

EXPOSITION REVIEW

2019

VOLUME IV
WONDER



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At the end of each summer, the *Exposition Review* managing editors go on a weekend retreat in the mountains. Surrounded by forest and lakes, we come together to reflect on the year and our goals for the future. It's less romantic than it sounds: we break down budgets, give ourselves tasks for the coming year, figure out who has the best speaker for editors calling in from out of town, and easily get distracted with t-shirt designs (though, we've yet to order any to this day after a solid four years).

We spend less time on the annual issue and more time on our larger identity. By our 2018 retreat, [Vol III. "Orbit"](#) was released and submissions were open for Vol IV. "Wonder." We were preparing for our annual Short Play staged reading, reviewing intern applications, and eager to see what else we could accomplish in the coming year.

We went through the list of different organizations, writers, and literary journals that we have worked with and want to in the future—and paused for a moment. When we started, it was important for us to use the resources we had. Were we still relying too much on the same events? The same writers? Should we find confidence knowing we have gotten better at hosting those events and promoting writers, or were we disserving our community by not venturing into new territory?

Then, a light bulb. Our place in the world is to amplify the voices of writers, artists, theater companies, book stores, readers, and anyone who shares our mission of inclusivity in genre and community. We should not shy away from revisiting our past or trying something new. The choice wasn't mutually exclusive—in the same way our theme, "Wonder," can allude to both the act of questioning what is known and the beauty in encountering the unknown.

To that end, Vol IV. "Wonder" is full of surprises. We're publishing more experimental than in any previous issue to date. There are some familiar faces from our past: an interview with Jeffrey Lo (contributor in [Vol I. "IX Lives"](#)) and hybrid collage-fiction from Trinie Dalton ([Flash 405 guest judge](#)). There's poetry about love, nature, and Zoloft. You can find a wide range of nonfiction: the traditional true crime journalism piece, a hybrid lyrical story about a simple neighborhood blackout, memoirs on caring for a mother, or a personal essay on caring for yourself. All of our fiction has elements of magical realism, whereas the artwork takes real objects and photography to create magic in the mundane. Our stage and screen showcases dynamic examinations of characters experiencing wonder. We could not be more proud of this issue.

We'd like to thank our team of readers for powering through a record-breaking number of submissions. To our interns, Lauren and Alayna, you both helped build out this amazing issue and learned first-hand that rejection does not come without careful consideration. Thank you to WriteGirl and The Hatchery Press for helping us host another successful workshop for teen girls in Los Angeles to learn about publication. Thank you to Rachel Mindell from Submishmash who runs a great weekly newsletter that brings together writers and submission opportunities. Thank you, especially, to our donors who helped us achieve our fundraising goals this year and allow us to do more than what we dreamed possible.

Lastly, thanks to an extraordinary group of managing editors and associate editors who stay dedicated to this journal each year. *Exposition Review* belongs to all of us, and we know this is only the beginning of what's to come.

Lauren Gorski
Jessica June Rowe
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Little Planet

ZACHARY ELLER

FICTION

Today we took a day trip to Little Planet, just a short ride from C-Sphere, but still off the beaten track of most day trippers. Hardly anyone was there, but it was a lovely, starry place, small enough to walk around in about forty minutes.

It's hard to believe that all the hours of stressful broom traffic were waiting to be escaped with just a ninety-minute spacebus ride from the C-Port. Aural starlight oozed jelly, white to purple, while long-poled speakers pumped echoing twinkles.

Friendly staff at the tourist center offered informative maps, and one of them explained the conceptual backing of the planet's background music-sounds from the spacebus, below the threshold of perception, looped and pitchshifted to imitate a sheepcall. Nice concept!

Visitors may wonder how such a wonderful destination could still be so unknown, but with some sips of local brainwine, taking in the view, they'll instead hope it stays that way as they're washed with private pleasure.

Purple and yellow stripeworms were burrowing the neighboring planet, flinging candy from the mountains, frolicking, praising the jelly star. Their roars and violent quaking were to us a pleasant view as we rolled out our picnic blanket and poured ourselves some brainwine, watching the wormworld writhe in nothingness splashed with purple spotlights.

As we were taking our time relaxing, some gnome vendors approached on their gnometruck. "Truth! Truth!" they peddled in their gnomespeech.

"Look at this!" one pip-squeaked, bursting his woven basket, from which a liquid rainbow pummeled. "Ooohhhh!" we said, blood rushing with excitement.

"Heeere! Truthbutter, truthbiscuit, truthjam!"

"Ohhh! Looks yummy!" We grabbed the truthbiscuits, slathering the truthbutter and truthjam. I like to layer mine so thick that the oleic level would be sickening if not for the hard, sour seeds, truthbiscuit being the doughy stage for this double tsunami of yum.

Sorry guys, but YouTube's encoding wouldn't even allow for frequencies high enough to affect these mice; you're just imagining the results. Your walls are hollow; mice run through them. You probably don't understand this but hollow walls offer better insulation. Your house was made for you by someone else and you live in it without understanding. Inside your house are passages you don't know, small passages through walls that the mice know well. They live there and eat there. They too want things and

want to feel a certain way. Trap them in a closed space and they'll scream with little voices. Your efforts to make this house only yours is a disingenuous means to overlook the truth that there's nothing that is yours and you're full of a leaky passages. Mice and spiders evade you and parasites live inside you, using you without your knowing it, thoughts and words powertubed to your dreams. The same fat that makes mackerels delicious was meant to protect them from frigid waters, and your words are ignorant of gravity and of what gravity does to your body.

The gooey, flaky truthbiscuit floods inside my mouth; doughy facts rush a sense of relief: at last, I know what is true.

*In my dream I don't care who you are where you're from don't care what you did as long as you *** me and at the moment Nick sings as long as you're **** with me I am folded into an envelope delivered from this soil do you understand this in my dream? I wake up and my dick is little jutting from my zipper and everyone else watches on the dry land and I'm in the mud. No that's not what I meant, I'm sorry, I didn't say that. Child killing medicine gives you a dream about killing a child! ♪Although **** has always been a friend of mine / I'm leaving my **** in your hands♪*

A long walk home through a baseball field at night, dome of stars suspended in a plump frozen grape: the truthbutter comforts me; this is what I want.

Nice buttons Bilbo, but how'd you get those in an agrarian society? You'd need mills and an economy to support that shit for various reasons. Your nice-ass hobbit hole, where'd you import that from you rich fuck, and what did you trade for it? We can only conclude that the Shire employs slave labor, how else could they uphold such a traditional existence while enjoying consumer goods? Saruman tried to change that and introduce technology to them but they resisted. Progress always wins in the end. I'm tired of reactionary nostalgia for the Shire. Gandalf perpetuated a legacy of abuse.

The tartness of the truthjam, stinging while also feeling good, making me feel like I conquered something.

Honestly the whole experience exceeded our expectations. We tossed the gnomes some C-coins and they jumped in the air to grab them.

"Thaaaaaank youuuuu!" the gnomes harmonized cutely, doing a traditional dance of thanksgiving. We exhaled luxuriously; the gnometruck puffed away.

Ah... what a perfect day. I'm so glad the gnomes burst that basket open. Brushing against some truth is more than worth the cost of the spacebus tickets and the time it took to get here. Now I feel motivated: I need to keep living. I take a sip of brainwine and listen to the speakers.

On the spacebus back I look at the seashell-shaped galaxies: the conch galaxy, coral galaxy, horseshoe crab galaxy. I imagine the galaxies as raw eggs in boiling water, boiling into the universe of matter, spacetime, egg drop soup.

Sometimes all it takes is a vacation to refresh one's brain. Now back on the C-Sphere, I watch the lines of cute witches, all on their brooms going about their daily tasks, and I feel from the bottom of my heart that I'm proud to be one of them.

I can always take a morsel of truth to eat on my bonsai terrace, watching *the white apartments, clean, dipping to surfaces inconceivable, such a distance from these heights, so many bonsai shaking out oxygen, bonsai granted, one to each terrace, recalling something nonlinear, feedback loop pitchshifting my life, the mirrored, musty storage room, the tuba band, walking, blasting their tubas, the fat funny pig man smiling in my face, serving his barbeque cut from his belly, the long pronged knife, everyone laughing, big long table, oversize room, white paint and wires, we've come so far now, too long scroll bar, same psalm posted again and again, but each time different, scary changes, minor, nonlinear, all my experience, sketched on my witch hat, only my story, these trillion witches, magically puddling, alleys of monuments, I am unique, I look from my balcony, endless crowds, cute, but not me, girly, beautiful, following orders, fun, my witch hat, woven my colors, radiant struggle, on whatever planet, freedom to choose, what's right for me, appreciate me, my witch hat resting perfect in one hand, oversize crystal ball in another, showing my heart's true crystal future, dream plucked, leafy, vein rust colors, refracted, contours of crystal-balled world, perfect, secret, my true colors.*

Bones

KYLE RAYMOND FITZPATRICK

FICTION

The problem started when he couldn't feel his fingers. He thought it was the weather, the cold, but it was something else. His fingertips were white.

"They look flat," I told him. I picked up his hand, drawing the fingers closer to my eyes: they were harder than flesh, as if the skin had calcified, salt bodies rising out of the Dead Sea. I tapped a few fingers with my own. They were like a buttery marble that could be scraped and spread. I tapped his pointer finger with the nail of my thumb, pressing in lightly. "Does that hurt?"

He shook his head, giving me a grimace, fear widening his features like an empty headline. His breath was heavy. His eyes became full.

"It must be the weather," I told him, squeezing his hands in mine, turning them over to kiss his palms. "A little numbness is normal this time of year. I'm sure it's nothing."

We went to the hospital. I drove him and waited in the lobby, ripping through magazines to find any image to replace the white fingertips. A snowy vista, a coconut cake, the shaggy hair of an aging man: anything to take the image, anything to absorb it. His whiteness kept fingering my brain, poking the back of my eyes. I imagined his fingerprints disappearing, eventually rubbing off on my skin. His touching me would become foreign.

There must have been a problem with his diet, the doctors told him. An imbalanced diet can contribute to poor circulation and numbness, both of which can desaturate the skin, causing a paleness. It could be diabetes. He waved pills at me as we drove home from the pharmacy. "My diet is fine," he said. "I don't have diabetes." He whispered the words to himself over and over again as the cold sun set. He didn't have diabetes. He was right about that.

He started wearing gloves. I didn't notice them at first, but they became more apparent as warm weather approached. "I just don't want to look at them," he explained. Understandable, I admitted, but it all became so bizarre when he wore them to bed. They were black leather and felt like the bare stomach of a dog on my chest every night. He wrapped his arms around me and I too became clutched, gloved. There was a comic, dormant kinkiness that was untouched between us.

Then came the shirts and the socks. Long sleeves, at all times, increasingly odd as spring was firmly upon us. The socks weren't as strange since he always had cold feet, something I'd joked about since we first met.

That stopped. The gloves, the shirts, the socks wrapped him in himself, containing his body as he stored himself away from the world. He resonated a strange warmth, becoming a soft radiator. After weeks of this, after being “so cold” for so long, I confronted the normalizing and demanded an answer in bed. What was the problem? If you won’t be yourself with me, you won’t be yourself with anyone. What are you hiding?

He froze, his back fused to the headboard. A socked foot twisted around the hem of flannel pajama pants. These, too, were new. We always slept in our underwear.

“I’m cold,” he shrugged.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” he said. He sniffed away the tips of teardrops.

“If you aren’t telling me your problems, I know you’re not telling anyone.” I put one hand on his shoulder and the other on his sternum, pressing into his bony chest. “You have to tell me.” Then I was sniffing. We hugged. His face was smooth, no stubble against my neck. “We’ve been through worse. We’ll get through this.”

He nodded his head. He was fully sobbing.

I grabbed his gloved hands and squeezed. “We’ve gotten through worse,” I repeated.

He pulled away, staring at gloved palms before hiding them in one big fist, a hand within a hand. “I don’t want to.”

“Please.” I placed my hands over his. “I promise you’ll feel better. We don’t keep any secrets from each other.” I lowered my head to his, settling into his eyes.

