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# ellipsis

LITERATURE & ART

Volume 58

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***ellipsis... Award***

Judged by Carolyn Forché

*“On Considering the Killer of Stephen T.  
Johns” by Elisabeth Murawski*

*“Bane” by Anne Myles*

**Academy of American Poets Student Poetry Contest**

Judged by Carolyn Forché

*“Love-in-a-Mist” by Bailey Willes*

**Anne Newman Sutton Weeks Student Prose Contest**

Judged by Carolyn Forché

*“The Wheat and the Chaff” by Samantha Paredes*

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## How to Move On

Brent Amenityro

*temperatures rise  
killing even the hardiest of shrubs  
deer and elk  
migrate east  
the soil hardens  
and splinters*

a cemetery and an elementary school  
share a parking lot

all around are pastures  
where cows often appear  
suddenly from the fog

always a line of cars around the block  
never anyone amongst the tombstones

yet fresh red roses come and go

there's a sign  
about uneven terrain  
near the entrance of the cemetery

and a sign about back-to-school night  
in bright green and blue  
on the other side of the speed bump

morning dew burns away  
sweaters fall on the playground



just before the bell rings  
one kid hides  
    under his seat on the bus

he cries as the bus driver  
coaxes him down the stairs



**[To Heed and Ignore Brain Chemicals' Mixed Signals]**

Aaron Anstett

Fray of the fabric in timeframes' lapses  
sends tangles of ellipses skittering scatterplot,  
atoms fetching atoms, mulishly miniscule.  
In the pharmacy of writing, poetry's toxin

and medicine. Pristine antique paper outfoxed  
elements. Nature remains the greatest antagonist.  
From lines in the panhandler's bare palm  
number the days now to apocalypse.

Along the body's interiors, inimitable scribbles.  
Through smoke-soaked air, the rust-color sunset.  
When the universe ought to make me persona non grata,  
I like to watch a muted choir to see the many

mouths shaping themselves the same way.  
Afternoon arrives airy and ethereal as hearsay.

## Besotted

Julia Chiapella

Baby sister, you were sick. And we were  
on our knees: all those third graders,  
hands clasped, heads tilted toward  
the cross, that blood-smeared crown, our  
rise and fall in recitation: *Hail Mary, full  
of grace*. Naïve supplicants, we worked  
to keep you here. *Might not make it*,  
doctors said. *50/50 chance*, they said,  
your tainted blood eclipsing newborn  
cheeks. You were one day old. And I  
was not penitent: four brothers before  
you, fed up with the tussle, the raw  
sweat, the grappling of those hands.  
You'd be my safety net. Sweet sister.  
How could we know what would come?  
Planets in the churn, our wake  
a fertile innocence, pliant and fresh,  
pulling the unknown toward us,  
fishing line to the deep and dark,  
besotted as we were with all things  
defective, violated, besmirched —  
your brand-newness, doughy toes,  
papery nails later broken by brother's  
fiddling plunder. Before all that,  
you made it — safe awhile. I watched  
your tiny body sleep, pour out  
its favors one breath at a time.



## this is a poem about shame

.chisaraokwu.

**i.**

this is a poem about shame:  
you say she was a dumb fuck  
for letting him in. i say she was just a girl

when. pink ponies & reading rainbows are girl  
things that glitter. life should glitter, not the shame.  
& not the men that fuck

up a life. now u/we are stuck, a complete mind-fuck  
& how many others, girl,  
coddle this type of shame?

fuck shame, the girl laughed.

**ii.**

when he says “play” he means *fuck*  
& i’ve been translating sex since i was a girl  
but confuse its groans with shame.

at my first communion, the priest spoke of shame:  
the way one feels after a fuck.  
a hint for the fuckers: do not fuck with girls.

woman / me / spirit-fucked / girl  
thrashing up a river of shame  
swallowing the after-fuck

this is how little fucks shame half the sky, girl

**iii.**

little girls

block fucks

blister shame

shame, shame, shame

on the greedy girls

who don't give a fuck

the world is fucked

& boys bare no shame

fisting girls

what a shame

& this poem is for girls with no fucks left to give.

## **Pacific Coast Highway**

.chisaraokwu.

this time, we drive  
along Pacific Coast Highway

over cracked chandelier eyes  
reflect wasted sunlight.

imagined oases  
vanish in the rearview.

we traverse catfights -  
bite through our angst.

claw a future out of beatings -  
scrape our knuckles raw.

every cut a little fire  
melting the myth of us.

only jagged edge remains.  
into the cliffs

slam dreams  
& baby water

we began this  
uncoupling by locking



the  
door.

waded through lips  
& fists, thighs & backsides

as if our sex were liberation  
a red & dancing sun.

never mind we'll never  
know what to call this

thing we do when we open  
our mouths to say love

but only sirens  
are heard.



## Apropos of Dying: No Funny Stuff

Jim Daniels

Once, we had time, eh, old friend?  
Rain clouds' quick drift, clear skies  
around imaginary corners—we balanced  
on a concrete wall, ready to jump off, play ball,  
forgive each other yesterday's bad calls.

Dusty throat and cold water. Dreams  
without consequence. Sure, then some-  
body dies, but then there's heaven, right?  
Play ball with me: I throw it, you hit it.  
You throw it, I hit it. None of that funny stuff

we once relied on—that free drug that sent us  
laughing a-tumble through weeds, hoping  
for grass-stained proof. The dog ate the rule book,  
the bat and ball. Nostalgia is for sissies,  
so what are we doing? *Funny Stuff for Old People*—

we need that course, taught by our old dead coach.  
Funny stuff now means getting screwed over  
by my son-in-law who wants that pie in the ice box  
when I die. I'm slouched on a park bench watching kids  
play ball while the helper dresses my wife

in our little square of semi-private hell.  
By all definitions, you're my last living friend,  
and then you leave town and move in with  
your daughter in Florida? Remember your trick



of losing the ball in weeds to turn a home run

into a ground-rule double? What a quaint  
concept, ground rules. It's raining out here,  
but the kids just tilt their heads  
back. Open their mouths.

## Wilderness as Seamlessness

Kara Dorris

I love the phrase *as it seems*. Have never lived in a house without a fence, was taught a need to define space—the space we own, of course, not always our own. Why doesn't anyone tell us need is taught? What else is depression but a boundary? A boundary you & I walk everyday testing for weak spots. Each day we wake to tap that wall, shake barbed wire, scrape nails down white pickets. Each hole we make is always only temporary. You don't know how to live this world without seams: lullabies, night, these bodies. You know the body was stitched together from the beginning, that we never stop stitching ourselves into space & time [...] *permitted to regard her body as capital for exploitation*. Girls parked at make-out spots, exposed throats, open windows for hooked men. & when you tear, when you let others, you ask, *please tear along the seams* like a paper doll so it's easy to repair. Except when it isn't, when the tear becomes scar tissue.

the wilderness can seem  
whole, unscarred, but the seams are  
rarely where you see



## Wilderness as Sex Education

Kara Dorris

As a feminist, I don't mind burning bras. But why can a guy show his boobs in public but not women? *I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves.* Did you know, Victorian bathing machines, cabanas on wheels, were rolled right into the sea to keep women's skin white & untouched? It's dark magic. *Taught from infancy that beauty is women's scepter. The mind shapes itself to the body like a harem anklet. A ballerina roaming around a guilt cage—chastity belts, ice baths, bound feet, & other terrible things—only seeks to adorn its prison.* She becomes a wedding cake topper, a flake, all vanilla icing to be fingered. Growing up, my brother received how-to videos for sex; I was told, *don't*. As if it is the male's duty when I would have rather been taught to ensure my own pleasure. Both require open communication—with another & yourself—

neither of which

my one-word sex talk  
ever taught

## From Deep in the Bowels of Suburbia

John Grey

Anna and Jake split up.  
She plays *World of Warcraft* with some other guy now.  
He sits at home  
watching violent shows on cable TV.  
Sometimes, Ally stops in on his way to clog-dancing.  
They share a bong.  
When the next MacArthur recipient awards are announced,  
neither expects to be named.  
Actually, the thing with Anna and the new guy  
only lasted a month.  
She's back with her mother.  
They don't talk much.  
At least not when it's time for *America's Got Talent*.  
Jake is slowly weaning himself off WoW.  
*Grand Theft Auto* is looking better by the night.  
His Uncle Paul is serving ten years  
for the real thing.  
Jake is too lazy to follow in Paul's footsteps.  
Paul always boasted, "No prison can hold me."  
This one did.  
His wife Pamela filed for divorce when he was inside.  
She married this muscleman who loves to high-five cops.  
They have a kid, Archie, like in the comics,  
who's into causes like Save the Whales.  
When Paul was a kid, his dream was to work at the local Blockbuster.  
But then again, *Charlie's Angels* was his favorite movie.  
Archie lives with his mother.  
She and Ernie, the muscleman, make sure to speak softly  
when they discuss her silicone implants.

Ernie is deathly afraid of genetically modified foods.  
But he has no problem abusing OxyContin.  
Archie has a girlfriend named Julie.  
She works as a file clerk at the zoning commission.  
Her father is an expert in voice-recognition software.  
But when Julie calls him at work,  
she has to explain, “Pop, this is me, Julie.”

**“I am the only one who ever lived who remembers”**

Lisa Katz

*after Jorie Graham*

the girl on the stoop  
with the doll in a shoe box pulled by a string,  
the girl in two-toned shorts and a shirt  
with a Peter Pan collar crumpled under  
her mother’s sad arm. The girl with buck teeth  
and a strapless top over her flat chest, the girl  
with full breasts in a bathing suit sitting  
on the front lawn, the girl in the Triumph  
on the way to Jones Beach  
shifting gears for the driver with her left hand.  
The girl on her back on the dusty carpet,  
on the narrow bed, in the basement  
when the pan leapt into flames on the kitchen stove.  
The girl hidden in the fraternity house, reading  
Sherlock Holmes in an empty commune,  
or Doris Lessing or anyone who had ever  
lived and remembered and wasn’t  
the only one who wept at the thought  
of the imprint of a woman’s single breast found  
in the wall of the Villa of Diomedes  
when they dug up Pompeii for the first time.  
If only she’d been encased in lava whole,  
it wouldn’t matter that she’d forgotten  
to make a form of her own and now she  
is the only one who remembers  
exactly how it belonged where it was.



**Rule #86: Never Smoke and Drink  
When You're Alone in Bed**

Jennifer Litt

because the brain hemorrhage strikes, the cigarette ignites  
the liquor that flambés the mattress, catches the curtains, sets  
off the alarm that alerts the neighbors who call the fire barn

because this small town relies on a cadre of volunteers  
who may be selling life insurance or used cars, & answer  
late to location numbers blasted by the air-powered horn

because your husband's playing piano on the Fall River-  
to-Bermuda line, your friend Lily would curl up & wither,  
& your grandchildren yearn to know you better

because your beauty's now an old wives' tale, party girls  
age out of their vices or sizzle & you're visited by ghosts  
unfurling in smoke when you light another one in bed.

## Midnight Unicorn

Katharyn Machan

spices chili with dark chocolate  
and pours in beer, good hard  
dark beer she whisked away from a devil's  
brewery, his frown a grab  
for sex

Midnight Unicorn likes to cook  
for mouths that ask her for  
sweet hot, deep red, full fiery tastes  
dazzling waiting tongues'  
wet reach

her kitchen's not for everyone—  
she chooses, she discerns—  
but if she lets you share her apron  
you can trust your mouth  
will burn





## Monday Unicorn

Katharyn Machan

sucks clover.  
She grew up in Connecticut  
on a high wide hill  
without much money for sweets.  
Her father taught her strawberries  
but then he died  
and she fended for herself.  
Small unicorn  
knowing climb and gallop,  
afraid of lightning's reach.  
Have you seen a cloud at sunset  
so pink it makes you cry?  
That's her, searching for sugar  
in every ripple of sky.

## Barbed Wire Maps

Devon Miller-Duggan

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota:  
miles, then more in every direction and past  
the highway marker, past directions to the clinic  
for impossible diagnoses. A black-clouded storm tumbles in  
from somefar south, unworried across flat and distance.

We'll have driven another hundred miles by the time  
it hits here, pelting the cast-metal highway marker  
that bears a whole poem. Surely it must be grounded,  
or would have been lightning-blasted years or storms since.  
We never brought my mother here, her scarred nerve-sheaths  
clear enough, barbs strung along pathways of her brain,  
blocking the storms—infections roiling beneath a healed wound.

Any place we see trees from the highway  
means a creek or a house with a windmill-well  
and windbreak. The coming storm could consume  
its own path—a body turning on itself.

The long straight roads could go from no place to nowhere,  
huge horizons blind us for no reason we can ascertain.  
The land could stretch us out into two dimensions—  
precise as hospital sheets, roughened as dementia.  
The barbed wire could fence-snag all our old hurts.  
The nurses, wise as ponies, draw Sharpie lines around our wounds,  
mapping out infections, tracking poisons—my mother dies of  
no infection. Three times  
her brain has turned against her: MS, dementia, stroke.  
Sitting next to her the last time, I think of two friends  
stepping over barbed wire, breaking their own lines.

## the day the tumor began

Nancy Carol Moody

it was German on her trail run, tongue troweling her gums, dry throat working difficult vowels. Home again, she leaned with her phone on the countertop, hunting advice for pruning berries as the steadfast coffee maker whirred. The TV droned new recycling rules, projected weather variations 20 years out, discussed the star basketball player's injured knee. She tapped trash company acronyms on the small keyboard, searched a century of temperatures for her town, tried to grasp the meaning of a triple double. There was no point in dragging yourself out of bed if you weren't going to learn something new in your day—if she believed in anything, she believed in this. She poured Dark Magic into her mug, held her face above it for a breath, the steam rising bitter from the shimmering black. The hell of it was, you could learn ten thousand million new facts, but the one you didn't know would turn out to be the one that mattered most.

## Self-Portrait as Big-Ass Crow

Nancy Carol Moody

*for Karen Sue*

Technically, it's *Raven*, but I don't get fluttered  
when it comes to names. I'm all croak

and clamber. Resistance to coddle. Obsidian,  
my birthstone—the dowers of the sky arcing on my back.

My kind prefer to travel in pairs—  
black hyacinth in hover just above your shoulder.

That noonday eclipse? How sleek  
my insinuation between you and your sun.

Once, a woman misnamed me  
as I foraged in a place I was not expected to be.

She loved the idea of me so much  
she told my story over and over—

hobble-dobble ratchet-walk. Gobble-  
gobble-peck of irredeemable sidewalk rot.

While it's true I'll succumb to the occasional  
crumb, or even a stray French fry (or two),

there ends the affinity with my coal-colored kin.  
Visor your eyes against my sable self:

I'll ravage your nest and down your eggs  
and never once fancy leaving you a bauble.



## On Considering the Killer of Stephen T. Johns

Elisabeth Murawski

At first I wanted him to die,  
the old man who shot the museum guard.

Wounded, he lingered, full of tubes  
and critical, heart twisted

as a backward cross. But then I thought  
no. Let the rifle-toting racist

survive, sentence him to watch nightly  
the video of Stephen, Jr.,

eleven, skin soft as a peach,  
eyes numb with why. So much pride

and love in this boy suddenly  
without a father

talking about the fishing trip  
they'd planned to take this summer.

The clip should be the last thing  
the killer sees before lights out

when he lays his body down  
and tries to sleep. I want him

to lie there in the dark of his cell,  
hostage to a face, a voice.

I know it will never happen,  
that it's just me talking to the TV,

wanting justice  
for the museum guard

who held the door for him,  
the old man who walked in

like a tourist or a scholar  
and opened fire.



## Bane

Anne Myles

Even as a girl I felt the subtle ache  
of something hidden growing,  
pushing against my heart and breath.

Could it have been a rock whose weight  
I carried slung against my ribs—  
that hard singularity, that dense cold?

Or perhaps it was a sleek canister  
of poison gas—some days I'd swear  
I could feel it writhing.

I walked slowly, carefully,  
so I wouldn't jostle it.

Or maybe it was a fetus, as in my dreams  
of babies who'd turn out to be unreal  
or dead, with me so terribly relieved.

But more likely it was a demon  
curled against my spine, asleep  
or stirring its cramped limbs—

I'd start up at times to realize  
I'd been soothing it, whispering  
the name I called it, Bane.

Or was it a seed, dark and lustrous,  
splitting and rooting into the rock,  
unfurling its lone stalk

to cast out lines on emptiness,  
defining the blue of an October sky  
with a dragonfly buzzing through it—

now, perhaps?





## Fishing in Childhood

Anne Myles

—after lines by Tony Hoagland

If we are always who we are, if our living  
is finally of a piece, couldn't we observe it  
complete in any moment—choose any hour  
and find it in an image of the whole?

Take, say, those long-past summer nights,  
fishing with my parents as dusk approached  
on Walton Lake, in the aluminum rowboat  
with its electric motor putt-putting slowly—

or *not* fishing, since even then my interest  
in casting the Rapala to the perfect spot  
fell off fast—if there's a *there* I've wanted,  
its circles widening, it was never so literal.

Mostly I'd lie across the middle seat  
plowing through some difficult old novel,  
whether or not I could truly grasp the adult  
motives and the unfamiliar mores—yes,

certainly, I was a reader, but isn't it the case  
that to this day I fear I don't quite follow  
the plot by which you take two grown-ups  
and rub them together and it makes a story?

The bench was hard and flat against my back.  
I felt that, and saw the purpling dome of sky

I could launch my mind into. Within it, closer,  
a chittering, a swooping—were they birds or bats?

So much lies hidden at the edge of knowledge,  
as along shore, in the tangled, shadowy  
interstices of undergrowth; some wary animal  
might step out into view or not, but I kept watch.

Meanwhile my parents talked to one another—  
the play of voices a soothing, steady lapping  
to which I need not respond (so that even now  
lectures and readings lull me all too much,

returning me to childhood, held and safe,  
though also private and alone, an only child  
whose feelings are not much inquired into)  
until I began to drift, like the soft curl

of water riffing alongside the hull  
or breaking from the fingers that I trailed...  
Suddenly a line would jerk and tighten  
as one of them reeled it in—snagged lure or fish?—

and I'd scramble upright so I could see,  
though I clenched with pity for the bass  
gasping in air, as my father twisted  
the hook from its stiff jaw and raised it

a moment to admire before sliding it back in.  
Our fishing was benign, I told myself;  
we set them free. We had no need of them,



and wouldn't they go on to live their lives?

Still, some sadness lurked unnoticed  
like the creatures in the woods. Or maybe  
there was nothing, and I only sensed the depth  
in the middle of the lake—that canyon

where no one could descend, its cold  
currents flowing out from hidden springs,  
and fronds that might reach up and wrap  
a feathery grip around one's ankle...

Is this it? Is it anything? Or only memory,  
drawing me back again to write of lakes,  
their stillness and reflective mystery?  
There's something I discern there—solitude,

the weed-smell of emotions left unpoken,  
the strangeness of the complicated human plot,  
the slipped fish flickering away. So today,  
a slimmer book in hand, it all returns

as I read the words and feel a long line tug  
and wonder at what makes us what we are:

*Leaving people, and being left by them.*

*This catch-and-release version of life.*

## **I Like Birds Because I Ain't One**

Toti O'Brien

The dead pigeon, spread-eagled upon the checkered pavement, has been flattened by chubby tires so much, now it barely reads against the background meekly espousing its shades. Same grey. Lighter here, darker there. Same discreet hints of red, a small claw and a large pool of blood.

The young man boards the van to the airport, holding high twin bouquets of bright yellow, mimosa and sunflowers. He sits straight. When he leaves the bus he walks regally, as if leading a long invisible train. Something like a golden halo surrounds him.

In a damp cave of green, a cardinal bird climbs a diagonally-bent bamboo reed. It hops, delicate and tentative as if just exploring the idea of altitude. As if never having fanned open, still its freshly delivered feathers. Then it briskly takes flight, reaching bravely the highest branch of a nearby tree. No one, not even I witness its secret training, as it hides in the privacy of

Eden lost.

I cannot recall the tint of the rubber  
gloves worn by the security officer.  
Her speech sounded both clinical  
and fabulous. As she explored  
my groin and the inner side  
of my thighs, the light from the ceiling  
shone ominous. She sprinkled over  
my hands and her own a mysterious  
powder, then asked her computer  
screen for some formulas. I expected  
with some stoic lack of concern, with strange  
equanimity, to be turned into a tiny  
tree frog. Perhaps, to grow wings.

**fugitive: how it is**

Lisa Roullard

your secret steep

another tuesday    another february  
wishing each footprint could snare the last print

erase it

trail of ingrown toenails  
of boots broken    laces snapped

treading by flashlight

by ache  
through the skeletal harbor of trees

and it's raining    cold-raining

moss clogs the years

do you landslide  
the mud of you spilling    splattering

the shape truth takes

no

no

for now you are mountain

built by the years  
rock-rooted and armored with trees



## Self-Portrait with Storm

Sue Scavo

When the tornado touches down  
the only thing to do is walk with it.  
And it, all movement, moves with me.  
When I was a girl, I believed night  
searched for me — wind seeking  
seeking electricity. Destruction,  
destruction. I was scared  
I knew of *storm* was what  
Now, finally, I let it catch  
caught. It has been trying  
I pull my hair back tight  
whip next to my body  
Nothing torn apart.

next to me,  
So, I do.  
Familiar.  
thunderstorms  
wind, electricity  
I thought, seeking  
of storms then, when all  
happened inside that house.  
up to me, let myself be  
to simply walk with me.  
into a ponytail, let the wind  
which is also calm in the center.

