the mason jars in the world get Toland back again, no matter how many times with the tailor's chalk Harlan marked. So much more than a hundred times did this poor Harlan weep, upset. That one day he coined in scientific terms "stem-threads" and obtained a grant, and taped the permit on the basement door, where it stayed for all the colors of a Denver Fall he worked. And in all the mason jars in the world set Harlan to cure his broken Toland, and lined up with labels the things Toland touched. But Toland touched everything, and all the mason jars in the world were not enough. And in the basement forever inside him, Harlan prepared the threads of yarn, wrapping the lesions in rice paper, taking many steps backwards many times, before submitting his Toland to the empty jars forever and ever.

The Changeling

“I’m very concerned,” whispered Harlan, “about a mate and switch.” Toland noticed he put an emphasis on the word “*I’m*,” but she hid under the bed with him anyway. “There has been since Monday,” warned Harlan, peeking out through the blackberry of bedskirt, “much mating and no switching, so the time will soon be upon us.” Toland agreed, in her own way, and saw everywhere the scars of Monday, and marveled at Harlan squinting through his octagonal eyelids at a warped box in his datebook. *What’s that*, she asked, and Harlan blew as best he could the bedskirt like a summer dandelion, and a fragile piece of the June afternoon brightened for a moment the warped black box. “Monday,” he answered. Toland agreed, in her own way, and together they hid under the bed from the scars of Monday, the way they might if they had survived together as young lovers some Monday long ago. A chink of junelight escaped the bramble of bedskirt, and for a moment alighted the tangled geometry of body next to him, and Harlan tried very hard not to think about mating. He thought of sunflowers, warm and wavering, and bright winter suns, and made sure with

the datebook that all his hands were accounted for. But it was not his hands, not any of them, that suddenly entered his Toland. And it was not his hands, not any of them, that thought without pause about mating. Harlan knew it was too late. Through a slit in the hanging fabric swung down from on top of the bed a pair of feet. *Who is that?*, she asked, not recognizing herself. But Harlan could not answer. Harlan looked at his Toland beside him under the bed, and then down at her missing feet. *I'll have to carry her*, he thought, crawling her into all of his arms, away from the dangling feet, further and further away from the light, crawling. *Where are we going?*, she asked. "Tuesday," Harlan whispered, "Tuesday, with sunflowers tall as true suns," as he carried her further and further and further under the bed.

The Girl with the Seven Cables

Harlan sewed her from a very soft beam. From a very original wood. Of an unindigenous grain. Put all inside her hypodermics of cable. At first, he put her in a chair by the basement saw, and every day by the sound of sanding read to her from his biography of dolls. He read about the Saturday doll and the Sunday doll, and then he read about the Monday doll. It was cold in the basement, and Toland's threads stood on end. Harlan gave her from his quiver of needles a torn piece of wool, and then he continued. He read to her about the Tuesday doll and the Wednesday doll, and then he read about the Doll of the Seven Cables. And Toland in her chair by the saw sat up very straight. It was nearly time for the next doll, but Toland was not ready. "When," breathed Harlan through his doctor's mask, "do you think you'll be ready." But Toland in her paper gown just shrugged. It was nearly time for the next doll, so Harlan with his quiver of needles gave Toland a start. But Toland still wasn't ready. She would not be ready, she finally said, until she could be to them all a mother doll. And then Harlan understood. He took Toland's wiry hands between all his

rubber gloves and pressed until a charge on every corner of 14th and Humboldt was felt. Toland smiled. It was nearly time for the next doll. Harlan from her seven cables had to choose. There were cables in each putty-colored leg. And inside the stripes of arms. And bent like two wheels in her chest to spin. And pitched like the brightest Christmas star in all of Denver, upon a cable her head. Harlan had to choose. So he felt around in his quiver of needles for the patches, and replaced inch by inch the cable he removed. At first the cable like a weekend slept. And then the cable like a weekday woke. And so Harlan wrapped the cable in a blanket and gave it to Toland. And Toland hugged her cable so hard her back stitch by stitch protruded from the paper gown. And Toland and Harlan at each other blushed. It was nearly time for the next doll. There would be, Harlan knew, six more dolls. It was nearly time for the next doll. There would be, Harlan knew, five more dolls. Harlan began on the recipe always inside him to sign himself “dollsmith.” It was nearly time for the next doll. Harlan began on the recipe always inside him to write *afraid*, but Toland with her patches covered her ears. It was nearly time for the next doll. So Harlan felt around in his quiver of needles for the buttons, and decorated loop by loop Toland’s patches in polka dots, and inside their ellipses hid. Thursday and Friday like an empty nest left. Toland felt alone. So she removed row by row

all her buttons, until Harlan from inside her spoke. There would be, he said, no more dolls. So Toland with her softest sheet of sandpaper got ready.

Toland-in-Heaven

Toland realized that in order to find for Harlan a Toland-in-Heaven she would have to fill in all his holes. She would have to get from bedlam the very dark cloth. And she would have to play from the musical note of her hair-braid a very noisy thread. She would have to have light. How, she wondered, would she have light, lying like she did with her eyes shut? And that same moment inside her hands, Toland-in-Heaven revealed the small blue heart that she had Sundays before saved for her. *What is it?* Toland asked, and Toland-in-Heaven averted her eyes as she placed in her chest the thin cold battery, kneeling in prayer, until inside Toland's fist a flashlight like foil flickered. And Toland knew what she had to do. So while all of Harlan slept in a hazmat of holes, Toland in her loudest leotard thread her body into Harlan's favorite needle, and on tiptoe began her search. She searched every hospital and she searched every jail, but it was no use, she could not find Harlan's holes. How, she wondered, would she find Harlan's holes, lying like she did with her eyes shut? And that same moment inside her hands, Toland-in-Heaven revealed the very old datebook. And Toland

knew what she had to do. So she searched Harlan's childhood, and she found, along with a portion of cake that was never shared, a very large hole. *It's so big*, she sighed, losing very fast all her faith. And that same moment inside her head, Toland-in-Heaven revealed a hunch that she was meant for bigger things. And Toland in Harlan's favorite needle began to feel small. So she quickly poured like paste the cloth into Harlan's hole, and with the noisy thread began to close the seam, removing strand after strand of her long braided hair, until there was a concert of hair so loud Harlan began to sing. And so Toland sung. And the cake from Harlan's childhood began like words to appear on their lips, until Toland-in-Heaven like a very big hunch began to fade.

The Yarn

When Toland danced away that summer after the calamity, she spun for Harlan on her dizzy legs a yarn. She said *safe* and then she didn't. She said about the little things often something *fishy*. And she said about her particular area questions she answered exponentially. She said *door*, and then she opened in the afternoon always inside her a window. And then she said finally *wall*, and through a noise crawled inside. There had been eleven dark skies since the calamity, Harlan thought. There had been eleven times the sound of doors. Upon the doorknob, a leotard. Upon the wall, a very sudden upholstery of skin. And for the record, something in it all very fishy. Harlan began in the datebook always inside him to keep track. He charted like a calendar all the drywall in the house. The noise of crumbling. He charted every thread. The noise of weaving. He said to everyone the yarn Toland gave him, until he felt against his hands something cold, and so he clapped. And so everyone clapped until his hands became warm. And then they clapped until his hands became hot. And through their noise Toland crawled inside, and Harlan held her like a spool in his hands.

Finger after finger ran through her hair, until Toland in his hands began to squirm. And then like a bath to splash. And like a fish to flop. And like a very cold day to become quiet. And everyone through their clapping could see Harlan's icy breath when he said *Toland*. Until he didn't.

Elizabeth Horner

This Drugstore Has New Hours

There are only so many pills to satisfy these nerve endings and complex synapses. Complexity used to get us in bed, remember? Oh, dollface. Ratty couches with screw-topped cognac, sticky bellies, mouthy hair. It was so easy—low lights hid the corners and a guitar would pick a new lip to blossom. Not now, not on these widening streets, not with this laundry list and color-treatment shampoo, we're lost without the dope fiends and freaks. Give me the plague please, or molten boils. Give me the legs to hike out of here, quick! Keep this stale breath from coming back, tear me limb from limb or shape shift somewhere—breathe out, yeah. I'll give you a warrior, I'll give you a need. Dollface, I want to break your cheekbones and watch your smile cave in.

Sheep Woman Tells All

He gives me repose from broken combs in my woolly hair. How he loves to tangle fingers down my back, rub in the lanolin, then feed me asparagus, one tickling stalk at a time. It's the children—

with their cowboy hats and holly hobbies, jumping my back for a ride. The neighbor boy, I'll never tell of his afternoon with me, but I begged to move, silenced my hooves with socks to keep the clicky-clack quiet.

I am not joyless, but the basement still sends shivers. On the night of my Happening, my back exploded and my nose itched. When my feet turned black, I bellowed a bit and fainted downy to the floor.

Forgetting, I smear lipstick across my snout, but I'm still a woman, I have my hands, cuticles, thumbs and shiny human nails, I clip and buff and plunge into the mess behind me to soften my skin.

Now there are the gentle squeals of pigs downstairs
when they slice the air in two. I cover my ears
and tap, hooves good for something. I'd leave a woolly
ladder to drop them outside. I hope he is kind.

Amelia Gray

Diary of the Blockage

Day 1

I am hesitant to talk about it, but I'm the kind of person who turns off the television when the newscaster starts in on colon cancer. Therefore, I must say this delicately: it so happened that I came down with a mild stomach virus, hopefully gone by the morning but tonight was difficult and in the course of my time in the restroom I succeeded in expelling most of my dinner save for one small and stubborn piece which managed to lodge, it seems, between my esophagus and windpipe. At three in the morning I was crouched in bed and swallowing chronically, painfully aware of the foreign mass that will not move up or down but only vibrates unpleasantly. In the morning, I will call the doctor.

Day 2

I did not call the doctor. I went so far as to find my insurance card, but I could imagine the *remember Miss Mosely, well she has had a thing lodged in her throat* all within range of anyone with half a mind to be within earshot of the office window. I feel very sincerely that bodily functions have their place, but why would the toiletries and makeup and personal privacy industries all be such multimillion dollar successes if the place for those bodily functions was in public? To say otherwise is to disrespect culture. Meanwhile, the object makes itself known whenever I swallow or cough but is otherwise not troublesome. I can't decide if it is disintegrating or I am growing used to it. I think it is a piece of hamburger.

Day 3

It is not disintegrating. It is much like a jilted lover: when it heard its presence in the world was becoming bearable, it revealed itself to be living down the street, to frequent the same local eateries and second-hand stores once enjoyed on peaceful solitary afternoons. I have changed my diet. I avoided hot coffee with my breakfast though it left me useless and squinting at the turn arrow against the sun. I brought a tomato from home for lunch because the thought of my usual hamburger out was distinctly unpalatable, but I realized too late that the acid of the tomato plus the salt I sprinkled on it (the only way to reasonably enjoy a tomato) stung my throat and left me pitiful and nearly in tears, crouched in my cubicle. I have begun meditating. I can picture the fleshy walls of my delicate throat, red and raw, with the blockage the size of a small fingernail touching two sides of the void, vibrating with my vocal cords when I speak and avoiding, by some cosmic misfortune, the tomato and milk and corn chips and yogurt I send to destroy it.

Day 4

Office meeting today. Mr. Wallace brought in hot coffee and orange juice. During the meeting I discovered I can widen and collapse my palate around the blockage. It requires a slight back and forth motion of the head (imagine a small bird) and dominated my efforts over talk of redistricting, distribution, advertising, human resources news, 401-K plan changes. I picked out of obligation the orange juice believing it to be the lesser of liquid evils but of course it goes down like murder. I consider the possibility of a very successful diet: allow yourself to chew and enjoy the taste and texture of many foods, but at the point of swallowing, simply spit out the morsel and replace it with a healthier alternative such as a vitamin pill. In my case, something easier on the throat-parts such as ice water. I wish to patent this diet and to advertise its concepts in small checkout counter books across the country.

Day 5

Worrisome creaking sounds and feelings from the throat. I feel a moment of judgment or shame: the reason for my stomach flu of Saturday night was perhaps exacerbated by the drinks I had out at what I surmised to be a singles' bar, drinks that would have been far less troubling to my long-term health had I not seen my first husband, who suggested with his own meaty fisted drink that I had not yet had enough and who am I to deny a challenge. (The blockage encourages me to feel this way.) I can admit that yes, the confrontation may have been a part of it. I sit on my couch and cough for a satisfying amount of time before falling asleep to the sounds of smooth jazz.

Day 6

When I recall my behavior from that first night (there was a throwing of drinks and some shouting), I repeat a litany of self-assurances. I am kind, I am thoughtful and beautiful, I am clever, I am kind I am thoughtful and beauty I am kind of clever and thoughtful and beautiful cleaver and kind though beautiful. I must perform the litany in a somewhat secret manner. I have taken to ducking my head under my desk as if I am looking for a dropped pencil and then I can begin my meditations. The blockage seems to grow—tinier pieces of food and digestive acid and saliva perhaps. When I cough or swallow, the vibrations seem lower and longer, more permanent. I don't mind adding to it. Strange, how the disgusting becomes commonplace and then welcome. I wonder how long I would have to live with a parasite, a tapeworm or a leech, before it became a happy addition to the host of my body. I look at myself in mirrors obsessively.

Day 7

Power outage due to hail storm. I wonder, has anyone created a candle wax remover with an attachment that allows the remover to make new candles? A kind of catch system with a heated core. The resultant recycled candle would be multicolored from the different waxes and in that way it would be wholly the property of the consumer and free of obligation to a consumer system. I have many good ideas. I find that when I lie down, I have consistent trouble breathing. Swallowing also grows more painful. I force down some of the cottage cheese otherwise curdling in the warming refrigerator. Through this pain I have decided I must learn a valuable lesson. In the night's uncomfortable darkness, I consider my connection to the past and future of the planet. I take off my arch support shoes and remove my under-eye coverup gel when I undress for bed. I am quietly aware of my flat feet. Propped up on pillows, I touch the lump swelling gently on my throat.

Day 8

I have finally begun to internalize the blockage—it feels strange even to write “blockage,” because I forget what exactly it was blocking and why I felt so constrained. I found the plunging neckline shirts in the back of my closet and wore one out to lunch. I allowed the stares and gestures towards me with cool disregard. I sat at a table in the center of the room. For lunch? Ice water, ice water, ice water! Later, I have a protein shake out of desperation and collapse on the kitchen floor, sobbing. A cloud to every silver lining!

Day 9

My delicate condition has brought me a kind of daily transcendence as I move through the world. The girl who argues politics in front of the coffee shop has gaps under her fake nails where the real ones are growing, and she's waiting for the problem to get obvious enough to do something about it. The young man who listens to her has a piece of hair that never lies down flat. He is very disturbed by this and will lick his fingers and slick it down when he thinks nobody else is watching. I am very interested in necks, and how their owners handle them. People mostly ignore their own necks, except for very nervous girls who hold them while they talk as if they are trying to keep their vocal chords from exploding and splattering across the other person.

Day 10

I have a very interesting theory in terms of my condition: I am fairly sure that it never existed—never in any real, physical form. Can I conjure a physical event out of darkness? Could I imagine my toenails shorter? Could I create, using my mind, an object that has never existed before, anywhere in the world? *Is such a material, at this very moment, within my throat?* Tenderly, I carry within me the first invented treasure known to mankind. My body is the first supernatural wonder of the world. I am careful when I cough, afraid of disturbing the gestation period, protective of the mass.

Day 11

I have considered feeding myself intravenously but I worry that medical professionals would realize the unique quality of the blockage, and would conspire to take it from me.