“Remember?” I noticed his twinkle was missing. The glacial blue of his eyes had faded, melting down his cheeks. The way we looked at each other, my favorite part of his body, was turning white too.

He stared beyond me. There was the briefest nod and he tugged off a glove at the fingers. He covered the tips with his other hand before making a fist. He shook his head. “I don’t want to,” he said. He had become a child before me. “Please.” He looked up at me. “Don’t make me.”

I was scared. I didn’t want to see them. I didn’t want the image of him to decay any more, but I knew that he would do this for me, he would push me to open my body to him, to share in the tragedy as it unfolded. This would bring us together, he would say. I grabbed his confidence and reached for the sleeved forearm of his ungloved hand. I held the ungloved hand until his grip loosened, the fist readying to bloom in my palm. He closed his eyes, tears dropping into his lap. “Show me,” I told him. He nodded, revealing tan hands ending at white tips. Like the ocean receding from the land, his skin—his flesh—was pulling away from the underlying skeletal system. There was no blood, there were no wounds. It was all so clean, like the dark brown tip of a sharpened pencil, a speck of irregularity that made all the difference. It was like he was starting to turn to chalk.

I dropped the hand and covered my mouth, trying to swallow the shriek before it jumped out of me. He withdrew, pulling his knees to his chest and rocking.

“We—” I began, blinking, lost in our bed. “—We have to do something.” He was trembling, far away from the world, in emotions. I was not helping. “We have to tell someone,” I said. I leapt out of bed and he told me to stop, that he’d made calls, he’d

talked to people, that no one knew what was happening. Save for seeing a doctor himself, he hadn't found an answer—and he refused to see a doctor.

"I'm turning to bone," he sobbed. "My hands, my feet. I can't feel them."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. He seemed so much smaller than I remembered. I may have been imagining, my mind projecting this small problem onto his entire body. "I don't know what to do," he said. "I'm gonna die. I know it."

We didn't tell anyone for months. No friends, no family. We took vacation days, we worked from home, we did nothing but wait in our house, watching, looking for what his body would do next. We anticipated a time when his skin would creep back over the exposed interior, the wrongness of him righted as if pushing a rewind button. That didn't happen. As the heaviest and hottest parts of summer bore down, his hands were bare. His feet, to the tarsals, were revealed. He could still move his hands and feet in uncanny gesticulations that reminded of living skeletons, of Halloween come early. He was still alive, unpaired, just beginning to become unfleshed.

He said it didn't hurt. He told me repeatedly. His tears of increasing rarity only came when something beloved—the tip of my name tattooed on his forearm, a childhood scar on his heel—disappeared, exsanguinating as the understudying bone replaced it. There was no sensation to these parts, but the emotional loss filled in his blanks. I would inspect him in these moments, assuring that everything was fine. He was unchanged. Just a little different looking. We all die. This was expected, in a way. We said this but never meet eyes as we tried our best to ignore the reality. I patted the bones. I poked them. I draped them in a wet cloth, to keep them hydrated. The soft, firm whiteness was beautiful, almost inviting in their novelty. I was careful not to chip at them, to take any part of him away despite the childlike temptation to spread him, to see if he could write in white on the sidewalk or break him between my teeth.

We mostly sat around these days. I tried to work but idled at my computer, telecommuting in failure. He lost his job, forced to resign after refusing to come in, getting severance and sick leave in solidarity. They wanted him to get better but they couldn't sustain him without a valid medical justification. Friends felt the same. We staved them off until many of them abandoned us in our distance. They wanted to help, they offered dinners, only for us to demure their kindness. We ate and drank and participated in life at a minimum from within our home. Everything was normal, albeit lonely and on a tighter budget, until he was confronted with his fading body. Then, he'd lose it.

"I'm disappearing," he cried. "What is happening to me?"

This was just the new normal, I said. We will work through it. Our thoughts evolved though. The death was less scary than the living. We wanted to think it was going to stop at the forearms, at the ankles, that his bones would become cute accessories for fall. We'd show his skeletal hands to children all October. That was a fantasy. His body continued on and we were left with questions that were more searing than we were prepared for. What would happen when his face went? Would he be able to talk? Would he be able to eat? What about his legs? Would he eventually be unable to walk? What about his... parts? When he was unable to go, what would happen to his waste? If he was still here, without any of the senses, without any marks of humanity, was he still alive? Would he ever die?

The holidays stared us down, answerless, from weeks away, the closing of the year a dark drain we slid toward. He was in a catatonia, a flatness. I cried at his feet, begging for him to do something. I craved help, for a support system, for anyone else to speak to or to share this with. We were isolated. I was becoming nothing too.

"I'll be fine," he said. "It doesn't hurt. We will be okay." I looked up at his face, meeting his entirely white eyes. I wanted their brightness to consume me.

His concession was that we'd tell our families after refusing holiday invites, after nearly a year away from them. We explained our silence and our reluctance, defining the many distances we had kept within the year. We explained the bones for what felt like the first time, as if we had just discovered this problem in sharing it with others. This new context brought new fears, both obvious and not.

For example: his parents were horrified and disturbed. They wanted us to keep our distance, to never see them again, to not "spread" what we had to anyone. This was anticipated, a sour validation of our living with bones. This was how we felt we would have reacted if we encountered others with this problem. This was what we assumed a *normal* reaction would be.

Then there were my parents. They gave us support. They admonished our stubbornness. I admonished their insensitivity and told them we needed time. We would reach out once we knew that everything was okay. I wanted them but I wanted him more. As the slightest of brightness shone on our lives, his ball sockets were revealed. Perhaps they would have insisted more, had gotten on planes and in cars, if *I* were the one turning to bone. Instead, they respected our wishes and stayed at a reasonable distance.

He spent most of his time in the living room, seated upright, never moving, as to not become dust from the friction of unmuscle bone moving on unmuscle bone. He explained that he was trying to see all he could out the window before his eyes disappeared. He had me play music from when we dated, from his college days, from his childhood. He was trying to lock them in his skull. I read him books and, sometimes, we watched an old movie. We looked at a lot of pictures. He no longer ate food since it would end up unprocessed in his lap. He was balding. A small white cap revealed itself on his crown.

"I want to experience my life before it's gone," he told me, his voice starting to wheeze. "That's all I have left."

I tried to convince him to travel, to leave the house, to make this wish more robust. "For us," I explained.

He shook his head no. "I'll break."

As a new year came, as we were deep in winter, his late stages set in and he lived under a blanket. His face became a trace, the outline for a more detailed sketch that would never be filled in. I examined him daily to find his lungs, his beating heart, his chest escaping at the ribs.

I knew what would come next. It was obvious: he would slow to a stop. Parts of him would disappear until he was strictly skeletal and, even then, maybe that would disappear. He would seem permanently undressed, stripped to his most basic. It was devastating, but it was the inevitable ending, what we had been waiting for, our questions about his destination finally answered. But there were surprises to be found here,

involuntary twitches and spasms in parts of his body that I had resigned to senselessness. Perhaps the death he was experiencing was different, a locking *into* life instead of a locking *out of* life. Perhaps he would remain, haunting what was under the skin. I would have him forever as a physicalized feeling.

“Don’t move me,” he began his final monologue, his breath and words becoming soft clicks in a fading, dry gurgle. I watched his face, staring at the holes in his cheeks, trying to read his teeth. I held his hands, the bones worn from my holding them for months. If any part of his bones would disappear, it would be his hands from my touch. “Leave me here.” He couldn’t see me, he couldn’t hear me, but I told him I would. I squeezed his hand so faintly as he squeezed back with an intensity I hadn’t felt in months, as if he had stored up all his power to grasp me despite lost senses. He sputtered a last cough into a laugh. “Like a plant.” We giggled and cried. The shine of his deflating brain glistened in winter light. “I’ll be here.” He squeezed my hand, tight, the pulsing beat of his disappearing heart into my palm. “Love,” he said. “You.”

I squeezed back, opposite the pulse, giving him my own. The words stumbled out of my mouth as an echo—“*Love you, too.*”—and I sat there with his bones as he kept squeezing and squeezing and squeezing. I didn’t want to let him go. I watched him for hours. His grip sustained, flat but full. I watched and waited for him to disappear, as if he would. But he was still there, squeezing my hand, just bones with less and less flesh.

I let go of him after two days of staring at what was his body, in his chair, looking over the front of the house, out to the street, down the hill, into town, to valleys of the faded green beyond. I slept and cried and slept and cried. I called family to let them know.

For weeks, I would wake up covered in sweat and race to check on his body, the bones, to find him in his chair, waiting for me to join him in his ongoing wake. These weeks faded to months, to a comfortable indefinite of my stumbling upon his body in shock, every encounter a resetting of the surprise that he was neither here nor there, as if I forgot this happens to everyone in a way.

It always seemed like he was sending me signals through his bones. I’d find his hand still pulsing slowly, grasping, a suggestion that he was somewhere, traveling within. Sometimes both of his hands pulsed in sequence. Sometimes a hand pulsed to a beat that was opposed by the other. Sometimes bony toes tapped against the hardwood floor. Sometimes an arm raised. Once, he stood.

I treat the bones like they are a complete body. I speak to them and show them things. I play them music. I treat them as I treat everyone else because, after all, we have bones in us as well. What’s different is that his bones feel like they are a channel, this strange machine that I hope will return his flesh like leaves and flowers after a long winter. Sometimes I squint and pretend that the blur of eyelashes, eyelids, and tears are his body returning to me. That never works.

I have my time with him. I sit with him when I wake up and before I go to sleep. I hold his hands and he holds me back. I put his vacant squeezes to use. Wherever he is wandering, he pauses for me, taking a break from ticking and counting and tapping to acknowledge me. I remind him again and again that he isn’t doing any of this alone. He is keeping time in his own way, and I am keeping time in mine.

I have resumed life as best I can. I started to work as I once had, outside of the house, away from the bones. I moved him to a bedroom so he wouldn't get hurt or so no one would hurt him. He is like a pet fish now, impossible to understand but wholly present, vacantly available in an abstract world we may never know. I clean up any white dust that comes off of him, collecting him in clear jars that I stack on shelves around him. Someday, he will be gone. All the bones will be gone. I am as gentle as I can be until then.

Rendezvous City

ARTURO STANIG

PHOTOGRAPHY



Arturo Stanig, *Rendezvous City*, Riverton and Shoshoni Wyoming, 2017. Courtesy the artist



Arturo Stanig, *Rendezvous City*, Riverton and Shoshoni Wyoming, 2017. Courtesy the artist



Arturo Stanig, *Rendezvous City*, Riverton and Shoshoni Wyoming, 2017. Courtesy the artist



Arturo Stanig, *Rendezvous City*, Riverton and Shoshoni Wyoming, 2017. Courtesy the artist



Arturo Stanig, *Rendezvous City*, Riverton and Shoshoni Wyoming, 2017. Courtesy the artist

The Superhero Way

T.S. McADAMS

FICTION

Captain Superfriend is not a superhero. He's part of the RLSH (Real Life Super Hero) movement. He wears a Halloween Superman costume and Zorro mask, helps people find lost cats, and calls 9-1-1 on a cellphone when there's trouble. His website reveals his "secret" identity and links to a "sister site" for his real estate agency. Both sites mention that the Chamber of Commerce, or maybe it was the Lions Club, gave him a commendation, not for fighting crime, but for his "community spirit." And probably for being twenty-something and one of the Valley's top realtors. He shouldn't have been out after dark in any neighborhood I patrol, sucking in his stomach so it wouldn't hang over his belt, handing out flyers for an LAPD community outreach picnic.

Crouched in the shadow of a rooftop air-conditioning unit, I saw it coming before the Captain noticed the four guys in wifebeaters and saggy jeans—maybe gang members, maybe not, but lightweights either way. I'd been hoping they'd rob the dry cleaners under my feet, or maybe assault a customer, but I'd pretty much resigned myself to a wasted night. Then the Captain rounded the corner, and I started stretching and warming up, as much as I could without leaving my shadow, even before the kid with a soul patch sprouting through acne like pink bubble wrap yelled, "Check it out! It's Superfag!"