## Pasque Flower

Kerry Trautman

As if petals snipped from towels frozen to Lake Erie sand.  
As if Christ curled himself against his boulder,  
as if returned for Mary Magdalene.  
As if wishing for an end to ice brings sun,  
as if sun makes good on squinted promises.  
As if it is enough to be purple and soft,  
as if softness and purpleness fend off late killing frost.  
As if regret could manifest from soil,  
as if an old virgin wished she hadn't waited so long for nothing,  
as if a young non-virgin wished to float back into the soil.  
As if all we have to do is make it till April,  
as if all we have to do is flex open to still-cold sun.  
As if secrets could begin in the womb,  
as if they could be taken to the tomb.  
As if violet petals aren't the answer to re-seeding ourselves,  
as if beige pom-poms were,  
as if they would detach and float into May  
as if May were Lake Erie baptizing what falls in.  
As if we could float ourselves back to the soil,  
as if we could re-create.





## Mother has begun picking

Richard Weaver

the low-lying fruit from our family tree.  
There are so many of us we should have  
numbers tattooed on our wrists  
rather than prescribed biblical names.  
She's not a fan of eugenics so much  
as a woman who has whelped more  
than her share of Catholic babies  
in her all-too-fertile years. My father,  
her husband, opines ejecting sperm  
forcefully is a moral obligation, obliged  
by the Church and therefore a God  
who clearly believes there are no limits  
in a finite world. Many would argue  
whose voices are synchronous in monotone.  
Lockstep in labial disinformation.  
My mother insists that all lights be left shining  
at all times and all time leads to end-time.  
No neighbors are allowed to harvest what hangs  
low or has fallen. We are not the sharing kind,  
our hopes, our saliva, the dreams that shape  
our worldly paradise are ours alone;  
but our hunting dogs we freely let loose  
whenever a radar screen blip appears,  
or a ground sensor wakens with footfalls.  
We are a clan unto ourselves, set apart  
from our neighbors who are, like us,  
wholly incorporated small towns. We may  
long to look across the not-so-straight  
and narrow river, even when the sun seeks

to punish our eyes. We may wish in one hand,  
then shit in the other, and wait to see which  
overflows first; but our purpose lies beyond  
the obvious now and the hollow-hearted  
friends that might but will never be.  
If we are the world's future, and we are,  
we must be firm in our mores and laws.  
We must acknowledge and accept our fate:  
the end and the re-genesis of life on earth.



## Love-in-a-Mist

Bailey Willes

On a cliff side there's a poppyseed pile  
of ants sputtering against the pavement,  
overlooking the highway with its tangle of overpass,  
and there's a sweet smell of summerwine  
from bush grass and cat tails half filled in.  
Your liver's out, Prometheus, eaten but  
not getting any smaller,  
disappearing except for a little stain behind the ears:  
sulfur yellow that we both know is pollen  
from the fennel flower you hid that fire in,  
a cloth of gold to cover up your misplaced  
anthropocentric adoration.  
Always bashful, weren't you?  
But that liver, dangling out of you  
like a loose tooth  
I gotta ask honey-sap  
was it worth it?

## Adder

Leonore Wilson

Little duende of pith and phlegm

in the emery winds

rustling like mountain shadows

through water,

leaving your eggshell cavities

murmurous

while the ground below

turns to dust and the air blooms

with smoke;

whose earth is it,

pestilential beast,

lonely disciple —

what exegesis of the heart

did you prophesize

what blood red catacombs



above our heads  
when the heavens  
opened?  
Why is love so insistent  
so urgent, why am I called,  
from numbness  
to knowing;  
veil, hood, mask  
I have nothing to protect me;  
the fire came,  
the decadent flames  
slowly inched forward  
like an infant crawling feet first  
down a steep flight  
of stairs  
is how my novella ends—

some elderly new future  
against the black particles  
as if they were wafers of glass  
from the body of Christ;  
how do I disentangle  
myself from lightning,  
the last dashes  
embers

## Faculty Meeting: Beginning of the Semester

Keri Withington

*Don't give them the image.*

He tells me to make

students *work* for it. As if  
poetry is the minimum wage

our students can earn after class:  
physically demanding, a little

degrading, and never quite  
enough.

*They should make the effort.*

*On the text. Without tech.*

*Without bridging.* As if poems  
weren't like peonies, blossoming

buds dense and soft  
the pink of sunrise through my window.

I respond with research  
pedagogy

but even though my bones know  
that *our students deserve more*

that *poetry is about survival*

he's looking over my shoulder

for someone *better*. So I go to class  
to arm my students with words.





When Dennis reached out to me for the first time in nearly a year, I could say that I didn't think much of it — after all, it was a silly comment he messaged me about on one of my social media posts — but that would be a lie. When I opened my phone and saw the message I froze. My fingers hovered and I stared at it longer than I feel comfortable admitting because I realized I missed seeing his name on my phone. I was out at a bar grading my students' English 101 exams and his message quickly transformed what seemed would be a boring night into a night that seemed anything was possible.

They say that certain types of drugs can make you feel invincible. So can a person.

I answered Dennis' message and we made plans to meet in a few days.

He and I dated for about eight months almost a year ago. Things were going well until I told him I was in love with him. That declaration halted whatever we were doing promptly. He didn't feel the same way, so we stopped seeing each other. I should have been over it by now.

"He's probably bored," Tina said, shoving a tortilla into the chunky queso. "And horny." I had texted my best friend as soon as Dennis messaged me on social media and she and I made plans to meet the next evening at our favorite Mexican restaurant to discuss how I should handle it.

"No," I said. I thought about how he'd had a whole year to contact me and so why now? How it must've meant something. *He must be thinking of me.* Perhaps he wished things went differently. The moment in the rom-com where one person realizes all they've been missing. But then I thought about how if you like someone enough, it's easy to make endless excuses for their behavior, regardless of how bad it is. "Well...maybe," I admitted.

"Totally horny." She scooped another chip. "I mean, aren't you?"

In the months prior, I annoyed Tina so much with my constant attempts to see Dennis again that she thought she made a funny one time by quoting the movie, *Mean Girls*, and saying, "Stop trying to make fetch happen! It's never going to happen!" Except she inserted Dennis for fetch. But it didn't make me laugh. It made me sad because she was probably right and because it reminded me of how my grandmother died the day after *Mean Girls* was released.

“You’re really going to do this?” she asked.

“I have to.”

“Says who.”

I’m the kind of person that can’t leave any opportunity unturned and so I answered by taking a large gulp of my frozen margarita followed by a simple shrug.

“I can see that you’re going to meet up with him no matter what anyone says, but let me just remind you that there’s a reason they’re called exes and it’s not because X marks the spot.”

“Clever,” I deadpanned.

“Unless underneath that X is a piece of shit.”

“Are you done?” I asked her.

“I’ll be here all night, ladies and gentlemen,” she said, twirling the straw in her margarita. She was the kind of friend who would warn me against what she felt was a mistake, let me make them anyway, over and over if I had to, but still listen to me cry and complain at the end of the day. Which is to say she was the best kind of friend out there. “Well, I’ve been working out my arms plenty lately,” she said.

“Okay?”

“My shoulder is strong enough to handle your tears when it goes south.”

I laughed, but deep down I knew there was a good chance the side of my cheek would rest on her shoulder again eventually.

It turned out the spot Dennis and I picked to meet and play pool was closed on Mondays. I realized this right before leaving my apartment. I thought about texting him that it was closed but he was so elusive, so impulsive that the chances of him rescheduling were high. I drove to The Gauntlet anyway so that we could “discover it was closed” together.

When he finally pulled up to The Gauntlet and saw the unlit, red neon OPEN sign, the empty parking lot, he suggested I get in his truck to drive to a different place together. I’m not proud of how wide this made me smile. I turned my head into my shoulder to hide my grin as I slid into his passenger seat. The feeling of things going exactly as I’d hoped washed over me.

When we got to our back-up bar, we each ordered a flight of beer. I pulled my credit

card out and held it up like a ticket scalper outside a concert venue so as to make it clear I knew this was not a date. I thought that would somehow make me more attractive — the check dance. I was playing a game, of course, because deep down I wanted him to pay. He did. “It’s all on one,” he said, passing the bartender his card. It reminded me of before. How he always paid. This wasn’t necessarily a quality I looked for in a partner, but his willingness, no, insistence, to always pay — a default setting of his — was so foreign, so new to me that when we first met, I didn’t recognize it. As trite as it sounds, it swept me off my feet. Or at the very least it confused me in the same way a food you never thought you’d like comes as a pleasant surprise.

I watched him hand the bartender his credit card and fuck if it made me grin. I don’t know what it is about your early thirties, making you think you need to pick a person in case the world ends tomorrow, but that was Dennis for me. Perhaps I watched too many movies.

“So what’s been up?” he asked.

We caught up a bit; his life had not much changed and neither had mine. Both still working the same jobs. I was still living in the same apartment, but he had just bought a house.

“Ooh, I did just read a good book,” I said.

“Oh yeah?” He was never much into reading, but when we’d dated, he’d let me babble on and on about the books I was reading. He’d told me he liked watching me talk about the things I was passionate about. It was one of those slowed down moments that made me realize I loved him.

“It’s called ‘A Long Way Down’ and not only is it laugh-out-loud funny, but it’s smart and quirky and I don’t know...it found me on a good day.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t know if you believe in that stuff, but I think that books and films and certain songs find you at the right time.” I think that people do too, but I kept that part to myself.

He shrugged, shot a stripe into a corner pocket, and said, “I don’t know. Maybe.”

I wanted to ask if he was seeing anyone but I still didn’t know why we were hanging out again. The alcohol made its way through my body, my mind. I felt brave, so I decided to make the game more interesting. “You wanna bet on it, like we used to?”

I thought of the first time we hung out and played cornhole at his house. He'd suggested we place bets on the game. I told him if I won, he owed me a kiss. He said if he won, I owed him a kiss. At the time I remember thinking that he stole and repeated my bet, didn't up the ante, and therefore it was lame, but I also remember how badly I wanted to kiss him so I didn't care. It was a win-win. He ended up beating me and our kiss was sloppy and a little forced because it was bred of a bet, but it was still good. I knew because I liked it and right after he told me I was a good kisser.

"Let's make it interesting," I said, raising an eyebrow.

I banked on nostalgia, but he turned his head and said, "Nahhh." He saw the hurt in my face and mumbled something about the game already being interesting enough. It was a rejection; that much was clear. But I thought of Tina, of how much I wanted to prove her wrong, how much I wanted to be the exception to the rule. So I pushed.

"Ohhh I see. You're worried I'm going to fall in love with you again." He didn't say anything so I pressed on. "You know, you've hurt me before. You can't hurt me again." I knew the idea was ridiculous, but saying it aloud actually felt true. That the worst thing that could happen between us already did. I felt I was exonerated, exempt. A lightning bolt rarely strikes twice in the same place kind of situation. Or, at the very least, that from the time he first broke my heart to now, I'd toughened up. I was prepared. My eyes were wide open.

He laughed and leaned down to shoot another stripe. I recognized the laugh as a non-answer. A "let's play through and hope the conversation switches." This time, I didn't push. I realized that if people equaled places, I would always be his back-up bar. A something to do and pass the time with on an ordinary Tuesday night.

I wanted to believe my eyes were wide open, but I had been wrong. Once you've had feelings for a person it's not so strange to develop them again. People say that about sex; once you've slept with someone it's easier to sleep with them again. I realized the same is true for pain. But the hurt is there, just a duller, cooler pain. Dormant under the surface, but delicate to the touch.

Earlier, when we got out of his truck and awkwardly one arm hugged each other after getting to the bar, I couldn't help but sense we'd always be tarnished. Like our hanging out now was just the stale leftover of what was a decent meal before. We would never get back there and the more I thought about it, the more I thought perhaps we shouldn't. Cold food

reheated is rarely as good as the steaming hot plate served before.

After the game, we walked back up to the bar to close out. The bartender looked at us, printed the check, and handed it to Dennis with a knowing nod. I recognized that nod. The “sure thing” or “you two are sleeping together” nod. Another bartender who didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, and through some kind of unspoken “bro” communication hoped for a good tip. In that moment, I realized Dennis’ paying wasn’t because he liked me or wanted to make it work. His paying was solely for him. To feel good and look good for himself. A lot like when a stranger in front of you in the drive-thru line pays for your meal. A sweet gesture, no strings attached. Paying it forward. And if that was the case, we *were* strangers. You only ever do the drive-thru thing for someone you don’t know who you don’t owe anything to. Dennis and I didn’t have a forward. We only had a past.

It was quiet on the ride back to my car. Uncomfortably so. That told me everything I needed to know. Sometimes I like to picture myself in a library or a bookstore. With my future partner. Both reading books and enjoying the peace, the lull. Maybe trading looks or a smile, then returning to our respective solitude and reading. My point is, there’s a shared understanding in a comfortable quiet and when you don’t have that with someone, I don’t think you stand a chance. I thought of Tina and what she’d do in that moment. She’d crack a joke about the silence to cover the hurt. She was always good at that.

I mentally apologized to Tina before shooting my last shot. “You should read that book.”

“What book?” he asked.

“The book I mentioned.”

“Oh, yeah. What’s it called again?”

That also told me everything. We didn’t have that much to drink. I knew that couldn’t be the reason he forgot the book. He just didn’t care about the conversation. In hindsight, all the signs pointed to no. I realized what I thought I wanted was merely just that — what I thought I wanted. And it was wrong. But we do that to ourselves, don’t we? As children, when we’re told no, we want it — whatever IT is — more. Perhaps we never grow up. Physically we do, but our hearts just get dumber. More malleable and naïve. No one sees anything until they’re ready to see it.

“Nevermind,” I said.

When we finally got to my car, he regurgitated a stale line just to fill an awkward goodbye without looking at me. “We should do this again.”

I knew this was the last time we’d hang out, but I agreed anyway as I got out of his car and shut the door.



During my graduation days in Delhi, there used to be a watchman in our colony. I, along with my friend Abinash, rented an apartment of two rooms in a locale called State Bank Colony. There was neither a State Bank in that area, nor did any of the people residing in the colony work in a State Bank. It was just somehow called the “State Bank Colony” for reasons still unknown to me. Both Abinash and I were in the same college and it took around 15 minutes on foot from our college to reach our apartment. There were two blocks in the colony — A block and B block. Two respective gates were assigned to each of the blocks. There were houses on both sides of the alleys and there was one interlinking street between the two blocks. Basically the colony was in the shape of an “H” with A block on one side and B on the other. There were other, smaller lanes that people could walk in; but four-wheelers couldn’t pass through them. The delinquent teenagers of the neighborhood used to pass their two-wheelers through those narrow passages even after often being lambasted by the elders several times. There was also a park right in the centre of the colony, between the two blocks. That was the usual place for the evening gatherings for people of various age groups. Kids would be busy playing games — from football to *kabaddi* to tag. Some teenagers and a few elderly people would jog regularly, as if it was some sort of an evening ritual. The elders walked together in groups, whereas the teenagers would mostly be alone at the end of the street with their earphones on. And some other grownups would be scattered around various corners of the park, engrossed in their daily doses of gossip. Our apartment was almost at the end of the street — House No. 73, A Block. We stayed on the ground floor of the two-story building. The family of the owner lived on the first floor and a newly-wedded couple stayed on the second.

The watchman of our colony must have been in his late fifties. At least, he looked that age even if he wasn’t. He was thin and short. He reached ‘till my shoulders when he stood next to me. So he must have been just about an inch or two taller than five feet. His hair was entirely grey, with one or two darker ones popping out as lone survivors in places. He had mild facial hair, which he kept shaving time to time. He would look even older whenever his beard grew thicker. He had a small cut under his right eyebrow and that often made it look as if he was always raising his eyebrow each time he talked. His twelve-hour shift would start

from six in the evening and he would arrive neatly dressed in his uniform, without fail, sharply at six every day. I can't recall seeing him without his uniform ever — a light blue shirt with dark grey pants — as if it was an extension of his own skin. He would wear a sweater on top of it and tie a muffler around his head during the frosty Delhi winters. He would always carry a stick with him. When I first saw him holding the stick, I took it to be a walking stick which he needed for support. But it was much later that I realized that every watchman in those housing colonies in Delhi had a stick. It was, in a way, an innate part of their personality. The watchman in the B block of our colony also had one. It was presumably to scare away thieves — or perhaps to shoo away the stray dogs that were also integral parts of the colony. But it almost felt like the foremost objective of the stick was to make a repetitive sound at night. The watchmen would keep loitering around the colony at night, hitting the ground with the stick making a rhythmic sound — *takk takk takk* — as if a musician was working on the symphony of his lifetime. It was like a lullaby that the people of the colony needed to sleep comfortably at night. Around three o'clock every night, when unmitigated silence prevailed, we could hear the lullaby of the watchman from the other block. The watchmen probably forgot how to walk without their respective sticks. Each night, our watchman would make three or four rounds around the colony at regular intervals of about two hours — first one would be around midnight — then around two or two-thirty — then another one around four — and the final one just before he left each morning.

He hailed from Bihar and had been in Delhi for nearly thirty years. By the time we started staying there, he had already served as a watchman in that colony for more than ten years. I have always been a night crawler and being in Delhi escalated that by thousand fold. Abinash and I mostly stayed up late at night, even during work days. So most of the nights, when others in the colony used to sleep, we would step out. We would loaf around, spending a little bit of time with the dogs. That was how our interaction with the watchman had started. At night, we always saw him sitting at the extreme end of the street under a lamppost. There was a permanent chair he always sat on and whenever he would leave in the morning, he used to place it in the corner of the street beside an abandoned Vespa scooter. Whenever he would not be walking, he would be sitting comfortably on his chair. As far back as my memory can trace, I don't remember seeing him other than either walking with the stick, or sitting on that chair. Those were the two fixed binary states he existed in. During the incep-



tive days after we moved in, he would just greet us with a *Salaam*, simply raising his right hand — or at times, he would just add a few words to complement that *Salaam* — “Salaam Babu”. He addressed us as “Babu”; but the speed at which he spoke ended up omitting the “B”, making “Babu” sound more than “Baau”. In fact, he called everyone in the colony “Babu” — or rather, “Baau” — and greeted everyone with a *Salaam*. The female counterpart for the “Babu” was “Memsaab,” which he used for addressing the women of the colony. It was during our very first winter in Delhi when we started mingling more intimately with him. He always lit a fire to avoid the glacial temperatures at night. He brought logs from some nearby place and flamed those every night. He would be sitting utterly still on his chair near the fire, wrapping a shawl all around his body, leaving aside his face as the only visible part. Sometimes even the face would be imperceptible in the stark darkness. We would just see his smoke-like breath coming out of the mouth. He would only move when he needed to put more wood into the fire. We mostly avoided going out during those numbingly freezing nights. But whenever we did, we always ended up near the fire to warm ourselves and had prolonged chats with him. He bore the persona of a man of few words. Normally, we would be the ones asking him about various things, trying to ignite conversations and he would gently give cursory replies. He asked us about our studies at most, though very rarely. The dogs also joined him during those fire-lit nights. Initially, they were slightly scared of us and would move away whenever Abinash and I went near them. But with time, they started getting much friendlier and often kept the three of us company near the fire.

In our second year of college, some of my friends and I planned to make a short film. It was for a competition conducted across colleges in our University. I got underway writing a script for it straightaway. I was struggling to get it on track for quite some time and didn’t know where it was heading towards. We were all amateurs and had no real cognizance of how to proceed further. So Nikhil, who was eventually going to shoot the film, advised me to develop a story first. I discarded everything I had written before and decided upon observing a character, which I could later flesh out a story around — “Who better than the watchman to write about!” I started talking to him more regularly. Even when Abinash didn’t accompany me at night, I used to go out alone and be around him. I even used to keep him company when he used to take his rounds around the colony. It took me a little bit of time to make him comfortable around me. But I had to allow him that much to break the ice. He didn’t

talk much at first. As usual, I used to be the one triggering things and he would reply in a word or two, and if he was gracious enough, maybe a sentence. But slowly and steadily, he got out of his shell and started conversing with me. He used to talk about his native land, his family and narrate to me an ample amount of stories — starting from his childhood to the years he spent in Delhi. It became a daily affair for me. I would step out of the house each day post-midnight and come back around two. I'd spend time with him for at least an hour and a half — sometimes even more, when the chit-chat would make me lose track of time. I wanted to soak up all of his stories first and then start writing something around whatever I found engaging.