Day 12

Mr. Wallace called today to ask why I haven't been coming to work. I had been a model employee in terms of attendance and grooming. I wish I could press the appropriate button and confirm that *yes*, I was feeling fine, that *yes*, I would like to keep my job, that it *would be nice* if everyone understood that I was doing something for the *benefit of the world* and that my duties as a paper-mover would have to wait. The colors in my body have moved and centralized at my throat. There is a terrible pallor in my face and hands but I am heartened by the growing darkness around the strange, wonderful object.

Day 13

The swirling patterns behind my eyes confirm what I have secretly felt for days, that it is time for the blockage to finally emerge, the gestation period has concluded, the suffering is nearly through (though it has not been true suffering, though we will never know true suffering), that which will most closely resemble joy is prepared to leave my body and move into the world!

Day 14

I am wildly aware of the feel of everyday objects. My body feels wholly perishable against the tile and dirt and ground it touches. I set out the silver bowl I once received as a wedding present (so long ago, such strange emotions!) as well as a set of silver spoons and monogrammed hand towels. My plan was to expel the Object into the bowl, but when I attempted the expellation (hunched over the bowl on the floor, which I chose to be the easiest method for both myself and the Object) I was greeted by a sharp, shocking pain. My nose bled into the bowl and I hunched nearly blind with emotion but the blockage screamed *OUT* and my grasping hands touched bowl, towel and finally spoons! and gratefully I took a spoon in my shaking grip and fully formed ideas flashed before me, Stop the bleeding! Save the Object! And I do understand that This will be a difficult labor, indeed!

Boy, Falling

One night we see Boy. Boy, he is down by the river, and what Boy is doing there, down by the river there, is Boy is climbing up the side of Girl's leg. Boy, he is going up: this, us brothers, we can see this. Boy is heading up to the top to where Girl's head, it is sticking up through the clouds, through to that muddy blackness there on the other side of sky. When us brothers see this, back from where we are watching this, back from in the back of our house's backyard, we run ourselves down to the river, so that Boy can hear us when we yell up to him, Hey, Boy, we holler this out. Boy, what do you think you're doing? When Boy hears that it is us brothers who are calling this out, Boy turns back his boy head toward the sound of our boy voices. Yes, Boy, he looks down to see that it is us brothers, but no, Boy does not stop climbing up even when he sees and knows that it is us, even when he hears that it is us brothers who are calling out and up to him to stop. So us brothers, what us brothers do is, we start too climbing up the side of Girl's leg. Boy, we are going up after Boy to get Boy to come down. It does not take us brothers long for us to catch up

to where Boy is just a freckled spot, to where Boy is just a climbing speck of a spider climbing up the side of Girl's mud body. Yes, us brothers, we are boys bigger than this boy Boy is. We are bigger and we are stronger and we are faster climbers-up than this boy. We are boys who know Girl's body, the bumps and rivery curves, better than we know the banks of the river. Us brothers, we know this mountain of mud better than Boy could ever get to know it, because us brothers, we are the brothers whose muddy boy hands made Girl rise up out of the mud. And so, when we get up to where Boy is about half the way up to Girl's mud-topped top, us brothers, we put a hand on each of Boy's shoulders, and this is what gets Boy to stop. Where are you going? is what we say to Boy. And then, Who told you you could? What Boy says in answer to this is, Boy says, Girl. Girl, Boy tells us, told me to come see. Us brothers, our ears, we cannot believe it that this is what Boy is saying, though believe it, we have to believe it: us brothers, we know that it's true that nothing along this river is impossible. We have to believe it too when Girl tilts down her chin at us brothers and nods with her girl head that yes this is true, Girl was the one who told Boy that he could come up to take a look, to see this other piece of the sky. Girl's eyes, when she looks down at us brothers, Girl's eyes are quarter moons that do not wish to be, by us brothers, fully seen. But what Girl wishes to be true,

when it comes to us brothers, us brothers, we always do whatever we can to make what Girl wishes for to be true. And so, us brothers, we turn and look the other way. If this is what Girl is wishing for for us brothers, we say this to each other, we say this with this look of us looking the other way. If this is what Girl wants, we look with this look at each other. And like this, us brothers, we nod with our heads okay. And then, like this too, we lift up our boy hands up off of Boy's shoulders and we send Boy back up on his way back up to the top of Girl. Boy, our hands they are saying, Boy, and we both of us brothers both let with our hands go. Go, Boy, is what our hands say. You can keep climbing up. But our legs: our legs are telling another story. Our legs, on us brothers, our legs, they are telling us brothers to climb up too. Go after Boy is what our legs are telling us to do. To our legs, us brothers, we listen up. We go climbing up the side of Girl's leg up after Boy. We do not stop this climbing up, all three of us together climbing up the side of Girl, until we get up to the top that is the top of Girl's head. Up here, Boy reaches down and gives us brothers each a hand up. Up here, us boys, the three of us boys together, us brothers with Boy in between us like this, we make a crown of boys with our boy bodies up here at the top of Girl's head. Boy, he is looking like he is believing that he is one of us. This boy Boy, he could be one of us brothers, or so it might look,

but no, this boy Boy, he is a boy who is brother-less. But maybe, us brothers, we are both of us brothers thinking. Us brothers, we are looking at each other, and we are each of us thinking what the other one of us is not afraid to say. What we say to Boy, then, is we say jump. Jump? Boy asks, with his eyes. Jump, we say, with our mouths, but Boy just gives us both this look like Boy believes that us brothers, we are just saying this word just to say it. But us brothers, we keep on looking at Boy with this look and then, us brothers, what we say next to Boy is fly. Fly, we say. Like a bird, we tell him. Boy gives us brothers this look that he is looking at us with. It's a look that is broken only by Boy's eyes blinking both of them at the same time shut. Each blink of Boy's eyes is saying to us brothers, What do you mean? Close your eyes is what we say to this. And this time Boy listens. Boy does what us brothers say. Good, Boy, we say to this. Now, look now: Boy is right now more than just a boy to us brothers. Boy is about to become a brother to us. Now take a deep breath, we say, and we see Boy's body rise up: it is a kite that has just caught hold of a wind that only it can see. Now, we say next, let go, we tell him, and we give Boy with a hand on his back a push. It's a soft push that is just hard enough to get him to walk forward, a step into the dark, and when he opens his eyes what it looks like to him is, it looks like to him like the sky is a sky that is falling up. But what is really going on

is this: it is Boy who is the one who doing the falling, and this boy, he is falling and falling down. He is falling fast, falling down to where the river and the mud that the river makes are waiting to catch his falling. See Boy falling this fall. His falling, it is a sight that is beautiful to see: the way that the sky around Boy, that blackness that seems to hold the moon and stars in their place, it unfolds its hands and it lets Boy go. Watch Boy go. Boy, he is going. Go, Boy, go, the both of us brothers sing this out. When Boy hits the river, there is this sound that the river makes, it's this sound that sounds like what mud sounds like when you take up a fistful of mud and throw it, this fistful of mud, up against the side of something hard: a wall, a boat's hull, a tree. But there is this moment, too, just before Boy falls, that moment when Boy and Boy's boy feet are about to step off the ledge of Girl's head, when Boy is standing up in mid-air. Boy, it looks like to us brothers that this boy, he is a boy floating in a river of mud. His boy hands are stretched out at his boy side and Boy, this boy—are you seeing with us brothers?—he is pulling in at the sky, he is holding the sky in close to his body, he is pressing it, the sky, and the moon and stars in it, up against his heart. When he does, the moon, it shatters into a billion moon pieces. Each broken piece becomes a star.

The Man Whose Guitar Was a Fish

There was this man in our town, this dirty river town, who used to come into town to play his guitar, on street corners, outside of bars, down by the river even, him and his guitar standing and sparkling in the spotlight of the moon, and he'd play that guitar of his as if it was some fish fished out of some river unknown to us brothers, some other river other than the dirty river that runs its way through this dirty river town. This man who played this guitar of his like it was some kind of a fish, he was not our father, though there were times, like when he was closing his eyes and singing, when we wished that maybe he was, our father. What this man was, this man who sang and played his guitar like it was some kind of a fish fished out of some river unknown to us, this man, he was not our father, but what he was was, he was our father's brother. Our father, our father who did not sing or play the guitar, our father who liked to fish, our father who walked down to the river, one night, he walked out into the river, he walked out across the river, one night, and did not come walking back: our father did not call this brother of his Brother the way that us brothers do. Our father, what

our father called his brother was, he called his brother Joe. Hey, Joe, we'd hear our father say. But this Joe, our father's brother who our father did not call him Brother the way us brothers call each other Brother, this Joe never said nothing, he never gave any words to our father back. Sometimes this Joe, our father's brother, he would break out into song when he heard his brother's voice, our father's, calling out to him, Hey, Joe. But most of the time, our father's brother, he was quiet. Sometimes, he would just be standing there and we wouldn't even know it. Sometimes, it made us brothers think that maybe this Joe, our father's brother, was, like Boy, born without a tongue on the inside of his mouth. Maybe when he sang, maybe to be able to sing like our father's brother was able to sing, maybe the sounds that he made with his mouth came from some other place deep inside his man body. Maybe those sounds had nothing to do with being born with or born without a tongue inside his mouth. Or maybe our father's brother didn't give any words back to our father, maybe he acted like he didn't hear it when our father said to him, Hey, Joe, maybe he was sometimes deaf, or maybe our father's brother sometimes didn't say any words back to our father calling to him, Hey, Joe, because Joe, Joe was not our father's brother's name. What our father's brother's real name was, it was Hank. But our father was the first to say, to this brother of his, that there were already too many guitar

singing singers in this world who go by the name of Hank. So Joe was the name that our father called his brother by. Hey, Joe, our father would say. And so Joe was what us brothers, Joe was what our father and our mother and the rest of the townspeople who lived in our town, Joe was what we all called our father's brother by whenever we called him, which wasn't very often, because Joe liked it best to be left alone with just himself and his guitar that he played as if this guitar was some sort of a fish. But to us brothers, after a while, to our brother ears, the name Joe didn't sound right, not for our father's brother, not for this man who could make his guitar and make with his mouth, or make come out of his mouth, a sound that sounded, a sound that sang out, just like a fish. So us brothers, what we did was, when we wanted to call out to our father's brother was, we called him Uncle Fish, because him being a brother to our father made him be an uncle, our mother explained it, to us. But sometimes, too, us brothers, we liked to call him Uncle Guitar with our boy mouths making a loud hard g-sound when we said that word guitar, like gee-tar, or sometimes, when we had the breath inside us to make our mouths say it, we'd call him, our father's brother, our uncle, The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish. It wasn't really a fish, this guitar, but it sometimes, to us brothers, looked like it was, the way its sparkly guitar body and silvery steel strings used to

shimmer and shine and shoot back out at us moonlight when our father's brother, when Joe, when Hank, when Uncle Fish, when Uncle Guitar, when The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish, used to strum with his big-knuckled hand across its mouth to make that guitar and its six steel strings sing and sing and sing. But one night, when us brothers saw The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish standing outside our town's hardware's store with old Mister Higgeson there inside there standing on his one leg that he still had left with him from back when he was getting shot at in the war, we saw that Uncle Fish, Uncle Guitar, The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish, he was on this one night just standing there doing nothing there but just standing there outside of old Mister Higgeston's hardware store's window: he wasn't singing with his mouth, his guitar, it wasn't humming with its six silvery strings, because our father's brother, The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish, he didn't have his guitar strapped or wrapped around the hunchback of his back. Hey, Uncle, us brothers called out to him when we saw him, our father's brother, our uncle Hank, this uncle of ours who wasn't much of an uncle to us: he wasn't, we didn't think, much of a brother to the man who was our father—this man who, our mother sometimes said, to our father, our mother sometimes said that this uncle of ours was crazy—what our mother called this uncle was she called him Crazy Hank, because our mother,

she sometimes said that our father's brother had too much moon shine running through his veins. Us brothers, the first time we heard our mother say this about our father's brother, our uncle Hank, we figured that this, that having the shine of the moon running through his veins, this had to be a good thing, that maybe this was what made our father's brother's guitar sound the way that it did when he strummed it with his hand and made its strings start up singing. But our father told us brothers that when our mother said that his brother had too much of the moon's shine running through his veins, she wasn't talking about the moon at night and its shining, which he knew us brothers loved the moon almost as much as we loved the river and the mud that held the muddy river in its place, not to mention the fish in this river that us brothers loved so much to catch. What our father told us, what our mother was really saying about our uncle, The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish, was that he was most of the time always drunk, that the whiskey he liked to drink, he liked to make it himself, down in the basement of the house where he lived with no one but himself. When we saw our uncle Uncle Fish, Uncle Guitar, The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish, standing out there out on the street's corner without his guitar, we knew that something was up, that something had gone wrong. Hey, Joe, us brothers, we called out to our father's brother. Hey, Uncle, we said. We did

not say Uncle Hank. What we said was, Your guitar, we said. It's gone, we said. Where'd it go? we then asked as if this guitar was a fish that could get up and get away, as if it was a dog that could walk out one night on a night with no moon or stars shining down and go to sleep in a place, across the rusted rails of a railroad track say, that was never meant for sleeping dogs to go to sleep there. Our father's brother looked at us brothers with a look on his face that made us believe that, at first, he didn't know that it was us. It's us, we told him. It's Jimmy, I said. And John, Brother said. And when we said this, these names, us brothers, we gave each of us brothers a look. There was this look that us brothers, we sometimes liked to look at each with this look. It was a look that actually hurt the eyes of the brother who was doing the looking. Imagine that look. Now imagine the looks on us brothers' faces when Uncle Guitar, Uncle Fish, The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish, looked at us brothers and told us brothers that, his guitar, he gave his guitar away. It was time, he told us, to let it go. So I threw it back, was what our father's brother told us. Gave it to who? Let it go where? Threw it back how? This was what us brothers wanted to be told. Us brothers, we were this Joe's closest thing he had to kin, to somebody who you'd give a thing like a guitar to if you were looking for someone to give away a guitar to. And so, us brothers, when we heard him say, To the river, us

brothers, we both of us turned to face each other—we did not have to say a word between us brothers of what to do next—and then the both of us brothers turned and we ran ourselves down to the river without saying to this uncle of ours a word or a sound that might sound like a goodbye. When we got down to the river, there was this sound there that, us brothers, we heard, and this sound that we heard, it was a sound that sounded better to our ears than the sound that could be called singing. Us brothers, we looked and we looked but we could not see where this sound was coming from—this sound that sounded better to us than a sound that could be called singing, this sound that was better than fish singing, us brothers, we figured that maybe this sound that the river was making wouldn't mind another kind of a sound to be with it. So us brothers, we dropped down, into the mud, down at the river's muddy edge, and out of this mud, us brothers, we made us a drum. This drum, made out of mud, us brothers, we made it the shape of the moon. We started beating it, with our boy hands, and making, with our hands, a sound come out from this drum that was made out of mud that made the sound that we heard sound out louder, so that this sound it seemed like to us that it was up closer now to us brothers, and when the moon came out of hiding from behind a sky that was muddy with night now, we could see, out on the river, our father's brother's guitar, it was

shining in the moonlight there, it was floating down the river out there, it was, out there out on the river, it looked like to us like a raft made out of a steel that it would never, it could never, turn to rust. We watched it float down the river, and then, us brothers, we ran down the river after it, and as we ran, us brothers, we were the both of us brothers with our boy mouths singing. It was us brothers singing that made this guitar stand up on its neck and stop its floating down the river away. When it heard the sound of us brothers singing, this guitar, it started to float back, against the river's current, it was swimming, this guitar was, like a fish, it was coming back to us. This guitar, like a fish, it swam right up to where us brothers were standing, right there on the river's muddy bank, and then it flopped itself down into the mud right there at our feet. This guitar, this fish, us brothers, we picked it up like a fish and lifted it up out of the mud like a fish and we carried it like a fish up and away from the river. This fish, it was too big of a fish to fit inside any of our fish buckets. But we took it with us, this fish, back into town with us, this fish, to where our father's brother, our uncle, Uncle Fish, Uncle Guitar, The Man Whose Guitar Was A Fish, back to where we had left him standing, out front in the front of old Mister Higgerson's hardware store window, and when he saw that it was us, when he saw us holding in our hands between us what it was we were holding up and holding out for

him to take, what our father's brother said to us was, What's this? Us brothers, we shook our heads at this man who was our uncle. Not what, Uncle, we said. It's who, we said. This, we said, and we held our hands up higher and closer in to our uncle, this here is your son. This here is our cousin. But us brothers, us brothers said, we're gonna call him Brother. Brother because he is one of us. Our father's brother, Joe, Hank, this man that our father did not call Brother, he shook his head at us no. Boys, he said, I know you two are brothers, he said, and yes, when he said this to us brothers, us brothers, we could both of us in the moon's light see, that this uncle of ours did have on the inside of his mouth a tongue just like the both of us. I am not, our father's brother said this much to us, a father. I am, he told us what it was that he was, just a man. And just like this, this man, our father's brother, our uncle, call him Hank or Joe, Uncle Guitar or Uncle Fish, this man, is what we are trying to tell you, this man whose guitar, it was a fish—he fished his hand down inside his trouser pocket. When he pulled it back out, his hand, it was, this hand, a star-shaped knife. And even though us brothers tried to stop him from this doing, even though we sang out for him to stop, he raised back his hand, he brought this hand back forward, he cut off this fish's head.