No one heard me hit the ground, feet absorbing the impact without strain. Beach muscles are well and good—the Captain should have worked on his—but I have priorities a bodybuilder never thinks of, none more important than the feet: Pilates Reformer is crucial to my training. Still unnoticed, I let things develop a little. That's how it's done: you have to let them earn their beating or you lose the moral high ground. Once they had him down and were kicking him, not even that hard, I stepped out of the shadows and said, "The weight of your sins betrays you. Face the judgment of Osiris." That was Eric's shtick, and it's not as impressive when I do it, mostly because I can't fly, so I don't say it floating four feet off the ground. I'm a little tired of saying it, really. After ten years, almost, I'd rather switch to, "You're a criminal and I'm going to kick your ass," but it's a legacy: I'm Osiris, and there's no one else to do it.

Soul Patch nominated himself to handle villainous banter, and he opened with, "What the fuck?" He had a badly drawn skull tattooed on his neck, or it might have been Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, or maybe he told the guy with the needle, "Give me a mean potato." Sweaty pimples glistened like fish eggs, and I didn't want to touch him, but that's why I wear the gloves. I made his gargoyle face my piñata, and candy teeth skittered on the pavement. Right away, Captain Real Estate yelled, "No! Don't hurt them! It's not the

superhero way!” Lying on his back on the sidewalk, holding his ribs and crying a little, trying to tell *me* about the “superhero way”! I probably didn’t bother much with choreography. I don’t remember. It was like being in the shower rehearsing another argument with Don about why our comics store shouldn’t carry fucking *Simpsons* action figures and forgetting whether I’ve washed my hair. By the time the bad guys limped away, I had a whole speech worked out.

Because that’s *exactly* the superhero way. A superhero represents something incompatible with Captain Superfriend’s red polyester boot tops with the elastic straps that loop under his real shoes. Even my costume—charcoal gray hood and cloak, verdigris-green mask, head-to-toe custom spandex, and neoprene—would be ridiculous if I stood in the street giving lectures, letting people laugh at my tights. Contrary to reputation, Americans have no talent for idolatry. They can appreciate the idea of a superhero, and the sound of breaking bones will keep them focused for a few moments; then you have to disappear before the snickering begins. You can be less brutal if you’re Eric holding an SUV above your head, but he would still throw the car without a thought for the noncombatant who parked it at the curb. In a world where parents negotiate with toddlers, I used to think Eric should be more sensitive to the niceties. Now I know the golden age is not coming back until we learn to respect superheroes again.

I was ready to explain some of this to the Captain when Isis stepped out of the drugstore across the street. “You’re done here, right?”

“Were you shopping dressed like that?” Isis is Felicia Page in a costume a lot like mine, but mostly gold and without the Kevlar panels, because she’s too vain to cover her tits. She also keeps two-dozen small, ankh-handled knives, darts really, in a sort of bandolier that wraps around her hips and thighs in a vaguely fetishy way. They’re smeared with a paralyzing formula she may have learned from Eric, though she says it was revealed to her in a dream. Felicia is a brown belt in Hapkido (only a green belt in Eric’s time), and accurate with her darts if the target will hold still—not exactly Avengers-level skills. I let her sidekick for me because she’s the only one left with an actual superpower. I never tell Felicia when I’m going patrolling, or where, but when I find action, she often shows up. She’s also waited at places I didn’t go, but always places I thought about going, and she always witnesses a crime, which she may or may not take on alone.

When she told me she also has visions of the past, I said most people call those memories. She said, “No, Junior, not the way things turned out—the way they might have been.” She had a vision where we let Eric have that girl, and the girl became Isis, and Felicia and I got together. I almost said the last part could still happen, but I was in uniform at the time, and Osiris is never pathetic. Even when Eric died, leering at a tawny adolescent, oblivious to the dismay of his team, he was never pathetic.

Captain Superfriend was nothing but pathetic. He sprawled across a grimy constellation of used chewing gum like a sad connect-the-dots activity.

Felicia said, “I felt like you needed me.”

I said, “For them? Either you’re slipping, or you think I am.”

“I felt like you might need me to hold you back.”

“What the hell does that mean? Anyway, it’s over.”

Felicia shrugged, golden boobs filling the brackets of her crossed arms. Of course, her expression was hidden by her mask. I turned back to Captain Superfriend, trying to reassemble my speech, but it all rose up in me somehow, and I pulled his mask off and hit him. I drove my fist into his eye, crunching infraorbital bones, and told him, “There are no more superheroes, asshole!”

* * *

The Captain Superfriend thing happened maybe two hours after my little sister’s wedding. That’s not an excuse. Osiris doesn’t need excuses.

I was a groomsman, adjusting a rented cummerbund along with Lance and two firemen buddies in a choir room next to the chapel. Firemen, I learned, are always in each other’s weddings, and these two veterans knew a lot of honeymoon jokes about Lance having sex with my sister. After they told all they knew, some twice, Lance said, “Hey, maybe Seth doesn’t want to hear this shit!” Then they talked about feces. While one was on the toilet, the others would pound the door and say, “Pinch it off! You’re not the only one who has to take a dump!” When he opened the door, they would fan their noses, saying, “Oh my God! You need to lay off the firehouse chili! Jesus Christ!” The deity was fervently invoked to witness the smell of shit, but downplayed during the ceremony, when the minister mostly told anecdotes about Lance and Theresa. I knew the minister a little: he was the funny kid in my high school who said “in Jesus’ name we pray” after the pledge of allegiance. He said it at the wedding, when he had to, with an identical smirk in his voice.

After the ceremony, I sat at the family table, and Lance’s father tried to draw me out about the comics business, but I don’t like to talk about comics with people who don’t read them. Then Lance and his best man questioned me about the Olympics. That’s the cover I use with my family: I’m training for the decathlon. This explains why I almost never have time for family events, and why the co-owner of a comic book store has this physique. I always knew they must be repeating this story to friends, but I don’t usually have to meet them. Lance and Nolan asked about qualifying competitions, why I didn’t compete last time around, what coaches thought about my prospects at thirty-four—questions pointed enough to let me know they knew I was lying, without publicly calling me out. I had to change the subject by asking Lance what it’s like to be a fireman, and his stories made me realize he saves more people, prevents more injuries and more property loss, than I ever will lurking on rooftops. That’s not really the point—not the whole point—but that would be hard to explain to Lance’s family and fans.

I should have taken Felicia. Only one year older than me, Felicia designs her own clothing and owns three boutiques that sell it. Like Bruce Wayne with an hourglass figure, she would have impressed everyone at the table, and she would have nudged me ironically when the maid of honor said, “Lance is like a superhero! Seth, you should sell a comic book about Lance!” Then I wouldn’t have been on a rooftop last night, hoping to run into her, when my training log said I should be home asleep. I don’t know what Felicia would have said if I asked her to my sister’s wedding. What she ended up saying after I hit

Captain Superfriend was, “Nice work, Luthor. You finally took out Superman. Better leave this to me. You go home and practice your evil laugh.”

* * *

Aside from the Eric years, most of my operations have always started out like the Captain Superfriend rescue. I can’t fly, after all, and Spider-Man himself couldn’t swing from building to building in the San Fernando Valley, which is basically two stories high. I used to lie in wait dressed in gray goggles and a homemade black outfit with splashes of dark yellow, like my urine after supplements, imitating the coloration of the *cordulegaster dorsalis* or Pacific spiketail. If evildoers appeared, the Dragonfly would fall on them like a real dragonfly on mosquitoes. If not, they were safe from me for another two weeks, which is why Batman is the most unrealistic superhero. With Superman, you have to accept that yellow star radiation confers inexplicable powers, but the rest pretty much follows. Batman requires believing Bruce Wayne can find enough hours to practice his skills, meet extensive social obligations, and patrol Gotham City every night. Impossible: even with no social life and doing less than my share at the store, I’m so busy training in judo, Muay Thai, CrossFit, parkour, qigong, and Dynamic Tension, I barely cape up twice a month.

That’s not to say I wouldn’t make adjustments to Superman’s random list of powers. I’m no theologian, but all the important powers could be manifestations of an incredibly powerful, short-range telekinesis. He levitates himself to fly. He moves his own limbs mentally for super-strength. Invulnerability is his mind holding every molecule in place, preventing any physical trauma. The various forms of super-vision require a separate theory, and I would consider dropping them, but the thing that really bothers me is freeze-breath. I guess it’s no less plausible than heat-vision, when you think about it, but regulars at the store all agree, freeze-breath is the one power that makes a Superman story ridiculous.

I’m not sure whether I thought this up before or after meeting Eric Metternich, but those were his powers, too: flight, super-strength, near-invulnerability if he had a chance to brace himself. And the force-projection thing, which also fits my theory. He used that on me the night we met, which played out like a classic Spider-Man team-up, with the other hero thinking at first that Spider-Man is a bad guy. I was in my Dragonfly costume on the roof of Partytime Liquor, as likely a place as any to attract the serial robbers I’d read about in the *Daily News*. Eric was Osiris, streaking along at twice the height of a tall palm tree, in a white costume with sea-green accents, and he suddenly altered course in a dive toward my rooftop. I don’t know how he spotted me. I never could determine whether Eric had any super-senses. His dive took him below the roofline so he could swoop back up and hang in the sky, white cape billowing as perfectly as his long, white hair. When I became Osiris, Felicia would add a mask and hood, and swap out the white for gray; it spoils the regal effect but suits the way I operate.

Osiris gestured with one hand, and the Dragonfly was lifted and tossed by an invisible wave. Stepping onto the roof, Osiris pronounced, “Face the judgment—” But the Dragonfly knew how to fall, how to bounce back, how to scythe Osiris’s feet out from under him with one leg while striking a terrifically focused blow to his chest. The sweep

had little effect, since a levitating hero holds his place regardless of footing, but the strike caught Osiris by surprise and spun his body halfway around, and Eric used his right arm sparingly for several days. Osiris was ready for the next blow, and somehow the Dragonfly sensed it; he didn't throw the kick that would have broken his shin. Osiris raised one eyebrow as the Dragonfly uncocked his leg and lowered his foot to the ground. The Dragonfly may have thought this expression condescending, noticing and resenting, even then, Osiris' attitude toward the ordinary mortals he protected more as a hobby than as a moral imperative, as someone else might tend an ant farm. It takes time to understand that real superheroes are different.

I had barely planted my foot when Isis emerged from the store below and called, "He's not a bad guy, you know."

Osiris smiled. "Would you say his costume suggests a falcon?"

"Not really. I can fix that." So Felicia made me my first professional costume, which was dark brown with bronze, and I became Horus, and it lasted thirty-two months. I still have the Horus costume hanging in my closet. And I have Eric's Osiris costume, tacked up on the back wall of the closet, and his skull on the shelf above. Felicia had a vision that Eric's skull was missing, and she had a golden mask made, like King Tut's, and put in Eric's coffin to replace it; but the vision didn't tell her who took the skull. I guess it's sort of an altar, since I burn candles sometimes and sacrificed a parakeet once, which only led to harrowing dreams.

I also took a moment to examine Eric's body when we stripped the costume from it, not for any weird reason, but because I'd always wondered whether Eric was human. I couldn't tell. His skin was pale and flawless, with maybe a smudge of bruising where a dozen bullets struck his torso. If I say he could have been sculpted from marble, it's a necessary cliché that communicates nothing, really, except the message of every necessary cliché—that there is nothing to communicate about the sublime, and we must abide the mystery. His phallus wasn't gold, as in the myth, but it was bigger than mine.

No, I was not sexually interested in Eric. I don't know whether there was anything like that between him and Felicia. No, I've never slept with Felicia. Yes, I am a virgin. This has nothing to do with anything.

* * *

We lost Eric on a mission against a supervillain called Squadron. He wasn't the only supervillain around in Eric's day, either. There don't seem to be any now. Squadron's thing, his power, was that he was one mind operating dozens of bodies. Really, he was a cult leader who conditioned followers with hypnotherapy, meditation, synchronized swimming, and Shotokan karate. They all wore drab olive spandex and half masks, and all grew matching beards, and it was something how they all moved and vocalized in unison, not communicating, yet never in each other's way, so that six different kicks would come simultaneously at six different levels, from six different directions, "*Kiai!*" No way to block or dodge them all.