One night, he was telling me about his father while trying to get the logs to catch fire. Those were not icy cold nights that deserved a fire. But he was regularly lighting it anyway, after I started paying him daily visits at night. The fire made the conversations much cozier. He used to have a mortar pan where he would put all the logs and planks. He had a plastic bottle full of kerosene which he used very prudently so that it lasted longer, and he would refill it at the end of every month. He would put minimal amount of kerosene on the withered coconut husks because it caught fire more readily than the logs. The coconut husks, in turn, would pass on the fire reluctantly to the logs and the logs would gradually catch fire after much hassle. The watchman would have to first use the coconut husks and kerosene as igniters — then there would be slight hints of fire sparks in the logs — then he had to keep blowing the logs persistently, with an added task of fanning them with a newspaper — and then only the logs would seem gracious enough to light up. He told me that his entire family used to gather around a similar fire set-up in their courtyard during winters. Sometimes, the neighbors also joined. He and his father would always arrange logs from the woods just behind their house. They were a family of around 25 people who stayed under the same roof — his parents, his uncles and aunts, and all of his cousins. Whenever I asked him the exact number, every time he would start counting with his fingers first and then stop somewhere around ten. He would then tot up the rest inside his head briskly and say, “There must be around 25 people.” It was always 25 — never any less, and never more. His father and his elder brothers were farmers. He also helped them out at times, even though he wasn't particularly interested in it. But he used to lend them a hand whenever they needed it. But they didn't own any land. It was leased to them by the land owners, which usually was the case

with most of the lands in his native place. There were a bunch of people who owned acres and acres of land and leased them every year to farmers to grow a variety of crops. He told me how once, when he was really young, his father was battered by a landlord. I was astounded to see how vividly he recalled it. He was recounting it with so much lucidity, adding on the minutest of details, that I could actually see it come into being in front of my eyes. He had the ability to narrate his stories in a very riveting way, evoking images quite effortlessly. I often wondered whether he actually remembered all of it, or if he was just spicing things up to make the story more enticing. He would start off the stories in a mildly somber tone. It would seem as if he was half-asleep and still making an effort to tell a story. But as the story would progress, his body would start warming up and start participating more rigorously. He would first remove his shawl — then he would remove his muffler only to wrap it around his head once again — and then he would keep aside his stick to sit slightly upright. And his entire storytelling mode would shift drastically. The story would start unfolding with him behaving like an actor playing various parts. He would use his hands meticulously to complement his facial gestures. At times, he would even stand up if the story demanded it. But, strangely, he would never look at me. He would avoid eye-contact as much as he could. He would simply look elsewhere, and keep narrating — as if there was some imaginary invisible audience he was catering to. Even when he was telling me about his father being maltreated, he was enacting the whole thing in a way that he became his father at one point, and switched to being the landlord to show how he behaved the very next moment — and then, within a span of seconds, again he switched back to being his father. He also told me about how the atrocities and the oppression never diminished even after he had grown up. Just the faces of those tormentors kept changing, but not their cruelty — cruelty which probably was a by-product of power, wealth, and privilege. He didn't want to live there ever since he saw his father being humiliated for the first time in his life. It was an image that refused to leave his mind ever since. But his family kept facing such iniquities on many occasions over the years — so much so that it was accepted as a perennial part of their existence after a point. He always wanted to run away somewhere far. But his father didn't want him to go away, as having him around meant having an added helping hand in the farming seasons. So he had to wait until he turned 30. That was when his father passed away and he took off to Delhi.

But Delhi was also no different. It too didn't treat him kindly. The absence of the

landlords wasn't felt much as there were other people making lives difficult for the likes of him. He kept taking up various jobs over the years before landing up at our colony. And the slum where he had been staying ever since he set his foot in Delhi kept growing bigger in size, but the standard of living never really saw anything apart from stagnation. I once asked the watchman — "Isn't it frustrating to live like this? Why did you come here in the first place?" He fixed his gaze upon me for quite some time as he was taken aback by my query. He wasn't anticipating anything of that sort. He took a moment before a smile slowly transpired on his face. The smile possessed a sense of self-doubt as if he was asking himself why he actually came to Delhi and whether it was worth everything. But at the same time, the smile also bore a proud sense of maturity which was devoid of any regret. It had only acceptance and the sagacity of a wise man which, in a way, forgave my innocence and idiocy, and simply said, "I didn't think much. I just came...some people go to small towns. Some come to big cities like I did. And some stay back in their villages only. Life actually doesn't seem starkly different in any of these places anyway."

As I was spending more and more time with him, I started uncovering fresh avenues to approach the script. I simultaneously started writing it as the deadline for the submission started closing in on us. All my friends were fairly intrigued by the stories I shared with them about the watchman. I was trying to mould the script around whatever I got from him as inputs. So basically, a slightly fictionalized version of the watchman was my protagonist. After I jumped into it, I was channeling all my energy into writing only. I would attend my lectures during the day and drift through the nights trying to write. So most obviously, our regular meetings started getting briefer and briefer. Occasionally on some nights, I would go out for a stroll, talk to him near the fire and maybe sit for five to ten minutes. Then I would be making my way back to the room to write. And mostly on other nights, I wouldn't even step out. Though I was not doing it intentionally, he started noticing it after a few days. Whenever we would chance upon each other in the evening, I would greet him with a smile as usual — at times, maybe ask him something very routine — and he would also greet me back with his usual *Salaam*. But that *Salaam* would always have a peculiar curiosity hovering over it. He possibly wanted to ask me why I was no longer stepping out at nights, or why I wasn't sitting around the fire and chatting with him anymore. I would regularly see him loafing about near our house around dinner time. He would often look towards the house to see

if I was there. Whenever he talked to Abinash, he would never forget to ask about me. More often than not, I would loiter around in the park post-dinner; sometimes with Abinash, and sometimes alone. Whenever I met the watchman there, I would ask him whether he had dinner or not; and he would always quietly reply that he had just had it moments back. In return, he would also ask me what I had for dinner, out of courtesy. No matter what we talked about during those days, he would always carry a sense of curiosity in his voice. He was perhaps always seeking the reason behind my changed behavior. Once, while walking in the park, probably for the first time ever, he drew near me and sparked a conversation by himself — “The weather has been merciless in the last few days. It is getting colder day by day.” — “It feels like it will start snowing at any moment.” — “It’s only the fire that keeps me alive at night.” — I kept listening to him without saying much in response. He kept alluding to the fire several times in the course of that conversation. Most likely, he was trying to remind me of the cozy interactions we had near the fire just a few days back. But when he realized that the little doses of nostalgia were going in vain and there was no fervor from my side concerning either the fire or the conversation, he finally asked me in a hushed tone — “Are your exams going on? You don’t step out at night nowadays!” It did make me feel a bit uneasy as that was the very first time when I realized that he must have felt as if I was avoiding him on purpose. I had to let him know assuredly that it wasn’t the case and the shift was utterly unintended. “No, no. I just have been fully caught up with some work. I will get done with it in a few days. After that I will get back to listening to your stories again,” I replied with a persuading smile. The smile tried its level best to vindicate the abrupt shift in my behavior. But I wasn’t sure if he was wholly convinced.

I was ready with the script and we were all passably pleased with the outcome. Within a few days, we shot it in an area near our college. One of our professors, who was also the mentor of the theatre society of our college, played the lead part. Most of the other actors were from our college itself. During the course of editing, I stayed at my friend’s place for practically a week. The day we finished and I came back home, I was tremendously relaxed. It felt like I was being absolved of some crime. After almost an eternity, I felt a proud sense of attainment that day and the magnitude of satisfaction was on a different level altogether. I went out around midnight and started walking towards the park. I walked past the chair where the watchman usually sat. But he wasn’t there. I averted my attention to listen

cautiously whether the stick was making the rhythmic sound. And then it struck my ears from afar. So I realized that the watchman was on his regular midnight round. I could hear the sound edging nearer gradually. He recognized me from a distance and greeted me with his *Salaam* from there only. We were winding our way towards the end of the alley. He also could sense that I was in a much more jovial mood that day after a long time. He probably expected me to sit with him that night near the fire. So when we reached near his chair, he proffered me the tiny stool where I normally used to sit. With utmost excitement, he took out his mortar pan to start the fire in such a hurry that it didn't leave me a chance to react. He hoped for tempting me with the sight of the fire. "I will take a leave tonight...I am really tired. I have been working constantly for the last couple of days," I had to say. The despondant face replied, "Yeah, I understand. I guessed that you must have been busy somewhere when I didn't see you at home for the past week. I even asked your friend...you should rest tonight. You must be tired." I got going after bidding him goodnight. But I felt the urge to say something to elevate his dejected mood. "We will meet tomorrow. It's been so long since we sat and chatted. He smiled back at me with an appreciative *Salaam*.

I didn't meet him the next day; nor did I meet him the day after. It totally skipped my mind that I gave him my word to do so. Slowly and steadily, I got occupied with other things. And within a few days, the semester exams also commenced and I got submerged in that. The watchman never asked me to join him near the fire after that day. He perhaps didn't expect it from me any longer. He didn't stop greeting me, or talking to me. The *Salaam*'s never stopped coming my way, nor did the smile vanish. There was no behavioral change as far as he was concerned. He was as affable and warm as he used to be before. But bit by bit, our "friendship" got back to how it started off when we first moved to Delhi — as if the graph was reversed and we moved back to the inception point, going around the same route, passing through the same points. By the time the winter ended, it became precisely like how it was during the initial days. There was no warmth left anymore. There was no awkwardness either. It was just sheer indifference. The regular quick strolls at night continued. Abinash and I would step out of the house whenever we needed fresh air. We would talk to the watchman whenever we bumped into him. At times, we would go near the lamppost under which he always sat. But we never spent much time there. That became the new "normal" for me — exactly the same way that sitting and chatting with him for hours near the fire used to be a

“normal” for me at some point.

Our film earned widespread appreciation in the competition. It passed through two rounds and got picked for the finals, being the only film from our college to do so. We couldn't bag the top prize. We came second. But all of us were extremely delighted to be acknowledged on such a reputable platform. Everyone wanted to come home that night to celebrate. “I will throw you guys a huge party tomorrow...without fail...tomorrow, for sure” — I promised them. I invited everyone home the next day. I kept my promise. But I couldn't keep the promise I made to the watchman. The “tomorrow” I promised him never came.

I learned how to suppress bad memories at an early age. There's one in particular that, over time, I began to think of as an unwanted souvenir. I kept it stashed away inside a lidded box, left in the attic to collect dust. Once every year or so, I would remember it existed and go up there to take another look. With fresh eyes, I'd pull the memory back out to examine it from a new angle, and then another, turning it this way and that in my hands, desperate to finally make sense of this alien object after all those years. I never could.

I began drinking in my mid-twenties as a way to forget. By then, I was self-aware enough to recognize it as an unhealthy coping mechanism. But once I started, I couldn't stop. I went to the meetings, of course. They helped for a while, until they didn't. Then the whole cycle would begin again.

On my thirtieth birthday, I decided to start writing down, from the very beginning, everything I'd always been afraid to admit to even myself. My sponsor told me it might help to get the words down on paper. On a whim, I also purchased a used sewing machine off the internet. I'd heard that the very act of constructing clothing with my own two hands could be a therapeutic hobby, and by that point, I was willing to try anything. *Two years old*, the product description online read. *Well-loved but well-maintained. Still works like new.*

The package arrived a week later. The first time I held the machine in my hands, I scoffed at the idea that this gadget could somehow mend all the gaping holes in my life. But then I swapped out the old needle and threaded the machine with a new spool. Plugged it in. Turned it on. It really did run like a dream. I left the seller a glowing review online.

One month passed. Typically a slow learner, I caught on quickly. I had already finished a baby blue wrap dress and a striped loungewear set, and I was ready to move on to more difficult patterns. That's when odd things began happening in that room, incidents that could not be easily explained. For example, even though I lived alone and never entertained guests, the dress I'd made never seemed to be where I'd last left it. I was so proud of my first completed sewing project that I wore it out as often as possible. But then I would hang it back up in my closet, only to find it later in a heap on the floor. Once or twice I ironed the dress, only to discover in the morning that wrinkles had reappeared overnight. It was maddening! But my history of absentminded behavior made the inconsistencies plausible. I tried not to give



the mystery too much thought.

Weeks later, I was working on a mock-up of my next project in muslin fabric when I was suddenly interrupted mid-stitch by a loud howl outside my window: a wounded sound that was not quite human, not quite animal. Without moving anything, I left my workspace to investigate. Outside, I found nothing more than an overturned garbage bin. Most likely a hungry stray animal passing through. I sighed with relief but spent the next few minutes cleaning up the trash.

When I reentered the room, the air inside had changed palpably. My skin felt warmer than before, even though the temperature had been dropping since sunset. Maybe my adrenaline was still pumping from the scare. I shook off the strange feeling and sat back down. But when I looked down at my fabric, what I saw confirmed my uneasiness. Instead of the regular straight stitches I'd been sewing with, the machine had switched over to its monogramming function. A completely different presser foot was now attached to the machine, and a message had been embroidered where my stitches ended:

## U MAKE COOL CLOTHES

I jumped back as if the needle had pierced my skin, thinking I must be losing my mind. I was three months sober. There wasn't a drop to drink in the house. And this wasn't a misplaced article of clothing or a few errant wrinkles. I knew without a doubt I had not entered the numerical codes necessary to form those letters, those words. I wouldn't even have known how if I wanted to, because I hadn't gotten around to testing out that feature yet. I was so spooked by this turn of events that I didn't finish stitching the seams I'd been working on that night. Instead, I unplugged the machine, pushed it to the back corner of my sewing table, and replaced the dust cover that had been included in the box. I badly needed a drink, but instead of giving in, I just lay in bed unable to sleep.

When I got home from work the following day, I thought I might be brave enough to tackle the project again. Hopefully there would be no more interruptions. But I was shocked to find the uncovered machine was already back in front of my chair. Not only that, but it had been plugged back in and turned on. The pieces of fabric from the night before were still sitting underneath the raised needle, but now another message had been sewn directly

underneath the last one:

## DONT B AFRAID

I stumbled back, tripping over a fallen ruler in the process. Was this what a psychotic break felt like? And I had been doing so well. I was considering whether to call my sponsor when the sewing machine started up again right in front of my eyes. From my position on the floor, I could see the foot pedal being depressed by the weight of nothing. When the needle finally stilled up top, I got to my feet and approached the table cautiously. One small step, then another, until the new message came into view:

## IM LEANNA

“That’s a pretty name,” I said out loud to no one. My voice shook. “But what are you doing here?” I didn’t know if she could hear me, but the fabric moved to the right an inch, numbers flashed on the display, and the needle started its up-and-down motion yet again:

## I READ UR JOURNAL

I had been leaving it open on my desk after writing each new entry. After all, there was no one around to see it. Or so I’d thought. Immediately, I felt exposed. “That wasn’t for anyone else to read.”

## I KNOW

A pause.

## IM SORRY

I nodded, still flabbergasted by what was happening. “Just, please don’t do it again.” Leanna, whoever or whatever she was, took some time inputting her next message.

## I THINK U & ME R THE SAME

Slowly, she explained. I stayed up with her for the rest of the week, listening to her story. Our back-and-forth correspondance lasted for so long that I had to wind up a new bobbin and replace the thin spool of thread on the machine. I also swapped out fabric scraps as each new one overflowed with words. The machine's plastic body felt warm to the touch. I soon learned that Leanna was a teenager, only fifteen. She'd received the sewing machine as a present for her thirteenth birthday. She'd ever harbored dreams of becoming a costume designer one day. For Halloween that year, she made her first one: a hooded red cloak that made her feel like a girl in a fairy tale. By the following Halloween, she had graduated to trickier materials, so she handcrafted a detailed wolf head and body suit using several yards of faux fur. It was only meant to be a joke for anyone who remembered her costume from the previous year, but she ended up winning first prize for craftsmanship at the annual school competition. Everyone applauded in appreciation when she stepped on stage to receive her ribbon. But two months later, the spring semester kicked off with an outdoor sleepover on the night of the Super Blood Wolf Moon. That's when it all started going downhill.

## I THOUGHT THEY WERE MY FRIENDS

The sleepover was held on school grounds and chaperoned by two of the eighth grade science teachers. Fifteen minutes before the eclipse was supposed to start, Leanna went inside to use the restroom. But when she exited the stall, she was ambushed by a pack of girls she used to play with at recess when they were all kids. They called her *werewolf* like it was a derogatory term and left her lying on the tiled floor in her underwear. *You wouldn't want your nice dress ripping to shreds when you turn, would you?*, they snarled. *We'll keep this.* Leanna went home early that night, her shivering body wrapped in a blanket. She went straight to bed without telling her parents what happened. After all, she didn't even get to watch the eclipse.

## PLEASE DONT CRY

I realized then that my cheeks were wet, and I brushed the tears away, embarrassed. I tried to release the tension I'd been holding in my shoulders. "I'm really sorry that happened to you," I said. "It shouldn't have."

Leanna tried her best to get past the trauma of having to return to that building and see those girls every day. They'd barely been punished. When middle school ended that spring, she thought she could finally move on. But during her freshman year of high school, photographs of her from the night of the eclipse surfaced online. Those images haunted Leanna at every turn. Even at home, she couldn't escape them. She never turned on her sewing machine anymore. She didn't enjoy much of anything anymore. Nine months after the initial assault, she hung herself from the staircase balustrade on the second floor of her parents' home. She didn't die instantly. She remembered being surprised those wooden bars could hold her weight. For one brief second, she even regretted what she'd done. By then it was too late. She could only watch as her consciousness exited her body and left it behind.

NO 1 COULD C ME

she wrote.

I WAS INVISIBLE

she added.

BUT IN A WAY I ALREADY HAD BEEN

Her parents mourned openly in that house. They blamed themselves. She couldn't bear to watch. She wished she'd left behind a longer note. She wished she'd done a lot of things differently. Eventually, her mother packed away Leanna's belongings, including her beloved sewing machine, which was put up for sale online. Where I'd stumbled, by chance, upon the listing on the night of my thirtieth. The box was driven to the post office in the bed of her father's pickup truck. In a risky, last-minute decision, Leanna went with it as a stowaway. What followed was a bumpy ride, but:

I HAD 2 KNOW WHO U WERE

"Thank you for telling me," I said when she was finished. "That couldn't have been easy. I've still never told my story out loud, not to anyone."

IM HERE WHENEVER U R READY

My eyes scanned the room, and the wrap dress that was now hanging on my closet door caught my eye. “So, are you the one who’s been wearing my dress?” No response. “You can tell me, I won’t get mad.” Finally:

YES ITS BEAUTIFUL

Then,

I DONT LIKE FEELING NAKED

Leanna told me that initially she could only interact with the objects in my room that had once belonged to her, like the sewing machine and all its included accessories. But she soon discovered she could also touch items that had been sewn with the machine as well. “Do you want to put it on now?” I asked, indicating the dress. “I would love to see how it looks on someone else.” She didn’t reply. But a few seconds later, I witnessed the dress slide down the hanger on its own, remaining suspended in the air for a long moment. Then, I saw the bow untie itself. I saw the dress open up before closing again around the shape of a body. But I couldn’t see the actual body it covered. I only saw my dress, the one that had once saved my life, held up as if by invisible strings. Its dangling straps tied themselves back into a bow, cinching at the waist, and the assembled outfit began floating towards me. It spun around a few times, the ruffled hem of the skirt turning upwards slightly. The bodice twisted this way and that, swaying back and forth at the base. The long bishop sleeves rose in the air as if defying gravity. I could tell she was dancing. The dress was beautiful in action. It came alive when worn. The abstract watercolor print reminded me of drifting clouds. And so my own body joined in on the dance, mirroring her moves as best I could. I didn’t feel self-conscious now. I felt liberated.

A short time later, my dress floated over to the other side of the room and perched on my desk chair, hunched over the sewing machine. The sleeves extended towards the fabric that still remained, adjusting its position while never actually touching it. Then, a series of numbers began to flash on the digital display as Leanna plugged in the appropriate numbers to spell out her next message. I leaned in as soon as the needle began to move again:

THANK U

When I told her I was ready to share my own story, she could sense when my nerves were getting the best of me.

DONT B AFRAID

she wrote, echoing one of her first messages to me  
BREATHE

I took a deep breath before speaking. Mine was a short story. Like her, I had been assaulted at school. Like her, the perpetrator had been someone I trusted. Leanna didn't write anything more for the longest time, just stayed near me and listened, wearing that celestial dress while my past spilled out. The thing that had always disturbed me most was how my entire third grade class had stood by and pretended nothing was happening in that room. No one ever so much as blinked, not even my teacher.

After I was finished speaking, Leanna carefully crafted her response:

I SEE YOU

The magnitude of those words, fully spelled out without shortcuts or abbreviations, brought tears to my eyes once again. "Thank you," was all I could say. "I see you, too."

She never communicated with me again after that night. I wanted to believe her spirit was finally at peace. But every once in a while I'd find another one of my precious garments in a slightly different position from where I'd left it. By that time, I was making all types of clothing: denim jeans, a cropped blazer, a jumpsuit, a pinafore, a bucket hat. With every seam sewn, I became stronger and more confident. Bit by bit, I felt like I was stitching the deconstructed pieces of my life back together.

Months later, when I found the pieces of fabric we once used to communicate languishing at the bottom of my scrap drawer, I used them to cobble together a simple tote bag that was perfect for trips to the grocery store or the library. I DIDNT REALIZE HOW MUCH I WANTED 2 LIVE, one strap declared. I FOLDED MYSELF INTO THAT DARK BOX, the other announced. And whenever I opened the bag to grab whatever I'd tucked inside, the words DONT B AFRAID and BREATHE stared back, becoming a reminder that would stay with me forever.