A. Minetta Gould

Half Organ Amour

We rule ourselves like a canon;
repetition at regular intervals with silence and french fries.

We remember things
like the unavoidable fading
of construction paper and the lyrics
to all our favorite slow songs.
Why don't we ever dance? I forget.

R u s s i a

I find myself
a loaded potato in Canada
and in a relationship with the highest pitch
a grand piano can feed off of. I feel
as though I might die without eating
pomegranate seeds or without an understanding
of bureaucracy; spelling and otherwise.
Because we can't do
lunch today, because we spooned
with Fred Astaire, because urine is good
for the shrubbery, we realize
because to be no because

I find myself understanding the end
of the movie before the rest of the band does.

B o w t i e

I don't believe in snow
angels or girls with black eyes.
This may or may not make it
back to my mother, but I hate
the way peppermint is
associated with cleanliness. I hope
this turns into your hand on my palm, dear,
because it is a love story
ruled by muting drugs and a dream.
We, dear, entitle poems
"poem" because we know no other meaning
of the word besides self-
esteem and self-depiction. *Dear, are you
ok? Put on your glasses, your eyes are beside
the bed. Gettysburg can wait
until tomorrow, you aren't pregnant, your mother isn't dead.*
I don't believe we have met, dear, past this.

Pleasures

Perhaps because of the lingering heat or other atmospheric pressure, the global supply of sleep began to shrink, and sleep itself fundamentally changed its quality. We all complained, and it was scientifically proven, that drowsiness was now more brittle, like rubber seals and gaskets when they wear out. It was friable, dry, like sharp cheddar, a taste craved by some but anyway lacking the former creaminess of deep, blanket-laden slumber. People slept for a few minutes at a time, and strung the episodes out with periods of semi-wakefulness. All night long, old black and white movies played, the heroines of earlier decades looking so stiff now in their belted skirts, their hair crimped into waves. Bankers looked up from their desks at the sound of mobsters' cars; shiny little boys uttered insincere statements of adoration towards their on-screen fathers; the abandoned girlfriend shrieked as the madman advanced, when she would have done better to stay still and prepare to defend herself.

The same fate awaited other pleasures—the hand reaching out to fondle cloth, to pile apples in a bag. Even the desperate

scuttling of mothers behind the coal car, picking up clinkers to warm at least a corner of the baby's room, withered into caricature, the lust to accumulate or salve frayed into a chalky replica of itself, a dry going through the motions.

The husband she had long ceased to love was offered only the most unfleshy kiss when she left the house. At night she stayed up reading in the outer room until he went out who knows where. Formerly this had been only the last dry plug before some new flood, a torrent of carnality directed towards the new minister or the neighbor's brother. The undercurrent had always been there. But as the heat went on, and the headaches and complaints, even brushing her own hair meant nothing to her. Boys stopped flexing their muscles in the mirror. Quarters winking from the gutter could not attract takers.

The suppressed tide dried to a trickle, rocks in the cavern barely wetted, the whole experience an awkward fretting. Always there had been hope, and now there was only a scratchy delicacy.

Past Lives

Once they were swallows, swooping around each other, their lines of flight intersecting, though they each had their own distractions. Later it occurred to them that they had once been horses. From all the tumult of their legs, their beating hearts, their courage and exhaustion, this seemed the obvious conclusion. He stroked her flank, while she locked her fingers in his mane. Surely, when they thought about it, they had been galloping.

These were free horses, wild on the plains. Domestication brought new insight—now they were yoked to the drayman’s wagon, pulling some days fresh cut logs, other times gravel, tin implements, soap-making equipment. The sound of saws flooded their delicate ears. Their eyes were blinkered to keep them from shying. The padded collars wore thin and chafed. “At least we are together,” she said. A whole civilization was rising around them. Yet their weariness was completely encapsulating.

Then they discovered themselves hanging on the barber’s wall. They could only dimly see out of their iron eyes. The barber

strafed them over each other so they could sharpen each other's blades. He was a razor, and she a pair of scissors. "You'll draw blood!" she said. He was so sharp. But he could not cut her. They each had their function. They worked together, but rarely spoke. All night they hung on their hooks, inches from each other. Was it enough?

Backwards

The week that she left him, the magnetic poles reversed, and that Thursday the days began to run backwards. The baker woke standing in the bustling, steamy kitchen, the successful loaves stacked on racks, and at the end of the day contemplated their return to a mass of formless yeast. The poet put her children to bed and stared at her notebook, the site now of pruned branches, of screws pulled from dusty boards, the aftermath of a formidable editing of a work not yet begun. In the after-hours lounge, the singer began her set with grim self-satisfaction. She ended shaking in her clammy gown, afraid she would never dare go on. Five o'clock brought the paralegals immense, headachy frustration, while the next eight hours dipped and built parabolically. Yet at the last moment, while the coffee dripped into its vessel, they believed that all might go as planned.

The sight of him she could barely tolerate, then they laughed pleasantly, and later they were at the beginning, where she had met him outside the theater with Frank Dunn, and he plucked her hat off to see what kind of hair she had. One day soon she would not know him at all, though it would take years

to run through the longing she had had for someone just like him. Now those first kind moments in bed in the dark, after the alarm went off but before husband or wife had moved, located themselves at the end of the day, after the dreariness had drained away. But the morning rose like a wall, each return to light bringing with it an insurmountable disappointment.

Damian Dressick

If I Could Only Tell You One Story

for Jan Beatty

I

If I could only tell you one story, it would be this:

One crisp fall afternoon near the beginning of October when the autumn leaves shone like a bouquet of golden chalices lit through roseglass cathedral windows, my mother did a little dance, a jig or a reel perhaps, before launching herself from the observation deck of a mid-rise building in Albany, New York. Halfway between the blue screen of sky and the ground, hard and black, she was transformed into a sleek bird, rapacious and perfect and never to be seen again.

II

If I could only tell you one story and it had to be *true*—it would be this:

When I was fifteen years old my mother caught me stealing dishes from the mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania. I had been helping out in the city hall kitchen where my mother worked as a maid. When she caught me, shirt bulging with salad plates and trousers pockets lined with teacups, she scowled before she smiled and said: “The silver. My precious, precious idiot. Take the silver.”

Parallel

(in carrying)

In the loss of a parent for example (an ongoing encroachment, now breast now lungs now spine) the sense of absence (*in fissures & fissures*) or the loss of equilibrium. In my name balance is regained (this is what I can offer) a harmony of lines which continue but never touch. In between my lines a void (*we must preserve an interior*), see it as lonely or as fuller than all fullness (so I have always leaned). In the frills of the sea slug however (incarnation, the watery depth) I find my match, dark body's tousled lines urging me to bend.

Space

(an in-betweening)

I am constantly accused of being a third. Party to where none is wanted, some implication of curvature haunts me. As though I keep anyone apart, petulant or spiky. As though between lover & beloved I stand in wait, lurking & obvious; as though I am a blind point *from which you watch the object of your desire disappear into itself*. Geometrists and mystics alike invoke my name; I lace and curl in the becoming, purple as a leafy kale. (Accused of harboring paradox like a ship) as if I were some watery ambush. They have mistaken the light for what it falls upon. *What is known, attained, possessed, cannot be an object of desire*. I only keep the two apart.

M o v e a b l e T h i n g s

Unhinge the shutter; thwart the wind. My dear,
what is supposed to happen will be filled
with unkempt blinks of time. All this meandering

debris from one room to the next. Fog
falls in like gauze—whimsical. Or
medicinal? Purpose is such a loaded word.

Sometimes you feel a house settling
into its foundation years after being built:
Norway Pine. Shale & thatch. River

rocks to mark the absence
of river. Unbuckle the curtain plait.
There is a hiding place

there. Please do not put anything outside,
unless you're willing
to let it fall apart.

Criss-Cross

Mother I think you'd like my shoes. They're nothing I'd have worn back when you knew me & for some reason, on this confused spring day, these criss-cross black ballets remind me of you & your broken eyes. I have to look extra presentable at work, see, & remember when you always nagged me to blend my blush? Dollface, I'm burned out on the facts of missing you. Dear blame, not so dear. Not so to blame.

Still everyday I slip
& slip you on.

The Strongest Memory

What say I said it wrong.

& in a veiled southern accent.

Dear lack of words.

I know you cannot contain its beat,

all heart. Such useless palpitations!

Technique & crescendo; form & fingering.

Dear hidden orchestration of life.

I'm sorry to have shushed you.

It's just the great mystery of being here at all, et al.

The Way to Represent Night

These are places where people piece
together their lives, inside this box

& that, a county line, a city limit. Rain blurs
past my window while wind flaps American

flags in all sorts of American towns. Hard
to tell silo smoke from clouds. It's the middle

of some day, some week, in some winter.
Fourteen hours from me to you. Home

toward home. Worlds dissolve
into a streetlight's green glow

& shadow. Train rolls.

Train rolls on.

O n t h e M o v e m e n t o f W a t e r

People have been dying
back home. On occasion of suicide
& overdose, like it's just *something to do!*

Not old age. Not even at all. Despite
the green, green grace. Despite breath, stiffened
with whalebone. Despite all best efforts,

birds drop against the wind.

Prayer

Dear spontaneous assertion of identity,

Please rise up.

On the Unfortunate Bedspread

When do we stop criticizing ourselves for a lack
of necessary bedrooms? All of our unkempt
friendships. There are things I was going to become
& things I never considered. For instance,
I do not want to work at Superior
Carpet Supplies, if only because I prefer
hardwoods, which don't conceal the dots we drag
from here to there. I'm not looking for a new career
or anything. Just certain considerations.

After the Playpen Was Built

After it was built, it had to be used. Jim wanted the playpen to be perfect for his girls; he wanted it built just so. Jim started building the playpen when his girls were young, before they could exist independently. The playpen was his night job. His day job was banker. When Jim returned home he would shed his banking clothes, dig, cut and hammer in ways that contributed to the playpen. He would appraise his girls, then he would appraise the playpen; it had to be ready when his girls were ready, Jim kept telling himself, for when girls reach a certain age they need a playpen. Jim built to exacting measures; it needed to be just so, just so, he intoned.

Jim knew exactly how pink the playpen had to be. The swatches he kept flipping through were never pink enough, he said to his girls, throwing away another book of pink swatches. Often he would sigh and demolish the playpen as it stood. These were cases when Jim discovered a flaw, which was often, for Jim wasn't handy and his measuring was obscured by darkness. For years he worked into nights, spurred by appraisals of his growing girls. When he finished it was in the nick of time.

Jim explained to his girls that since it was finished, since it was brought to fulfillment after all these years of promise, the playpen was to be enjoyed.

His girls liked the playpen; it was just like a shed, but with pink walls and a pink ball. The ball was a girl's ball; it was very pink! Jim exclaimed, and it had many uses; bouncing was a timeless use, Jim showed the girls evenings when he brought trays of food. Jim sat with his girls and showed them how to roll the ball: this here is rolling, he explained to his girls, this here is spinning, this here is how to sit on the ball, and there are even more ways to enjoy the playpen via the ball.

Jim liked to gather his girls into embraces when they had eaten and tired from play. Their stomachs padding against him, his girls would murmur, fall to sleep. Jim would slip loose to watch from a distance their coiled breaths, the pink rolls of their pajamas; his girls were the softest of miracles, in Jim's opinion. When it was late and his girls were sleeping perfectly, Jim would secure the playpen locks and return to his house.

Mornings Jim went to work at a bank. He had an office and a visitor's chair where members of the bank and prospective members sat. He had a little plant; a little bluebonnet.

The first question Jim would ask his girls, upon unlocking and entering the playpen, was did they enjoy the playpen today? Each day the answer was the same: the answer was yes, the

playpen was nice, and each day his girls invented a new use for the ball; one day they invented the use of balancing the ball on their heads, another the use of playing the ball like an instrument, another the use of slipping the ball under their shirts, pretending to be much older, and pregnant.

Jim cooked Pinkbril in his house. He'd cook the Pinkbril in his kitchen, arrange trays, transport them to the playpen. His girls each had a pink tray; plastic ones to catch spills and heat.

At meals his girls talked about dogs. Not with their mouths full of Pinkbril; Jim saw to that. They always had to chew, swallow completely, and rinse their mouths before talking about dogs; Jim saw to it.

Jim nearly had a dog once. This was in the past. Jim was reminded of the dog he nearly had by a leather collar and leash he bought as a set. The set still hung on a peg, so one day he could welcome a dog; why not? The leash and collar were still fresh, certainly a dog was in the question, and his girls wouldn't mind! He had heard them considering names, which weren't names Jim would support; he would name the dog Eric regardless.

In a few years the leash and collar had molded. Downy specks issued from seams in the leather; not only that but it smelled, Jim told his girls, it smelled rotten, like rotten cow flesh, Jim said when he threw the collar and leash into the pink bin.

There were topics Jim explained to his girls and topics he didn't. Jim told them about carpets, dresses and nutrition generally. When he fed them a meal he'd inform them about it. He told them about rust, how things rusted. His girls wanted to know if they would rust, and Jim said no, that was impossible, for they would never be rained on.

Jim decided not to tell his girls about birthdays. Best to keep them from aging officially, Jim decided. They aged but it wasn't the kind of age you could record. Only Jim could record their ages, in his secret notebook. They were fine in the playpen with their ball, he had thought, content and darling, his willing honeys, but he soon found they had been counting ages behind his back.

These numbers were inaccurate and used to confront Jim. It was decidedly a confrontation when his girls said to Jim's face they were old enough for things.

Jim didn't have a tray of Pinkbril, or anything else in his hands, which disturbed him, for he felt ready to drop something.

His girls stood in a row and said that while lovely, the playpen was becoming a bit much. They would prefer to enjoy the playpen in moderation. They might perhaps return to the house? Or perhaps begin school. For surely they were old enough for school? They were prepared to ride a bus and to learn. Through the heavy walls they took a rumbling for the

rumbling of a bus, shrieking and shuffling to be noises of boarding. They were prepared to become part of these sounds, his girls insisted. Or if something was wrong with them, as they were beginning to fear, then couldn't a teacher be immunized, and perhaps brought to them?

Jim wasn't comfortable with this confrontation; he wanted to drop something out of shock and kept thinking about items he should drop. A confrontation was the last thing he suspected. The playpen was meant to be enjoyed and his girls seemed very much to enjoy it the day before. They had invented a new use for the ball: squeezing the ball firm against their breasts. How they could swing so instantly and drastically made Jim nervous, and he backed away from his girls. Jim knew the way they rowed themselves was a tactic; standing in that sort of row was a way to unify against him, and Jim's nervousness rose.