They were kidnappers and had to be stopped, but as Horus, I gave each henchman his moment. Only Squadron himself had a gun; Osiris handled that, bullets rebounding

from his chest until he waved his hand and dashed Squadron against a wall, leaving the unarmed mob to me, aside from those Isis put down with darts. I would punch someone in the face, see the next man open to exactly the same move, and pass it up for the sake of variety, ducking his punch and catching his arm to throw him halfway across Squadron's warehouse lair with an exaggerated *seoi-nage* technique. Then, realizing I could drop the next two with quick elbows, I would opt instead for acrobatic spinning kicks, leaving me no time to prepare for a flying five-man takedown. The outcome was inevitable, and there was no audience, not even security cameras, but the villains and Horus gave the performance everything they had. Then Osiris, Isis, and Horus raced up the stairs and broke down a door to save the commissioner's daughter, and everything went to hell.

It was an undistinguished office with no supervillain pretensions, only the fake bamboo plant and cheap desk that foreshadow calisthenic penetration in a certain genre of porn. The girl was thirteen, at most, but already developed, which is supposedly caused by hormones in the water supply. She had been tied to a chair, but we found her standing with her back against the wall, clutching the paperweight she had used to knock out the guard: impressive, but not a superhero audition. Felicia was as stunned as I was when Eric said, "Look at this young lioness! Isis, I think you will be making another costume!" Eric had the angular features seen in profile on Roman coins, and he looked at the girl the way he used to look at Felicia, the way Ming the Merciless looked at Dale Arden in vintage Flash Gordon strips. I felt myself adopting the stance of Batman in the seventies, when Dennis O'Neil restored his edge, turning Robin's super-scoutmaster into the Dark Knight again.

Felicia said, "She's just a kid."

Eric said, "Old enough to marry in Old Egypt. We'll call her Sekhmet."

A voice, a thought faster than voice, said don't do it, he didn't mean that how it sounded, I can still pull this kick. But my shin hit his neck in an almost horizontal trajectory, separating C4 and C5 with a crisp, wet sound, like stepping on an eyeball or a testicle, which I was not expecting. The girl looked at us for a moment after Eric fell, and then held up the paperweight and said, "I'm walking out of here." The paperweight was a cast-iron hippopotamus. The girl had sun-bleached hair and should have been walking through seagrass, holding a longboard over her head or maybe leading a horse, in a glossy advertisement for cable pullovers and high-rise twill pants. Eric looked undamaged, as though the hippo were kryptonite and he would recover once the girl carried it from the room, but he didn't move as her footsteps descended the stairs.

Felicia was in shock, I guess, expressionless as she stripped the body. She told me, "Don't just stand there. This is not a peep show. Osiris has to take her home." I put on Eric's costume, and it wasn't damp like the one I peeled off. Eric hadn't been jumping around. It clung to my sweaty torso and thighs, defiled. There was no other way. I wore the whole Osiris costume, but I kept my Horus mask.

I found the girl sitting on the curb outside. She had no idea which way to go, or whether the abandoned Sun Valley industrial park was ten miles from home or a thousand, so she let me drive her home in my Chevy Impala.

She said, "Who are you supposed to be?"

I said, "Osiris."

She said, "I thought you flew."

I said, "Not always."

Felicia's vision didn't show whether Sekhmet would have been happy with Eric, only that she would have looked good in a lioness costume and had the potential for a sort of berserker rage that could almost qualify as a superpower. The girl didn't say any more on the drive home, just kept the iron hippopotamus ready in her lap.

* * *

Felicia called the store this morning, and I knew it was about the Captain Superfriend incident last night. I had wanted to call her, but I wasn't going to. I was at the old computer we use for inventory, surrounded by Spider-Man and Captain America bobbleheads, because I've got to let Don win sometimes. Felicia told me to bring up the Captain Superfriend website.

It was more or less gone: no "Meet the Captain," no list of community events, no link to Delta Realty, just one embedded video. When I clicked it, I saw the Captain in a white and green outfit. A black eye spread across the left side of his face, from his eyebrow to well below his cheekbone, as if he were made up to play an angry Dalmatian on a children's television show.

"That looks kind of like Eric's Osiris costume."

"It's the original," Felicia told me. "Before I redesigned it."

"False Osiris!" said the Captain. "You are unworthy of that uniform!" Captain Americas nodded agreement. Spider-Men reserved judgment, remembering they are not real and I am as good as it gets anymore.

I said, "Where did he get that?"

Felicia said, "Eric had a son."

The Captain said, "I, Horus, will take it from you!"

"What the fuck? I'm Horus!"

"Not for eight years now."

The Captain said, "Meet me in the same place, at moonrise, if you dare!"

"Fuck that! Horus is my name!"

Felicia said, "If you want to be Horus again, maybe we need a new Osiris."

The Captain made scary Dalmatian faces into the camera for five more seconds, and the video ended. I tried to remember his last name. Didn't it used to be on his site? You'd think I'd have noticed if it was Metternich. Felicia said, "Do you think about Eric? About what you—what happened to him?" I said, all the time. I got carried away and told her about my closet. She said, "You took Eric's head? What, for a trophy? You are fucked up." She broke the connection before I could explain. Maybe she didn't, though: maybe she went through a canyon. She always loses reception on Coldwater, driving back from her Beverly Hills store. I should probably call her back.

Right now, I'm behind the dry cleaners, crouching in the shadow of a dumpster, watching the Captain wander the roof in an old Osiris costume and cape. Wrapped in my own Osiris cape, I'm not so much hidden as passing for a trash bag, my outline broken by sunflowers. Not the big ones with edible seeds: the smaller, branching yellow flowers

common at the sides of roads are called sunflowers too. They were sacred to the Incas. Behind me is the Tujunga Wash, a major tributary to the Los Angeles River. A hundred years ago, the Los Angeles flooded like a lesser Nile, filling the basin with marshes like those that sheltered Child Horus; now, tributary and trunk are concrete channels, mostly dry, and sunflowers get by on sour liquid that drips from the trash.

I don't hear catcalls from the street, which means no one has noticed him yet. He's too ridiculous to be Eric's son, and I decide not to meet him. Then the Captain tires of pacing, holds his hands out to brace against invisible parallel bars, and levitates maybe eighteen inches off the roof. My reflexes are strategic choices, acquired through hours of drill, but I don't choose my actions now, any more than a desert toad, buried and dormant through the dry season, stops to consider his options before scrabbling from his burrow at the first sounds of rain. In five yards, I build enough speed to run straight up the wall.

He drifts toward me and a bit higher, until his fists, clenched at his sides, are even with my eyes. "You're not Osiris."

"I worked with him. I was Horus. When did you learn to fly?"

"I know all about that, murderer!" The Captain's broad gesture is not the way Eric did it, but the power is the same, a wave that lifts and tosses me from the roof. What would the toad make of this? Emerging into a flash flood, tumbled on a rocky streambed, would he regret digging out? Wish for drought again? Not if he had trained like Dragonfly-Horus-Osiris. I fall eight yards to pavement and roll to my feet as though warming up on a judo mat. The man floating down from the roof doesn't seem impressed, but a rut of teens stops to pay the tribute of narration.

"He's not even hurt!"

"Dude's flying!"

"Motherfuckers are mutants or something!"

"Check her out! Damn!"

Isis steps from the dry cleaners as the Captain touches down and rebounds a few inches, like a helium balloon that isn't quite spent the day after the party. She slides a dart from a loop at her thigh, and I try to signal no, that's not necessary, it probably won't even work, I've got this, and I see what you were thinking, maybe he could be like Eric, we could be what we were. I can't get all that into a hand gesture, but it doesn't matter, because she's aiming at me.

I can dodge anything Isis can throw, but I'm dizzy, the same as when I'm upside down too long for core work, and I unhook the gravity boots and drop to my feet again, and blood rushes from my head. The blade slides along Kevlar at my chest and doesn't have enough momentum left to penetrate my inner arm. Felicia knows all the unprotected spots, though, and she'll hit one soon if I don't move. It shouldn't hurt much, compared to some of the injuries I've had. I wonder what Felicia will do, what expression will be on her face, when the drug takes effect and I collapse. She lifts a dart above her head, and maybe I shouldn't be watching what this does to her chest, but the Captain stares at her too; it's no reason to change sides. She says, "I don't know if I can do it."

The Captain moves toward Felicia, treading air a bit with his hands. Eric never had to do that. The Captain hasn't even mastered the implacable expression proper to a superhero. With his discolored eye, he looks like an artless kabuki actor hoisted on a

chūnori wire, vogueing his response to a lover's betrayal or a mother's rejection. "I knew you might turn on me." He hits Felicia with the back of his hand, bouncing her off a window with the slogan "No Starch, No Wrinkles, No Problem!" She lands on her hands and knees, gets up slowly, and takes a defensive stance.

Felicia tells the Captain, "I'm not turning on you, Julian."

"I wanted to believe you. But how could an ordinary man defeat Osiris without help?" The Captain settles in front of Felicia and raises his right hand, preparing a telekinetic attack. "At least I know why he let down his guard. I can't blame myself, if he fell for it too."

I throw the deicide kick, and his cervical vertebrae make that chiropractic sound, the sound that my sister's husband makes dismembering champagne lobster, and the Captain doesn't fall gracefully like Eric did; the body lying on the sidewalk couldn't be anything but a corpse. Felicia doesn't say anything. She's all right, but she looks tired. I'm tired. All my life I've trained for this, never thinking of personal gain. At least two people are filming with cell phones, and I know how this is going to look on YouTube, me standing over a dead guy in a prototype of my costume, intoning "Face the judgment of Osiris," but I can't consider that. It's a legacy. I'm Osiris, and there's no one else.

Which People Void of Feeling Need Not Read

REBECCA ORCHARD

FICTION

I. Such Things Are/An Intriguing Teacher

When I said, Don't call me baby, you said: You don't get to choose your own name.

II. Natural Sense of Propriety Inherent in the Female Bosom

I am not a baby, I am a whale, great mossed hump and terrible eye, rotating my vastness in a *grand pas de deux* with the rushing green current.

III. What Might Be Expected

When I dance, I dance for me, each muscle cord bound around each bone. There is not a moment I am not aware of my own body. When I dance, there is pain and there is anger. When I dance, there is a brain, but I shout at it to keep quiet. When I dance, there is half of you inside me, dividing swiftly.

IV. Domestic Pleasures Planned

When it arrives, we will curl into each other like layers of a conch shell. I will tell it stories set in impossible lands and learn a new dance with it swathed to my heart. You will be banished from our kingdom.

V. A Wedding/A Mistake Discovered

Two of our friends stood smiling in a bower and you pressed your hand into the small of my back; sweat prickled under the lines of your palm.

VI. Conflict of Love and Duty

The friends would tell me to speak.

But the walnut in me twists and leaps: we are alone in the world.

VII. Reasons Why and Wherefore

It, too, will be a secret whale, and we will migrate together, and sing together, long haunting words no one can translate.

We will dance; it will spiral around me, doubling my helix, as I lead. We will nudge ice floes and clear loud breaths in the tropics. We will lurk, twin shadows, in the deep.

VIII. A Trifling Retrospect

Even as a child, I was serious.

IX. We Go Forward Again

Wherever I go, there you are. Around corners, over oceans, through hallways lined with books: your face and your body, disjointed parts. When I signal *jeté en avant*, you stand firm. When you signal *pirouette*, I turn.

I am used to taking cues.

X. A Man May Smile, and Smile, and be a Villain

There are a thousand thefts.

Every almost-orgasm, tallied between the layers of my skin.

Every time you accept a plate of food in silence. When you ask if you must attend my premiere. When you say before your friends, Not so much for the book smarts, this one, and clap me on the back.

When you laugh at my feet with tones I cannot surmise. Each of my cracked and bleeding toes flees my body.