## A Painting of Such Reputation

Matthew Meade

I had no intention of reviewing Camilla Rowland's installation, the one prominently (and dare I say proudly) featured at the center of the Midwest Center for Art's current exhibit, but my relationship with the piece known as *Exultation of Inconsistency* is too well known for me to escape without comment. People have asked me about it with impressively unremitting frequency over the past several years and I can only assume that interrogation will continue. They ask about that painting when I am on panels, they inquire about the intention of Rowland's use of line when I lecture at universities, they ask in private about the composition when I am cornered at cocktail parties or while I try to urinate during the intermission of a performance of Haydn's *The Creation*. Indeed, the primary reaction to the release of my book last year, a grouping of essays collected from a decades long career as — I don't mind telling you since I long ago learned how corrosive false modesty can be — one of the most prominent and respected art critics of the generation, was a near universal roar of objection that there had been no juicy details about my long-standing relationship and semi-public falling out with the sometimes lauded, sometimes criticized piece that Camilla Rowland (or as I knew her, Cammy) painted midway through her unorthodox career. I don't know if this is the time or the venue to describe my relationship with the work of art, or associated parties like Cammy and the infamous Doris Moore, but this publication has generously bequeathed this space to me and I have decided to use it to set the record straight, so to speak. Whether or not this is ill-advised remains to be seen. This piece of writing will be my final word on this entire matter and no one will be responding on my behalf to any further comments on it by any party.

I first became aware of the painting called *Exultation of Inconsistency*, not unlike everyone else, at Camilla Rowland's show at the Transnational which I attended as a very young man. She had just come scurrying back to oils and the canvas after a string of failures and she needed to present herself as a general in the army of Neo-Anti-Traditionalism, marshaling her forces for the war against the fad that was Anti-Neo-Modernism. While I had been earning my degree, Rowland was revered, written about in our textbooks like she was some kind of geographic anomaly. By the time I was waiting for the arts section of *The Dragoon*,

I had already witnessed the once lauded painter's collapse — those dark performance art days, dressed as a stuffed animal, blooming like a pustule on security camera footage; listed in the liner notes on the record of a deconstructionist synthwave band as playing “thoughts & prayers”; the incident with the acetylene torch when she was trying to become a sculptor.

I see now that these flights of fancy, these forays into art forms where she didn't belong, are part of what makes us love her, part of why we find her so troublingly intoxicating, so delightfully problematic. It was these incursions into realms where she was ill-equipped for success that engendered her oils on canvas with such life once she returned.

So, I knew of her, thought I understood her even, when I was sent over to that show, *The Void Staring Back: Survey of Line, Light and Thought*. My attendance had been offered as some kind of olive branch between my institution and the gallery owner, the details of the row never being revealed to me. I wasn't even there to see Rowland's work, however. That wasn't even the point of it. I was there to see Parker Joyce Synge's sculptures, fire-killed madness that they were. And we all know where she ended up.

The show failed to engage me at first — it was one of those events that had beautiful caterers, but terrible food — and under that malaise I found myself looking for an exit. It was when I stepped outside that I saw the painting; *Exultation of Inconsistency* and all those lurid colors vibrating from the canvas the way steel does when it's wet. That piece, erroneously identified by most casual observers by the outdated descriptor of “abstract,” stood there rebelling against the wind, chatting up some busker in the light left behind by the setting sun, pretending that he wasn't trying to score some cocaine, though he was very obviously trying to score some cocaine.

To be clear, and for those of you who don't know (I don't know why you might be reading this if you don't already know), “Exultation of Inconsistency” is anthropomorphic. He has no mouth to speak, yet he speaks. He has no esophagus to swallow, yet he swallows. He has no organs with which to reproduce, yet he makes love. Just like you might. Curious, no?

I interrupted the anthropoid painting and the timid busker, asking for a light. The busker hustled off and “Exultation of Inconsistency” spoke to me. The painting introduced himself as Jessie, as if the work was separate from him as an entity, as if *Exultation of Inconsistency* was just some part he played in a long-closed play. I didn't question the moniker since



most of the people I'd gone to school with had either contorted their first name into a single initial that adorned their middle name like a designer handbag, or simply asked to be credited in their articles for major Art & Culture magazines such as *Spike* or the digit "4".

I could tell upon first seeing Jessie that if he wasn't good, there was at least something I liked about him. Rowland's work during that period had evolved to the point where line and color achieved a sort of grace she'd never approached before, but that wasn't what made the painting so attractive. There was something different about him, unique. He was not completely original, of course, he would not exist were it not for Rothko and Duchamp, but who among us isn't the descendent of someone or something? And just because you can trace my ancestry back to someone who traded slaves, was a Nazi sympathizer, and who gouged rural farmers during the Great Depression, I'd petition you not utilize that information to formulate expectations for me.

Camilla found us out in the alleyway, stifled in our efforts to acquire cocaine and having settled for Sertraline provided by a fellow gallery attendee instead. Camilla hustled us back inside talking and clucking so ferociously like she always used to do. I don't blame her chastising us that way. At the time, it was unclear if her *Exultation* series was going to matter and she didn't want it to get away from her, so I couldn't blame her for ruining our fun and nannying us back into the gallery.

We couldn't know that *Exultation of Inconsistency* would come to be known as the defining work of the artist, as well as the series, and eventually the post-anarcho-brutalism movement in general. I think I was blind to it all because Jessie was the first good time I'd had in a while. We spent the rest of the showing making fun of the artists, trying to start a fire in the bathroom, and talking about our mutual interest in The Mandelbrot set. In short, we liked each other from the start, attracted to each other's propensity for mischief and the shared knowledge that we were so much more helically enlightened than everyone else and all their terrestrial concerns. I couldn't know what was to come. I couldn't expect the Doris Moore situation to unfold. I was focused on progressing in the world of art criticism, having my voice heard and my opinions matter.

My initial review went something like this:

*The work is lustful and virile, potent and dumb. It has the decency to not be beautiful but it finds a way to lord that over you. It perservates on the absurd. On the obtuse. It knows better and it knows it knows better. What can be more obnoxious? Still, it would make a lovely dinner guest. Full of knowledge and anecdotes, an off-kilter sensibility, and the desire to do right. To make good on some promise. To thumb its nose at convention and to try to transcend, though what it attempts to transcend is anyone's guess.*

The review was hesitant but effective. Along with Geary's description of the textures being "treacherous" and Diaz' suggestion that the tone was "welcome," my article helped to establish the work in the scene. I wasn't the only one to notice Jessie or comment on him, of course. One choice line that came out of that very show, and one that I see quoted over and over again (and it will be easy enough for you to track down who said it) is, "Though the form may be inconsequential, the line work gives the piece an import its brethren in the movement do not typically possess." I guess sometimes if you compliment someone or something, it's like you are the one who did the thing. I don't mean to be so critical of my fellow cultural assessors, but after being a part of a class for so long, one can't help develop opinions.

Cammy was thrilled with all of this, of course, and so she used the good will earned by the successful show to run off to the field of robotics, deeming it the most relevant form in the art world before returning defeated to the easel and the palette. I didn't think about the artist, the venue, or the work again until I encountered Jessie some time later and quite by chance. I found him, of all places, at the Y on 79th and Bentham. He was talking to a big fellow who was getting dressed and "Exultation of Inconsistency" was making a fool out of himself, as usual.

"That trainer you were talking to was unbelievable," Jessie said. "Great body. Is she through the gym?"

"What trainer?" the big fellow asked.

"In the red tank top. And the yoga pants?"

"That's my fiancée," the man replied and slammed his locker. His nose was twisted and when he slammed the locker I notices the chisel of his pecs. The ceiling bulbs created a chiaroscuro contrast between each twitching muscle of his body.

“Jessie,” I said, surprising both the annoyed Adonis and the 55.125” x 65.125” acrylic and oil on sewn silk, cotton, and linen with colors that Limpidi called “lurid,” but Ng had suggested were “enlightened.” I don’t know if Jessie recognized me, but he was happy that his conversation was being re-directed so soon after sticking his metaphorical foot in his mouth. Though he had no foot, of course. Since he was a painting.

We went out for lunch at that place near the Y that no one goes to anymore, The Vaguely Cajun Café where I had a bowl of Pretty Much Gumbo and he had a sandwich they called a Destitute Male Child. That place had lost most of its charm by now, though it’s still there in some form or another. We ate our lunch and that, of course, turned into drinks. Well, I drank. It turned out that he didn’t drink alcohol, preferring teas or simply water. We had something of an odd but enjoyable night — finding venues we’d never seen before or since, encountering folks with sensibilities so charmingly off-kilter that they didn’t seem real, getting invited into environs because of how we were and what we looked like. We laughed derisively and acceptingly through most of it.

Jessie was self-satisfied and strange, opinionated about the most obscure things. He could sometimes be difficult, but I found that I liked him quite a bit. He had nice things to say about the artist who painted him, but also honest things. The type of things that didn’t usually come up. “Cammy is preoccupied with her feet. In ways that I think go beyond hygiene...” and “The woman doesn’t excuse herself after she farts. It’s the strangest thing I’ve ever seen.” And he flattered me as well. In a way that seemed genuine. He seemed, at the time, to be quite transparent. Uninterested in hiding anything. He talked openly about his negative opinion of his own appearance, his complex relationship with the opposite sex, his mother. I felt like I was in the presence of authenticity. That was my mistake.

We spent a lot of time together over the next few years. Parties, late night conversations at bistros I didn’t know existed, even over the phone or via text. I introduced Jessie to people. Young artists who I thought might fall in love with one or the other of us; people who I thought might be impressed by my knowing the painting; frustrated mid-careerists whom I thought he might help. Because of my relationship with Jessie, and a few other works it doesn’t seem necessary to mention here, my reputation grew. Though I reject the term “kingmaker,” gendered and regressive as it is, I will admit to a certain amount of clout

in the art and even the literary and cinematic worlds — not too bad for a kid from upstate who always dreamed of the exquisite corpse that is the skyline of Manhattan. If one were to be magnanimous to Jessie, one might attribute some of my success to him. Being one of the first to notice him gave me a bit of clout and gravitas that would shield me from later missteps (the less said about *Analogic Effervescent* and the Josiah Twins the better.)

Jessie changed as well. No longer just an objet d’art, he was now a dandy-about-town, earning friends within my social circle and without. He once introduced me to a Croatian freedom fighter whom I found charming and a bit sinister. You never knew who you’d find Jessie with. Once he overcame the expectation that he be given the kind of clout he received hanging on a wall and once he navigated the inconvenience of being a canvas on wooden frame, plastered with paint and having no hands, feet, digestive tracts, sex organs, or legally recognized personhood, he found his way in the world quite well.

Because of my proximity to Jessie, I got into places I had no business being, I had a sense of self-assuredness that I did not deserve. I broke laws and was not held accountable. I felt bullet-proof. We all did. It seemed like we were doing something bigger together. Like there was some destiny compelling us. I wasn’t so naïve as to think we would change the world with art, but I thought we might make some kind of impact. I thought that between Camilla, Doris Moore, Jessie, and me that we were the start of something. That things would change after us. That we were different. That the normal rules wouldn’t apply to us. But it turned out we were just like everybody else. Just petty and mean and ruled by our passions. And discovering that together made us hate one another.

The falling out happened around the time Camilla died. Maybe that was part of it. The work seemed different without her. More permanent. Hallowed, somehow. For a long time I used to put Jessie in the same category as other works I considered important; the photography of Walker Evans, the Goldberg Variations, Andy Warhol’s disquieting portrait of JonBenét Ramsey, Bouguereau’s *Satyr Drowned by Nymphs*, and the entirety of the work of Richard Brautigan. We all have a funny way of curating the museums we keep in our hearts.

I don’t even care about the money he owes me anymore. I don’t even hold it against him that he thinks I was trying to sleep with his wife. The infamous Doris Moore situation that everyone always asks about. And, at this point, it is important to clarify, precisely be-

cause there has been so much talk, so many rumors swirling regarding this situation, that I did not have an affair with Jessie's wife, did not sleep with her anyway. Doris, feline, disorganized, and lude, and I, pompous, self-aggrandizing, mean, had both been seduced by Jessie, however, both been convinced of the notion of a beauty beyond the norm, of the absurdity of the mores and the expectations of the day. Jessie's mysticism enthralled us.

It's true, of course, that Doris and I did spend more time together than anyone else associated with the neo-paleo-fundamentalists. And we didn't tell Jessie how often we got together. How could we? He'd have just been fine with it and who would want that? We wanted to cuckold him with our chaste friendship; getting off on not getting off. The delicious thrill of asking if the other had mentioned the lunch date at Greyson's to him and confirming that we hadn't. Hand-waving away notions of infidelity with the flimsy proof that we'd never see one another nude.

We did not love one another. Or, at least, I didn't love her. She might have felt differently; it's not my place to speak for her. You'd have to ask her if perhaps she longed for me to provide for her the things Jessie could not. You'd have to ask her that. As for what you can ask me, I suppose you could ask me if I feel guilty and I do. I know that I could have handled the whole thing differently. I know the ways in which I erred and I will have to be the one who lives with those mistakes.

The last time I saw him was at The Dilettante, where Doris and I liked to meet for drinks. We were chatting up some teen chess prodigy who was there drinking club soda, trying to get served. We'd both turned down lunch offers from Jessie that day, lighting upon some excuse or another, always surprising ourselves with how easy it was to deceive him, how simple, how willing he was to believe. We laughed about it when we got together.

"He just thinks that people run off to meet with their genealogist in the middle of the day."

"Can you imagine being that oblivious?"

When we looked up from our mirth, we saw all those textures Anton Geary had described as "treacherous" and the color selection Kline had suggested was "enlightened."

"Are you enjoying yourselves," Jessie said to us, chasing off the chess child. He knew just where to find us. He always had. "You two look like the worst couple since Brando fucked Dick Pryor."

Doris didn't take the bait. She never did. When Camilla had been with us, Camilla and Doris would scurry away to laugh about Russian composers and other inside jokes that they found uproarious, but that Jessie and I didn't care to get. Without Camilla to distract her, Doris looked long and hard at Jessie, waiting obediently for the next insult.

"Don't be so miserable," Doris said, pleading with him.

"Sit down with us," I offered, though I knew it was the wrong thing to say.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" she asked him before I could even pull out a chair.

"I hoped you would," Jessie told her.

"Would you just sit down?" I said, trying not to plead.

"She knows what this is about," Jessie said, without sitting.

Doris' mouth was a citrus fruit unplucked, her arms folded as tight as an envelope.

"I wish you'd told me she was trash when you introduced us," Jessie said.

"I think you introduced me to her," I corrected, though I wasn't sure,

"It's not like it was anything that you haven't done," she said.

"I thought we were past that," he said.

"I guess I wasn't past it," she said to him, her arms still stuck to each other, her lips still pursed.

Then Jessie said something that I'll never forget. Something so despicable that I can't even relate it here. We all sat silent after Jessie said it, looking at one another, wondering what we were to do now.

"Maybe we should go," I said.

"Did you know about this?" Jessie asked me.

And of course I knew about the affairs. All of them. I knew who everyone was sleeping with. What could I say. What did he think we talked about while we were gadding from one overpriced rooftop bistro to the next? Even that wouldn't have been the end if it weren't for the stick-up. We'd fought like that before, betrayed one another. It wasn't abnormal.

I didn't think anything bad could happen when I was with Jessie. Nothing really bad. I thought that knowing Jessie was going to save me from something, anything, everything. I thought knowing him would matter. So, when the chess kid turned out to be a stick-up artist, the pimply kid transformed me into a menace by the same magic that had animated Jessie

and made us all, no one thought anything would go wrong. So when the chess-prodigy-cum-stick-up-kid pulled his gun on us, no one took him seriously until he killed the bartender. That's when we filled a bag with our valuables.

"I'm gonna shoot someone else," he said, like he was confessing it. "Who's it gonna be?"

"Don't..." Doris said when he turned his gun on Jessie. "Shoot me instead."

"Anything to say about that, fella?" the stick-up artist who maybe could have been the next Kasparov wanted to know.

Jessie didn't say anything. He shook his head and turned his will and fate over to the boy.

So that was pretty much the end of things. Jessie and I weren't friends after that. None of us were. How could we be after we'd revealed what we were really made of? The old chess-prodigy-as-a-disguise-for-a-stick-up-kid routine. We should have seen it coming. Though it wouldn't have mattered. Something else would have led us to that dissolution point eventually. We all survived in some form: the stick-up kid went to jail; Jessie returned Doris-less, to his position in the museum — the wooden frame and canvas hanging on the wall, the linework resplendant as ever; Doris went back to composing, never to speak to either of us again; Cammy is dead, of course; and I have become the specimen you have come to know and trust.

I see now that maybe Jessie and I were just in the right place at the right time. That perhaps we needed each other for either of us to have any meaning. But who knows if that's right. This all happened a long time ago.

So, seeing that *Exultation of Inconsistency*, the painting of such renown, is at the mid-western Center for the Arts brings back a lot of memories. Some good, some bad. It would have been nice to see Camilla again, sipping wine, her makeup not quite right, the sense that she had somewhere else to be redolent. But she is long dead, of course. I wonder what she would have thought about how Jessie had changed. No longer as piercing, the garde that he was the avante of having been relieved of duty and relegated to context for that new wave, the Retro-Proto-Classicists or the Meta-Radical-Minimalist and then whatever comes after that. Not that it matters what she would have thought of him. Despite the years, there is still

something about him. Something beautiful and charming, tragic and humble, but I've learned too much since first seeing him. I'd become myself and no longer needed to wonder what I was in context to him. It is bittersweet to say goodbye to the kind of fear and excitement that blooms in a new relationship. But there are new feelings associated with the letting go. New cavities created by releasing the hold over me.

Over the years I have learned that my initial assumptions — that he was authentic, original, and fundamentally good-hearted — were wrong. When I look back I wonder how much of my relationship with Jessie was based on this misperception, on my desire for him to be what he was not. Though, who needs their art to be true, really? Who needs their art to be the kind of guy who would help you move, who might pick you up from a bar if you'd had too much and got kicked out, who might loan you some money or give you the benefit of the doubt? Who might expect their art to save them from a bullet, stand up for them at their wedding, answer the phone when no one else will? I'd argue none of us deserve that from our art. None of us have earned that.



## Some Information about Pedro Ramirez, 2025 Nobel Prize Laureate, Received by Means of Telepathy

A. Molotkov

### Introduction

*Our extrasensory connection began in 1962. This might seem confusing considering I was born in 1968. Truth is, the sort of connection the two of us shared does not require concurrence and is devoid of chronological order. In fact, it is natural that a telepathic connection that overcomes distance should be able to sustain a gap in time. Although I placed my notes about Ramirez in a semblance of order, by no means does it imply that the notion of sequence is intrinsic to our communications.*

*Skeptics may doubt the authenticity of my account, arguing that a communication such as ours has not been verified. Indeed, it may be an isolated occurrence, a part of the bizarre phantasmagoria that is the life of Pedro Ramirez. I play only a secondary part in all of this, the part of a vessel for his telepathic revelations. Someone else could have been in my place. I am of no importance to the story.*

*I will not focus on the logistics of our telepathic connection — it is Ramirez that I am interested in. Should any of the facts mentioned here attract the attention of scientists, psychics, or other curious individuals, I'd be glad to answer their questions at another time.*

*Of course, my familiarity with Ramirez is limited to the bits of information he chose to share with me (assuming it was a conscious choice on his part — a questionable assumption, since his circumstances are unknown). Ultimately, I must admit upfront that my report is unverifiable. Skeptics have noticed that my reasoning is based on a completely unfounded premise that a writer named Pedro Ramirez actually exists. In fact, I don't have any proof. 2025 is still ahead of us. It's more likely that our Pedro concealed his real name, rendering all attempts to find him pointless. Maybe Pedro is not even a person, but rather, a hypnotic suggestion induced by an unknown entity whose motives are also unknown. Then again, maybe I have a mental disorder, and Pedro is a voice in my head.<sup>1</sup> Let's just agree to think of him as Pedro.*

*The exact nature of our telepathic communications varied, but on most occasions it assumed the form of monologue. This is why it seemed natural to tell the story from Pedro's point of view.*

*The day after tomorrow is the second anniversary of our most recent communication. In Pedro's time, it took place on a dreary autumn night of 2025. I think it was our last telepathic contact.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Detractors should take note: this statement is rhetorical and does not constitute an admission. One should never consider oneself fully sane — yet I assure you that I have never shown suspicious symptoms, have not been institutionalized, and am not seeing a psychiatrist at this time.*

## 1

As you know, my first novel, *Rebel Illusions*, came out twenty-three years ago, in 1997. It was successful in my country. A year later, I received a call from the Nobel Committee, letting me know I had won the Prize. I was excited, but incredulous. Nobels tended to go to gray-haired maestros of literature. Awarding a Nobel Prize to a *young talent* is nearly unprecedented.

I was on my way to Stockholm when they called me again, to let me know that the previous message had been a mistake and that the Prize went to José Saramago.