When Jim was nervous he was quiet. Blood thickened and pinched Jim's lungs when nerves gave the signal. He stood tall, silent, perfectly still, and watched his girls for about an hour.

Jim managed, before leaving for work and securing the playpen, to tell his girls that nothing was wrong with them; had been wrong with them; or could ever become wrong with them on his watch.

It was really more of a yell than a tell, Jim conceded to himself while driving. He had meant to tell his girls, but it was

surely a yell: his girls' bangs had flown straight up against the sonic pressure, Jim remembered, passing a car. Jim was driving in disturbed haste, looking for more cars to pass.

Jim thought about his girls while working. Members of the bank sat with him to discuss accounts but Jim's mind wanted to discuss his girls. He showed a member his picture of the girls, a Christmas photo of green and red dresses, though his girls hadn't known it was Christmas or why they were not wearing pink that day.

Jim went home, but he didn't visit the playpen. In three days Jim went inside the playpen.

They had slouched against the door in wait; when Jim began keying locks his girls straightened. As he stepped inside his girls fell, clawing at his feet; at first Jim thought it was an attack.

Then he realized they were groveling! An accident, they said in voices muffled by Jim's shoes. They'd gone astray, they'd slipped into the confrontal, they cried, puddling their remorse around Jim's feet. They would never purposely confront, didn't he know that about them? They would never confront a fly, his girls continued, wetly eyeing him, didn't he know this about his girls?

Jim knew his girls. He had been expecting their reform; they were his good girls. His own departure was hasty, he realized. It had taken three days to emerge from his disturbed haste. At

work, for those three days he had been tapping his foot, walking too fast and stapling papers that should have been clipped.

But he was back, Jim assured his girls, he was moving at a normal speed now, and he knew what his girls needed.

In one hand Jim held a pan of Pinkbril; in the other a painting.

While the girls ate Jim hung the painting on the wall. It was a vivid watercolor, an original the gallery attendant was himself thinking of buying. Jim thought it played well against the pink walls. The painting was of an orchard, the fruit trees were pink and the sky was another type of pink. Jim explained how the fruit and the trees could be any sorts his girls supposed, fruit and trees from another planet if his girls imagined, for it was not real; it was just a painting that someone had done.

The girls were free to look at the painting as much as they wanted, Jim promised, so long as they never confronted. For if they confronted him again, he didn't know, he might destroy the painting with his fists, Jim speculated.

Jim and his girls watched the painting until it was late. When his girls had fallen asleep, Jim distanced himself, admired their bodies from afar. They breathed so softly; like insects. He secured the playpen and returned to his house.

Mornings Jim continued to leave for work. The difference was that his girls were watching the painting and the ball was

stowed in a corner, deflated slightly. Jim had gotten used to them playing with the ball before he left for work. He was accustomed to that. Jim missed the days of the ball's era, but the painting he selected was beautiful, and captivating, and so this was a new era, he figured.

Jim banked efficiently at work, opened some new accounts. Chatted with the vendor of a sandwich he bought for lunch. The streets were in fine shape that day, cleansed by an early rain.

When Jim's shift ended he drove straight home to his girls.

Jim found his girls watching the painting. Being ignored didn't bother Jim at all, for the painting was beautiful and engaging; besides, they would revert to watching him eventually, he knew. It was human nature to revert.

And it was true that after a few years, they were looking at Jim again. More so even than the painting. Jim brought them trays, spoke to them about nutrition, or about grass and mowing. They watched him speak and would clap their hands; Jim even reintroduced the ball, shifting his own momentum to that of the ball, and his girls enjoyed games of rolling and spinning they had forgotten about.

One day his girls approached Jim. By creeping, and using whispers, his girls approached Jim without it resembling confrontation. When they asked him for an art set it was with casual faintness. A canvas, paint and a dish of water, that was all,

they said. Perhaps a few brushes of different widths, and an instructional book.

Jim was lying on the floor of the playpen; his girls were lying with him in mutual relaxation, looking at the ceiling how people usually looked up at clouds, or had been mutually lying and looking, until they began to creep. Jim was shocked; he saw them stir and hunch into a creeping poise. What were they saying? Jim wondered. A paint set?

The arts were important to Jim; no one could dispute this. The arts were even important to the President; he had said so in an address. Everyone should support the arts; that was a fact. Jim had proven his support by acquiring the painting. Jim simply loved art and was a proponent of the arts.

The problem, for Jim, was that he also loved the playpen, and was a proponent of the playpen. He knew his girls. There was not a chance his girls could paint art without splattering the playpen; they were clumsy and made mistakes nearly every day. Paint would get on the floor, wallpaper, who knew where else. If his girls created a painting it would be at the expense of the playpen. Also, Jim added, the fumes would endanger them, the toxic paint fumes, since there were no windows in the playpen, and could never be windows in the playpen.

In the morning, Jim was discomposed by a powerful dream: he had dreamed he was a rancher. Jim had never dreamed of

being a rancher before; he had also never dreamed his girls would launch a sneak attack.

Had Jim been attacked? Jim wondered, remembering the way his girls asked for a paint set, the way he was forced to defend himself. Was Jim sneak attacked? He remembered feeling abnormal, unlike the way he had felt for years without interruption.

Attacking was one confrontal, but a sneak-attack, a sneak-confrontal, such as the premeditated variety his girls launched the night before, was a sort of confrontal that would scramble Jim. A rancher! Jim did not invest his subconscious in ranching; his mind had been scrambled by his girls, the sneaks, who thought he might risk the playpen? For paint!?! *The sneaks*, he repeated, staring vaguely at his slippers.

Jim didn't truly understand it was a sneak attack until that morning, until his dream confirmed it. He had never dreamed of being a rancher, not once in more than fifty years!

Jim sat up in bed, his thighs partially covered by his coverlet. *Sneaks, sneaks, sneaks, sneaks, sneaks*, he repeated in a rhythmic sequence, the slippers blurring and shifting before him.

Jim needed a vacation to unscramble himself. A vacation, he said to the mirror. Jim left his girls a pan of Pinkbril and went to Hawaii for a month.

When Jim returned from Hawaii he unlocked the playpen door, opened it, then quickly closed it and locked it.

Jim stood outside the door, thinking. He thought: my girls need a present. They need a pick-me-up.

It took Jim a week of injections and nursing until his girls regained coherent speech and he had to ask his question many times, pronouncing it firmly into their ears, until they smiled clumpily and murmured a dog or other pet was what they wanted for their present.

Jim thought about this at work. He thought about the rotten leash and collar; he recalled a newspaper story about a rabbit whose teeth grew like nails.

Jim went to the petstore.

The petstore was out of pets, he informed his girls, feeding them with a spoon, but they did have this: Jim brandished a puzzle cube.

His girls did not solve the puzzle cube in ten years.

Jim went to work during this span, banked, then retired.

He volunteered to help them solve the puzzle cube, but in ten more years the cube had regressed. Jim took it out of the playpen, into his house. He broke the cube with a hammer.

Jim returned with trays of Pinkbril and said that fair was fair. They could have a new present, since the cube was defective; wouldn't that be fair? Now what was the present to be?

A child. They told Jim with startling immediacy that they wanted a child.

This startled Jim. He wobbled, settled on his knees. For they were certainly too old to bear a child! Jim stood up and dropped a tray of food out of shock. They were too old to survive a delivery, plus they were too old to be sexy.

His girls didn't know their ages, but Jim did. He retrieved his secret record. Do you see? Jim informed them sadly, showing the record. You are almost forty.

His girls persisted; it was the only present they wanted. Jim suggested a radio, or a fan, for when it was summer, but they claimed not to want either of those.

Jim walked in the yard; he walked once per day. He made laps around the playpen. That day he made twice his usual laps and his calves and buttocks tightened.

When he reentered the playpen he explained that to deliver they needed to become pregnant. Had they considered this? To become pregnant they needed to become sexy, Jim explained dubiously.

His girls attempted to be sexy. They proposed their bodies in various ways. Each way was a comedy or a tragedy, Jim laughed, but hardly sexy. They touched each other and they tried to touch Jim, but he had rolled with laughter out of their reach.

Their mistakes were both dress and movement, Jim pointed out. Jim directed his girls to put their dresses back on, to tie them firm around the waist. Jim knew their hair needed

dressing; he went inside his house and retrieved the pink bonnets he kept in a locked chest. He tied the bonnets firm under their chins. Now they needed to lie still. They needed to lie still with their fingers laced. Completely still, he directed, you need to maintain proneness.

Jim wasn't sure if it was sexy or not. It was sexy in theory, he knew. He needed a night to decide. He would sleep on it and decide in the morning, Jim announced.

But that night, Jim crept into the playpen.

In the morning, Jim watched his girls change. Something was beginning, he knew, watching them from the corner.

He watched, coughed and sneezed; he'd learned to sneeze with his eyes open. He didn't like watching but knew if he lost focus, then later, refocused on his girls, the changes would appear drastic. From a distance, he watched them fill with water. When their shapes became sinister, he imagined popping them, with a pin, but Jim was too weak from pneumonia to uncrouch or forget his role in their disease.

Their boys were born the same day Jim died. After the burial, his girls demolished the playpen. They chopped it with axes, then burned it, so as to clear away the ashes and start building, on the foundation, a blue playpen.

New Gate Island

The television dimensions were controlled by Regulation, but some people had managed to steal channels, enabling them to leave for other worlds. We were following a group that had done just that after hiding on an island. We wanted to join them. After our fuel grew solid, weighing us back to earth, we continued on foot through the northern hills. In a dark village, Thimble acquired a pocket TV, a device that had been preserved in a peat bog, according to its proprietor, and which transmitted from another dimension. It made reference to an island that had once been populated, then abandoned, then repopulated, so we decided to visit it.

“This must mean that the volcanoes have been active,” said Thimble, tapping his metal thumbs. His small eyes were clouded with sulfur because he had escaped from Regulation before they finished his face. He’d been engineered to open gates onto other worlds where the new TV shows took place, but someone had bombed the factory. Thimble was obsessed with volcanoes, whose spewing mouths, he believed, were causing the earth to commit suicide, even as they created more

land. He was delusional, but like a little brother we felt the need to protect him.

For the journey we hired a refurbished airboat. Our group consisted of Swanson, Mordant, Impala, Thimble, and myself, each of us wearing a different hat. With recharged levity, the ship rose above the cumulus, gathering ice, and I played a broadcast on the old TV, which we hoped was transmitting from the illegal utopia now inhabited by the group, a place where it was possible to achieve immortality.

Times have changed since we came to the interior. Now we have picnics at the hospital park and play volleyball with strange and dangerous objects. We came here on a gravity track manipulated by telekinetics, which opened the gate like a storm on this world. I remember poking and beating people, which was my way. They helped me see beyond that. I was consigned to investigate a series of exit ramps.

I wasn't sure what this meant, so I asked Impala. She seemed to have a sixth sense, so whatever she came up with would serve.

“Impala, what do you make of this transmission?”

“What? Oh, I don't know. Can I guess? I'm glad we packed our umbrellas?”

I checked to see if we had packed any, and we had.

“That sounds right,” I said, hoping the others would go for it.

Mordant rolled the things in his head that passed for eyes, and after a silence, the sky began to clear, and we fell into a discussion concerning the northern architecture we were now flying over, as well as technology and the subject of dust in the childhood bedroom, which Mordant felt should be removed with a moist cloth, whereas I felt strongly that the dust should be left alone for a year or two. Crossing water, a series of submerged islands became visible below the ocean’s surface, some still inhabited, deep shadowy pockets protected by ancient walls. Thimble pointed to a particularly dark spot.

“Few know the history of these islands,” he said. “But after the caps melted and the rivers began to choke on their streams, the Pacific found a crack in the Sea of Cortez and squeezed through, almost instantly consuming Old West. Only Birdtown was preserved by its giant walls built higher each year until the city was in shadow below the surface. Native swallows flying too high seeking sunlight were said to drown in fields of water above the sky. The walls only worked for so long, however, and then disaster struck. The sole survivors were city officials who departed through a private gate, their unauthorized exit path enraging the nation. It interrupted a nationally broadcast clusterball match, soaking the field and ruining the game.

Allegedly the undersecretary was made into a living piñata. Anyhow, some people thought it would be cool to move back to these cities. They found a way to build new walls.”

“Curious history,” I said. “Thankfully New Gate Island remains above sea level.”

“Yes,” said Thimble. “For now, and although their spewing mouths will be the death of us, I would say we can thank the volcanoes for that. They suck the earth’s blood and turn it into land.”

Mutant creatures wearing transmission necklaces lined the runway as we landed, but otherwise no one was around. The airport terminal was abandoned by all but a lost hummingbird that flitted hopelessly among fake flowers. Swanson, hungry for fish and water fowl, wanted to visit the beach, but it was agreed that we should head for the interior. We began hiking, and after crossing several bridges, came to two hills covered with dead pine trees, like porcupines. We entered a village where the air was hot and stagnant and people wore little if any clothing. They seemed drugged and bowled for milk bottles with a skull, their only audience a man in an airtight phonebooth who appeared to be screaming. At the Welcome Center, a sunburned puppy ignored us. The door was locked so we climbed through a window. In the corner of a flooded, dripping room, two nude characters conspired with an iron lung, old gate tourists judging

by their lack of hair. A woman mashed bananas as her children sucked lazily on fish bones at a table whose curvature I found to be alarming, as it resembled an ear.

“You, sir,” said Mordant, addressing one of the men connected to the lung. “How long have you been here? We are looking for the ones who came before. What can you say?”

The man cowered and could say nothing, but then spoke as if his mouth was filled with marbles.

“Highwayman can say *allo* to you.”

“What?” said Mordant.

“Those people you can say are gone. Let me tell you how I come here. I come from Horn City, which was a dump with strange laws. Once the Regulation spread, it was illegal to crush rocks within the city limits. A woman was not permitted to drive unless a man walked ahead with a searchlight, and any motorist sighted by a team of horses had to pull over and take apart his vehicle and hide it in the bushes. One needed a permit to pee in his neighbor’s mouth.”

The man sucked the iron lung.

“You would think I would be granted an immunity because of my job, but I was caught with corn up my nose.”

“What was your job?” said Impala. “Was it important?”

“Hell yes. I collected laughter for God. We played it on an old-fashioned movie projector.”

“He’s lying,” said Mordant. “He’s still got that corn in his nose.”

A stream of water bounced off the man’s head.

“Nope. Highwayman wouldn’t do that. The job was a television job and it didn’t last long because one day God appeared with an empty jar of shoe wax, and since he didn’t have shoes or feet, I had to ask, ‘What have you been polishing, God? Where’s the shoe?’ His expression unraveled and he admitted that he had been polishing the inside of his head. ‘This shoe wax is the only stuff that makes things glitter.’”

Thimble was scribbling in his ledger, his steel fingers clanking, but I motioned for him to stop. Clearly our man was a tourist.

“I’ll be damned if God wasn’t fucked on shoe polish. So I lost that job and came here through one of the first gates, although as you can see I’ve been forced to wear clothing.”

“You appear naked enough to me,” said Mordant.

“Be that as it may, I don’t know where the people you speak of have gone. And I would like to get back to the lung now. I will tell you this much. I remember that they treated us well, your friends. At night they built trashcan fires and we all breathed heavily in the darkness. They gave us roasted water fowl, fish sandwiches, and bags of wine. Then the Regulators came and set up their gates and those people were gone.”

“You won’t get much out of him,” the woman said, taking us aside.

“What about the people who were here before?” said Impala. “Your husband said they treated you well.”

“That man is not my husband.”

I pulled the TV from my pocket and showed her some faces. She shrugged.

“I doubt those are people.”