XI. We Know Not What a Day Might Bring Forth

Today, I might keep walking. Past the train, past the taxis, to the sludging river. Today, I might slip between strangers and disappear.

Or I might ask a friend, Can I borrow your car? I might say, I plan to be cruel.

Or I might go home and shower; when you open the curtain I might say, Not today. I might sit with my walnut, with my twin whale shadow, and watch your consternation.

XII. Necessary Digression

In the blister-hot morning, a bird sings “secret, secret, secret, secret, secret, secret.”

XIII. When We Have Excited Curiosity, It Is But an Act of Good Nature to Gratify It

The city reaches through my aching feet and grips my knees; I go home.

When I walk through the door, I stretch and stretch, invert my body and send its blood rushing to the places that are shred and torn.

You watch. You say, Come here.

XIV. Unexpected Misfortunes

I bleed.

XV. Mystery Developed

The doctor says, Nothing to worry about, but I am still bleeding, and the hair on my underjaw prickles with danger.

XVI. Which People Void of Feeling Need Not Read

Have you ever had flesh part from your flesh? Have you left behind a torrent that was going to sing with you through the hollows of the ocean? Have you groaned and groaned and wished this pain over, though it means you are now empty?

The currents tore at my body; the salted froth did not let me breathe.

My teeth slid along teeth, and my whale twin sang a long farewell, slipping down from its inner sea, and I wished I could catch it between my fingers and lay it beside my cheek, and maybe it could find a pocket of my pelt to live in and grow until ready to face the world.

XVII. Maternal Sorrow/Embarkation

Being left was a *brisé en arrière* on crooked ankles, all gracefulness gone, but leaving was one small, lovely lap of an inexorable tide.

In the end, it was just a closed door.

In the end, it was a gentle bow, a determined turn, a final sounding into heavier waters.

Don't Waste Your Prayers, Saints are Bad Listeners

MEGHAN E. O'TOOLE

FICTION

My father is building his coffin.

Piles of wood shavings and sawdust pillow the workshop floor. I stand at the door, one mitten on my hand and the other in my pocket. He bends a piece of wood around the head shape of his coffin. The wood is fragrant, cedar.

When I was young, it was the wood my father taught me to recognize by smell, others by touch. "Feel the grain," he said. He would rap his knuckle against the board. "This is a softwood." Again, another piece. "Now this," he'd say. "Hardwood. This?"

I would knock, softly, as if in response, and whisper, "Soft?" It was a guess lofted into the cold, something waiting for an open hand to catch.

Sometimes, I would be right, and he would rub calluses along the grain. "That's right," he'd say, only half approving.

I'd pull my weight up the stairs to my bedroom where I held my breath waiting for night, waiting for his calloused hands to slip into my room. Everything reeked of varnish, and every night I forgave him.

Watching him work now, he smooths sandpaper along the grain of wood. He has bled from every crack in his palm, just like the crucifix that hangs above the shelf full of unstirred paint.

He does not speak to me.

This is his penance.

* * *

When I was young, I was washed in a desire for church. It was not from the fear induced by Sunday school nuns. It was a memory of safety I longed for. Not confession, not mass. Just the solitude of a church at night lit by red candles, prayers waiting to burn out.

The smell of shared Bibles and catechisms, paper as thin as moth wings telling the stories of saints. The pages rustled and whispered, *you could be one of us*.

It was night, a church at night, that I wanted, the stained-glass windows dormant. Mary would be woken first, the east-most window, her pale hands outstretched. Each finger counted a time I had to forgive my father.

Instead, I taught myself to pray.

The garden was my cathedral. Dew jeweled the grass and rubbed off on my clothes. I clutched a rock, this thing I pried from the pond bottom, and pressed my lips to the cold, mottled surface.

I prayed for Joan of Arc to dust ashes off her pant leg and brace her sword against my door. Her lips were pink and her hair unevenly cut. She was burned for wearing men's clothes and not canonized until 1920. This, I decided, was the saint who could protect me. This young girl with hands a hair bigger than mine.

I breathed these wishes into the stone and buried it beneath the bench behind the workshop.

* * *

I leave my father, for a moment. His hands catch splinters, and I hear his curse as I pull away from the door and wander into the garden. Damp grass clippings plaster my boots. I can see my breath, then I stop.

Saint Joan is sitting on the bench behind the workshop. She cradles a cigarette, and a birdcage veil obscures her face. Gold beads on her flapper dress shimmer when she moves.

No sword, no armor.

"I came too late?" she asks, her French accent light as butter across bread.

She really is nineteen. I can see it in the way she tucks her chin into her chest when she know she's being watched.

My wish clicks in my head, and even now I can taste the algae on that rock. "Heaven couldn't spare you for a twelve-year-old?"

"I am too late." She bows her head, exhales smoke. She is just nineteen. I can see that this was the confused cast to her eyes when she signed a page she could not read, when, like a child being taught to write, a large hand guided her pen across a line, a confession, and she realized that Charles would not come, that she died for voices clamoring in her head.

I hold my hands in my pockets. "Not too late," I say, softer.

Her T-strap heel grinds her cigarette into the ground. "Liar."

I stare at her. Her hair is black and cropped to her jaw the way I had mine at fourteen.

She smells like cinders.

I want to collect her narrow shoulders in a close hug and rub aloe across her skin in case she remembers the sensation of blisters breaking across her flesh in the heat of a fire. I want to sit beside her and tell her what I wished I'd known at twelve, fourteen, nineteen. Don't trust a man, not even gods. Too often, they test us; too often, we are the ones who must ask for forgiveness.

She gestures towards the garage where another tool whirrs and something is screwed in place. "But he's getting what he deserves now, *non*? Your wish."

* * *

I go back to the workshop and stand in the doorway. “Do you need help?”

He doesn’t answer. I can see the shape of it now, boxy and simple. The edges of it echo the downward slope of his shoulders, the hunch in his back. This coffin will fit him just right.

He hands me a can of dark varnish and a brush. I slop the brush around, stirring and marinating in the fumes. Like a heavy syrup, a string of varnish drips from the bristles.

The wood soaks up the coat. Broadening my strokes and simmering in the fumes, I find myself praying. Like sealing one last wish into this wood.

The Snowman

BERNARD STEEDS

FICTION

A little over three years ago my dear friend Tobias disappeared while he was walking his dog Lucy by the Paddington Canal. It was a dull afternoon in June and not many people were about: just a few walkers and cyclists, a skateboarder or two. No one saw anyone fitting Tobias's description, either near the canal or along the route he usually took from his flat in West Kilburn. His absence was discovered only when a woman who was passing saw the dog lying beside the canal staring intently into the water. Tobias's navy blue Marylebone Cricket Club scarf was tied around the dog's lead. Tobias's name and number were handwritten on the label. So this passerby called and left a message on Tobias's answerphone, and two days later the message was heard by Tobias's girlfriend, Yasuko, when she arrived to find out why Tobias had not been calling, letting herself in with the key he had given her only weeks before. It was Yasuko who called the police. She knew there was no way Tobias would have left that dog alone.

There was an investigation. Police divers searched the canal from Harrow Road to Kensal but found nothing. Drowning was ruled out: Tobias had been a high school swimming champion. Two young constables asked me a series of questions. Had Tobias ever gone missing before? (No, he had not.) Was he in any kind of trouble? (No.) Had he been behaving unusually? (No more than usual.) Was he mixed up with any suspicious characters? (Yes.) Was he employed? (Yes, as an archivist at the V&A.) Was he depressed? (No.) Had he recently experienced a breakup, the death of anyone close to him, a sudden loss of confidence or change in dietary habits? (No, no, and no.) Had he suddenly come in to a lot of money? (No.)

I answered these questions as patiently and honestly as I could. There was nothing out of the ordinary, I said, except that he seemed happier than usual, and had begun to hang around with a guy named Mukhta. Who was this Mukhta, asked the younger of the two officers, the one who did not yet have a moustache. What was his role in Tobias's life, and where would the officers find him? I did not know. I had never met Mukhta, but had gathered that he was some kind of spiritual teacher, or poet, or yoga instructor—something of that sort. Tobias had been visiting him on Sunday afternoons, and always—if I saw him later—seemed to be in a mellow kind of mood. There was something unexpected going on, for sure, but it had never struck me as dangerous. For all I knew they spent the afternoon reading comic books, or drinking coffee and discussing Camus. "He might have some rooms in Camden," I said, though I had no idea where that thought had come from. The officers thanked me and left. Three weeks later they called with the news that they had

been unable to locate anyone fitting Mukhta's description in the Camden area, nor any other place. He was, it was implied, someone I might have imagined.

Tobias's disappearance was difficult for Yasuko. In the first few days she had seemed remarkably calm. Not that she was pleased that he had gone, not at all. It was more like she had fallen into that state that people experience when their car is about to crash: time stops, everything seems still, perhaps their life flashes before their eyes, but above all they are calm. That was the state that Yasuko fell into. She spent those first few days at Tobias's flat, not really doing anything—just waiting. Sometimes she would sit on the sofa beneath the window out onto Drayford Close, with her legs crossed and her eyes closed. I asked her what she was doing and she said "Meditating," in a slightly impatient voice, as if I was some kind of moron. She and Tobias were into that sort of thing. That and yoga and eating detox salads from Mildreds. I wondered perhaps if she should do something, like go through his things and look for clues, but she seemed content just to wait, just to "be there for him" if he walked through the door.

She waited a week like that, maybe two; then she went through a phase of doing. She tidied the flat, washing everything—his clothes, his dishes, his sheets and towels, his curtains. She dusted. She went through his things—even his computer, which had some documents from his work, a few fragments of poems, some downloaded essays about obscure topics (relativity and time, cognitive biases, symbolism in Eliot, the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*), and a couple of films (*Bruce Almighty* and *My Life as a Dog*). None of it, Yasuko said, seemed to offer much of a clue. We were sitting together on the sofa in the front room as she told me this. Her eyes were hot with tears, her face pink and puffy. She kept rubbing her hands together hard as if she expected to peel away the skin and find him there. "Oh God," she kept saying. "Oh God, I'm sorry." As if somehow it was all her fault. I leaned over and took her in my arms and held her, just for a moment, and let some of her grief run into me—it was too much for her to carry alone. "You were good for him," I whispered. And then regretted saying "were."

As months went by, resignation set in for both of us. It became clear that we were not going to see him again. One afternoon, I visited the police station to find out what was going on. An officer told me that the file had been made inactive, which seemed to be his way of saying they had no clues and had given up. "Perhaps he has skipped the country," the officer said. "Happens more than you might think. Financial difficulty. Relationship trouble. Chance to start afresh, that sort of thing." He had a face that looked like bread pudding, and I found it difficult to take him seriously. "Please don't laugh," he said. "I don't see how this is a laughing matter." The strange thing was, neither did I—it was just something about that officer's face.

Anyway, Tobias's flat was cleaned out and most of his things were given away to charity shops. His family took care of all that—it was only right that they should. I offered to do anything I could, but his mother told me there was nothing. "He didn't have much, poor chick," she said. She was standing in the doorway, arms folded across her chest. I said I would leave my number in case she changed her mind, but she said that would not be necessary. They let Yasuko help though, and I was glad of that—glad for Yasuko's sake, and glad for Tobias. I felt like he would want her there—would want her taking care of his things. A few weeks later she called and told me how strange it all was, seeing his life

reduced to what he had left behind—his clothes, some books and CDs, a few posters and photographs, some op-shop crockery. “It was just junk,” she kept saying. “Just junk. It sure makes you think.” But she’d saved me a snapshot, one of Tobias and me together walking Lucy beside the river down at Chelsea Wharf, and I thought that was nice of her.

On the anniversary of his disappearance, his family decided to hold a memorial service. It was a small affair—we had all moved on by then, in our own peculiar ways. Which is not to say that Tobias had not left a big hole in our lives—he definitely had. But we had all found some way of avoiding that hole, of growing our lives around it. It was like a big crater suddenly opened up where Oxford Circus had been, and instead of going that way everybody just started taking the Circle Line, or getting off early and walking. It was different, and we’d preferred things the other way, but how things had turned out was okay too. Lucy, for instance, had been given away to some friends of Yasuko’s, which meant Yasuko got to see her every now and then. Once, I tagged along. The dog was like a puppy: jumping around, wagging her tail—she even seemed to be smiling in that way dogs sometimes do. When no one was looking I leaned down and whispered Tobias’s name in her ear, just to see what would happen, but the dog just turned her head and licked my nose.