I was hurt for a moment, but I had always admired Saramago's work, whereas my own was still beginning. It was easy not to take offense. I got to work and wrote my second novel, *The Demented Ones*. Imagine my surprise when in 1999 I received another call from Sweden, with a retraction the next day. It could have been a coincidence if the misadventures with Nobel Prizes had stopped. But believe me or not, precisely the same thing has happened every year since then.

At first I thought of this as mockery, although I failed to understand why I was chosen as its subject. I was planning to sue the Committee, but when other strange things started happening to me, I realized the Committee had nothing to do with it.

Naturally, I stopped paying attention to their tricks and went on with my life. But this year, they were unusually persistent. They employed every form of communication to reach me. I didn't believe them anyway, but a call to the airline agency confirmed a reservation in my name. I decided: why not travel to Sweden at somebody else's expense. I might come back with new ideas.

You know the rest. But there is one thing I still can't fathom. What was a mistake: twenty-two false awards or the real one?

## 2

I've mentioned that my first novel came out in 1997. Not many know that it wasn't actually the first. The truth is, I had started my literary work earlier, in 1993. I began with an autobiography, unpublished for reasons that will become clear. I decided to stick with maximum authenticity. No fiction. I didn't even dare give the character another name.

Naturally, my character too was writing a memoir, and so was his character. I enjoyed

building this chain of personalities, every one a copy of myself. It helped consolidate, elevate my own existence, still vague in my twenties.

Yet, very soon the situation was out of control. I had sentenced myself to an infinite sequence of reiterations. I was painfully unable to change the course of events, even in the slightest. The characters had captured me, surrounded me with a dense circle I couldn't break. They faced me with my own faces, rendering any resistance bitterly pointless.

I had already written over two thousand pages, but had not attempted any plot development. This abundance tormented me, as well as those I had settled on the pages — my replicas. If this were to continue, I'd be condemned to a lifetime on the sole project of my autobiography.

But how could I abandon my principle: maximal truthfulness, no fiction? The situation was hopeless.

I thought of killing myself, but that way I would have killed all of my twins not yet created. In some way, their non-existence would in turn imply that I, too, was immaterial, as if I had never existed at all. Without a reflection in the mirror, can one claim to exist?

The crisis was redoubled by yet another misfortune: somewhere in the turmoil of repetitions I must have made a mistake. A wrong word, a missing letter — and now, to my horror, the portrait was gradually losing familiar features. As if my mistake had led to a devolution of my image. The mirror stared at me with somebody else's face. I spent hours rereading the pages I had written, over and over, and now I was in a labyrinth of mistakes giving birth to other mistakes. I wasn't the only one writing a book, everyone was: my protagonist, his character, the multiple characters down the line. Any writer knows that characters act independently of the author's will. Maybe one of them had decided to introduce fiction into what had started out as truth? The decision itself may have eluded the narrative frame: scrupulous as I am, it was impossible to document everything.

I was horrified! In reverse causality, I could be seen as I'm portrayed in the book. Everyone would perceive me in a new, unfair light. My characters had conspired to edit me, to erase those of my features they didn't like, to add new, improved functionality. It's hard to express how much this frightened me. Would these alterations help? Was this revenge for subjecting my replicas to all the difficulties of reconciliation between being creators and imaginary figures? Was I myself a character in some strange story?

I was on the verge of insanity. Do you know what saved me? A fire. A fire in my office. My own fault — I should have made sure the cigarette was out before dropping it into the paper basket. The basket caught on fire, the fire turned to the curtains and before too long the furniture was in flames. The fire was extinguished, but my manuscript had burned.

I was free again! Idle observers couldn't fathom a house owner overjoyed by the fire. They must have suspected an insurance scam.

Gradually, this accident took on a frightening meaning. I couldn't get it out of my head. What did they feel, dying in the fire, unable to escape the pages I had placed them on? Did they feel the pain? Did their cremation mean my own death in some ambiguous dimension I can't conceive of, but from which I will suffer?

I still check my skin for burns.

### 3

In 2002 I finished my fourth novel, *The Death of a General*. The publication date was set. I was expecting the book to appear in stores any day. Finally I saw it. I was slightly surprised because I had not received the author's copies yet, but it must have been due to the ongoing postal service strike. Impatient, I decided to buy a dozen copies for the closest friends. Imagine my astonishment when I realized that instead of mine, a completely different name graced the cover. Moreover, the book was published by Mexico Books instead of Torero!

I was outraged. I had never heard of such an obnoxious theft. I rushed to the Mexico Books office — fortunately, located right here, in Mexico City. The owner herself received me: I was already more or less well-known by then, at least in my country. She knew nothing about the incident, and my story upset her considerably. I reassured her that I would not hold it about her personally. She asked the secretary to check the records, and we discovered that the manuscript had been received from the fake author directly.

Eager to take care of the situation as quickly as possible, I decided to confront my offender. Carlos Montanella, a name I hadn't heard before — or had I? There are so many names floating around in the literary world. Montanella's motives remained obscure: it was obvious that no court would doubt my authorship. I looked him up.

I rang the bell at the door of an expensive apartment in a fashionable part of town. A

pleasant middle-aged man opened the door, I acknowledged as much even in my rage. The host invited me in, all politeness. Yes, he had read my books, they were very good, but to what did he owe the honor? He looked completely bewildered, an excellent actor. But I knew the truth, and I laid it out for him.

“Wait a minute!” he asked, acting startled. “Are you crazy? I didn’t even dream of stealing your manuscript. Why would I? I write books, I don’t steal them. I wrote this one myself. If you don’t believe me, I’ll show you the drafts, the backups. But this is absolutely insane — what gave you the idea? What is this, some experiment?”

“No, it’s not,” I replied.

He shook his head, puzzled, and left the room, returning barely ten seconds later, with a pile of paperwork. Out of politeness, I leafed through the pages — they were fragments of my novel, an imitation of working drafts abound in cross-outs and insertions. I could see at once they were not mine. The fake drafts must have been created after the manuscript was stolen. I didn’t know the meaning of this masquerade. The situation was taking an unexpected turn.

Then I noticed something — a postal receipt dated November 15, with Mexico Books address on it. Evidently, the day when Montanella had turned in his “final” fake version.

On November 16, I had decided on the title, *The Death of a General*, over *Collision*. On November 17, I’d sent it off to my publisher.

Something didn’t connect.

I called Mexico Books and confirmed they had received the book on the 16th — before I had sent it to Torero.

It all came together. We both had written the exact same novel. Since then the cover of *The Death of a General* bears two names: mine and Carlos Montanella’s, who, thanks to this odd incident, became a good friend. Technically speaking, he had two days worth of priority, but he was kind enough to forego this minor detail. I’m happy about my decision to give up the old title. If not for that, the coincidence would have been revealed much later, and Carlos and I might have ended up bitter enemies instead of friends.

#### 4

Six years ago I wrote *On Giant’s Track*. I was quite proud of myself: it was my best

work thus far. I sent it off to the publisher, expecting her excited acceptance. A few days later a telegram arrived:

*dear señor ramirez are you suggesting new edition please highlight corrections*

I utterly dislike telegrams, even though most people seem to enjoy sending and receiving them. I could not fathom what they wanted of me. I demanded an explanation.

From the reply, I learned something unbelievable: apparently the publisher was convinced that I had already written a novel with that title. Absurd! I may have mentioned the title, stewing in my mind years in advance, and the publisher must have misplaced it in her memory.

Finally she called me and assured me that the new manuscript was completely identical to my novel, *On Giant's Track*, published by Torero in 2009.

I hung up confused, uncertain if my life was what I had perceived as my life. I couldn't believe this absurd occurrence, but a thorough inspection of my special self-bookshelf revealed it. The novel had fallen behind other books and magazines featuring my work. I'd forgotten all about it! How was this possible? I had almost lost a year to this distressful selective amnesia.

There wasn't even a slightest difference between the old and the new version. Is any artist capable of such supernatural consistency? After all, there are many ways to say the same thing. Was it merely another coincidence?

Unfortunately, this was not the end of it. Two years ago, it happened again. It bent me out of shape for quite some time. When I had finally recovered, I was glad to get back to work. I was hoping writing would help me get over the crisis. Indeed, it felt wonderful. But when I showed the first chapter to a good friend and confidant, we were in for a shock. I had written the beginning of *On Giant's Track*.

I did the only thing I could do under the circumstances: I ordered a sign that read:

**NEVER WRITE** *On Giant's Track*

Below that, in a smaller font, I quoted the first several sentences, just in case. I hung the sign on the wall by my desk. Since then, each time I start writing that novel, sooner or later the sign grabs my attention and I indignantly erase the newly written pages.

Discussing this is difficult. The sign has helped me tell the story clearly. But in truth, I'm far from certain that I have ever written a novel whose title referenced a physically

unique personality. This topic sounds interesting, something I should work on soon, perhaps even tonight.

## 5

Once, my novel disappeared. The manuscript I had mailed to the publisher vanished from a sealed safe, but the seal remained intact. All the rough drafts disappeared from my house, my computer. Moreover, all my notes regarding the novel in question were erased from my diary, leaving empty pages behind. Thus, every bit of the novel's existence was retracted, and clearly, not by human hands.

I was facing the option of rewriting the novel or giving it up. Given my experiences, if I rewrote it, I would probably lose it again. I decided to surrender.

And yet, fate, always so inventive with jokes concerning me, was fair this time. A year later, in a bookstore, I saw a novel I had not written signed with my name.

I knew this was going to happen. Six months earlier, notes regarding this spontaneous opus had started to appear in my notebooks. I know I didn't make those notes, although no formal investigation could prove it. Although written in my handwriting with a pen similar to mine, the speculations were concerned with what to do next, where to proceed with the plot, how to reinforce the characters. These were plans, while all I ever jot down is brief information about the parts already written. But I must admit: these fake notes were consistent with my writing style. Remarkably, they never appeared while I watched.

According to the notes, the novel promised to be good — a serious, uncompromising investigation of love and greed. I was satisfied with the trade forced upon me. For the sake of my reputation I cannot disclose which novel I'm referring to, although this information will be disclosed after my death.

## 6

These anecdotes represent only a small share of the bizarre and inexplicable events that have plagued my life over the last twenty-seven years. I could tell countless tales, if not for the fear that I have already tired my telepathic listener. If you crave bizarre real-life stories like mine, you should use telepathy to contact my friend Carlos Montanella. As you must have guessed, he has plenty to tell. In fact, Carlos' story is nearly identical to mine. All the

adventures that have amazed and bewildered me over the years have occurred to him as well, sometimes in an altered form, or at a substantially different phase in his life. Carlos appears to be my approximate double, his story is as good as mine.

Yet, my disclosure would not be complete if I didn't mention the situation I face now.

The beginning of my new novel finds the main character, Pedro, in his car, on the road, on the way back from his out-of-town villa. There is a woman in the middle of the road, she waves for him to stop. If he doesn't help, she may be stuck here for hours waiting for the next car. Pedro rolls down the window.

"Could you give me a ride to the city?" the woman says.

"Sure, get in."

She does.

"What are you doing here at this time?" Pedro asks.

"Just walking," she shrugs.

It's one o'clock in the morning, with no town in sight.

My character drops her off at home. She invites him for a cup of coffee, but he's not up to it. He still has a chapter to write. He claims a headache, asks for a rain check, and leaves with her phone number.

A month has passed. Tonight, it is I who is on my way back into town. The headlights grasp at scraps of reality in night's domain. A white apparition. A woman, waving. I recall my novel and smile: what a coincidence.

"Could you give me a ride to the city?" she asks.

These are the most natural words to express the request. I say yes to this game, it thrills me that I'm the only one who knows about it, that the woman has no idea about her predecessor on the pages of my novel. Could fate miss such an opportunity?

"Sure, get in," I reply. "What are you doing here at this time?"

Some enigmatic inspiration comes over her, and she says:

"Just walking," and shrugs.

I drop her off at her place, reject the coffee, return home. I turn my computer on and get to work. Maria has moved in with Pedro. It didn't take long for trouble to start. Once again, she was out until morning hours, without a call, without a warning.

"Where have you been all night?" Pedro asks.



“That’s none of your business. I don’t make you tell me how you spend your time.”

“Sure. I’m not making you either. I’m just asking you where you were. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“Nowhere,” Maria snaps.

## 7

Six months have passed since the road episode. In all this time I haven’t noticed a single touch of difference between the text of the novel and the real events that follow. Every day I describe exactly one day in the lives of my characters. Obedient to the rules of the game, I stop there. Naturally, I cannot mention every detail; some flexibility remains.

It’s a special kind of pleasure, following precisely the plot that I myself have written. If not for this, I would have broken up with Maria. This relationship is not real, it’s a mere literary game, an extension of my novel. There’s nothing else behind it. We have nothing to talk about. We fight frequently, if not continuously. And tonight — again — she was gone all evening, who knows where.

Sometimes I confuse myself with my protagonist and the real Maria with the one I have invented. Only the one-month interval helps avoid chaos. I’m confident I can end this game anytime. But something has stopped me so far. One way or another, it has to end sometime. My novel is not infinite.

## 8

Almost a year has passed. I’m at my desk, writing. I’m going to finish my novel today. Pedro walks into the dining room and pours himself a cognac. It’s midnight, but Maria is not back yet. He calls her at her apartment, which she insists on keeping. To his relief, she answers.

“Aren’t you coming?” he asks, pointlessly.

“No, Pedro, I’m not. I just don’t feel up to it tonight.”

“Is it something serious or is it just one of your moods?”

“It’s serious. It’s one of my moods. My moods are serious. I don’t know.”

“Wait for me, I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Pedro says.

“Don’t come. I don’t want to see you.”

“I’m coming.”

He rings the bell. Maria doesn’t open for a while. He rings again, then again. The door reluctantly moves.

“What’s the matter?” His voice is almost out of control, not quite.

“Nothing. Come in?”

Another fight is not long in coming.

“You think I ever loved you?” Maria screams. “Idiot. Only a self-important ass like yourself could believe that. Alberto and I have been doing it behind your back all this time. I picked you only for your damn money. And guess what. I can’t do it anymore, even for the money. It’s just too much. Bloody Shakespeare! Hemingway!”

“Shut up!” Pedro interrupts.

“Oh, no! Why don’t you listen to me? It’s going to do you good! You should read one of your books sometime. I’d never laid an eye on such banal, arrogant stuff. To tell you the truth, I couldn’t even make it through the first ten pages. And boy, do I hate it when you start talking about your work. Just to think that I had to pretend I was thrilled by the conversation.”

Quite unlike himself, Pedro loses control, the hurt and the sadness rushing to his head. He slaps her — something unimaginable, something he hadn’t considered himself capable of. Maria’s not one to take this lightly, and a fist fight ensues. An accidental push, and she falls, her head against the wooden sofa frame, but obliquely, not a direct hit. It doesn’t sound or look dangerous, but Maria doesn’t move. Everything is quiet. Pedro kneels down. She is breathing, there are no signs of blood. She should be okay.

The unexpected silence returns his thoughts to the things she said, things that brought him into such rage. Clarity arrives: all of it was true. He wants to care for Maria, to love her — but in reality, he is indifferent. And his writing? Is it really worthless? Isn’t it? Has he ever done anything truly outstanding? He’s not sure. Maybe he has been deceiving himself all along?

He stares out the window. Like silent guards, the neighborhood houses are still, unable to help. What’s there to do? In a second Maria will come to, and everything will start over. But can it, really, after what has been said? Could all that be forgotten like yesterday’s news? Does he want to forget? More importantly, why? What is there to live for? To keep crafting

identical books irrelevant to everyone? He is fifty. What can one change at his age?

Lights are going off in other houses, people falling asleep, holding one another. Pedro flings the balcony door open, steps outside. For a few more minutes he observes these meaningless lights singing the vanity of life. He shifts his gaze higher, to the other lights in the sky, equally meaningless, and so distant.

He climbs over the banister and dives from the nineteenth floor.

## 9

My novel is finished. Did I just sign my own death sentence? Possibly. Should I break up with Maria? Offset the course of events with a determined action? But is it worthwhile? The character's troubles are exactly the same as mine. It makes me think that Pedro might have also known everything in advance, that he had accepted all of Maria's accusations even before they were stated. He must have been writing a novel about a writer named Pedro. The twenty-seven year old story has snuck on me again. I feel trapped, and yet amazed how unconcerned I am about being trapped.

If Pedro foresaw the result of his visit to Maria's and didn't correct the plot, doesn't mean that I'm also incapable of such a correction? A month has passed. I'm at Maria's place. As usual, events are unraveling according to a plan, and it's unclear who has made it: I, or my character Pedro, or his character Pedro, or...

Maria repeats her tirade, perfected in an endless series of rehearsals. Still, one thing remains unclear: who is going to be the next one, the next Pedro to be crushed against the concrete exactly a month from now. Is he finishing a novel about me? Am I merely a character in someone's book?

Everything is familiar. I've been through it. There is nothing to fear. I'm sad about Carlos: his future cannot be very different from mine. But I'll be less sad if I know that my telepathic listener thinks of me.

When the right moment arrives, I fling the door open and step onto the balcony.

### I

Grain hisses with the sharp October wind ruffling through the plains like playful fingers through hair. Inside the cabin, the fat of freshly fried bacon still sizzles in its pan. Grace, the mother, has just gone outside into the stable to tend to the horses. Justice, the older brother, is supposed to be keeping watch outside the cabin, but has nodded off in the high-backed wooden chair. The musket of that “father” who abandoned him is still clutched in his right hand. Charity, the younger sister, was sent out when it was still light out to fetch a pail of water for the evening meal. She has not come back.

Crickets chirp. A raven screams of death, and the sound of the sparking stream remains uninterrupted in the stillness of the night. The mother returns a moment later into the cabin, to find that door is swung open, with her son asleep in his chair. Suspecting a burglary, she pushes herself inward with a horrified gasp, only to find a scene out of her worst nightmares.

Lying in the center of a black circle drawn with charcoal, is a small scythe, placed neatly atop the crumbled, bloodied remains of Charity’s finest white dress and bonnet. The mother’s disconsolate scream is the only sound which awakens Justice from his nap.

She tears through the field separating her home from the minister’s, growing wider and more treacherous while her son tails her. When her frenzied knocks bring him to the door, she stumbles into his home and collapses into a pitiful heap.

“Grace!” exclaims Josiah, tugging at her hands to bring her to her feet. “What ails thee, child?”

“Oh Lord God, help me!” she cries. “Minister Turner, sir, my child, she’s been taken! Someone’s stolen my Charity!” The Minister’s face, white and angular like a Greek statue, softens with concern. “Just now?”

“I come into the house after tending to the horses and find her dress and bonnet all stained with blood and scythe lain atop it! Oh God, what can this mean?” He kneels to speak at her level. “A scythe, you say?”

“Yes!” She shakes her head. “Well...no, it was...it looked like a scythe, only smaller.”

“We will search for Charity come sunrise, I promise you that. Have you any idea where

she may have gone?”

“Oh no, not gone! She was taken, Josiah. Someone took my baby. You must find her!”

He assures her that he will and urges her to go home.

Distraught, but trusting in his judgment, Grace is helped up by her son and walked back to the house. That night, she lies awake, occasionally dozing into a fitful sleep replete with nightmares and shadows of strange men, and the sound of a little girl screaming.

## II

The next day is Sunday, and even in her sickly state, Grace dresses herself in a forest green dress and a white apron, and walks arm in arm with her son to church. The news of Charity’s disappearance has already been dispersed through the congregation. Neighbors offer a kind word and a promise of prayer, but she can see the thinly concealed fear past their eyes. The air is fraught with tension. Blame will come, and swiftly.

When the minister takes the stand, he announces what has happened, though there is no need, Grace thinks — everyone, including the children, already know. Mothers clasp their daughters more tightly against their bosoms. Fathers sit against pews straight-backed, clutching bibles as arms against evil.

He names off those that will be heading the search party with himself: Job the Righteous, and a few other men, the first two being the husbands of Amity and Honour, respectively. Grace’s only friends. His speech is short and to the point, urging prayer and safety. Lastly, he says that if anyone has any information pertaining to Charity’s whereabouts, he invites them to come forward now. It is clear to Grace that no one in attendance is to blame. She suspects nothing of her neighbors. She knows them all too well. Amidst the sound of people shifting in their seats and of little children crying for their mothers, the minister’s last words continued unanswered to. It is at a tearful moment with her hands clasped firmly in her lap that Grace watched as a young woman with fierce green eyes stands up from the back of the room and strides to the pulpit, wringing her knobby hands. *Amity Johnson*, Grace wonders with a start. *She knows who took my Charity!* The minister moves out of her way. When she speaks, her voice is frail, and shaken.

“I know what happened to Charity. Most of you will not want to believe me, but I speak the truth. I know many of you have feared the devil’s return to Salem. I am sorry I

must be the one to confirm your fears.” Her arm swings up, finger pointing straight up as though pulled by a puppet master’s strings. “Grace Osborne is a witch.”

A gasp ripples among her friends and neighbors, all at once disbelieving and horrified. They stare at her wildly and shift away from her in unison. Grace’s cheeks are burning with the fury of betrayal. Amity had fed Justice when he wore diapers. She’d rocked Charity to sleep. And now she would help Charity’s abductor, perhaps murderer — go free.