Returning to the center of the town we found a small radio in a trash heap. From the mouth of the man in the phonebooth, butterflies surged, their wings closing his eyes and covering all but his feet. I tried the radio, twisting through the frequencies until a crackle sounded out with sparks. I recognized Veta, her voice smooth and round and distant.

I remember standing on the roof of our building beneath a sky full of burning paper. We stood beneath the arc of our agreement and everyone said good things, but you weren't ready. The Doctor threw some crumbs at your feet and said that the side effects should be experienced somewhere else alone. You weren't ready, but you should have come. In this dimension, people can project almost anything and time moves in every direction. If you're hearing this, I hope you'll find us. Look for a cruise ship that used to circle the underwater cities, beaming a spotlight into their depths. A bus used

to circle its decks in low gears and you could sit in it and pop shrimp all day. Eventually order will assume a door whose knob can be turned without a key. Watch out for hospital parks.

I knew about the group's plans because I had hauled gate materials that sometimes fell off the truck. I would join them in their tower, which was surrounded by artificial fog, and we'd listen to the Doctor and eat brisket, passing around a pot of boiling water. He explained about gravity and membranes and parallel worlds and how the new TV didn't take place in our universe. Most shows were penalty performances. People alleged to be criminals were sent through a gate, where they became part of a script in which they were turned into plants and animals and inanimate objects, then eventually killed. I didn't watch TV, and I didn't like listening to the Doctor, but I was happy to help anyone who wanted to escape. Evidently they could achieve a collective immortality. I was invited to follow them to the utopia they were working on in their secret building, a skyscraper on its last legs, its protective weather compromised, but I was still deciding when somebody caught their signal and surveillance dust surrounded them. Everything had to be moved overnight, leaving behind a building filled with crumbs and radiation.

•

The radio hissed and disappeared.

“It’s a vanishing model,” said Mordant.

“Don’t be a jackass,” I said. “We should keep looking before it gets dark. The clouds are getting redder.”

As we walked, Mordant recalled how he and Swanson had been conscripted to the Black Ice Village, a television program set in a cave on a black moon where they’d been forced to pet rats while teaching viewers how to scream.

“You could hold your ears shut,” Mordant said. “But rodents would still crawl in.”

“Yep,” said Swanson. “They predicted moonquakes, God bless ‘em. If you are ever in a cave and see rats running for the exit, it’s time to leave.”

“How did you escape?” said Impala. “By following a rat?”

“No,” said Swanson, “but that would have been a good idea. Instead, we built log cabins. I remember the night well. I was sitting in a comfortable chair inside our cave, thinking that this wasn’t even me sitting there, my face slathered with nature’s snot, when a voice told me to relax if I wanted, but that my chair was way too comfortable. It said that a friend died in the chair. That’s how comfortable it was. He sat in the chair and just died. I didn’t know where these words came from, but because acoustics require an atmosphere and there isn’t any sound in space, I assumed that they weren’t simply in my head.

The cave was acting as an acoustical conductor, I reasoned. I found Swanson petting a dead rat and he told me to meet him in the frozen village that night. So after the last broadcast, I went to the surface and found him in a cabin making soup.”

“There are billions of changeable cells in the skin of curious animals,’ he said. ‘Certain snails can develop their own behavior patterns. Did you know that oysters use transmitters to make their promises? They’ve been doing it for a thousand years. Searching for their alien signals night after night can test anyone’s patience, but still ...”

“I asked him what this had to do with anything and he told me to take a seat. He said to have some soup. He had learned to build cabins, he explained. When the channels changed, we made a break for it.”

We came to a hospital park where a wind warning was posted, meaning the gate was on standby and something might come through. The air was thick and we took out our umbrellas. In the park, patients sat awkwardly on benches, cowering under the heavy air as doctors X-rayed them to see how their bones were holding up beneath the pressure. They had probably been conscripted for the latest hospital drama.

Swanson snuck into the park, whistling as he went to work on some trees. He quickly felled several and began throwing

together a cabin. By the time he was done it was twilight, the gate bright beneath the red clouds, making it too risky to hike to the coast. The cabin had a skylight, and as the sun gave way above the glass, Thimble built a vapor fire and Swanson helped himself to huge portions of rations, digging deep into the bag with his knife, slicing a hole in the air in which to hide some for later. He related a story about shields. He and Mordant had protected people in the northern mountains one winter, tossing together a series of cabins.

The next morning, I understood why we had been warned about the park. Swanson was missing a kidney, and during the night someone had given him a mock elbow. Our hats were also gone, and I couldn't be sure that the gate had ever opened. We burned the cabin and followed a narrow dirt trail whose wide shoulders had recently been paved. Mordant claimed that Swanson had beaten him in his sleep.

"You gave me rotten dreams," he said. "And then you beat me with them. You ate all the rations."

"Wait, Mordant," said Impala. "We all agreed to give Swanson extra rations. He built us a very fine cabin, and look at that rotten elbow he received for his efforts!"

I asked Thimble if he could fix the elbow, but he was mute.

Said Mordant, "Nothing takes me to the fair more than a well-made cabin rewarded by a tragic joint replacement. But ..."

“It’s true,” said Swanson. “We stood in front of a strange wooden structure very near to collapse. The only solution was to climb up to the roof. I accepted the burden and climbed first. You Mordant, in particular, required my special assistance.”

“Those tactics aren’t working,” said Mordant. “Today is a brand new day.”

“Mordant says even our days are branded!”

“Shut up, all of you,” I said. “The headache is spreading.”

The dirt trail ended near the staging grounds for an abandoned television program. Weapons, soda cans, and engineered body parts lay scattered near a sandbox filled with human waste on which was written “scrimmaging environment.” Pieces of an automobile lay behind a tree, entangled with a horse skeleton, between its ribs a small TV. It crawled from the bones and I put it in my pocket. The air thickened and I saw a frown in the sky. I thought I heard the ocean coming back to its shore, or maybe leaving, or perhaps bombs dropping. Later, the sound of waves was undeniable. You could taste the salt. Impala swished some air and ate a soybean, as we had come across a patch growing in a swamp, although Mordant claimed the swamp was actually an infant’s pond and the soybeans were green baby plums. Now we stood atop a row of cliffs that dropped hundreds of feet to the ocean. In the distance, a pyramid jutted from the water.

“Volcanoes,” said Thimble, trembling. “I think we should go back.”

But that was not the plan, so we tied off ropes for our descent, and as we lowered ourselves, collected water fowl that roosted in niches.

“Craggy niches everyone,” I said. “Watch your toes.”

“Ten four, boss,” said Swanson, stuffing another bird into his sack.

When we came down on the warm black sand, the winds calmed, and fish revealed their abundance in clear tidal pools. Beyond the foamy littoral, under the dark surf, was evidence of a subaquatic gate that appeared inactive. Nevertheless, we moved away from it, gathering driftwood and fish. We made a fire and cleansed the animals of the sea and air, roasting them on skewers of driftwood.

“Being at the beach reminds me of my father,” said Impala. “The government buried him to the neck in sand, and the fact that he survived at all was a happy miracle of the moon, whose fullness kept the oceans at bay, or enough of them, anyway, that the high tide only grazed his upper lip.”

In a sky-reflectant pool a dead blowfish floated on its side.

“As everyone is well aware,” said Mordant. “The blowfish is poison incarnate. Few know, on the other hand, that there is

actually a remedy. The trick is to fool the poison by puffing yourself up like a puffer.”

“Insufflation,” said Impala. “I hear you, and personally I think that everyone has an overbite. Do anyone’s front teeth actually touch at their tips?”

Swanson finished another bird and licked his lips. “Sauce for the goose. Sauce for the gander. As my mother always said backwards and forwards, ‘Do geese see god?’”

I was waiting for Thimble to chime in, he was a fan of the palindrome, but he was gone. We retraced our steps and discovered him clinging to the cliff. A breeze blew his long hair and we could hear him sniveling.

“I cannot raise my head,” he snorted. “I’m really stuck this time.”

“Take it slowly,” I called.

“The earth is committing suicide,” he said. “The time has come.”

“What is he talking about?” asked Impala.

“One foothold,” called Swanson. “At a time. Use the rope for Pete’s sake.”

Thimble moved slightly, but then an instant later lost his grip. His metal fingers scraped the rocks as he fell, each outcrop redirecting his plummet. I closed my eyes and when I opened

them he had landed soundlessly. The sky wavered and flashed, and I felt a jolt as if we were not on this earth. What if we had been pulled into the gate the night before? We could be anywhere. We had to move on. The others had gathered around the body, but when I walked over, there was just a depression.

“Where did he go?” I asked.

“Poof!” said Mordant. “Explain that.”

We came to a cluster of squat rock formations and followed a trail of crumbs behind the stone, through a series of rooms, then out the back, where elaborate animal topiary pointed toward speculation that this might be the remains of the group’s colony. I pulled the new TV from my pocket and it began to play a transmission, something about how in the face of a steady advance, one can match it with an equal retreat, causing the advance to appear stationary—faster or slower depending on the speed of regression—but Impala hit off, saying, “Enough transmissions.” On a mound of trashed electrical equipment we found surveillance dust. Usually this dust was gathered by trained birds with magnetic wings, but here it had been allowed to settle.

“I wonder how old this dust is?” I said.

Mordant looked worried. “Some of us are not immune. I feel a sneeze welling.”

“Try to direct it inward?”

A refrigerator stood among broken appliances, and Swanson approached it, claiming he was famished. When he opened the door, the woman from the village sprung out, pointing a finger and raised thumb.

“You’re under arrest!” she boomed.

“Huh?” said Swanson.

“For trespassing,” she said. “And also that peach fuzz above the lip.” She pointed at Impala and came closer, saying, “I’m making a citizen’s arrest. So get your hands up.”

“How did you get here?” asked Swanson. “Do you work for the Regulators?”

Her finger was shaking, her thumb beginning to cock, so we did as we were told.

Highwayman appeared from a nearby hut and stumbled toward us, muttering, “interesting, interesting. I see you’ve met my wife.”

“So you’re married after all?” asked Impala.

“Close enough,” said the woman. “Now keep your hands up.”

She gestured to the hut and we went inside.

“Okay, you can put your hands down now,” she said. “We’re safe in here. Ever since you landed we’ve been shielding you. Highwayman has been working overtime, the dear.”

The man chuckled. “My fingerprints often leave their signatures in piles of dust.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked. “Why didn’t you leave with them?”

“Your friends?” said Highwayman. “We try to help new recruits and such, but their utopia was not to our liking. Almost anyone could go there if they wanted, is how we felt. What’s the point of watching yourself in the past moving in endless loops? Cities rose and fell, sucking the blue from the air and spitting out rain and turning red at night, but so what? Women were permitted to ride bicycles, that much was true, but before you could get your feet on the pedals, you might bloom into a flower and be pollinated by giant insects. Also, while I don’t favor Regulation, their lack of laws went a bit too far. For example, I approve of the yearly bathing laws, and I firmly believe that a loose pet should be required to wear a tail light.”

“Mutual mouths, though,” the woman said. “Those were the worst. We found sharing them to be disgusting. A large household might keep one buried in the yard, and people would throw their trash into it. One could fall into one’s own mouth, an experience I did not care to imagine. So we stay here and try to help remotely.”

Apparently the husband and wife team had been planning to help us all along. There was nothing to do but trust them.

They escorted us deep into the gorge, and I saw patterns in the bushes and the remains of a cruise ship. We came to an overturned bus, its wheels still turning.

“Nothing can stop those wheels,” said the man.

“Yeah,” said his wife.

“If you want to leave,” said the man. “Just concentrate.”

I thought of Veta and felt a cloud pass. When I opened my eyes, what I saw was the same as when I closed them. I kept them open and eventually doors appeared. At first too high to reach, as if set into an invisible second story, but over time they lowered, and it didn't matter if my eyes were closed or open. The same doors appeared. They lowered. We opened them without a key and stepped through.

James Wagner

from *Syracuse*

(part three of *Claims of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles*)

A man throws himself out of a window but doesn't die. He is paralyzed from the hips down, and in a wheelchair, consequently. Man, despairing, attempts at frequent intervals to throw himself from the wheelchair.

I prefer birds
on the ground. There can be birds
in the air as long as I'm inside.

Slothful even among procrastinators, the self-assessment.

Anger as mask of another mask of another mask.

It is more than likely that question does not have an answer.

I keep dreaming of dead men in the street.

What is the use of thoughts and ideas if one feels, as I do, that one doesn't know what to do with them? (Walsler)

Lonesome was the name of Weldon Kees's cat.

The patient is always informed covertly that he or she is dying by the demeanor, by the shrinking away, of the living. (Yalow)

If you find a dead bird.

Trying to find something to get defensive about.

A blonde girl in the dream saying, *The trap door isn't working, The trap door isn't working, The trap door isn't working.*

In my family, if someone was being very active, energetic, to a degree that seemed over-the-top, it was mentioned that he or she was running around like a chicken with its head cut off.

Clay has fallen on my monologue (Howe)

It's not like she walked
off with the staircase.

It's not like she walked
off with the lawn.

Telephone/Chinese Whispers not being a mere children's game but one of the principal practices of human communication.

It will not add up to a whole, his one hope.

Brando, in *Last Tango in Paris*, placing the gum under the railing as his final living act.

A hole, perhaps.

The strange elation I sometimes feel when someone acknowledges I am right. And then feeling the rigorous destitution of spirit.

R, interrupting my self-castigation for going off the subject of our conversation: “James, there is no subject.”

Don’t drink, smoke, consume caffeine any longer. Getting kicks solely from cold medicines.

Listening to Richter’s Liszt. On Comtrex.

Collage merely sound bites?

The purported “OK” gesture created public interest in her identity.

All in her head.

Sorry Excuse.

Quotations more about the quoter than author.

As if unknowing narratives reveal the selves one doesn't or won't know.

To from.

Salt springs, at one time, being the main attraction.

A man drives back to his home town, days away, doesn't tell anyone, goes to the hospital where he was born 40 years earlier, finds the presumable room the birth was accomplished in, and then fires a bullet into his head.

Tacos.

Petty grievances.

Styptic powder.

R wanted a birthday to mean she was a judge of something.

Mirror is tilted, or the wall is, or I am.

How is anything someone writes not autobiographical?

To not be while being.

“Impossible nonsense”

Two days later, and: *I am afraid of lunch and lint in little purses underslung and empty.*

The act of inserting a part of one plant into another in such a way that the two will unite and continue their growth.

Everything/Depends on whether somebody reminds you of me.
(Ashbery)

Erotic picnic.

Language being a kind of half-assed shorthand for Experience.

A double errant thesis. Taking an erring step forward to find oneself lying.

Oblivion falls in a note on accordion.

Who's verifying anything said?

He provided examples to support his theory, which *seemed* reasonable, and therefore were not true.

Three mirrors with different distances.

What I have written is not what I am saying.

I am said.

Metascopic

Deburred your love

Abrasions

But who would want to be with a woman who liked men with nice cars?

Dream vowels are little fires.

Seaway to a music plumbed by a drug fuse.

Upheaval, disclosure, emotional digression/aggression, collage, dream, is mimetic to me.

Friday a movement among vestments.

The Tree Cutter

I was only nine when I met the tree cutter in the woods. He had wavy blond hair, and, despite the rough beard, his skin was ruddy like a child's; the plaid shirt he wore was completely covered with bird droppings, tree sap, and wood chips. I'll never forget the way he looked at me with his bulgy eyes, the way he stopped his rhythmic sawing to size me up. When he spoke it was as though someone (or something) else were speaking through him.

“Hey boy, wanna try? It's real easy. Watch me carefully now.”

The tree cutter took his two-handed saw—whose teeth resembled metallic thorns—and resumed cutting into the massive oak. He held his arms around the perimeter of the trunk the entire time, as if hugging it. This was certainly not the way my father sawed down trees; I had been taught that it was dangerous to saw toward one's body instead of away from it.