Yasuko had moved on too. She had a new boyfriend, a lawyer from the city who seemed to have a little of Tobias’s spirit in him, though he was richer and better groomed and more uptight. She seemed happy, although it was clear the memory of Tobias still hung around. I had found my own ways to move on. For one thing, I was writing—just little fragments and poems, diary notes, that kind of thing. “Without attachment or ambition,” as Tobias used to say—just for enjoyment in the moment. I had found a new job, too, working night shift in a warehouse for one of those online book outfits. I was checking the orders, packing up books, and sending them out. It seemed satisfying, in a way I would not have expected. I saw it as something good, sending out these little parcels, imagining people checking their letter boxes, experiencing that little thrill when the books finally arrived. It felt like I was sending out an antidote to loneliness. After a while I started talking to a girl in the dispatch office, and soon we were dating. She was the jolliest person I had ever met, always seeing the bright side of things, always ready with a kind word. I needed that. Her kindness drew me to her.

She had a big circle of friends and they were just the same, always laughing and joking. They seemed happy to make room for one more, that one more being me. Things went along quite nicely, and I almost began to let go of my memories of Tobias—but it seemed there was something that had to happen first, and that something happened after the memorial.

I had noticed Yasuko during the service, while the celebrant was talking. I had expected her to cry, just one last time—but she had not. She sat through the whole thing with this most serene smile on her face. Once or twice it almost seemed like she was laughing. I felt a little angry about that, and afterward I confronted her. She was standing with Tobias’s parents, so I said a few words to them, and then I took her arm and pulled her to one side. “What’s going on?” I asked. “Why do you keep smiling?” She answered this with a smile. “Jesus,” I said. She looked at me in a strange way. Her eyes seemed

very—I don't even know the word. Big? Still? It was like she was trying to see through me—no, it was like she *was* seeing right through me.

"Come with me," she said. "I'll try to explain."

There was a coffee shop just down the street, so we stopped in there. Yasuko was in a strange mood—she would smile and seem very serene, and then suddenly she would start laughing and talking very quickly, and then she would cry, and then laugh again. It was like a whole series of storms were blowing through her—but that's what they did, they just went right through, and then they were gone.

"You'll never guess what," she said.

She was right, I never would have. I didn't even try.

"What," I said. "Tell me, what."

"I got a letter," she said. "From Tobias. Only this morning."

"How," I said. "How is that possible?"

"Mukhta delivered it," she said, "by hand."

"Mukhta," I said.

"Yeah, Mukhta," she said. "He's a little Irish guy who rides a Kawasaki."

"So, he's all right," I said. "Tobias is all right?"

Yasuko just smiled again, and reached into her pocket. "Here it is," she said, and handed it over.

Dearest Yasuko,

I hope it is not too much of a shock to be reading this. I hope too that the last year has not been too difficult for you, or for my friends and family. Please trust that nothing has been left to chance.

I cannot explain what happened to me, not in any way that begins to convey the wholeness of it. You might think that a crime was committed, and that my body was dumped somewhere the police did not think to search. But that would be a small and irrelevant part of an endless picture.

If you close your eyes, Yasuko, perhaps you will know what I mean. Perhaps you will catch a glimpse of it, and know that it is real, and, if you choose, you can let go and drift right into it.

You can float and float in its nothingness, and then one day turn around and look back into the world you once thought was yours, and see it like a tiny snow globe, filled with tiny snow houses and tiny snow people.

When you see that, Yasuko, even for just a second, you can never be hurt again. How can you feel pain when you are everything?

If this makes no sense, just wait, and see, and in the meantime be kind to yourself. It is wonderful to see you here, in your yellow sweater, sipping your coffee. I am glad you wore red—it is a colour of love. And I am glad you are showing this to my friend. Show it to everyone. Ask them what they see.

*I am yours, always and forever,
Tobias*

I read the letter for a second time, and a third—and then I handed it back. I looked into Yasuko's eyes. They seemed to contain so much space, it was as if you could fall right into them and travel anywhere—out to the moon, past Jupiter and Saturn, off into that depthless stillness that no one can even imagine. Perhaps I was falling in love with her—or was that just grief, just the strangeness of the moment? The letter had destroyed any certainties I might once have held. I didn't know anything. Could Tobias really have written it? Where was he? How did he know I was there? Who was Mukhta? Who, for that matter, were Yasuko and I? The questions spun from me little comets, and I watched them flare and disappear.

"Well," said Yasuko. "Thank you. I'll be going now."

I got up, feeling confused, and watched as she paid for the coffees. Outside, I hugged her and said goodbye. I walked away without looking back, and I haven't seen her since.

But even though years have passed and everything has changed very much, I have never forgotten Tobias, or Yasuko, and I have never forgotten that letter. It had to be some sort of trick, didn't it? Some sort of nasty hoax played by that Mukhta character? I mean, when I think of it now, could we even be sure it was Tobias's handwriting? And how could he have known she would wear red? And yet, I have never been able to escape the feeling that something changed that day, and for the better.

Not long afterward I married the girl from the book warehouse, and about the same time one of my stories was accepted for a journal. Somehow that turned into a contract with a publisher of detective novels. I'm on my third book now, and the royalties have seen us through since the warehouse closed down. It isn't much, but it's enough to go on with.

Outside the window, as I am jotting down these notes, our children are building a snowman. Seth, the oldest, is standing with his hands on his hips, giving orders. Bella has just put in the eyes, and Lily has come inside, perhaps to find a carrot for the nose. It is a little wonky, this snowman—the body leans slightly to one side, and the head to the other: it could fall at any moment. But its smile—a row of twigs—is mad and gleeful. Soon Lily will be back with its nose, and then it will be complete. A real snowman, with real hopes and dreams.

It will not last, of course. Tomorrow, perhaps, the children will knock it over. Or the wind will take it. Or it might stand until spring and then melt. But for now it is here, grinning. It can see everything. The stars, the moon, the endless space between. The children, the little brown mop-eared puppy they will get for Christmas, the mother at the door and the father at the window, both of them watching. For now, the snowman sees. For now, this is all there is.

Élan Prequel to Murder

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

JOURNALISM

TEEN MISSING AFTER NIGHT OF UNDERAGE DRINKING, read the headline. Jennifer Moore's picture appeared on the July 25, 2006, cover of the *New York Daily News*. Two days later the teen's body was found in a Weehawken dumpster and a pimp and prostitute had been arrested. The photo of the alleged perpetrator, Draymond Coleman, age thirty-six, was tucked inside the paper while Krystal Riordan's frightened twenty-year-old face emblazoned the newspaper's cover. HOOKER WATCHED BOYFRIEND KILL TEEN.

Before Krystal Riordan's thirty-year sentence and incarceration at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Clinton, New Jersey, before Draymond Coleman and the murder of Jennifer Moore, and even before the prostitution, there was the notorious Élan School.

* * *

Krystal has been waiting for Draymond all night in their shabby rent-by-the-week room at the Park Avenue Hotel in Weehawken, New Jersey. At last he arrives broke, high, and with Jennifer. He's been drinking and snorting cocaine, and the white burst of anger inside him simmers, ready to boil over. He orders Krystal to go pay the cab fare, and she does after telling him again she's leaving him. Step by step, the duo climbs the stairs, Jennifer unsteady and helped up by Draymond. She is tiny and petite; Krystal later remarks on her small size. They tell the drunk girl there's a charger for her cell phone inside, and so she follows the tall blonde who wears a long wraparound skirt into the repellent room, and the man with the black goatee and ox-like shoulders closes the space behind her. The door clicks. Locks. The dawn peering in the window is hot—the flaming orange of a stone crab. The drapes sagging, the bed unmade. Heaps of dirty clothes, take-out containers, Coke cans, cigarette butts, the air fouled by fighting and sex.

* * *

Jennifer uses the community bathroom in the hall, the one in which two hours later in the unimaginable future, the two Good Samaritans will clean her lifeless body with bleach. He starts kissing Jennifer as soon as the door closes, and she pushes him away. Maybe he doesn't kiss her but lifts up her halter. His face in the blue cast of the TV, the sound of sirens and gunfire from inside the screen. He's loopy on cocaine, no sleep, and alcohol.

“Come on, beautiful,” maybe he says, almost lovingly. Or maybe the anger already boils. Rage soup, swimming with animal fat and marrow, rage simmers in his blood vessels. The heat-clotted room ignites the scalding cauldron of a childhood in foster care. Jennifer scratches him. The first time her nails rake him, she must know she’s trapped, that it’s hopeless. You don’t attack a violent man, otherwise. Above her the shaved head, the bow lips on a savage face.

* * *

The street cart Big Fat Gyros is parked outside, already seeping the oily smell of grilling lamb.

* * *

The beating starts, blood squirting from Jennifer’s nose, but this soccer star, this lissome girl is a fighter. Jennifer scratches him, and he hits her. More scratching, more punches. Her fingernails are her only defense, and she uses them fiercely. He hits her again and again. “Lie still,” he orders. Her soccer game is running down the field without her. He starts to strangle her, wanting to quiet her. Krystal freezes. She remembers Draymond’s fingers around her own neck, squeezing, how she couldn’t breathe and it felt as if she was drowning. Like his thumbs were forcing water into her lungs and pressure’s fat thigh lay over her chest. Jennifer rises up from the bed and down she is pushed. Her eyes have swollen shut. Sun dances in the cracks of the ceiling. Her fingernails rake his hands. A fingernail breaks. He rips Jennifer’s mini off, then grabs her wrists, tries to tie them with her halter. Blood everywhere. “I’m doing this to prove my love to you,” Draymond hisses. The words ripple through Krystal that he is strangling Jennifer, the girl she is jealous of, to prove his love for her. Like he proved his love by fighting for her.

* * *

The ur-question—the one anyone studying the Jennifer Moore murder asks and the one hardest to answer—why doesn’t Krystal come to Jennifer’s rescue? Why doesn’t she stop Draymond Coleman from killing?

“Dray snapped,” Krystal said. “It was a combination of cocaine and me saying I was leaving him.”

She doesn’t understand how her words sound. Nowhere does she mention the smoky kerosene of Draymond’s lust, nowhere does she speak of his hands becoming battering rams, nor does she talk about Jennifer’s agony. Not one scream issues from her mouth. Krystal lacks something essential—perhaps it’s the ability to feel.

Krystal has been sentenced to thirty years in prison for her sins of omission. What is such a sin? James 4:17 “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” A girl never mothered might be able to watch another girl take a beating, a girl trained in the Élan school routine might.



Krystal Riordan at her bail hearing after being arrested.

“Élan was a lockdown therapeutic boarding school. I was there for three years. If I’d never been sent there, I might have had a full basketball scholarship. They broke me down, but I never got built back up.”

— Krystal Riordan, Inmate #661387

* * *

Her parents drive her to Maine, and although there are trees on both sides of the two-lane highway, she doesn’t notice them. She sees the back of her mother’s head. The blond hair with the tight curls just below her ears, the ears that hear everything.

“White pines,” her father says, “they’re so stately. Tall like you, honey. You’ll be taking hikes through them.” They’ve been told the Élan residential school’s program includes hiking, camping, and outdoor sports.

“Dogwoods and swamp birch and horse chestnuts,” her mother chimes in, reading from a brochure they picked up from a Maine Visitor’s Center. “I envy you. Krystal, you’re going to live here. It’s like a park. You always liked to climb trees when you were younger.”

“I was in Élan from fourteen to seventeen.”