Justice leaps forward in his seat, a murderous glare glinting off his eyes. Grace places a hand on his knee, and he halts. She turns to him and shakes her head. Without a word, she takes his hand and walks out of the church as Amity’s trembling voice calls out from behind her. “She’s a witch!”

### III

Back at the house, Justice has gone silent and sullen. He goes out to the shed and retrieves the musket, setting himself on the porch steps. He stares at the wood, innocuous in the blazing daylight. *Just try and bother us again*, he thinks. *I’ll kill whoever dares come near*. Grace kneels before the stained garments that once belonged to her little girl and wrings them with a pain she cannot express. With a quiet moan, she rocks back and forth with bitter sobs.

### IV

Night falls, and Justice does not sleep. He waits at the porch steps with his musket, hoping for someone to come out of the wood dragging his little sister, so he can blow their head off and watch them crumble.

Grace is awoken by a strange noise, like the cry of a wounded child. She grasps her way out of bed, heart pounding, face streaming sweat. “Charity!” comes her hoarse cry. “Charity!”

“Mother!” a voice calls back, spritely and childish. She calls after him again, following the sound of her voice in the darkness. She hears a giggle, and stops. The voice is no longer a little girl’s. The door to her house is wide open to the tangled wood beyond. A scream rings out. “Charity!” she leaps into the grass, chasing the shrieks. A dry cackle mingles with the screams.

She opens her eyes, still clasping the dress to her chest. The sun glints through cracks

in the ceiling. A bird tweets and flutters away. She gets up, wiping her face with a moist rag. She opens the door to find Justice like a statue, musket across his lap, eyes fixed on the wood. She walks to the minister's house and uses the ornate brass knocker to pound on the door loudly.

When he answers it, his grave expression is all the story he needs to tell.

"Come in, Grace." She steps into the house, and he swings the door shut behind her.

"We couldn't find her." he says. Her face falls into her hands.

He consoles her gently, hands on hers. "We'll search again in an hour."

She cries softly. "Grace..." she looks up at him stoically. "Grace, I think you must be prepared for the worst possibility."

"And what would that be?"

"That Charity is dead." Her bonnet hides her expression as she looks down.

"They are blaming you for her disappearance. They have said that you conjured up the devil to take her from this world."

"And where could they get such an idea?" she fixes him with a scathing glance.

"I have never claimed to believe in witches."

"Here, you don't need to. Look at someone sideways and you're a devil worshipper."

"Grace!" She looks down again, clasping her hands as though in fervent prayer.

"You understand I must respond to these accusations. You understand that it is part of my duty as a minister to take you to court to stand trial."

"I do." He turns, but she grasps his arm. "But please, for my daughter's sake, hold off a while. Buy me some time."

He places a soft hand on hers. "For your sake, I will."

When the sun has nearly set she remembers she has not been concerned with her son's whereabouts since morning. When she came back from the minister's house the musket had been placed back in the shed and he was gone.

She pulls a shawl over her dress and circles the outside of the house, calling his name. She searches for him in the tiny stable, but finds nothing.

She takes off running into the wood, screaming for him and stops when she hears the sound of chopping wood. She stumbles through the forest floor, strewn over with dead

plants, and sees him chopping a log in half with a force unlike any she has ever seen him exert. “Justice!” she calls, but he keeps on. “Justice!” she places her hand on the boy’s shoulder, who swings around with rage in his eyes, screaming. He stops the axe before it lands on his mother’s head, immediately stumbling backward and letting his hands fall to his side. “What... are you doing?” she says breathlessly. He says nothing, only tosses the axe to one side and pushes past her toward the house.

Still, he does not speak. In fact, Grace realizes, he has not said a word to her since Charity disappeared. While he broods, she rounds on him. “My son?” He turns to look at her slowly.

Without warning, the boy begins to weep, covering his eyes. “She’s gone, mother! And it’s my fault!” Grace’s expression softens in an instant. “No, no it isn’t, my son.” With tears in her own eyes, she wraps her arms around her son and strokes his hair, gently shushing him and rocking him like a baby.

## V

The next morning, Justice is awoken to screams. His mother is being dragged out of bed by a mob intent on making her stand trial for witchcraft, Amity at the lead. Despite his best efforts, he is not strong enough to stop them.

At the church, Minister Josiah Turner has been called to try Grace for the crime of sacrificing her daughter to Satan. In her delirium and her grief, Grace is scarcely able to defend herself. It is the first witch trial held in four years, yet the want of blood is no less. Justice defends her but his cries are drowned out by the throng.

Grace is found guilty of witchcraft and hauled into a chamber to await execution. She wails into the emptiness until she has no tears left.

Amity visits her a few hours later, tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Grace,” She says. Grace spits at her. “Get thee hence. This is all your doing.” Amity says nothing, only turning away, her face expressionless. “Why?” she asks. “Why would you do this to me, Amity? You were my friend.” She turns to her again, face contorted in anguish. Her bottom lip is trembling, and Grace finds herself disgusted with this appeal for pity.

“Please, I can’t...”

“I know you must hate me, but please know I never meant you any harm. Please know that.” Quite suddenly, Grace narrows her eyes in suspicion. Of course, why hadn’t she



thought of it before? Why else would she accuse her? She must have killed Charity herself!

“No!” Grace screams, grabbing her by the collar and slamming her against the stone wall. “You killed her, didn’t you? You killed my daughter! I’ll kill you, you witch! You killed my baby girl!”

“No, please!” she begs. “It wasn’t me.” Grace’s face begins to tremble, her eyes wild and staring.

“...But you know who did.” Her voice is clotted and strained.

“It was the minister.” She whispers, tears squeezing from her pitiful eyes. “I know what he did. He tried to lay with her, but she struggled. So...he killed her. He told me if I didn’t help him hide the body and accuse you of witchcraft, he’d tell everyone my sins.”

“What sins?”

“How dirty I am. How I laid with him when I was a girl. Oh God!” A horror unlike any she has experienced before grips Grace and a scream rips her lungs to shreds. She grabs onto Amity and shakes as though she may be sick, wailing.

“He strangled her and soaked her clothes in goat’s blood, then buried her in the streambed.”

“Josiah? But I — I trusted him. I let Charity play with him, I —” Grace stops as she suddenly remembers all the seemingly innocuous moments between the two of them. Her beautiful, angelic child, rolling around in the grass with a grown man, a man who growled like a bear when he lifted her high up above his head. A man with no children of his own, a celibate man who would routinely visit her house and ask if her pre-teen daughter was home so he could spend time with her down by the streambed... She sees him twirl her corn-silk hair in his wide fingers, gathering bunches of it and inhaling the scent. She’d once thought those eyes had been full of fatherly admiration, but now everything was clear. Those eyes had moved up and down the length of her daughter’s quickly developing body — shining with unmitigated desire.

“I never wanted to hurt you. I’m so sorry!” cries Amity, trembling with the pain of her guilt. Grace stares at her, still and defeated. Amity tears from the cell like a rabbit through the woods. Grace presses a hand against the stone, sick to her stomach and weak in the knees. She thinks she will collapse, until she hears the minister’s heavy steps nearing, and swells with a deep revulsion and hatred she never thought herself capable of. Then she remembers. The

scythe is still hidden in a knot in her apron, having slept with it out of paranoia. Quietly, she removes it and holds it behind her back, waiting.

“Grace,” he says as he steps in front of her. “I am so sorry for all of this.” She remains silent for a long while, watching Josiah with his innocent look and his feigned compassion. She almost wants to believe that Amity was lying for a moment. Then she imagines her baby kicking and screaming beneath his weight, and decides.

Her mouth twitches. “You killed her.” It takes a moment for him to register what she is saying.

“You killed my daughter.” Her eyes are now dry.

“You know I would never do a thing like that.”

“Amity told me what you did! To her and to my little girl. You’ll burn in hell for this!” His reaction is so controlled it chills her.

“What did she tell you? Grace, you know me. You know I would never do anything to hurt you or your children.”

“She told me how you lay with her when she was only ten. How you tried to do the same to Charity, but she fought back, and so you killed her. But you couldn’t admit to what you’d done. Not Josiah, the perfect, all-knowing, trustworthy leader of the congregation. So you made her blame it on me, the town whore.” With every sentence she takes a step forward, until she is inches from his face.

“And to think that I ever let you be around my children. You aren’t fit to be among dogs.” He is caught. The façade crumbles immediately. In an instant, his face changes into something utterly ugly and impossibly evil.

“That whore! I told her what would happen if she ever told. She’ll pay for this.”

In one fluid movement, she takes the scythe grasped in her left hand and swipes it across his throat, slicing it open with a mighty, inhuman roar. The minister staggers backward, grabbing at his neck frantically with a shocked look in his dull, soulless eyes. Grace watches, her bosom heaving up and down as the once great man falls onto his knees, clutching at her skirts. She stares at him until he’s lying motionless in a sticky pool of crimson.

She sinks into the floor, making no sound. She closes her eyes.

While both she and the minister are dead, she is confident of who will be burning in hell.

Abby's pristine, five-year-old Merrell boots crunched onto the dusty gravel of the trailhead below Kearsarge Pass. The dry air and the distinctive, sunlit fragrance of sage and mountain granite hit her gut with nostalgia. In her youth Abby had hiked these mountains from mid-June until early September or the first big snow of the season. That youth stood far behind the rearview mirror of her Toyota Prius, and now even her Prius stood behind her. Her steps landed heavy and Abby's hips hurt even before she arrived at the first switchback.

"Shit," she said.

A certain kind of panic had come into Abby's shoulders when she'd been watching *True Detective*, and the voice in her head demanded she return to the Sierra Nevada mountains. A reverence and profound fear had tightened her neck muscles. *What if I die up there?* she'd found herself considering. In response, Abby had changed to network television and poured another glass of Chablis. And yet, as though she'd done it in a dream, the plans were arranged: the new pack and the tent were purchased, the unused hiking boots finally pulled out of the closet, and the time off work was arranged.

Within the first two switchbacks, a lithe pair of hikers came up behind Abby. She felt the heat of their stare. There was a quiet conversational murmur between the couple, but the pace of their stride had bunched up behind Abby. Despite her best intentions it was closer to noon than eight in the morning, and the sun blared hot and unforgiving. At the next widening of the path, Abby feigned stopping to apply more sunscreen to her nose. She didn't look up but heard the light breath and quick step of the two hikers. Their conversation continued between them.

"I guess," said the woman.

This statement left Abby to ponder what they were guessing. Her finger pressed another layer of zinc oxide upon her nose, but the sweat of her whole being was profuse enough that Abby wasn't sure it would work. While the goo slid around her face, Abby managed to suppress the fear the hikers had been talking about her being fat and out of shape. Her view of the mountain to the west of her pounded in her pulse. She had the distinct experience of seeing an old boyfriend who had aged extremely well while she, of course, was

a train wreck. The next step was harder than the one before she'd paused to have a break. Her feet felt like they'd gone flat tire. The parking lot was still clearly visible below her. She tried to comfort herself that the climb was steep, and the parking lot would be visible for the first two miles. This was not a factual recollection, but it did help Abby to continue.

Fifteen minutes passed while her feet paced ahead and the words "I guess" continued to ring in Abby's ears. A female ranger in her forties, fit and suntanned, trotted down the mountain. They exchanged nods and no one else appeared on the trail. Abby moved slowly and steadily and considered how much she'd become like her own mother. This recognition discouraged her. In the *True Detective* vision voice of her mind, she'd experienced hiking at twenty-three: attacking the mountain; feeling the cool of sweat under her arms, her neck, and the small of her back; the power of her own legs burning; and moving forward, always charging ahead. But this was not what it felt like for her now. The pack itself weighed almost seventy pounds, and she hadn't even packed half the food she'd purchased. She had told herself she could stay up there until she ran out of food. Part of her was considering the first set of lakes. Abby wanted to sit down and eat her lunch and all the rest of the food in her pack and head back down to stay at a motel that night. This idea made her guffaw aloud and also tightened her throat.

In general, her gaze found focus down on her feet. She knew she was supposed to be taking in the surroundings. That was a sacrifice she decided she would need to make. Her blinders focused her fortitude. The new boots had already begun to rub her right heel and middle toes. Ahead she heard voices on the trail. She kept trudging forward, waiting for more svelte hikers to speed past her. When the bodies didn't arrive, she surmised the people were a couple switchbacks ahead, before the trail tucked behind the mountain.

When she was about five yards away, Abby took her eyes up to the horizon and discerned three people standing under a pine tree. An African American guy, about sixty pounds overweight, wearing too-tight blue shorts, a white tank top, and silver sneakers. He was laughing and eating. With him were a White girl with pink hair and cutoff shorts, not necessarily fit but thin and vibrant, and another guy, who wore a cowboy hat, boots, and gym shorts with an unclad, lean torso.

"Gurl! Okay. You see, honey. I got you," said the Black guy.

It took Abby some time before she understood he was speaking to her. The Black

man was fanning his hand in front of his face. She slowed down and nodded, but Abby was afraid to stop. She felt it was possible if she stopped, she'd just quit everything. And if she stopped she knew she'd need to chat, and that she would not manage. Abby smiled(ish) and trudged ahead.

"See, Jerry. She's going," said the girl. "Let's go."

"Well, I am not bionic. I got to take my time, gurl. I don't know if you see me, Vanessa, but I'm not twelve pounds. My people don't hike. We don't do this. You White bitches all hiking and jogging. I don't see no one chasing me, okay? So I go when I go."

Jerry's voice boomed and filled up the mountain. A laughing lilt was the most prominent quality to his dialogue, and it made Abby feel happier. She had moved several yards beyond the group's sheltering pine toward the creek when she detected their feet approaching behind her. Leaning toward the exposed tree roots, Abby attempted to let them pass. The sweat was in her eyes now and it burned. Beyond the droning of their chatter, Abby heard the stream up ahead, and the idea of shade came to her. Vanessa and cowboy-hat passed Abby, but Jerry's feet slowed behind her. She glanced at him. He shook his head.

"They all f'in crazy. I ain't keepin' up with them. Gurl, move your sweetness when you ready. I say: Take. Your. Time. I'm Jerry."

Abby nodded. She walked a few feet ahead and mumbled her name but recognized her voice had been garbled. She spoke louder.

"Abigail."

"Nice to meet you. Now *you* know how to keep a pace. Those idiots were trying to kill me. It's not even a joke. I mean it. I grew up in Chicago. In the hood, okay? Black folk don't go into the mountains. Do *you* see anybody else like me out here? *I* don't see anybody like me. Shit out here can eat my ass. So I don't even know what I'm doing here...I blame it on Brad. Anything for a pretty face. I'm ridiculous. Not the first time. Oh Jesus Lord, my sweat has sweat on it. Dis-gusting!"

For someone who was exhausted, Jerry didn't seem to lack for oxygen. Abby hadn't needed to worry about conversing with Jerry; he was a one-man show. She enjoyed Jerry's laughter, but the constant chatter of his words gave her the impression the world had a vise around her. She stopped listening to the content of what he said almost immediately.

It was after the creek when she noticed the glint just beyond the trail. It looked like

a message: a perfect crystal sparkle dancing beyond the silty trail dust. Was it beckoning her to come explore? Abby felt compelled to follow it. With Jerry at her heels, though, she forged ahead on the trailhead. Her eyes looked up at the waterfall cascading the other mountain. The snowpack had been high that year, and the water trickled down everywhere.

“Sometimes it’s like my scalp — it gets too tight. I mean, I know that can’t be it. But maybe my head is getting bigger. Ha. Wouldn’t that be the funniest. I have some ever-increasing head growth disease. Oh, hells no! I hope you don’t mind,” Jerry said. “You remind me of my mom.”

Jerry looked to be pushing thirty, and Abby found it hard to imagine anything about her could remind Jerry of his mother. She was fifty-two that year, and it depressed her to consider she might be old enough to be a fully grown man’s mother. Of course, notions of motherhood made Madeline enter her mind. A familiar despair washed over Abby. With effort she kept her pace. The blister at her heel felt almost raw.

“She was a really good listener. Like you. I miss her.”

“That’s nice,” Abby said. “I’m sorry — for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

They kept their methodical pace. Abby could hear Jerry’s curiosity about her. She knew he wanted to ask. Yet for all his blathering, Jerry seemed to understand he shouldn’t ask anything about her. She was glad.

“I think my thighs are chafing. How does that even happen? I mean, I know I’m meaty, but I never had a rash from walking. Dis-gusting. Jaysus. Well, I’m gonna die any minute. I do not. It’s just too much. You know? If your actual thighs start rubbing together, you have got to stop what you are doing. Shit. I want ice cream. Or like a popsicle. Oh God, that sounds good. And I wonder why my thighs are rubbing...”

An eruption of laughter came from Jerry. Up ahead, Brad and Vanessa sat waiting on a large rock. They were perched beside the waterfall at a substantial switchback. The rush of water pounded down the mountain, and a sense of nostalgia filled Abby’s heart. The earth was damp with moisture.

“Okay, Jer. We waited,” said Vanessa.

“God bless you!”

Jerry laughed again with his full volume. Abby’s legs had already found that soft,

rubbery feeling that used to take ten hours of hiking at twenty-three. She didn't stop. Abby couldn't stop. She glanced over her shoulder to see Jerry. Through the pine trees her eye caught the glint of parked cars. They were tiny due to distance but still lingered in her view. Devastation filled her heart. It had been well over an hour since she left the parking lot, and yet she was still at the beginning of the hike.

"Bye, Jerry," Abby said.

"Bye, Abigail! See ya, gurl!"

An urge to cry came to her. Staying in virtually the same spot despite her great efforts to catapult ahead, saying good-bye to Jerry: all of it struck her deeply. All the elements scrambled together to create the sense (no matter how she added the sum parts to the whole) her entire existence cast a gloomy and miserable shadow. In the wake of Jerry's incessant chatter came images of Madeline. Over a year in which she'd trained herself not to obsess, Abby was back at it again. Her daughter's face came to her in various snapshots: fifth grade, with an ecstatic smile, holding the neighbor's Jack Russell, the gap still in her teeth; sullen thirteen in a black sweatshirt with braces and patches of acne; Maddy the baby — so new and perfect; a wailing toddler, still perfect; a glaring nineteen-year-old explaining how Abby had ruined her life; Maddy's orange Honda driving away after an exceptionally angry Thanksgiving last year where the departing words were "I hate you"; again with the exuberant ten-year-old with the Jack Russell; again with the beautiful, fresh baby. Abby's feet trudged ahead. She had to believe there was a way forward — each stride a prayer that there could be more than failure.

A twig placed on a boulder caught Abby's eye. Was it another sign? She yearned for something to show itself to her. Did it point off the trail? Or did it aim back onto the trail, urging Abby to stay the course? Was it placed there by person or nature? Abby paused for a moment. She took out her canteen. The wet of the water on her lips felt beautiful. It was a wrong description, but it was the only description for the experience. Abby looked back behind her: Jerry, Brad and Vanessa nowhere in sight. The sound of solitude floated past her in a breeze through the pine. The heat radiated off the dry earth and crept into her legs.

"Don't stop," she said aloud.

Even still, Abby's feet were reluctant. The pinky toe had gone numb, and the blister at her big and middle toes had formed. But she continued ahead. She ignored the stick. She

ignored any other signs — just as she had ignored the signs her marriage was failing. Abby kept forging ahead. Conner had moved in his own direction and she hadn't even noticed. Madeline had been left on her own. Wreckage had been everywhere. All the shit had hit the fan then. Probably. But she hadn't noticed for several years. She always ignored the signs.

“Shut up!” Abby screamed.

A kind of humiliation came to her. Abby did not want to be that kind of reckless person. She would not scream at the sky. She moved one foot ahead and then the other. The pain in her hips, her feet, and her left knee felt almost comforting. They became her penance for living a shitty life — for always trying to fix it without ever actually seeing anything, for trying to date Scott and not caring when that failed too. Abby's sweat had leveled by then. The air was cooler, but the sun shone just as harshly. Or the cumulative time under its hot eye had caught up with her skin, and she felt the sun's teeth upon her flesh. But the sweat had stopped pouring into her eyes.

At first the voices were quiet, and she wasn't sure they were of the world or lingering memories in her mind. Then she heard the boots gliding on the trail. She pulled up beside the rocks and dirt, her hand steady on the small pebbles of the embankment beside her. A family dressed in REI hiking gear appeared. Two boys around eight and eleven years old bounded down the trail toward her, their legs long and big-kneed. One boy had a huge grin on his face; the older one looked more pensive. At the rear was a father, who had a nightly flosser, uptight quality.

“Hi!” said the youngest one.

Abby nodded at him. Part of her wanted to join them. In truth, most of her wanted to join them. She wanted to arrive at home with them and cook a wholesome dinner with steamed carrots and suggest the boys take a hot shower before going to bed. The father was somewhere around forty or fifty. She would kiss the man's cheek. It would be a good life. The shy one nodded back at Abby, his eyes studying her. Then the father passed and they were gone. Abby forced her feet to move ahead, but her boot made almost no noise now. With little reason, Abby felt convinced she'd become invisible.