“D'ya know how old this here tree is?” he said.

I shook my head.

“Ya can tell a tree's age by the number of rings it has. I've sawed through about a hundred an' fifty already, so this here

tree's probably about, oh, two hundred an' some-odd years old I'd say, maybe even older. D'ya have any idea of how old that is, boy?"

Again I shook my head. He continued cutting, never pausing to look down at his hands or the saw, the serrated edge of the instrument fast approaching his legs. Small wood chips flew in all directions as he moved it back and forth, back and forth...

"How old are ya, boy?"

"Nine and a half," I replied.

"Oh yeah? My son's yer age. Would y'like to meet him sometime?" He spat out a syrupy gob of saliva, which landed atop what looked to be a dead bird in a pile of wet leaves.

"You're a prissy little boy, ain't ya?" he continued, the saw gnawing away at the once mighty trunk as if it were made of cardboard. "Y'got no flesh on them bones. Where's your mama at? What're you doin' in these woods? Don't ya know that there'r *evil spirits* dwellin' out here?"

I shivered when he said the words "evil spirits" and shook my head, my teeth chattering. I needed to relieve myself and felt chilled; sweat trickled down my neck and back. The tree cutter laughed and hawked another dark lump of spit onto the leaves beside the rotten bird.

“You’d better run home before it gets dark, boy,” he warned. “Y’know ya ain’t gonna escape unless you run fast, don’cha?”

I could do nothing but stand there, however, my feet rooted to the earth like a bulbous plant. The great oak began to tilt. I looked up to watch, but was too confused to guess where it would fall. At the same time, urine ran down my leg and into my sock, seeping into the synthetic sole of one of my brand new sneakers. There would be hell to pay for this at home.

As the tree cutter continued sawing a grin slowly spread across his face. He did not pause for a single moment, though he had already started cutting into his own leg; instead, he smiled at me, as if this were all just a game. Before long he had sawn completely through the limb. His lower body was covered in what I assumed to be blood, although it was more the color of tree sap than of any substance produced by the human body. I should have bolted, but I was much too scared to scream, no less to move. With a flick of his terrible saw, he snapped a string of raw flesh that had previously connected the severed appendage to its stump in two, like a string of greasy cheese. Regaining my senses, I began to run. I ran and ran, panting like a helpless creature, until I reached the edge of the woods, where I paused for a moment to catch my breath.

Before long I sensed someone's presence. A young boy stood perhaps six feet away from me. He was scratching his crotch with the barrel of a diaphanous, plastic water gun, the tip of which was dripping like a leaky spigot. He wore a flannel shirt—the same color and design as the tree cutter's had been—and had short, sandpapery-brown hair matted with small twigs and flower petals. When he spoke his voice was slightly hoarse, almost delicate. He hobbled toward me before speaking, as if injured.

“Have you seen my Daddy?” he said.

I shook my head from side to side, hoping he wouldn't notice the piss stains on my pants. The area he had just been scratching with the toy gun now glistened with little drops of sticky, translucent liquid.

“Well, in that case,” he whispered, “*get the hell out of our woods while you still can.*”

He then pointed the plastic gun directly at my head, motioning for me to leave with a sharp movement of his smooth chin. As I turned to go I saw that his feet were hovering slightly above the ground (or perhaps it was the lighting? the angle?). Finally, I ran. I ran until I was clear out of the woods; the sky had turned gray, and ice-cold drops of rain soon began to fall *pitter-patter* all around me. I didn't look back even once until I had reached the porch of my house, wet and exhausted. It was a miracle I found my way back at all.

When I opened the front door I could hear my parents' voices. They were arguing about something; I couldn't make out the words. All that really mattered was that I got my sneakers cleaned up before they discovered what I had done. I pulled the soiled things off as quickly as I could and scurried down to the basement; the water that ran from the rusted faucet there was so cold it turned my hands bright red, though it did little to dissolve the grime from my tattered sneakers.

As I stood hunched over the makeshift sink and scrubbed—rivulets of sweat running into my eyes and mouth—my father descended, a wood paddle clenched in his white-knuckled hand. I immediately recognized it as the largest of three paddles he had carved himself; it was also the heaviest. Without a word he grabbed my wrist, pushed me facedown onto the cement floor and began thrashing my naked backside. I don't remember for how long this continued—it might have been five minutes or five hours—though I distinctly recall the sleek, lacquered wood made as it struck my raw skin, a most awful sound that is nearly as impossible to forget as the pain. When he was finished he sent me to my room without supper.

"That'll learn ya," he said, his breath smelling of putrefied fish, before locking the door behind him.

While I lay there on my mattress that evening, my backside throbbing dully, the tree cutter's severed leg continued to chase

after me, to lead me—in an interminable series of nightmares—back into the heart of these dark woods where I now stand, many years later, listening to the sound of that wretched saw as my son draws it across the girth of the large oak tree repeatedly (*back and forth, back and forth...*). My leg tingles like a phantom limb as I hobble forward to try and stop him from continuing, but at the moment the large oak begins to tilt I suddenly slip on a pile of damp leaves and go down. My son smiles, says, “Have you seen my Daddy?” and, in response, the wizened man that now stands directly behind me, leaning on a gnarled cane made of pine, shakes his head from side to side, then slowly begins to walk away.

Valerie Suffron

A w o k e G r a y i n a W h a l e H e a r t

You slimy filamental seaweed wonder, slippery dew-fat pulsar:
in what have you caught yourself all of a sudden? A briny bird
first, and then a socket-picked fish, and now mooned-over eyes
to straddle the sodden last strand of a wind-empty wind?
Terrible to squish such a thing in your fist, and worse to wish
that it weren't, but flip through the book of all things thrown
back and isn't this just every one of them? Gray the fluff missed
of pockets and gray the scruff long-gone-lost and gray the
once-ever-happy that ends in the end like all ends end: in tears
and in tails, and in the whale re-bellow of *stop loving me* to
which the sea wept, *but love me*.

The Law of Diminishing Returns

She said I do, but first gold pancake stacks with white whipped cream and strawberry topping. He said I do, but first the cadillacs a team of which to pull the wagons. She said I do, but you must wear my dress and in your hair these bachelor's buttons. He said I do, but you must don my suit and shoes that click and recite poems. She said, look we are armfuls of sunlight. He said, look we are shimmer and dew. They kissed and vowed and turned up the TV too loud.

Far away and after, he heard the clank of fork tines on her teeth. Far away and after, she heard the squeak of wax inside his ears. Have you always had these teeth? He asks. Have you always had these ears? She'd say, what's unreal only rots away. The false is never true, he'd say.

And so the rot: it came and rotted. And then there was no longer shimmer, but at least the moon again filled them with wonder.

Dancing in a House

We want to go dancing, so we approach a nice Cape Cod. The house has indigo aluminum siding and an imitation oak door with a gargoyle knocker. The gargoyle is sticking out its tongue. It's nice. Once we're inside we see that the living room has plenty of floor space for what we are going to do. The floors are hardwood, a rich dark cherry, and the rugs are only throws, so it doesn't take any time at all to move them out of the way.

The beauty is, none of us have to ever bring our own stereo. It's a perk that comes with most houses: the voice of a house. We do however bring our own knapsack of CDs, because you can never trust peoples' tastes. The stereo is one of those upper middle class jobs—large but not ostentatious. There are a few boring family pictures on the wall, cluttering the future path of the sound, as well as a magazine rack, a coffee table—easily disposed of. After that happens, * goes to the kitchen to make sandwiches and ** warms up the stereo. I root through the backpack to begin things.

Enjoyment of music depends a lot—maybe entirely—on environmental conditions. Because this is a clean house, and

because twilight creeps through the bay windows like ivy, I decide we should dance to Steely Dan. We all have our own tastes, and that's fine, but we all really like Steely Dan. The thing we like about Dan most is how the Eagles sing about him in _____. It's during the part when the Eagles are talking about steely knives being unable to kill animals. A heartbreaking moment in code, especially if you've danced to Steely Dan lots of times in houses, listening to dogs barking in the basement.

Everything is running smoothly, when just as * comes back from the kitchen with a plate full of peanut butter sandwiches, and ** has cued up _____, someone comes down the stairs. It's a girl, old enough to vote but not old enough to drink. She must have been sleeping because she's rubbing her eyes. Her red hair is in a scrunchie, and she's wearing the sweatshirt of this band I'd never heard of. I reason that maybe she's woken from a nightmare, so seeing us in her house's living room might not be all that bad. Who knows, maybe it's an improvement.

The thing is, she looks exactly like my mother did at that age.

I'm about to say something to her when ***, who's been really quiet until now, just kind of skulking by the door, starts screaming at her that she's ruining everything, and why doesn't she just die. *** has always been a little bit unhinged, but I have to admit that at that moment I couldn't have agreed with him

more, except maybe the dying part. I don't want anyone to die, especially when there's dancing about to start. But it's hard to tell that to *** when he gets going. It's hard to stop. Everything else more or less freezes. We're not used to interruptions once we're in a house. ***'s hand hovers over the play button, and * is looking for a place to set down the sandwiches, as if the plate is hot.

The girl takes one good look at us and runs back up the stairs. I grab a sandwich and stand at the foot of those stairs, telling *** as he's running up to be cautious, that he shouldn't do anything he'd regret later. *** does a good job at ignoring me. Doors slam above us on the second floor. They open, they shut. I don't even hear ***'s heavy breathing anymore.

** starts the Steely Dan anyway, but it's not right. The power chords of _____ jangle instead of soothe, and there's no way for the music to enter me. It's never been *less* right, and I clench my head in my open hands and shout to ** to turn the music off, that the moment's over, and if we're not lucky and careful we might never dance again.

I take the Polaroid of my mother out of my back pocket. I don't know who took it; I just kind of found it at the foot of my bed one day. The picture depicts my mother at a Laker Girl tryout, dancing in the empty Coliseum, eyes wide, doused in

sweat and glitter, in yellow and purple stretch pants. It's the only picture I have of her where she's smiling. She didn't make the final cut.

* throws the platter of sandwiches to the hardwood. I put the picture away. Peanut butter splatches the floor, ruining it. I don't blame him. * couldn't have done anything else, and there isn't going to be any dancing anyway. I put my hand on his shoulder and head up the stairs. ** starts crying below me, but then his voice is very small as I notice other voices above me. Plush blue carpeting at the top of the stairs. I take off my shoes. I hear them in the bathroom, talking. But ***'s voice is much louder than hers. I want more than anything for the girl to be dancing with us, though I should have tried to ensure that when I had the chance to do something about it. Instead, I went along thinking that my silence was a lot more important than her well being. Pain is a not a form of dancing, though many confuse the two, no matter what type of thrashing occurs.

The doorknob to the bathroom is brass and shining so hard it's almost glowing. I try it. I can't bring her back, I know that. It's not her house, it's a girl's house, but that doesn't mean I feel bad at all for finding a fire extinguisher in my hands and aiming it at ***'s face. He's reaching down towards the girl's exposed shoulder, he's got her pinned to the toilet seat and her shirt almost off. It's good that he doesn't notice me before I

blast his face with the cold jet, because I wouldn't want him hurting me or anything. His elbow accidentally flushes the toilet. He yells and tries to push himself backwards, but he's really falling forwards. As if he's really in the middle of a frenetic dance, moving to the guitar solo that closes out _____, because his eyes are closed and his mouth is open and his arms are going all over the place. So maybe other things can be like dancing after all. I keep squeezing.

Anyway, I don't know if there's much else to talk about. The girl runs out of the bathroom and while I'm hitting *** with the fire extinguisher I tell him not to ever, ever fuck with mom again. That she's a good person who doesn't deserve people who'll spend all their time figuring out what they can take from her. Then there's a hand on my arm. The girl's. She looks concerned. How can she know that all we wanted was a place to dance and forget who we are for a few minutes?

Seeing her face, the magnolia blood on her lip, reminds me when my mom took me to a basketball game. We were high up in the bleachers with the popcorn at our feet and the pigeons above us in the rafters. I heard the downpour rapping on the roof, wanting in. While the game droned on, I told my mom that I'd learned how to breakdance in a dream. I told her that it was very easy and that an angel in the dream told me that I had a natural body for it, that my spine was like a Slinky. Halftime started, and

the Laker Girls started their routine. She turned away, and started crying, holding her palm to her face as if she was wearing a mask she wanted to tear off. Mom then said, and I will never forget this, that I was a good son, a beautiful son with many gifts, and no matter what happened she would love me until there was nothing left to give, or until the end of time, whichever came first.

The girl takes her hand off my shoulder and tells me that me and my friends (except ***, of course) should go, before her parents get back. Before she calls the police. I have no doubt she will. I tell her it's a nice house she has, and lots of children in faraway places would love to live in a house like this, and would give anything for this. She smiles. Something else has taken the dancing's place. A kind of emptiness, like the air's been knocked out of me.

I'm not scared, though. * and **, on the other hand, are shaking wrecks. Back downstairs, they're looking at me to lead them somewhere, to get them out of this mess and into a more manageable mess. I guess that's the definition of taking care of people. I don't know if I'm up to it. After what has happened in this house with *** and my mother, I don't know if I can dance again, or listen to Steely Dan again. But why should I tremble? As if this has never happened to anyone else in the history of the world? Like the old saying goes, you can check out any time you like, but you can't go home again.

Bonnie Emerick

What We Intended Before We Never
Again Will Intend After

we should make time thought is on *time if we think we don't*
want thought *have it* the wrong thought *we should make time on*
and not knowing *time if we think we don't* painful for us to
watch *we should* the thought *make time if not knowing we think*
we don't have it

we feel someone *let's* listen we feel someone *assumes* takes our
everything

the snapping turtle swims directly
into the wired cage we planted
we hang it by the tail
shoot it in the head
we eat turtle
until jokes no longer joke

skin is *remembering everything at once* truth we wrap palms
around *after being there with* what we have *half of each other*

warmed and worn *we just lay it all in front of us* we never have
breath *it was like that* to spare we choose to close *the whole*
written our mouths to *make us think* we shut *all of ourselves*

air sounds *we try to see* history's siren *a scene* indifference enables
it's not the scene that matters we hear indifference allowing us still
but someone chooses *it's the everything else* not to

there is no *we should make time* beginning *make time* again but
our end *if we think we don't* again *don't have it* a beginning

we have no *when we were eighteen and careless* we look to some-
one to suggest closer *wanting desperately* it is late too late an
answer *under that great big sky* precedes to *see alone again*

someone shoots the deer
we hang it by the neck, hose grime off its ribs
we choose not to bathe we know why
but intention stretches to before that first bullet
neither of us thought someone
would release

if we think we don't an end *we should make time* repeats *we think*
we don't have the again

a finale isn't *lucky for us* the finale until *we can't help* we turn *but*
distract and ask if it is *weakness* the finale *not admitting* someone
says yes we believe *what is true* the answer *we really believe this*

the bird lands in the dog's mouth
the dog widens its mouth until a bird
is in and out

indefinite *we should* an end ends to *make time* to gain a start the
definite start *if we think we don't* never again *don't* an end
undefined *have it*

blanket eardrums we're neither *night unclutters* we're neither
what we open time nor *what we close* only *the tail-end*

Visitor

With you in this house, my face wears the numerous
crashes like badges. Under the floorboards a zoo

of vibrations from your basement music, lolling
on the turntable, volumes of a mystery novel series—

your tongue's divided, there's another, and I haven't
figured out how to tether you to anything.

If you were a rash I would sing; a tornado, roll
like a dog in your orange urgency. But you're

a jinx. So go on, drop on by—I'll keep my distance
front and center, igloo-vested, shoulder to the wheel.