— Krystal Riordan, Inmate #661387

* * *

Still fourteen, Krystal has been getting into trouble, embarrassing her parents in front of their neighbors, and they have an accounting business to think of. More than that, they love their adopted daughter and want her to be helped, but it's beyond them. She's from a different bloodline and although they would never say so, an inferior one. Child Services calls the boarding school they're taking her to THE LAST STOP. Krystal is seeing the trees, the white pines shaped like living pyramids. She wants to wrap herself in their bluish-green needles and gather their cones. The fissured gray trunks so still, only pretending to stand in one place but ready to move. The dogwoods with their explosion of white blossoms. Krystal hasn't seen any towns for miles and wonders how much farther until Élan. Will she be able to run away? This is nowhere.

* * *

The Great Horned Owl lives in these forests with tufted ears and yellow eyes like a cat.

* * *

The Directors and Founder are the Great Horned Owls turning their heads a whole 260 degrees, their keen hearing and their eyesight vigilantly overseeing their isolated Élan kingdom. Today the Directors are only people and greet her parents kindly, politely, but do not offer to show them the grounds. The school costs \$50,000 a year. Krystal's parents have written a check, in full. The Founder tells them he was once a heroin addict and it was through this therapy that the addict in him was eradicated. In the bright light, Krystal can see the gleam on his hard teeth and his thin hair and bushy eyebrows. Her parents can't get away fast enough.

"Élan is well-known even throughout the residential treatment industry as one of the few direct descendants of Synanon, a defunct cult that pioneered the use of North Korean brainwashing techniques to control its members."

— Anonymous, I Am a Graduate of Élan School, Reddit.com

* * *

The Founder tells her there will be an outdoor gathering to introduce her to the community, but first she needs to sit down and write a letter of confession to her parents. She is told to write that she does drugs (a lie) and drinks (another lie) and that she is a whore (the last lie). The pen trembles in her hand. She's thirsty and wants a glass of water but is afraid to ask.

Then a man and woman escort her to the gathering outside where at least a hundred kids sit in a circle. The residents have been gathered for a General Meeting." The trees are close by—ash and quaking aspen, and she can hear the water flowing in the leaves. Krystal must stand up and tell them her name and sing "Happy Birthday" or "Mary Had a Little Lamb." The lump in her throat keeps growing when they make her stand and

everyone looks at her. They tell her to say hello and introduce herself, but her mouth is dry and her tongue feels like wood. She can't imagine any words ever coming out of it. She tries not to look at anyone, only stares at her sneakers and the terry cuff of her white gym socks. Already the kids are snickering and someone yells that she is fat. Worthless, stupid, a waste of protoplasm.



Krystal as a basketball player (second to the left)

* * *

Quickly she learns that the residents run everything—kids who have proved themselves worthy monitor your sleep. Every ten minutes your blanket is raised and a flashlight washes over you. The Night Monitor always stands guard. The nights stretch endlessly, sleep comes, the brown blanket is comforting, a warm silty soil, then the flashlight moon shines over her body. Every ten minutes until the sun begins burning in the dawn sky.

“We all went to static group therapy to talk about this stuff. That was where you could sit and no one screamed. It got to the point I actually started to believe I’d done all those things they said I had.”

— Krystal Riordan, Inmate #661387

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She’s told not to look directly at a member of the opposite sex by Yasmin, the resident hall monitor, who marks down infractions. Punishment for looking at a member of the opposite sex might be washing a toilet with your bare hands. Flirty behavior would be worse. The halls are patrolled by Judith and Christian, Tod and Melissa.

It's already dark when school classes begin after dinner at 7 p.m. Krystal sits in a rickety desk where an open book has been placed in front of her. An algebra book with marks made by others erased and she wonders if any message has been left for her by the ones who came before. She can trace the not-quite-invisible river the pen made, its indentations—*at least no one is shouting*. The teacher, a bearded, slope-shouldered man, chalks something on the blackboard, the kind Krystal's never seen before—not a green board but an actual black one. The teacher tells them to copy a page from the book and hand it in. No exams. No homework.

After the algebra teacher leaves, the history teacher shuffles in. Short, her small face lost in black frame glasses, she says hello to the class and seems to smile at Krystal, singling her out. She dares not smile back at the teacher because one of her classmates would tell. When classes end at 11 p.m. she files out of the room walking down the thin halls. The teacher's smile lingers. "You're beautiful," she imagines the teacher whispering.

"I was one of the last people to get a ring. I fought two huge girls and a boy for one minute each. It may not seem like a long time, but when it's happening it is."

— Krystal Riordan, Inmate #661387

* * *

The ring is the crown jewel in Élan's brainwashing wizardry. Krystal has not eaten fast enough in the eight minutes she's allowed, plus her scrubbing of floors is deemed lackluster, and her waxing suspect. During her phone call home her voice trembles and she tries to tell her father to come get her. Melissa, her Support Person, cuts the call. Melissa is a STRENGTH and Krystal, a NON STRENGTH. In the Isolation Room they bring in the residents who will fight her. She watches the huge girl, tall like Krystal but built like a refrigerator with bologna arms and legs, stuff her hands into boxing gloves. Tod tosses boxing gloves at Krystal and tells her to put them on fast. Show us how tough you are, non-strength flirty nobody, show us. He pushes her into the room's center. One, then another, then another.

The Directors discover her fear of being alone in the dark, which they mistake for a fear of the tall trees, the rustling and whispering. They blindfold her and stand her beside a tall tree where she waits for the owl to seize her with its talons and crush her skull. She listens for the batting velvety fringes of their wings.

"The people who run Élan are not dumb. Since there was constant screaming being done, at times they would come to the house and order all the higher residents to transform the house to quiet mode. We would draw all the shades and temporarily suspend all dealing crews and General Meetings, etc. ... Usually a 20/20 news team was afoot."

— Anonymous, I Am a Graduate of Élan School, Reddit.com

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The trees have to come to Krystal when she closes her eyes. You are never allowed to be alone here (ever), yet she is filled with the loneliness of animals abandoned by their mothers. You go outside only during gym class once a week. At night under her lids she can open doors that are always locked, she can go outdoors and walk in the maples, red and orange leaves crunching. You can breathe any weather, clothe yourself in a hot summer afternoon. At night when her empty stomach rumbles, the girl in the next bunk giggles. Krystal closes her eyes and sees herself eating shrimp heaped on a bed of yellow rice, fluffier than the one she lies on. The shrimp are slippery and light, one after another they swim into her mouth.

* * *

Krystal has to train herself to use the bathroom in the Élan way. In the morning when the sun muffled by the thick shades still manages to shine inside, she stands idle for a few seconds next to the window to drink in its heat. Four kids attack her for that, shouting and spitting. LAZY, SLOW-MOVING, SELFISH, UGLY. She loses bathroom privileges until mid-afternoon. She learns you're allowed three bathroom passes: morning, noon, and midnight. She learns about the Support Person who goes into the bathroom with her. Judith, her bathroom SP. Judith, the watcher, has curly dark hair and goat eyes that sometimes glow yellow. She learns you can't shut the stall door. Those first weeks she only pees; she can't do the other with Judith staring at her.

"I was in a chair made to face the corner with someone watching me. If I got up I would be tackled and restrained. So if I had to use the bathroom, I had to wait for a staff member to say I could go. Which could take hours. I was sent to the corner if I didn't want to get up in front of the house and sing. If I didn't get on my hands and knees and properly scrub their floors. If I didn't want to participate in their groups when I was supposed to yell and curse someone out."

— Krystal Riordan, Inmate #661387

* * *

Facing the corner, Krystal keeps her eyes open, must keep them open and stare straight ahead. Her face must line up with that corner crack, no looking up or around, no slouching, her hands on her knees always where the watcher can see them. Her ears are still hers and the quaking aspen takes her. She follows the bits of light sparking through holes in the leaves, a private speech.

"I always said that I would rather be here in EMCF than at Élan. When I try to explain it to people they think I'm lying. That's why I wanted to show some people the papers you're sending me."

— Krystal Riordan, Inmate #661387

* * *

The chilling thing Krystal said about Élan is she would rather be in prison than there. Her parents refuse to believe her when she describes conditions. Why should they believe the daughter gifted with their name that they've fed and loved, only to be lied to and sparred with?

Fifteen-minute calls to parents allowed once a week while another student listens hardly serve as warnings.

Stephen Smith, another Élan graduate who did time in a maximum security prison, has said, "Élan's much worse. Here there's a lot of shit but I get a chance for some solitude, to read, and I'm going to college. At Élan there was nothing positive—it was pure hell. You know the worst thing is, the judge who sentenced me here lectured me, telling me I blew the opportunity I had at Élan." He goes on to describe a punishment. "Anyhow I got a cowboy ass-kick then. That was when they took you and threw you from room to room bouncing you against the walls. All the residents would drag you around, digging you with their hands, punching you, and spitting in your face."

* * *

During Krystal's sentencing, Jennifer's mother also mentions the opportunity of Élan that she's forfeited. After forty-one years of operation Élan closed in 2011. Survivor reports continue circulating on the internet—stories of student abuse, almost unbelievable corruption. Tuition of \$42,000 to \$56,000 a year purchased a student-to-teacher ratio of forty to one. The students who committed suicide or went to prison after Élan—countless.



Krystal, early on in her sentence at EMFC (Edna Mahan Correctional Facility).

* * *

Age 18, she signs herself out. She's of age and Élan can't legally keep her, although she never becomes a Strength, a Support Person, a member of a Dealing Crew, never climbs the shouting and screaming ladder. After Élan, what next? Her adoptive parents will pay for her to go to college but after the strict regime she's lived under she wants her freedom. How can anyone graduate from four years of Attack Therapy and a thicket of restrictions and rules and humiliations ready for college? Krystal calls a girl she knows from Élan who shares an apartment in Manhattan with her boyfriend/pimp. Yes, Krystal can stay with them under the condition she'll work as a prostitute for the girl's boyfriend too.

* * *

Eighty dollars a blowjob seems a high price but her friend's pimp and now hers says, you're eighteen and men like teenage tongue. She loves walking through Times Square to the hotel where she sometimes meets men. The first man she has sex with for money she hooks up with there. After Élan's "haircuts," when four screaming residents attacked her for complaining about the food and made her wear a diaper over her jeans for a week, a sign hanging from her neck read: FEED ME PUREED PUKE. I AM A BABY, it was easy to sit on the edge of a bed and wait for the man in the fake leather jacket to unzip and free his organ, long and narrow like a taper candle, and lick it like it was the sweetest best-est ice cream.

Having money is freedom, and she sings to herself among the towers of lights: the Gap Jeans girl's flowing hair is a forest. MoneyGram. Second Stage Theater. Bread Factory. Disney. B.B. King's. Then the taxi she's waiting on pulls up and she vanishes, leaving behind the puddles of overripe perfume.

The prostitute/call girl is her own celebrity. She's eighteen, tall, blond, and the men love her. She's stretching her wings and stops for a pretzel slathered in mustard. She stops again for a piña colada pineapple smoothie. Four years in Élan, lunch and breakfast the same tasteless glop, dinner three minutes to eat before MEAL KICKS is called. STOP EATING. If you're lifting a forkful of food to your mouth, drop your fork.

* * *

She is still a long way from rent-by-the-week hotels and windows patched with black electrical tape, lobbies with musty odor of a rabbit hutch that a slow-moving fan stirs, but this day, new to the city, to the selling of her flesh, she's as beautiful as the model with sable eyelashes walking her doggy stroller past a man with his pants at half-mast, relieving himself.

* * *

AFTERMATH

Krystal unlocks the door to room 37 and goes in. Draymond has stripped the bedding and only the mattress remains. She walks toward it and notices the blood soaking it. The man knocks outside.

“Lisa?” Raising the mattress and flipping it over, she sees nothing. Not Jennifer fighting, arching up. Not Jennifer’s nose spouting red bubbles.

“I’m right here,” she answers in her low voice, a voice deeper than the one you’d imagine coming out of her soft face, her heart-shaped mouth. Krystal’s voice is older than she looks, husky, a little Lauren Bacall but more monotonous. Expressionless. If her voice was dough, it had been flattened by a rolling pin. The Coke can sweats, and she lifts its cold to her forehead. The carbonation stings and she treasures the prickling hurting swallow. A sob catches in her throat. *I’m doing this for you.*

She opens the door and invites the man inside. She offers him the \$150 special. The heat is suffocating, and he too opens his mouth to breathe as if Draymond had his hands around his throat. Each time she moves she has to pull her feet or arms through the glue—the room sticks to her body, a syrupy honey bear. The air conditioner blows hot air only. She closes her eyes, and what flashes by is Draymond and Jennifer and the sun staring at them. The mosquitoes keep lighting on her shoulders all night and she feels them drinking her like they want her and would take parts of her to share with strangers.