The afternoon sun was sinking to the horizon when she reached the first lake, more of an overgrown pond, called Little Pothole Lake. She didn't stop to eat. It had been clear she would stop altogether if she rested here. The blister at her right heel was shrieking, and



the left heel throbbed too. Each step felt as though her skin was meeting a hot poker, and Abby could feel the backs of her knees caving.

She arrived at Gilbert Lake with long shadows and a crisp chill in the air. Once her pack was off, she slipped on her pullover. The damp of her T-shirt had turned her cold. The camping stove and tent were erected by rote. It felt like riding a bike. Her mind was methodical. She ate her orange for dessert after wolfing down the double portion of her reconstituted, freeze-dried beef stroganoff. Her water supply was low, but she could filter more in the morning.

After eating, Abby removed her boots and socks to examine the blisters on her feet. She had had worse. The right heel had worn raw in two nickel-size spots, the left heel had filled with fluid. Her big toe had a raw blister too, but the middle toes only looked red and irritated. Abby searched the pack for her moleskin. As she dug in, she pictured the emergency kit on the kitchen counter waiting to be packed, still waiting. She did locate a clean pair of socks. After a moment she shoved her freshly-socked feet back into the unlaced boots. A wave of nausea washed over her. Using the last of the evening light, Abby put the rest of her supplies in the Forest Service bear-proof storage, ten feet away from the tent.

Each step made her wince. Also getting up after sitting down had felt nearly impossible. Abby ruminated about the many ways her body would likely seize overnight. She crept into the tent as the dusk fought against nature's pitch darkness and stuck her headlamp to her forehead. A weary exhaustion had come for her. The kind of tired that no longer allowed for rest or rejuvenation. The zip of the tent rang out in the wilderness. It felt like a time transport: outside of her personal misery, she could have been twenty again. Abby closed her eyes. She hoped for rest, hoped for dreams, hoped for new signs, but she felt resigned to a deafness of perception if they came for her.

As anticipated, she awoke to a cramp. It came in her right thigh. Abby flexed her leg into her hands and made loud exhales. After a minute of this, her groggy mind became more alert to the chill of her body, her face exposed to the night, the deep muscular ache, and the fullness of her bladder. She lay silent for a while, wishing there was a way to avoid the inevitable. She knew that she wouldn't get warm or find sleep until she got out of the sleeping bag. Her headlamp lit up the tent. Abby fumbled with her hiking boots but decided instead to go barefoot. Outside, her stiff joints lumbered in the guidance of the headlamp.

No other tents had settled. She was alone on the mountain. A feeling of satisfaction came into her heart. The earth was dense and sharp against her bare feet. The sound of her pants rubbing against her thighs felt loud in the sacred quiet. After pulling down her hiking slacks and spreading her feet astride, Abby could detect the gravel shift beneath her. She could smell the dry highland grass mixing with her beef stroganoff-tinged urine. Mid-stream her headlamp flickered.

As if in obedience to an authority, Abby turned the light off. The stars above bewildered. Their brilliance and abundance knew no end. The trillion of years it had taken the light to arrive to her in that moment weighed upon her. Those stars awestruck her. Abby felt for certain that moment was why she'd come. Or at least it could have been. The bigness, the interconnectedness, the fabric of all history, her significant insignificance all seemed at her grasp. She shook off and pulled her underwear back on. Abby took a step forward and stumbled into a rock. The blister on her big toe sent bullets to her brain.

“Son of a — Fuck!”

Given that this moment might have been *the* moment for which she had come, Abby had wanted to watch the stars more. Even with her naked feet stuck in the cold, it had felt meaningful to be beneath that regal sky. But with her angry stubbed toe, an immediate shift descended upon Abby. Perhaps the idea that she could have fallen down the mountain and died barefoot and foolish had infused into her brain. Suddenly the excitement of solitude gave way to a fear and sense of how alone and vulnerable she truly was. Her personal insignificance pumped into her brain like a drug. *If I die, no one will notice. If I die, I will die. Am I already dead? I'm afraid. What if I'm dead? Who cares? Do I care? Am I dead? How can I tell? Am I dying?*

Abby flipped on her headlamp. Her feet made a ginger return to the tent. After she entered the tent, Abby grabbed another glimpse. Her favorite and seemingly unattainable lover, left waiting and wanting since her youth, glared upon her. Abby wanted to apologize for not having more courage. But she didn't. Her fingertips grazed against the ground: cold, hard, uninviting. And she zipped the tent shut.

Within the imagined safety of her tent, Abby closed her eyes and heard sounds. Her eyes opened to the darkness. She waved her hand in front of her face but couldn't discern it. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. She wanted the morning to come.

At some point, she fell asleep because at some point later, she was awakened by a bear outside her tent. Its nose snorted near the left side of her tent. She imagined the bear's jaw beside her own shoulder and jaw, only the thin polyester of the tent separating them. The hard earth her fingertip remembered touching shifted easily beneath its mass. A sense of constriction came to Abby in a swelling, swirling motion. *This is the moment I die. Is this the moment I die? I was alive but now I die?* She tried to determine if she had anything the bear would want in the tent with her. She could hear its breath. She visualized the flare of the bear's nostrils.

After an eternal thirty seconds, the beast moved to the bear-proof trash can. At some point she heard, or made-believe, another bear joined the first bear. An involuntary shake came into Abby. She waited. She prayed. She knew black bears didn't attack people. She also knew that they might. They were wild animals and she was alone on that mountain. She was alone in this lifetime.

An hour later Abby unzipped the tent. It was still dark; the inky shades of very early morning solitude. Her fear had so escalated that she searched for lurking dragons and any other predator waiting for a chance at her. She wondered what it would feel like to have a bear charge toward her. Her frame felt feeble against the reality outside her tent.

Her headlamp caught the bear-proof can. The latch was secure. She had remembered. The bear (or bears) had done their best to test it. But her supplies were fine. She imagined the bears trotting down into the parking lot, where they could ravage her Prius. A YouTube video of a bear sitting on a van to pop open the doors came to her mind.

In the dark (with the bears high-fiving each other in her imagination), Abby rolled up her sleeping bag and the bedroll. She took down the tent and packed it back together. Once all was in order, Abby slipped the pack onto her back. The depth of her ache felt steadied by the return of the pack's gravity. Weighted down, she could better off afford the steps ahead. The nectar of that feeling surprised Abigail. She had not expected to remember it after yesterday's rambling and pathetic hike. The stiffness of her spine and the raw pain of her feet felt like a direct link to a younger, tougher version of herself.

"I can," Abby said.

Her headlamp offered tunnel vision to her cautious steps. She still felt blind and oblivious. The brilliant stars of the Milky Way had almost disappeared, and she shuffled, aimless

and lost, in the dark of the morning sky. The sun would be up soon. And still she would be blind.

Then Abby heard a quiet voice. The sound wasn't discernible but she still knew it was there, speaking to her. The forward motion, her feet hitting the trail, signaled something to her. The morning chill of the high Sierra created a shake in her jaw. As expected, and within the narrow scape of her headlamp, she saw the cairn — a stack of six flat rocks.

This time Abby obeyed and ventured off the trail. The darkened ground shifted beneath her feet, and she labored to keep herself from sliding down the grade. *I could die*, she thought to herself. *I will die too. One day.* A bossy whip-poor-will began repeating his singsong lyrics. After staggering along the mountain, Abby arrived at a giant boulder — a vista perch. And within a fraction of her arrival, the sun crested the mountains across the valley, covering Abby in a reddish-pink light. And in response, Abby allowed herself to stop. Not simply to keep her feet still, but to stop.

She spoke aloud, “*I will die.*”

*It will happen. One day. This trail*, she thought. *I have been on this trail my entire life. This mountain has nursed me with love that lasted thirty years. Somehow — even if I forgot. And for now I am not dead. I am as alive as I ever have been. I hear her still. I will die. But I am alive. I am here. This. This. For me. Right now.*

Abigail let the newborn sunshine touch her face. The morning sounds of the wind up the face of the mountain, the quiet wrestle of the pines, her own breath, the whip-poor-will, and her heartbeat merged together. Nothing from her life had made sense, but that didn't change the moment. The moment made sense. And just for now the entire universe held her in its palm.

## Notes for a Eulogy

John Sandman

When I walked into the room where my ninety-five year-old father was dying, the first thing I noticed was his mouth. It was wide open. He looked like a character in a cartoon screaming. His mouth was open so wide, it looked as if his jaw must hurt. With his eyes closed, his glasses off and the gaping mouth, he did not look at all like himself. During his life, he was a man who, for the most part, kept his mouth closed.

I did not hear how hard he was breathing until I got close to him because the oxygen tank emitted a loud, constant hum. A two-pronged oxygen tube was hooked into his nose. It was hard to believe that much oxygen was getting into his nose, given the long, desperate gasps coming out of his mouth. What happened over the next days was that the gasps were gradually longer and longer apart.

When my brother Phil called to tell me that my father was dying, the first thing I did was to volunteer to give the eulogy. Phil is my only sibling, and he did my mother's eulogy, so it was my turn. And there were other factors. I am an English teacher and Phil is an accountant, so, theoretically, writing a eulogy should be in my wheelhouse. Also, after my mother died, Phil and his wife Jenny moved my father to an assisted living/nursing home near where they lived. I live five hours away, and, in my father's final years, I was only a weekend visitor. Many years ago, after I brought my ex-wife to meet my family for the first time, she said to me, "Do you realize that 90% of what you say to each other is sarcastic?" I had not realized that. Since I come from a family where we are rarely sincere and where we almost never express our feelings, it made writing a eulogy difficult. The insults we traded around the house were not going to provide fodder for a tribute.

I did have the basic materials: at the age of two, my father lost his father to tuberculosis. My father grew up during the Depression, fought in World War II and went to college on the GI bill. He eventually became the president of a bank. He served on all sort of boards: the United Way, St. Peter's Hospital, Union College. I could make it a standard American story—rags to riches, Greatest Generation.

I just needed to fill it in with the aphorisms that my father used when he gave us advice. The trouble was, I could not remember my father ever giving me advice. While I was

driving the five hours out to the nursing home for the last time, I had this crazy idea that, in his final days, he was going to tell me stories about himself that I had never heard before. But as soon as I walked into the room and heard the oxygen tank and saw his wide-open mouth, I realized that my father and I would not be having any revelatory deathbed conversations.

Three months earlier, when my dad first got to the nursing home, they took away his wallet. The idea was many people would be in and out of his room, and they did not want staff members being accused of taking money or credit cards.

Not having his wallet drove my dad crazy. He was constantly checking his pockets, asking, “Where’s my wallet?”

“Dad, they put it in the office to keep it safe. You don’t really need it in here.”

At this point my dad was not clear on where “in here” was, and he could not grasp the concept of not needing his wallet. He thought he would still be going out to shop, to eat, to gas up the car. How could a man be a man without a wallet?

My father was a fellow who rarely complained, but he would not stop complaining about having no wallet. He said that being in this place was worse than being in the Pacific in World War 2. He rarely referred to the war. The only detail I can ever remember him telling me was that, when he was in the Philippines, red ants would sometimes crawl into his sleeping bag and chew on him. When I asked him why he never joined any veterans’ groups, he said, “It was the most miserable time in my life. Why would I want to reminisce about it?”

I was set on getting my dad’s wallet back. I spoke to the head nurse. He said my dad could have the wallet but without credit cards and money.

I said, “That’s not going to work.”

He said, “Let’s try it.”

As soon as my dad had the wallet in his hands, he opened it, looked for his credit cards and money and said, “What the hell?”

I went to the head nurse and said, “Look, I’ll sign a waiver. We’ve already shut down his credit cards. If someone takes cards or money out of his wallet, I don’t give a shit. The man needs to have his wallet.”

He let me put two hundred dollars and all of his cards back into the wallet.

From then on, checking the wallet became a compulsive behavior. First, he would count his money. Then, he would pull out his driver's license and each of his credit and insurance cards and put them on the hospital table that went across his bed. He would keep rearranging the cards as if they were puzzle pieces. He examined the driver's license more than any of the other cards, maybe to look at the ten-year-old picture of himself. The playing with the cards could take twenty minutes or so. And then, since his wallet was packed so tightly, getting all of the cards back in it could take quite a bit of time. This game with the wallet was how he spent the bulk of his time each day that I visited him during those final months.

He was often confused, and he would sometimes ask me questions that I did not want to answer.

“Where's your mother?”

“When am I going home?”

Instead of answering his questions, I would get out his wallet and put it on the table in front of him. Then he would quiet down and start to pull out the cards.

Before the wallet, before the nursing home, he watched CNN all day long. My father was always a newspaper junkie. In his early nineties he read three papers every day. “Still reads three newspapers every day” was what I used when I bragged to friends about how sharp he still was. He read every section of *The New York Times* except Arts and Leisure. On the mornings I was with him, when he passed Arts and Leisure to me, he would say, “Nothing useful in this section.” It was a standard line, the way he and I had always divided up the newspaper. I remember, once in college, I showed him my grades, all A's, and instead of commenting on the grades, he looked at the list of courses—Chaucer, Greek Tragedy, Approaches to Literary Criticism, etc.—and he said, “Would it kill you to take at least one useful course?”

In his old age, reading the useful sections of the papers would keep my father occupied from breakfast until early afternoon. Then, about a year before he died, my father started to pretend to read the paper. He never got off the front page. He would hold the paper in front of his face, but his eyes were looking up at the ceiling or closed. He would pick up each newspaper and spend about five minutes holding it in front of his face.

Once he was not reading the papers that meant he turned on CNN much earlier, usually by 9 AM. The TV would then stay on CNN until he went to bed. When I was visiting my father during his final year that is what we did: we sat in front of CNN all day long. I was thankful it was not Fox News, which was what I would hear blasting out of almost every other apartment whenever I walked down the hall of the complex.

During the final year of my father's life, Donald Trump was running for his second term as president. Whenever Trump would come on the screen, my father would ask me, "Is this moron actually going to get elected again?"

I would say, "Dad, there is no way he will become president. He's way behind in the polls. The only places he can win are in the South and the Midwest. He can't win the states where most people live."

Usually, because he read the useful sections of the paper, my father knew much more about the news than I did, and I liked finally being able to instruct him on current events.

Trump was one of the only things we talked about. We mostly watched CNN in silence. While we watched, we would each take furtive glances at our watches. Even though my father was near the end of his life, and the time should have been precious, for both of us, those days dragged on. I look back now and I wonder, why did we waste all that time watching CNN? Why didn't we try to talk to each other?

To say we never talked is an exaggeration. Like most older folks, my father would tell the same stories from his past over and over. Whenever my father tried to remember an old story, there was a pause, and I imagined his mind like an old jukebox, the pincers sliding up and down the rows of memories before finally clasp an old standard and playing it.

When he talked about the past he did not talk much about his own life. Sometimes he talked about seeing famous people. He once saw Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig play for the Yankees in an exhibition game at Washington Park in Albany. In his one at bat, The Babe hit a home run and then he left the field. When kids swarmed around him trying to get his autograph, he swung at them with his arms and said, "Get the hell away from me." Lou Gehrig stayed for the whole game and hit three home runs. After the game, he signed autographs until the line in front of him had disappeared. My father told me this story more than a hundred times.



He also talked about men from his job and from the neighborhood. One of the characters he always came back to was Andy O'Hara. Mr. O'Hara lived three houses down from us, and he had grown up with my father. They both went to Vincentian Institute, fought in World War 2 and went to college on the GI bill. I remember hearing that Mr. O'Hara was some kind of a war hero. I do not know what he had done in the war, but he was a different kind of veteran than my father. He was the type who marched in parades and who often had a flag flying in front of his house.

When Andy got out of college, he took over his father's funeral home business. He was not at all like an undertaker. He could play somber at wakes and funerals but outside of his funeral home he was the life of any party. I was friends with his son, and I remember him taking all of the neighborhood kids out to get pizza and giving all of us nicknames with "head" on the end of them. He called me "Muttonhead" because I was slow to place my order. When we were playing basketball in the O'Hara's driveway, and Mr. O'Hara came outside to chat and shoot a few shots, we were glad to see him. I have to admit there were times when I wished that Mr. O'Hara was my father.

Every August, Mr. O'Hara spent as much time as possible in Saratoga playing the horses. In his house, he always had a racing form on the kitchen table, and he would call out, "Muttonhead, who do you like in the fifth at Belmont?" The trouble for Mr. O'Hara came when he was in his 60's. After betting on horses for many years, he blew through all the money he had made and all the money that his father had passed on to him. In order to stay afloat, he started to spend money that had been pre-paid for funerals. Eventually, when some of the pre-payers died, there was no money to pay for their funerals. My aunt was one of the pre-payers whose money disappeared. When she died, my father came up with the funds to pay for his sister-in-law's funeral at another funeral home.

My father told me there were other issues over the years. Andy consistently bounced checks, and it was so tough to get any money out of him, that a lot of people just let him get away with it. As a Notre Dame alumnus, he chaired a fund drive for the college and skimmed money off the top of it for many years until he was caught. As a kid I sometimes came home talking about what a great guy Mr. O'Hara was. My father always knew otherwise, and he never said a thing.

For his prepaid funeral scam, Mr. O'Hara went to jail. But, he was only in for a year.

When he came out, he was broke and needed a job, and one of his funeral home competitors, Frank McCaffery, actually hired him. According to my father, Frank made Andy do grunt work: going out and picking up bodies in the middle of the night. But the main reason Frank took Andy on was so that he could work the crowds at wakes and funerals. Even after he had stolen funeral money, he was so much more charming than any other undertaker that people still wanted to have him at their funerals.

When Andy died, his funeral was at St. Catherine's, the parish church in our neighborhood, and, according to my father, the crowd spilled out to the sidewalk and onto the street. My father said he had never seen so many people at a funeral at St. Catherine's. At the end of the funeral, when they were carrying out the casket, a high school marching band played the Notre Dame fight song.

Every time my father talked about Andy O'Hara, this is how he would end it:

"After what he had done to your aunt, to so many people, I couldn't believe it. I have never seen so many people at a funeral."

My father had been unconscious and breathing hard through his wide-open mouth for a full day. We were getting different estimates of how much time he had left. Four or five days. A few days. My brother and I decided that someone needed to spend the night with him. I volunteered immediately.

After my brother and sister-in-law left, I held my father's hand and was surprised that he gripped back so tightly. Then, after a half hour, my back was killing me from having stood hunched over the bed most of the day. I eased his hand off of mine and sat in the chair on the side of his bed.

On the side table near the chair there were photos of grandchildren framed and standing in rows. The rows were so deep, and the pictures so close together that you couldn't actually see any of them except for the ones in front. Sometimes, when I was visiting, I would touch one of the pictures with my elbow and they would all fall down like dominoes. My brother and I played this game where, every time we were visiting, we would rearrange the pictures so that our own children were on the front of each row. I was carefully moving my son's high school graduation picture to the front of one of the rows when my father woke up.

He woke with a cough and that made me knock all the pictures over. The clacking caught my father's attention and he looked over at me.

"Too much," he said.

I was shocked to hear him say anything. I jumped up and went to the side of the bed.

By the time I got there his eyes were closed, his mouth was wide open, and the gasping had started up again.

I wondered if my father had recognized me. I wondered if his words had been directed at me. Was what I was doing with the pictures too much?

Then I realized that my father would not have had any idea what I was doing with the pictures. He did not know anything about the game that Phil and I played. Maybe the noise from the pictures falling was too much? Maybe the pain he was in was too much? Maybe him holding on this long had been too much?

"Too much," ended up being the last words that my father ever spoke. Most likely, it was him talking in a scene in some dream he was having, and there will never be any way for me to know the context of what he was saying. Still, I thought about the phrase over and over, and I worked hard to give it meaning.

It occurred to me that this was something I could use for the eulogy. I could claim that "too much" was my father's philosophy on life and that it was something he often said, although, other than that one time, I don't remember hearing him say it.

My father was always moderate, restrained, careful not to express himself too much. I never saw him cry, and I could count on one hand the times when I heard him yell. My father criticized excess of any kind. If someone's house was too grand, if someone went on too long about his/her own accomplishments, in private, my father would speak out against them. I could not quote him directly because his actual words would have been "goddamn showoff" or "fucking blowhard." Still, this "too much" idea was finally giving me some material for his eulogy.

My father made it through that night and all of the next day. When it got dark, I volunteered to stay the night again. I offered, thinking: Phil won't let me do this again; he knows it's his turn to spend the night. As soon as I made the offer, Phil and Jenny went to put on their jackets. Phil said he would be back by seven in the morning. I couldn't believe that Phil

did not even pretend to deliberate, and that Jenny did not say anything to him.

It wasn't just that I was exhausted, it was also that this keeping watch was becoming increasingly harrowing. My father had not been conscious since saying "too much" the night before. From looking at my watch I knew that the amount of time between his breaths was about thirty seconds now. It seemed like an outrageous amount of time between breaths, but I had no idea what it meant. The nurses were not helpful. They came into the room rarely and were increasingly vague on any questions about how much time was left.

My duty was to call Phil if it seemed my father was close to death, so that he and Jenny could get there in time to say goodbye. I knew I was going to blow this. How was I going to know when he was close to death? I was going to make them come out in the middle of the night for no reason or, worse, I was going to make the call too late, and they would not get there by the time he died.