Derek Henderson & Derek Pollard

from *Inconsequencia*

Vine Street noon greening over
The bottle—how green it is, glassed in

There were flowers woven into
The fabric left behind

The clock reads _____ a.m.
The bottle the earth
Before I could die

Disappearing, parting from

This poem—make of it something
I wonder about the pressure, the weight

She asks these questions as dawn
Breaks, then a glance over the shoulder

The bottle close out in the street
Morning

A sort of craning of the neck in the midnight, among streetlamps.
It all becomes yellow. It leaps to that
which is so light I write down some of what remains with my hand,
what is
passing by the window, what is dropped.

The hiccough of a chestnut dropped in the water, which is so
 little attached
it returns in echo. A sort
of crack. The window which makes the shape of an arch.
The night, when it becomes sufficiently dark, starts the sound of the fan.
All of it is given up.

You insert time behind you, give a kiss to it yourself;
This is the ache of a monopolized One.

A sort of crane lifts off in the noon. A forest, a station.
Old Hannah, where she burns the end of the book,
is at the place where something remains at hand,

which is at the edge of the bottle.

Bottle. How the forest comes to this. A limning
edge. The edge which is broken. A lip,
brushed, by sunlight, that can be used by the sunlight, painted
with its lacquer. Movement,
slow, crossing the horizon. Glassed.

Still becoming, because for certain, the remaining hand is
something which

There was a table, there was a rag,
There was a flower which was knit in cloth,
The cushion which is found. There was a feeling
The tremble of the lip, of the nostalgia which was gone,
The stuttering which tries the fact that you criticize
in the place where the hand remains—those who are
left behind. The stuttering which stuttered
—You stuttered, stuttered.

A crane taking wing. It makes the new bottle hot.
A clock reads 1:38. Myself as a bottle,
the heated liquid comes after myself who started the boiling, who has
remembered that I
am seven times the king, and that you must walk

before I can turn the earth, can die.
Time turned to face the rear, in isolation,
That is itself another part. All parts are kissed;
It goes out. Because it is kissed it separates.
Everyone's contact with each other is because they are kissed.
It is lost. The movement which crosses over those who are kissed...

This poem makes *that* into *what*,
with many simple words. As for this, is there really a poem?
Are these people who see it? Is there a reminder here of the kiss?
I think in doubt,
concerning pressure, weight,
the exquisite line of your lip.
Is there enough of this poem to be sufficient?

She was around when the dawn broke open—a wound—and takes
these questions
simultaneously.

Open up, make the gate of the graveyard turn pale,
compile the manyness of this poem
and glance back from the tuck of your shoulder.
The gristle of these words, this poem,
as *have been*; we have written, or else

you went away in order to make us because of us.

These are dead words for dead people.

In the other room, a baby nuzzles

the end of the bottle. It is small to others, huge to him, and morning
starts to ease

through green glass. Horizon.

Streetlights

Sprung yellowing across

Vine Street

What into it?

Midnight

The light in the—is what it is
Spilled through the little window

Water, tips of cracks stuck in

Street in the night, arched windows
Blackening, full, abandoned

(: : : fan sound : : :)

Backward, time slips itself and kisses
The arch of its own back

Vine Street

Now over against the

Greening

Burning Old Hannah into the back

What is left—the end of the end of

How the bottle is green, its edge

Limning the edge, the broken, brushed

Lip—sunlight by, lacquered across and

Moving, slowly, the glassed horizon

Is in

What what left for is yet to become

There—a table, a rug

Flowers woven into found fabric

There—a sense of lost nostalgia
The tremble-stutter of lips

I begins to simmer—*I remember when*
Seven times around, before the earth died

Turning time backward, isolating

Every part kissed is when
Form disappears, parting the kissed

Touching each other—the kissed who are lost
Who poem across this and make something

Mere words, this poem? These people?
A remnant of wonder? A kiss?

I pressure about *the—the, the, the*
Or—the weight of an exquisite line is

(Enough, this poem?)

She asks dawn—questions as the paling breaks
Make nothing of this poem more

The words of these, which is this poem

Writing *We are there as nothing if it were left for us to do*

In the baby room, the bottle nuzzles in close

Out there begins the street, morning

Green to lighten the horizon glass

Streetlights along Vine Street:
Another night of; another morning of

Or

Because we always had Old Hannah, A. was our king

Instead

We would list, left in the light
Mostly bottle edged, mostly cemetery

The lie was the window—
That it was open, that it was closed

Quiet lives. Midnight. Beacons.

Yellowing about. Jump into it (him, he) is going to go left on the next street, interested in that window, in the luminare, the c sharp of light which spurted,—the small waters clear, specific. Disagreeing on how to divide an environment... window would have to bend... night, that may directly sound many a true and curt defense.

Abundance.

Time slides behind us, and a kiss in the bend of its back is characteristic of the gesture.

Quiet lives. Midday. Behaving, his conscience unclogs him of the last century. Hannah, aging, makes a bricolage in the backyard, not obstinate, but left at the end of her politics, interested in the percentage of ounces in bottles. A bottle. As green. The IMAGE (IMAGE) of border. The border has broken. The lip

which was cleaned, painted in the light of the sun.
Movement slowly about the horizon. The bottle. I saw.

Leave it well enough alone, then—for this purpose, but
for the license.

Around that time we had dinner, had been given up to
the fact which we wove, which the carpet found—
readable, it (the flowers) in the material surrounding
pillows. It was allowed, it was exceeded, an attribute of
its (our) loss, maximum, the same people nauseated,
with noxious lips, bulbous, sending us words which
tried in vain to tell us to go, which condemned, in the
interest of the place. Benzodiazepine falters at the edge
of an envelope, at the edge of the glass, falters, has
faltered, has, had faltered, etc...

Quiet lives. The new bottle has been heated up. The
bell reads its 138th morning of the year. When the
bottle begins, boiling remembers—going directly, but
more slowly to the fire (fire), I, I went, as the kings left
me, seven times around the country, as I would be
capable to keep going unless that I, I die.

Turn of the times, which isolates me somewhere behind, opposite myself. Each departure is a disappearance, a farewell kiss. At the edge of the body of the party, he was kissed.

Then, at that moment, with the mention of coastal lines he(it and I am lost by another—that seacoast, something about it

signals a poetry of movements, and a little bit more of the lot of the most simple words... It—poetry? These people around the firepit?) Kissing it (he, the other parts of it) not obstinate, not it. I am more the pains I earn than I am placed—place me under active weight, under the excellent line of a lip.

This poetry is sufficient?

Make it ask anything of the water, of what they ask of the keel's cut of the water, off-kilter, open to interruptions, palisades which about me occur like cemetery stones and... and has been made into poetry, shouldered into occurrence... These words, the robbery of bones, this poetry which writes, as floating as it is direct, takes the departure which makes itself as I have, which makes.

Regarding the striking impact of others, of the sights of churlish children—that is the end of bottles. Be in an environment, in whom—in what the mornings outside take (undertake)

Green bottle, horizon.

Water. Night slips backward, noon burning the end of the bottle. It limns the broken edge. The lip, abandoned. Time kisses its own back. Vine Street greening over. Old Hannah, what is left.

The bottle? How is it moving, glassed in? What there was of found cushions. There, trying to stop. On Vine Street. A new bottle. Wondering about these questions. Dawn paling this. And that. And:

Again. A glance over the writing in the other room. Out in the street, midnight sprung into it, spilled. In little tips. Vine Street yellowing across. What it is. Cracks in the street. Arched windows, blackening.

Fan sound reads: *I*. Meanwhile, I am turning to disappear. The pressure is the cemetery gates. The shoulder left for the baby, morning. There was a sense of lost nostalgia—a stuttered 1:38 a.m.

The bottle tipped backward, isolating another part. What it is stuck in itself. The arch of noon. Is the edge. *What is yet to become* was a tremble on the lips. A flower that would condemn our stuttering.

A king, close. Breaking. Green, brushed by lacquered sunlight. The horizon for a table. In those early places, a worn rug. Before I lost something more than mere words: making

Nothing else, the stutter heated. The clock begins to walk seven times around the earth. Time kissed those who made *this*. We nuzzle green glass. Horizon. Woven into the fabric

Was, in places, that which had to be bent, broken. Lost, the weight was in those places; Read: *Could die*. As if there “was enough,” she—and nothing more than she—did us in.

Again, left in the light—full back, slowly across—there, the ones who were left over. That in itself. Every part parting from the kissed. The kissed who are these people. The remnant

Of a kiss touches this. The exquisite line of your lips breaks open this. Nothing else lightens—through the window—into. Of.

Cane Street. Midnight. Streetlights.
Yellow dyes. The resilience enters,
Keeps it in any light, it is
The overflow that passes the window

1.

overturns the water to surround. Suppressed
in the street. The arch becomes the window.
The night changes to black, full of the vent sound.
Abandons.

The time skids, falls backward, and kisses itself
in the arch of its back.

Cane Street. Noon. The foresting of spring.

The old Hannah fever returns,
and stays behind to end in the bottle.

Bottle. How it flourishes. Limning
edge, broken edge. Lip
caught in the sun, coated with the lacquer of light, is passed over gently
and swiftly. Motion
slowly stretches across the horizon. Glassed.

Why anything stays behind is to become.

Have the table, have the rug,
Have roses woven into the fabric.
A cushion which was discovered. Have the feeling,
lose nostalgia. The lip, trembling,
can try the stuttering that condemned,
which is left behind in place,
forgot. Stuttering stuttering
—The stutter spoke and stuttered.
Cane Street. A new bottle is spirited out of the kitchen.
The clock reads 1:38 A.M. As the bottle
starts to simmer, I remember the work I did

as king—I must walk seven steps
before the earth can die in me.

Time rotates backward, separates

from other parts of itself. Each kissed part
vanishes. Separates from what is kissed.
Who kisses to contact the sun
lives in loss. Who kisses to move stretches across
the first poem and makes of it something
more than merely the ratios of Word. Is this the poem?
Is this peopled? Does the kiss remain?

I feel strange to the pressure, the weight—
your lip is an exquisite line,
and the first poem is at the root I dig up at night.

She asks these questions when daybreak breaks
open, and changes the pale gate of the public cemetery in the sun,
makes this the first poem. Anything more must be
compared to a glance over the shoulder.

These words cushion bone from bone, this the first poem
which we write looking like we have
anything left which would cause us to *do*.

In another room, the baby nuzzles
the bottle gone. In the street beside this room, morning
starts to illuminate
green glass. Horizon.

Vine Street, dyed yellow
The arch becoming the window

Time skids, falls backward
Kisses itself along the arch
Of its own back

The edge, broken
Edge

A cushion, discovered
Spoke, and stuttering

The clock reads: *Each part kissed*

Making something more
Than merely the ratio
Of the word

Does the kiss remain?

Anything more must
Be compared to a glance
Over the shoulder

In the street beside this room
Morning starts to illuminate
Green glass, horizon

Kristin Abraham

Constitution

I learned this:

I qualify

(A sort of
little bit)

And I learned to fill my yield

—like a houseful of silk
straining—

with sensible things:

car pet shirt etc.

(I don't need)

(But I need)

Learned a yield

to simpering

to “take me”

(sort of)

to stout-hipped

(little bit)

to confident

like windows up against a window

Julianna Spallholz

The White Cat

It was winter, and nighttime. I was driving to a friend's house in upstate New York. There was a white cat on the side of the road. It had been hit by a car. I pulled over. I kept the headlights on it. It made these movements. It jerked then relaxed then jerked then curled itself up like it was going to sleep. It curled its tail around itself, like it was sleeping in some peaceful place. But it wasn't sleeping. It was dying. It was trying to keep warm, trying to comfort itself. And then it would jerk again. Its white tail would fly upward then come back down.

The friend whose house I was driving to was not a friend I knew very well or liked very much. She and her new husband had just bought this new house and it was all they talked about: bathroom fixtures, cabinetry, redoing the hardwood floors. They were nice people and they had been generous with invitations and dinners and wine. But it was too long a drive to get there for what it was, especially on a northeastern winter night when everything is cold and dark and the car always sputters and stalls and seems like it might not make it.

(My car was always doing that. I was too poor to get a better one. I was much too poor to buy cabinetry, bathroom fixtures, too stupid and lazy to redo a hardwood floor. Much much too unattractive and bitter and drunk to get a nice generous new husband. Better, much better, to stick with men who are poorer, stupider, lazier even than me, who are those things but are also more attractive than me, crazier, drunker, and more talented, maybe even already married, like you, who I loved, oh, I loved you.)

I watched the white cat dying in the headlights for twenty minutes or more. I did not get out of my car. People drove past and swerved. No one stopped. I kept the white cat in the headlights to protect it from getting hit again. But maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe I should have let it get hit again sooner, to end it, to allow for a quicker end, to allow its puffy white tail to stop its jerking and flailing, to allow a careless vehicle to come and make its neck stop stretching, to make its eyes stop looking, to make it so it didn't feel so cold and alone, dying all by itself in the winter at night on pavement.

When I got to my friend's house I told her and her husband about the white cat. They poured me a glass of wine and gave me food and listened. They tried to comfort me with vague clichéd phrases like "time to die," "not in pain anymore," and

“in a better place.” There was a fire in their new gas fire area and their new kitchen was warm and cheerful even with the few remaining rough unfinished edges. I smiled and nodded and drank their wine but did not eat their food. I spoke in their language in order to agree with them, to end it, so they would feel like they had been wise and successful, so they would feel like they had been soothing to sensitive little me.

(I reject comfort. I do not do things that are good ideas. I use poor judgment. I seek difficult or impossible situations in which to put myself and when difficult or impossible situations do not exist, I create them. I say no to offers of good things from good people and I say yes when someone offers me something bad. When something breaks I do not fix it nor do I dispose of its pieces. I bring the pieces to bed with me night after night after night, I hold them, I dream of you, I miss you, I would have continued to accept anything, you are good, you are, I cup my red hands to balance you in them, I offer you your exquisite reflection.)

I called the cops from my car while I watched the white cat dying in the headlights. The cops didn't care, as I knew they wouldn't, though they wouldn't admit they didn't care, instead they made up some excuse about not having enough cops on duty that night in that area at that time. I cried to the woman on the phone. I told her about the white cat. I described its flailing

jerking tail, its opening and shutting eyes, how it kept curling around itself in an attempt at sleep and warmth and finishing. The woman listened, was sympathetic but firm, and I knew, I knew, I sounded like a crazy person, lost, inappropriate, misguided, a bleeding heart. Just a cat, she didn't say but said. Just a cat, said the cars, swerving to avoid us.

The white cat jerked, flailed, attempted sleep, its tail flew up and came back down, it didn't die and didn't die and didn't die. It was so cold that night, the kind of cold that makes everything, the ground, the air, the trees, tense and mean and brittle.

(I ask for help from the wrong sources at the wrong time. I usually ask for help after I have already done something terribly wrong, when I have gotten in too deep, when I have turned my nose up at a banquet of good advice. No wonder they are disgusted. No wonder they are fed up. I am fed up. I am disgusted. And all I have, now, is you, because you know, because you messed it up along with me, but I don't have you, maybe I never did, I see your eyes now and they are decided, they tell me back away, so I'm backing, because I do what you tell me to, that's how I was trained, and I curl up now under blankets and remember when I was allowed to come near you, near you, because I gave up all others for you, for you, because you are perfect, because I believed, like a child, that sacrifice would lead me to heaven.)

I had drunk too much wine at my friend's house with not enough food, no food, in fact, and I started, I guess, to look distant, as if I were, perhaps, thinking. What's wrong? they asked, and I told them the white cat. I told them I could not stop seeing it there in my headlights, dying. I remember that they looked at me tenderly but that their asses gave them away, shifting around in their chairs uncomfortably, pitying me. They had already said their piece, had already given me what adages they had saved for the subject of unfortunate untimely violent animal death, and it was, clearly, annoying, that I was still attached, stuck, harping, hadn't by now, for God's sake this again, moved on.