Four years ago, we had missed our mother's death in Albany. I had been at the nursing home with my mother and father just before she died. She had stopped eating and was hooked up to oxygen but she was still conscious when I left. It had been a long, slow decline, and somehow I convinced myself that she would make a comeback and that I would get back there before she died. It was summer, I was not teaching, and I cannot remember why I felt that I had to get back home right away. Two days after I left, she died. At her wake Phil laid into me.

"Since you had been there and left, I figured she must be stable. Nice to have a brother I can count on."

After Phil and Jenny left, I stood at the side of the bed and held my father's hand. I said to myself, I am going to stand here and hold on for as long as it takes.

A priest had come to the room during the day. Somehow my father must have identified as Catholic, even though he had not attended mass since my mother forced him to go on Christmases and Easters when Phil and I were young. The priest could tell that Phil and I were not a receptive audience so he zipped through a couple of prayers and went on his way. But, before he left, he said something that got me thinking: "You need to talk to your father. When they are in this state, they can still hear you. Try to comfort him before he makes his final journey." My first thought was, bullshit. He's already gone. Still, the priest's idea stuck in my head, and, that night, I thought: maybe I should be talking to him.

“So, Dad, I’ll be doing your eulogy. I’ll make sure to tell everyone how good you were with Mom when she was dying. I know you never liked talking about the war so I’ll just mention that quickly. I’ll be honest, Dad. I wish I had more I could say. “

It was not long into my feeble attempt to talk to him that his gasping became more like groaning. I wondered if what I had been saying has upset him. I could see the muscles in his neck tensing. I timed his breaths, and now they were about 40 seconds apart. I wasn’t sure if I should call Phil or not. I wanted to go and check with a nurse to make sure, but I was afraid to leave my father’s side. So, I stood there, tormented, timing the seconds between breaths.

Then, the nurse on duty came in as part of his rounds. I laid it out for him. 40 seconds between breathes. Groaning. Tensed-up neck. Should I call my brother? This was a nurse I had never seen before. He was jet black, frighteningly thin and had a Jamaican accent. He put two fingers on my father’s neck to feel his pulse.

“He does not have much longer. You need to call your brother.”

That was maybe the only time a doctor or a nurse gave me a simple answer to a tough question. And I never got to thank him. By the time my father died, another nurse had come on duty. Looking back, I wonder if I imagined this fellow who came in the room and guided me at just the right time.

Phil and Jenny got there in about fifteen minutes. It seemed like hours to me. They agreed that my father was doing a lot worse than when they had left, and they thanked me for staying and for making the call.

Phil and I had no idea what we were supposed to be doing, so Jenny, who had been a nurse long ago, took charge.

“Hold his hands. Talk to him. He might be able to hear you.”

It was the second time someone had said that to me and this time, again, I thought: that’s bullshit. He’s gone. He can’t hear a thing.

Phil and I each grabbed a hand, but neither of us said a thing.

“Say goodbye to him. Tell him what he meant to you.”

I resented Jenny. This was our father. What right did she have to tell us what to do?

“I don’t think we can do this, Jenny. I mean, we have never been the kind of family where we tell each other our feelings. You’re thinking of a different family.”

Phil gave me his chastising big brother look. And then, he started speaking to my father.

He told him that, while he was not there a lot when we were kids, he was there when it counted. Phil appreciated the fact that my father came to most of his baseball games. He said that, while my father never gave much explicit advice, he set an example of being kind, generous and careful. He ended by thanking my father for getting him out of having to go to Vietnam. In 1970, my brother had a low draft number, but my father served on a board with the local commander of the National Guard. Phil ended saying, "You saved my life, Dad."

After Phil spoke, I thought: that speech sounded rehearsed. I imagined that Jenny had told him a while ago that he should make a goodbye speech, and he had figured out what he wanted to say. Now there wasn't much left for me to say and, on top of that, I was still going to have to come up with a eulogy.

I remembered a few years ago, when I asked my father how he was coping with my mother's death, he said to me, "I am doing what I do whenever I feel bad. Whenever I think about her being gone, I try to block it out, I try to bury the thoughts." My father had never said anything like that to me, but, once he said it, I thought, yes, that has clearly always been his idea of how to be man. And mine too, unfortunately. But, then, he went on and said something that surprised me. He said, "All the sadness I've buried, if it comes exploding out of me, I hope I am not out in public." He laughed. I laughed. It was the kind of thing I wanted to put in the eulogy, but I didn't know if anyone else could appreciate it.

What my father described was what happened to me the night he died. I tried to say goodbye to him, and all the sadness just came exploding out of me.

I was remembering this time when my father drove me home from college. My mother sent him to get me without coming along herself. I think it was part of a constant behind-the-scenes campaign on her part to get my father to spend more time with me. On the rare occasions when I was going to be alone with my father for any period of time, I would actually write out lists of things we might talk about. The Yankees were always a sure thing, but you could talk about a baseball team for just so long.

Whatever was on my list for this car ride did not work because what I remember is three hours that were mostly silent. I was never sure if my father was unnerved by the silences between us, but, this time, I knew he was. Just before we got out of the car, he said to me

“You know, I never had a father, so it’s been a little hard for me to figure out how to be one.”

I was trying to tell my brother and Jenny this story about riding home from college, about one of the only times I can remember when my father told me something that seemed heartfelt. But, in the middle of the telling, I had trouble with breathing and swallowing and then I could not talk at all. At first, I sounded like a car that will not start. I kept groaning and then I’d go silent. I had not cried since — I don’t remember — and allowing myself to cry was a slow process. When the crying did finally start it was a wailing, and I could not stop it.

The first thing I felt was anger. God damn Jenny for making us play this stupid, fucking goodbye game. God damn me for losing control and not being able to tell one small, coherent story about my father. God damn my father for being so hard to talk to. Couldn’t he have loosened up just a bit and given me some stories to tell? How the hell was I going to give his eulogy?

Then there was sadness. This was my father, and the relationship I had had with him was hollow. I knew the outlines of his life — growing up without a father, serving in the army, becoming a banker — but my only felt knowledge of those kinds of experiences came from novels I had read, not from stories he had told me. With my brother who was an accountant, they would often talk about his work. With me, the rare times we would talk about my job, he would be asking questions about the enrollment and the endowments at the private school where I worked. It felt like he just wanted to make sure that my employer would remain solvent.

When the wailing finally stopped, I went to the public restroom down the hall to splash cold water on my face and gather myself. Even though I was only out of the room for a matter of minutes, the whole time I was gone, I was afraid he would be dead when I got back.

When I went back Phil and Jenny did not look at me directly. I appreciated that. I also appreciated the fact that Jenny did not encourage any more talking to my father. I held one of my father’s hands and Phil held the other. Jenny stood at the foot of the bed with her eyes closed and her hands folded together. She looked as if she was praying, but she and Phil were not at all religious as far as I knew.

I said, “You know, I have never actually see anyone die.”

Phil said that he had been there when his father-in-law died.

Jenny told us she had been in the room for quite a few deaths many years ago when she worked as a nurse.

I wondered, how does a man get all the way into his late fifties without ever witnessing a death? This one time, when I finally did witness a death, what I would say is, there was nothing peaceful about it. His breaths became over a minute apart. I kept thinking, he's dead, but then, his whole body would seize with a long, slow, rasping attempt to breathe.

I was looking at my watch to time the breaths, but I was also looking at what time it was, and I was amazed at how slowly time was passing. As my father was dying, I was hoping for time to pass more quickly. I was hoping each breath would be his last. Of course, I would say that I wanted him to stop breathing so that he would not suffer any more, but, actually, it was about me wanting to end my own suffering. When his last breath finally came, I felt bad for having looked forward to it. It was one more thing to feel guilty about.

Jenny knew it was the last breath before Phil and I did. She rushed to get his wedding ring off his finger before it swelled up. She got some Vaseline out of the drawer to help get it off. Once the ring was off, she took her thumb and her forefinger and she closed my dad's mouth. She put his glasses back on. Now that he was dead, he finally looked like himself.

I said, "Thank you, Jenny."

I was glad we had someone there who knew what you are supposed to do when someone dies.

Then, my brother and Jenny took care of business. Jenny got a nurse to get a doctor to declare my father dead. My brother had arranged with a funeral home in Needham to prepare the body and transport it to Albany. He called them, and a half hour later an unshaven man in his twenties with a slight limp came into the room with a gurney and a long, black vinyl bag with a zipper. He asked if we needed more time with our loved one. We said no and left the room. Fifteen minutes later he came out of the room with my father in the bag on top of the gurney. I wondered: how did he get a dead body into a bag without any help? I thought about Andy O'Hara, when he was in his sixties, going out at night and wrestling dead bodies into vinyl bags.

We sat at a table in the lobby of the nursing home and my brother went over lists



he had been making. He had already been in touch with the funeral home in Albany, with St. Catherine's, and with Saint Agnes cemetery. One of my brother's lists had the names of relatives who would need to be called. He told me he had made this list with my father about a year ago. I was surprised that he had had that kind of a conversation with my father. I had to ask him to give me some of the names on the list. My brother's tendency is to take care of everything, and in caring for our aged parents, I had taken advantage of that tendency.

I tried to think of how I could help Phil in planning for the funeral but I was not sure how to help. Could we somehow get enough people at St. Catherine's so that they would spill out onto the sidewalk? Could we hire a band to play outside of the church? Could I write a eulogy that would make my father seem like more than just a decent fellow? Could I somehow, finally, make myself into a useful son?

## Feel My Warm Hands: A Memoir

Karen Wunsch

During the summer when I was around ten, I'd take the train by myself from New York to Cleveland and visit my father's sister and her husband. I wasn't particularly close to my uncle Dave, but my aunt Ruth was warm and cheerful and I adored her. I'd stay for around two weeks, and while I was there I'd try not to think about going back to our tension-filled Manhattan apartment where my remote, psychoanalyst father and depressed, narcissistic mother were very unhappy together.

Ruth and Dave lived in a big house in Shaker Heights with their daughter, Jackie, who was eight years older than me and often away when I was there. In the morning my aunt Ruth would come into the guest room with a deck of cards and sit on my bed. She was thin, with short black hair, very white skin, and freckles across her nose. I was thin, too, with big dark eyes. People were always telling me to smile! Before breakfast we'd play many games of "Spite and Malice." Bemoaning her bad luck, she'd pretend not to notice my cheating.

At some point we'd go to my aunt's bedroom and while I'd use the silver-backed comb and hairbrush on her dresser and sniff the perfume in the many fancy bottles, she'd tell me stories. I loved her stories, like how my uncle would tiptoe on their thick bedroom carpet in the morning so as not to wake her — and then inadvertently slam the bedroom door when he left. Unlike my mother, whose stories about my father tended to be bitter or mocking, my aunt always sounded affectionate. One of my favorite stories was about the time when Ruth was young and suffered from Addison's disease (eventually cortisone saved her life, and when I knew her she was fine). Once when she was in the hospital she became aware of a horrible smell coming from the room across the hall.

"That poor patient must be terribly sick, the medicines smell so bad," she said to one of the doctors.

He explained that the woman suffered from a really offensive body odor that no amount of washing or deodorant could get rid of.

Eventually someone in a lab came up with a chemical that helped her so much, it was later used in Dial deodorant soap.

For years I'd ask people, "Do you know how Dial soap came to be invented?" even though few of them seemed to find the story as satisfying as I did.

My aunt and I were what she called chatterboxes, but although I assume she was aware of my parents' marital problems, I don't remember our ever discussing them. If she was critical of my mother, she never said anything. My mother adored her and would joke that if she and my father ever got divorced, "I get Ruth!"

During my visits my aunt and I would go to her country club for lunch and a swim, or stop by her modern-looking Reform temple. Wherever we went, everyone seemed happy to see Ruth. She laughed a lot and touched people when she talked to them. The Cleveland we drove around looked brighter and cleaner than Manhattan. The supermarkets were bigger than the small stores I was used to. Sometimes we'd shop for what my aunt called my fall wardrobe. Most nights I'd ask for barbecued chicken wings, and we'd grill them in the backyard.

Toward the end of my first visit, I came across the return ticket Ruth had bought for me. Hoping that — somehow — I'd be able to stay longer, I tore it into tiny pieces that I flushed down the toilet. My aunt searched and searched, (I later found out that she'd also fired her cleaning lady for theft), bought me another ticket, and I left on schedule.

My parents met in the early 1940s. My father, in his mid-thirties, was an internist in Cleveland, and my mother, nineteen, worked as a receptionist in his office. He admired her looks and she enjoyed having a sophisticated older man introduce her to things like lobster. They got married and a year later I was born. Toward the end of the war, my father was sent to England as an army medic. As he treated the soldiers and saw how, under the stress of war, a lot of physical illness is psychosomatic, he decided to become a psychoanalyst.

When the war was over he studied psychiatry at the Menninger Clinic, and then we moved to Manhattan where he was analyzed, joined the prestigious New York Psychoanalytic, and began to see patients who'd lie on the couch five days a week and freely associate while he took notes and said little. Unfortunately, he'd bring his analytic manner home. He'd answer a question with a question, interpret our behavior according to Freudian principles, and reveal little about himself. When I complained about something like a stomachache, he'd quietly ask if something at school had upset me. This upset me.

His analytic world was mysterious and confusing. At one of my parents' cocktail parties my mother needed help opening a jar of olives, and since my father was busy she asked

one of his colleagues (all his friends were analysts) to help her.

When the man couldn't do it, my father tried and also failed.

I was passing around hors d'oeuvres.

"Did you see how happy he was that I couldn't open it either," my father whispered to me cheerfully.

For him, it was reassuring that another tenet of psychology, this one having to do with competitiveness, had proved — once again — to be true.

But I wondered why he wasn't hurt that his "friend" had been happy that he'd failed.

And — no one got to eat the olives!

My mother's new life as the wife of a psychoanalyst was hard on her. She found New York noisy and dirty and felt inferior to the older, better-educated and more sophisticated wives of my father's colleagues. Many of these women had careers. My mother wore a lot of makeup and tightly-fitting tops with plunging necklines and didn't work. Although she had a few friends of her own who she played canasta with, she spent a lot of time in bed with the shades down. She'd supplement the antidepressants she'd get from her therapist with the many samples that drug companies sent my father and he kept in a shoebox in his closet.

Sunday nights our family would go out for a lobster dinner. I remember the time — I was nine or ten — when my parents weren't speaking, and my mother refused to come with us.

I went into the dark bedroom, where she was in bed. For a change, she wasn't wearing any makeup. I thought she was prettier without it, but whenever I tried to tell her that, she wouldn't listen. She kept the windows closed so dirt wouldn't come in, and the room was stuffy.

I begged her to change her mind and come out with us.

"Don't be mad at him, we want you to come, *please*," I pleaded.

For a while she didn't answer.

Finally she said, as if she were explaining the meaning of life, "Love dies."

As my father learned more and more about the long-lasting effects of childhood experiences, he felt guilty about my growing up in our unhappy family. He'd tell me how after college I'd get psychoanalyzed. Ever since I could remember I'd heard how this was what

people who could afford it should do. I assumed I'd do it too, but it was hard to share his enthusiasm for the prospect.

In the meantime, trying to brighten my life, he'd do things like not tell me in advance when he was planning to take me someplace special — say, to the circus: his theory was that if I knew about it and then something happened to spoil the plan, I'd be disappointed.

But for me, quietly doing something like burying my head in a book, suddenly there'd be a rush to go out and then we'd be on our way to someplace exciting. It was unsettling.

In Cleveland, during those summers I visited my aunt, it seemed as if every day was hot and my aunt and I were always laughing as we'd go from her big air-conditioned car to some fancy air-conditioned place. Whenever we were outside, she'd moan, "It's like an *oven* out here, feel how *warm* my hands are." As she'd beseechingly hold them out to me, I'd pretend to be too much the grand lady to deign to touch them.

My favorite of my aunt's stories were about my father while he was still a general practitioner in Cleveland, single and living with his parents and sister.

One night when he came home from his office, Ruth didn't seem like herself. She'd already been diagnosed with Addison's disease, but although she didn't act very sick, something told him to wrap her in a blanket, carry her to his car, and rush her to the hospital. This saved her life.

I liked the story partly because after my father became a psychoanalyst, he was so rigid about no longer practicing physical medicine that he'd say, "See a doctor!" when I'd ask him to do something like get a splinter out of my foot.

And maybe I also liked it because it seemed as if he'd saved my aunt — for me.

When I got home from one of my Cleveland visits, I asked my father, "How come Aunt Ruth is so much happier than we are?"

Without missing a beat, he said, "I think her Addison's disease fulfilled many of her masochistic needs."

I was in my early twenties when my parents divorced. (Guess who got Ruth?) My uncle Dave died; eventually my aunt remarried and they moved to Florida. By then I hadn't

been to Cleveland or seen my aunt in years. Looking back, I'm surprised by how short a time I was there — maybe six weeks in three years. It was enough.

After college I came back to New York, taught English and, of course, saw a psychoanalyst. Friends and books and maybe New York also saved me. One day I fell in love with a warm, optimistic man, and we got married and had children.



## Submission Guidelines

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We accept original English language submissions in poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, drama, and art. Submit poems in one document, please. Our submission period is August 1 through November 1 for poetry, short fiction, drama, and creative non-fiction. We accept art submissions from August 1 through January 31.

Please include a 75 word contributor's note and your address, telephone number, and email address.

Simultaneous submissions are welcome but withdraw your submission immediately if your work is accepted elsewhere. Note that we do not republish pieces, including work online.

We usually pay \$10 per poem and page of visual art, and \$3 per page of prose, plus two free copies of the issue. We cannot pay international contributors.

Submissions cannot be accepted via email.

## Contributors

**Brent Ameneiro's** poetry has been published in *The Fourth River*, *Hispanic Culture Review*, and elsewhere. He was the recipient of the following awards: 2019 Sarah B. Marsh Rebelo Excellence in Poetry, 202 San Miguel Poetry Week Fellowship, and the 2021 SRS Research Award for Diversity, Inclusion and Social Justice.

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*Gun/Shy*, published by Wayne State University Press, is **Jim Daniels'** eighteenth poetry book. Other recent books include his fiction collection, *The Perp Walk*, and his anthology, *RESPECT: The Poetry of Detroit Music* (2020), co-edited with M.L. Liebler. A native of Detroit, Daniels lives in Pittsburgh and teaches in the Alma College low-residency MFA program.

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Bilingual, multidisciplinary artist, **Marie-Julie**, works as a freelance illustrator in Quebec, Canada. She uses pencils, brushes, digital software, and fabrics to express her creativity.

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**Devon Miller-Duggan** teaches at the University of Delaware. Her books include *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* (Tres Chicas Books, 2008), *Alphabet Year* (Wipf & Stock, 2017), and *The Slow Salute* (Lithic Press Chapbook Competition Winner, 2018).

**A. Molotkov** is the author of four poetry collections from Word Works Press. His memoir *A Broken Russia Inside Me* about growing up in the USSR and making a new life in America is due out in 2022 from Propertius. His collection of ten short stories, “Interventions in Blood,” is part of Hawai’i Review Issue 91. He co-edits *The Inflectionist Review*.

**Nancy Carol Moody** is the author of the collections, *The House of Nobody Home* and *Photograph with Girls*, as well as the chapbook, *Mermaid*. Individual pieces have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Salamander*, *Tampa Review*, and *Nimrod*.

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**Anne Myles’s** poetry has appeared in the *North American Review*, *Split Rock Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Lavender Review*, and other journals. Professor Emerita of English at the University of Northern Iowa, she has recently moved to Greensboro, North Carolina.

**Toti O’Brien** is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish last name. Born in Rome, living in Los Angeles, she is an artist, musician, and dancer. She is the author of *Other Maidens* (BlazeVOX, 2020), and *An Alphabet of Birds* (Moonrise Press, 2020).

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**Ann Reed** has been published in *Tayo Literary Magazine*, *Sou-wester Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, *ON-THEBUS*, *Broad River Review*, and other magazines. She has fought forest fires in the Sierra Nevada and created “best in show” pastries in New York City, taught high school calculus and helped bring babies into the world as a doula. She lives in New Mexico.

**Lisa Rouillard’s** poetry has appeared in such magazines as *Atlantic Review*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Hubbub*, as well as on buses with Poetry in Motion. A chapbook, *An Envelope Waiting*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2020. She lives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

**John Sandman**, emeritus English professor at the State University of New York at Delhi, has published stories in *The MacGuffin*, *The Northern New England Review* and *West Branch*.

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**Richard Weaver** volunteers, when possible, with the Maryland Book Bank, CityLit, and the Baltimore Book Festival. He's the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende Press, 1992) and provided the libretto for a symphony, *Of Sea and Stars* (2005). Recently he published his 130th {Ir}Rational Narrative, aka prose poem.

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**Keri Withington** has published two poetry chapbooks: *Constellations of Freckles* (Dancing Girl Press) and *Beckoning from the Waves* (Plan B Press). Withington teaches at Pellissippi State in Tennessee's Appalachian foothills.

**Karen Wunsch's** stories and memoirs have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Literary Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *North American Review*, and elsewhere. A collection of her stories, *Do You Know What I'm Not Telling You?*, has been published by Serving House Books.



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