(I am always the sucker. I have always been. As a child I always wanted to play orphan, fire, flood, any scene having to do with suffering, with emergency, (and finally, with deliverance), and I always felt it, believed it, became emotional, and my friends, then, found it un-fun, and I would, then, have to back off, break out the Barbies, lighten it up, so that they wouldn't leave. Too much, I am. Too much. I am sorry for my company. I am sorry how much I worry, how much I want. I am sorry I say what I mean. I am sorry I didn't know it was playtime for you, sorry I took you seriously, sorry I carried your words home with me, held them, petted them, thanked them for

coming into this world, for being propelled by life, sorry I got familiar with your hair, your face, your hands, sorry I thought I was back home at Christmas when really I was lighting the last matches on the street corner, freezing to death. I shouldn't have. (God then delivered me. I went into the light.)

I did not go to it. I did not get out. It would have been cold, poor me, it would have been scary. It would have been embarrassing, all those cars, swerving, seeing me do it, seeing me try. The white cat might have been angry if I attempted a rescue, it might have spat at me, bit me, hissed, told me to leave it the hell alone, dying, thanks, I'm dying, and I don't even know you.

I didn't want, ultimately, I guess, maybe, (or maybe something else), to interrupt. What had happened already, had happened.

(I touched your stomach once and I felt, finally, like the time had come for me to receive what I had, tirelessly, hoped for, what I had, tirelessly, worked for, what I had expected to come from enough tireless hope, enough tireless silence. This, I suppose, is my misfortune, my incapability, my pathetic miscarriage, my lesson, my failed attempt to do good, be good, my confusion about, and my dependency upon, that meaningless word, which, I thought, once upon a time, meant that I should do nothing.)

I left my friend's house. I said my goodbyes and I said them politely, graciously. I complimented them on what needed complimenting. I thanked them. I put my coat on with delicate humility. I got back in my car. I took a different route home so that I would not see the white cat, so that I would not see what I had not done.

(Or maybe I could have been braver, smarter, more determined. Maybe I could have scooped it up from the pavement, petted it, said the words that would have come through me from God. Maybe the warmth of my arms would have been enough. Maybe the press of my chest. Maybe I would have driven like a demon with it in my lap all the way to the ER, maybe I would have had enough money, maybe it would have been the right doctor. Maybe I would have celebrated in the waiting room. Maybe I would have brought it home, lived the rest of my life looking, amazed, at this being. I would have named it. I would have held it. It would have been soft, gentle, warm, healthy, eating, rubbing its face on corners, sleeping under blankets, and maybe I would have thought, each time it stepped, stretched, yawned, breathed: I saved you.)

Kristin Abraham won the 2005 Elixir Press chapbook contest for her manuscript *Orange Reminds You of Listening*. Her poem “Little Red Riding Hood Missed the Bus” was selected for *Best New Poets 2005*, and her poetry, lyric essays, and critical essays have also been published in such places as *LIT*, *The Journal*, *Delmar*, *Review Revue*, *Spout*, and *Phoebe*.

Hanna Andrews is a New York native now living in Chicago. She received her MFA from Columbia College, where she currently teaches college writing. She is a founding editor of Switchback Books, and her recent work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *CutBank*, *DIAGRAM*, *MiPoesias*, and *Pebble Lake Review*.

Kristy Bowen is the author of *the fever almanac* (Ghost Road Press, 2006) and *feign* (New Michigan Press, 2007), as well as another project, *in the bird museum*, forthcoming from Dusie Press Books. She is also the editor of the online lit zine *wicked alice* and founder of dancing girl press, devoted to publishing work by women writers.

Blake Butler has appeared or is forthcoming in *Sleepingfish*, *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, *Copper Nickel*, *Monday Night*, etc. He was born, raised, and currently resides in Georgia. His work can be found at his website, www.deadwinter.com.

Anna Catone received her undergraduate degree from Princeton University and, in addition to an MA from the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College, holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. She has published work in the *Boston Review*, and her poems appear in *Post Road* and *Lumina*.

Myfanwy Collins's work is published or forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Lilies and Cannonballs Review* and other venues. She is an Assistant Editor at *Narrative Magazine*.

Matthew Cooperman is the author of two full-length collections, *DaZE* (Salt Publishing, 2006) and *A Sacrificial Zinc* (Pleiades/LSU, 2001), as well as three chapbooks, *Still: (to be) Perpetual* (Dove/Tail Books, 2007), *Words About James* (Phylum Press, 2005) and *Surge* (Kent State, 1998). Recent work has appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *Verse*, *New American Writing*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *POOL*. He currently teaches in the MFA program at Colorado State University.

Alan DeNiro is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *The Black Hare* and *Atari Ecologues*. His short story collection, *Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead*, appeared from Small Beer Press in 2006. His stories have appeared in *One Story*, *Crowd*, *Fence*, the anthology *Logorhea* (Bantam Spectra), and elsewhere.

Damian Dressick lives and writes in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. So far this year his fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Vestal Review*, *Flashquake*, 3711 *Atlantic* and other literary journals. He has fiction upcoming this fall in *The Worcester Review*, *The Kennesaw Review*, *Word Riot*, *Storyglossia*, *Ghoti*, and *Contrary Magazine*. He holds an MFA from the University of Pittsburgh and has recently completed his first novel. He teaches creative writing at Robert Morris University and at the University of Pittsburgh through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.

Bonnie Emerick lives in Gunnison, Colorado, and teaches at Western State College. She holds an MFA in poetry from Colorado State University. In addition to having been a featured reader in Harlem's DiVerse City Reading Series, she has had or will have poems published in the following journals: *cold-drill*, *Curbside Review*, *Diner*, *Interim*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Rive Gauche*, *So To Speak*, *Square One*, and *the tiny*.

Andrea Kneeland has no plans for the future. Her work has recently appeared (or is shortly forthcoming) in a few journals, including *Hobart*, *DIAGRAM*, *Night Train* and *elimae*. She is also an editor at the delightfully decadent online journal, *Mad Hatters' Review*.

Elisa Gabbert holds degrees from Rice University and Emerson College. She is a reader for *Ploughshares* and an editor of *Absent*. Recent work appears or will appear in journals including *Pleiades*, *LIT*, *No Tell Motel*, *Kulture Vulture*, *RealPoetik*, *H_ngm_n*, and *Redivider*, as well as the forthcoming anthologies *The Bedside Guide to No Tell Motel – Second Floor* and *Outside Voices 2008 Anthology of Younger Poets*. A chapbook, *Thanks for Sending the Engine*, is available from Kitchen Press. *That Tiny Insane Voluptuousness*, a book of her collaborative poetry written with Kathleen Rooney, is forthcoming in December from Otoliths Books.

Erin Gay is a student in the MFA Creative Writing program at Syracuse University. She is a contributing editor for *Double Room* and fiction editor for *Salt Hill*. *Mid-American Review* selected her as the featured poet in their Fall 2006 issue. She has work in *Field*, *Lake Effect*, *Paper Street* and *Ontario Review*.

A. Minetta Gould grew up stunned and left wanting. Her work can also be seen in *elimae*.

Of early French Canadian descent, **Daniel Grandbois** was born in Minnesota and raised in Colorado, where he lives today with his wife and children. His first book, *The Hermaphrodite (An Hallucinated Memoir)*, with forty original woodcuts by renowned Argentine printmaker Alfredo Benavidez Bedoya and translated into Spanish by Liliana Valenzuela (Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez), is forthcoming from Green Integer in spring 2008. His second book, *Unlucky Lucky Days*, a collection of absurd tales and prose poems, is forthcoming from BOA Editions in June 2008. Daniel's work has appeared or will appear in *Fiction*, *Sentence*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Del Sol Review*, *Double Room*, the anthology *Online Writing: The Best of the First Ten Years*, and ATA's *Beacons*, among others. Also a musician, Daniel has played upright bass for two bands on Jello Biafra's Alternative Tentacles label: Tarantella and Slim Cessna's Auto Club. The latter had the honor of opening for Johnny Cash in Las Vegas in 1998.

Amelia Gray lives and works in Austin, Texas. Her fiction is published or forthcoming in *McSweeney's*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Storyglossia*, *Spork*, *Swivel*, *Bound Off* and *Guernica*. "Diary of the Blockage" appeared subsequently in her collection *Museum of the Weird* (FC2, 2010)

James Grinwis lives in Florence, Massachusetts. His work has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Conjunctions*, *elimae*, *Born*, *Quick Fiction*, *Mississippi Review* and many others. He is founding editor of *Bateau*, a new literary venture.

Derek Henderson is alive and well in Salt Lake City, where he lives with his wife and children. They find themselves consistently astonished by the mountains in their front yard.

Elizabeth Horner teaches and writes in Los Angeles. She has published work in *POOL*, *Small Spiral Notebook*, *Dusie* and *wicked alice*, among other journals.

Lisa Jarnot is the author of three full-length collections of poetry as well as the forthcoming *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador From Venus: A Comprehensive Biography* (University of California Press). She currently lives in Queens, New York, and teaches in the MFA program at Brooklyn College.

Julia Johnson, a native of New Orleans, was a Henry Hoynes Fellow at the University of Virginia, where she took her MFA in 1995. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Third Coast*, *Poetry International*, *64*, and *New Orleans Review*. Her first book of poems, *Naming the Afternoon*, was published by the Louisiana State University Press in 2002. She was the winner of the Fellowship of Southern Writers' New Writing Award. She lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and teaches in the Center for Writers at The University of Southern Mississippi.

Un pistolet écureuil. Une chevelure arachnéenne entourant un visage aux proportions cubistes. Qu'il soit subtil ou grotesque, le décalage qu'opère le travail de Jules Julien questionne la réalité du monde qui l'entoure, faisant ainsi basculer la notion de vérité du général au particulier. Détournant et associant figures et objet familiers, il met en scène un univers où le symbole se marie à l'anecdote et où l'étrange se camouffle derrière une palette de

couleurs exagérément chatoyante. Car il faut bien reconnaître que l'apparence lisse de ses images, méticuleusement dessinées et vectorisées, renferme des strates bien plus complexes. Un monde souterrain où les super héros s'appelleraient Eros et Thanatos et où les tensions donneraient naissances à des chimères aussi séduisantes que vénéneuses. —Justin Morin

Marc Lowe's fictions and prose poems appear or will appear in various journals, including: *5_trope*, *The Angler*, *BlazeVOX*, *elimae*, *Opium Magazine*, *Pindeldyboz*, *The Salt River Review*, *Sein und Werden*, and *Steel City Review*. Marc holds a Master's degree in Japanese literature, edits for the online multimedia journal *Mad Hatters' Review*, and is currently working on his third novel. Please visit him at malo23.com for more information.

Peter Markus is the author of *The Singing Fish*, *The Moon is a Lighthouse*, *Good, Brother* and the forthcoming novel *Bob, or Man on Boat*. His flash fictions / prose poems have appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *3rd bed*, *Quarterly West*, *Chicago Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Willow Springs*, and *Sleepingfish*.

Ashley McWaters's work has appeared in *Northwest Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Carolina Quarterly* and *Pindeldyboz*, among others. In 2006, her manuscript *Whitework* was a finalist in the National Poetry Series and the Four Way Books Intro Prize in Poetry. In 2007, she was a finalist for the Stadler Fellowship at Bucknell University. She finished an MFA in Poetry at the University of Alabama in spring 2004, and an MA in English at the University of Memphis in spring 2002.

Bryson Newhart has taught fiction at Brown, where he received an MFA, and has served as Associate Editor for *3rd bed*. His work has appeared in print and online journals including *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Bust Down the Door and Eat All the Chickens*, *elima*, *3rd bed*, *Horseless Press*, *Taint*, *Snow Monkey*, *The Cafe Irreal*, *Eyeshot*, *Pindelyboz*, *Word Riot*, and others, including the out-of-print magazines *American Journal of Print*, *Insurance*, *Both*, *Tatlin's Tower*, and *Coelacanth*. He lives in Utah and welcomes correspondence at bryson_newhart@hotmail.com.

The Pines have work appearing or forthcoming in *Cranky*, *Konundrum Engine Literary Review*, *elima*, *POOL*, *RealPoetik*, *Zafusy*, and elsewhere, as well as in the ongoing series *The Pines* (Volumes One, Two, and Three available; Volume Four forthcoming in the Spring). More at thepines.blogspot.com.

Derek Pollard is an associate editor at New Issues Poetry & Prose, and a contributing editor at *Barrow Street*. His poems and reviews appear or are forthcoming in *580 Split*, *American Book Review*, *Court Green*, *DIAGRAM*, *No Tell Motel*, and *Pleiades*, among others.

Alison Powell's poetry has previously appeared in journals such as *Black Warrior Review*, *AGNI*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Poet Lore*, *Meridian*, and the anthology *Best New Poets 2006*. She resides in San Francisco.

Meg Rains is a graduate of the Vermont College MFA Program for Writers. Her work has most recently appeared in *Arts & Letters Journal of Contemporary Culture*. Originally from Arkansas, she lives in Chicago and works in arts administration.

Kathleen Rooney is a founding editor of Rose Metal Press. Her first book is *Reading With Oprah* (2005), and her poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in the anthologies *Outside Voices 2008 Anthology of Younger Poets* and *The Book of Irish American Poetry: from the 18th Century to the Present*. Her essay “Live Nude Girl” appears in *Twentysomething Essays by Twentysomething Writers* (Random House, 2006). *That Tiny Insane Voluptuousness*, a book of her collaborative poetry written with Elisa Gabbert, is forthcoming in December from Otoliths Books.

Shya Scanlon is an MFA candidate at Brown University. His work has recently been published in *Mississippi Review*, *Opium Magazine* and an issue of *Guernica Magazine* guest-edited by Terese Svoboda.

Kim Gek Lin Short received her education at the University of Colorado and the University of San Francisco. Her work can be found in recent issues of *Fence*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *POOL*, *Can We Have Our Ball Back?*, *The Big Ugly Review*, and other journals.

Julianna Spallholz's work has appeared in *Cranky*, *Gargoyle*, and *Sleepingfish*, among others. She is the Managing Editor at *Tarpaulin Sky*. She lives in Tucson.

Ben Stein lives in Amherst, Massachusetts and teaches college writing at Fitchburg State College and the University of Hartford. He received his MFA last spring from West Virginia University. His work has appeared in *Cranky* and *RiverTeeth* and is forthcoming from *Gargoyle* and *5_Trope*.

Valerie Suffron was born in Berea, Ohio and has since lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Farmington, Maine. She is currently an MFA candidate in the NEOMFA consortium through Kent State University where she is working on a thesis of prose poetry about free will and determinism.

James Wagner is the author of *Trilce* (Calamari Press, 2006), *the false sun recordings* (3rd bed, 2003), and *They* (Frunk Press, 2001). *Work Book*, a collaborative collection of his stories (drawings by Edgar Arceneaux), will be published this Fall by Nothing Moments in Los Angeles. Recent work has appeared or will appear in *Boston Review*, *Fascicle*, *Fence*, *Sidebrow*, and *Sleepingfish*. He lives in Chico, California.

Rob Walsh's work has appeared in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Columbia*, *Fugue*, *LIT*, *Mississippi Review*, *Noon*, *Redivider*, and *Sleepingfish*. He lives in Seattle.

Angela Woodward has published recently in *elima*, *DIAGRAM*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Gulf Coast*, *Sidebrow* and others. Her book of short prose *The Human Mind* was released in fall 2007 by Ravenna Press.

Arianne Zwartjes received her MFA from the University of Arizona, and currently works as an outdoor educator for NOLS. She lives in Seattle with her dog, Wodehouse. Her work has appeared in *Blue Fifth Review*, *Front Porch*, and *Red Wheelbarrow*, among others, and is forthcoming in *Cue* and *Word for/Word*. "Parallel" and "Space" are from *(Stitched) A Surface Opens*, a chapbook being put out by New Michigan Press this fall.

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