* * *

Krystal’s lips look caught in mid-tremble as she gets into the taxi. Her frightened eyes speak their own truth or hide it. Time to leave the befouled Weehawken. The driver is a Pakistani, and Dray tells him to take them to 112th Street in Manhattan. They have money for the New Ebony Hotel. The cab’s air conditioner leaks tepid air and she buzzes the window down, watching the New York skyline rise, the tall buildings are already glowing with light. She doesn’t feel anything at all. She’s walked through a wall of jagged glass into another world—where you go when you’ve committed a mortal sin. Do you reach over and squeeze his knee or fumble a Newport to your mouth? *I didn’t think I could live without him.* It’s Draymond who lights a cigarette. His hands tremble. They’re gouged with scratches and he notices her staring at them. “I had to quiet her. That wasn’t me in that room.”

* * *

The detectives who first enter the room talk about the unspeakable filth and heat—almost ninety degrees, the air conditioner on the blink. The crime scene in shambles. The calendar reads July 27, Wednesday, twenty-four hours after the murder, yet it will always be a steamy July dawn becoming a reeking hot day in room 37 in the Park Avenue Hotel.

“Jennifer didn’t scream,” Krystal said. Candida Moore’s Victim Impact Statement states, “A while later, when Krystal entered the room after hearing Jen’s screams, she

witnessed him violently beating her in the face.” The story is a shape-shifter, and what occurred in the room stays in the room no matter if obliterated by a wrecking ball.

* * *

Krystal today:



June 2000 Blackout

JEAN JACKMAN

HYBRID NONFICTION

In my North Davis neighborhood
on a summer night—
with homes cocooned
by sounds of air conditioners
and closed up windows.
The lights went out.

I was in bed reading when darkness came.
“Hey—what are you doing?” I called to my husband.
“The lights are out.”
*Thinking now he’s done it
as he was fixing the refrigerator.*

I peered out across the park.
No lights on the other side. Instead—
indigo silhouettes of trees and houses
against a lighter-toned sky.
I opened the windows to hear—
the silence.

Soon, flashlights
and lanterns in yards, dancing.
“...dark across the park, too.”
“...just drove... whole section is out...”
“...got people coming to see if they
want to buy my house.”
“Want us to fire up some
lanterns for you?”
A group with candles strolled by.

One man stood on his lawn
and spoke into a handheld CB,
“This is Ellamae, Ellamae

...anyone
sign on with news of why
the lights are out.”

People
passed by on bicycles,
turned back, stopped
to talk.

On the corner,
teenagers gathered around a fat candle
watching mosquitoes get
trapped in the wax.

Next street over, people were playing with darkness too.
Big Brian, the football player
lay on his lawn
toying with two kittens.
“These are my girls,” he shouted.

The Mabuchi’s dinner party was aglow
lit by a dozen candles.
I laughed along with their
conversations too.

Farther down the block,
children shrieked
as they slid on a slip-and-slide.
A kerosene camping lantern on a tree branch
the only light for their raucous party.

Neighbors gathered at the end of the street
talking quietly. They hailed me as I strolled past.
We looked up and saw the stars
so newly visible.

You know,
 one night a week,
 I’d even settle for one night a month
 of...
 lights out.

Church Day

AMIE MCGRHAM

CREATIVE NONFICTION

You're standing at the shitty strip mall by church, the one with the Dollar Store, Vietnamese nail salon, and the Safeway that's closing at the end of the month because everyone's buying everything online now, even goddamn groceries, waiting for the Dairy Queen to open, your nose pressed to the glass like when you used to wait for the liquor store to open, back when you could only buy vodka in the state-run package stores that didn't open until noon. You'll order for your mother because she forgets what she wants in the nanosecond between deciding and ordering and you'll have nothing because food makes you want to puke lately, the low hum of anxiety swirling around your belly like the hot fudge in your mother's peanut buster parfait. You long for the ease and comfort of a drink, a glass of red wine from the good old days, before you gave it up twenty years ago and, at your first meeting, met the man you'd later marry, the man who told you that you've never had one of anything in your life.

Your mother's eating too much sugar these days, the wellness nurse is monitoring her intake, and she really shouldn't have an ice cream sundae, but this is the least of your worries, and at this point you figure what the hell, she doesn't have much else to live for, and church is a shitstorm with her deranged outbursts and giggles and, today, this—wetting her pants in front of the congregation—at least the carpeting is beige, thank-you-Jesus—and the smug glare of those fucking church people, silently spewing the self-righteous vomit of hypocrisy and reinforcing your supreme hatred of religion, of church, of Bibles and fairy tales, even more than you hated it forty years ago when you were forced to go twice a week until you left it—and your mother and everything else—behind at age sixteen to elope with your loser of a first husband, that bad decision over as soon as the desk lamp narrowly missed your head, and you realize you've never really been free of it, the lash of religion, because you've been caring for your mother for the past five years and taking her to church every week brings her joy even if all you want to do is scream at the top of your lungs that whole hour, but you smile the plastic smile of the Barbie dolls you played with in Valerie Clark's pink bedroom, the ones your mother didn't allow you because Barbie was too mature, too sexual, and you realize it's the same smile you give your mother when she calls you *her* mother and you wish God, a higher power, the universe, whatever, would just take her right now because this is no way to live and you're thinking: so, who's the hypocrite now?

Your mother needs help with the toilet, she's wearing Depends and this makes you sad—stealthy, fat tears in the dark as you fall asleep thinking of her in her bed in

Trazodone-induced slumber that doesn't last as long as it did when you first agreed, yes, yes, she absolutely needs to sleep so let's give her meds because this is the only time she's free, when she sleeps and her disease lies dormant like a housefly on a windowsill in winter, but lately, she's up wandering around at two a.m. like the memory care director (who your mother calls the lawyer just like she calls Margie's husband her father) told you this morning; she's ghosting around in the dark eating Froot Loops and knocking on other residents' doors to see where everyone is, they're not out on the road, and you agree again with the director, lawyer, whatever that yes, yes, your mother is anxious, she's agitated, she needs to calm down, yes, let's give her more meds, and you think maybe, just maybe, I'll steal her pills and swallow them all, but you can't because they're in a hermetically sealed pill pack secure in the med tech's locked cart to be dispensed and recorded one day at a time, so you start smoking again, after quitting when you got sober, because you're anxious and agitated and need to calm down, and yeah, it's better than a drink or a drug or a gun, but they're all the same in the end and so what, you're not afraid of dying—it's living that terrifies you.

You've set up your mother's monthly memory care payments on auto pay—astronomical, yet cheaper than round-the-clock care at home, which you tried by yourself for a while when you moved back to your childhood home and gave up your life three thousand miles away (as if a career wasn't sacrificial enough for the altar of Alzheimer's) because uprooting her from the island where she'd lived for fifty years would unleash even more misfiring neurons in an already short-circuiting brain, but then the wandering started, she was out in the woods in her housecoat one January night, singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" at the top of her lungs, and you finally had to move her out West closer to you—because you're a planner and because your husband, bless his heart, is a bottom-line kind of guy, not equipped to deal with emotions or aging and has an unspoken fear that dementia is contagious and worries he'll be next, or, God forbid, that he'll be responsible for paying her bills because you're her only child, the only blood relation left, on the off-chance you die before your mother or your husband, which you might, as this death march of dementia relentlessly tramples your relationships and finances, and yeah, might as well say it, erases your soul.

And the memory care home, christened "Illuminations" by some brilliant Pollyanna of a corporate marketing department even though that light went out long ago; the place with no mirrors or phones, reeking of old age and wet diapers and baby powder that no amount of lemon-scented Lysol can camouflage; the place five minutes from your house where she's lived for the past year, where you watch Alzheimer's snowball down the hallways, a looming avalanche pummeling its way into the collective brain trust of the Illuminations residents, who she says all have mental problems, these people she "works" with, and you can barely keep a straight face because like Jimmy Buffett says, if we didn't laugh we'd just all go insane, yet you worry that ship may have already sailed in your life every time you forget someone's name or whether you've paid her *New York Times* subscription, because, yes, she still clings to the routine of holding the newspaper in her gnarled, age-spotted hands even though reading has become as difficult for her as the concept of time; she tells you she's having trouble understanding August, and you want to rip the calendar off the wall and hide it like you did with the clocks last month, but you

don't because some shred of her former self is comforted by the repetition of tallying weeks and months and years, even when she screams, "HOW MANY DAYS DO I HAVE LEFT?" in the candy aisle at Target.

And those crazy-ass lists she writes—reminders to herself because as soon as she has an idea or a thought it evaporates, those jumbled scrawls almost impossible to decipher; reminders to you that her handwriting used to be beautiful, as elegant as the floral watercolors she once painted from her studio loft, fingers stained with oil paints and ink—such a talented artist, her old friends say, shame this happened to such a wonderful woman—but now all she writes are notes on scraps of toilet paper and in the front cover of her King James Bible and even with the twelve-pack of yellow junior legal pads you bought that keep getting lost like all the socks and pencils and slippers; she can't stay in the lines, and her spelling is shit now when she used to be the best speller you know—she won the spelling bee five years in a row and always made you look up words you couldn't spell in the dictionary, saying, "Sound it out," which makes about as much sense to you as the fractured conversations she has with Margie, who she thinks is her best pal from grade school, for fuck's sake everyone from her childhood haunts us now, her dog Spunky, and lately, your long-dead grandfather—but now she writes the same thing over and over—"WHERE IS BIBEL?"—and she's panic-stricken until you review the list together every day, patiently handing her the leather-bound Bible from the coffee table two feet away and she calms down until the next time you go over each scrap of paper, all with that same question.

And now she's got a boyfriend, Albie, one of the few men in Illuminations because we all know women outlive men—though women are more likely to have dementia, just one more reason it sucks to be female—and this fat, greasy-haired guy—who she calls Daddy, who may have last showered when Reagan was in office; who she's watching the Military Channel with and eating dinner with and sitting with on the sofa thinking it's the squeaky glider on her parent's porch—this Albie fellow who you should be happy about because you don't have to feel guilty for skipping a day, shit, she practically pushes you out the door when you visit now, but fucking A, the last thing you need right now is a third stepfather, even though you should be relieved that she's got someone to hang out with besides that pain-in-the-ass Margie who's got such a mouth on her you can't believe your mother, who cringes when you say, "Damn," puts up with this tiny firecracker of a woman who once told you she may be short but she gets shit done and you worry that your mother and Albie may hook up because you've seen how he looks at her, and how the Christ will you deal with that.

* * *

It's Church Day again, the day you dread the most, and getting ready is sheer agony because your hair's flatlining, blond streaks as faded as your mothers' memories, and the skin-brightening makeup for removing under-eye bags—hell, they're the luggage compartment of an entire airplane—is an epic fail, and it's your mother's reflection gazing back at you, you're no longer just the mirror of her emotions but the old woman of the Sylvia Plath poem, rising toward you like a terrible fish, day after day in all its crow's feet

and sagging-jowled glory, and today, when you find your mother in her walk-in closet thinking she's in her bathroom and you can't quite believe this isn't a dream, you're appalled at how fast she's sinking, the quagmire of dementia pulling her under, and you're not sure if you're having a panic attack or it's your charred lungs imploding from the Marlboro Menthol you just choked down, but you smile and dislodge her from the laundry hamper and out of the dark recesses of old-lady sweaters and elastic-banded polyester pants and slippers that quite literally smell like shit, and help her with a shower because the staff is too busy shoving oatmeal and pureed eggs down the residents' throats, and you hurry her into the only clothes you can find that aren't food-stained from the bowls of soup she eats with a fork, that just won't come clean no matter how much you Shout them out, and you race off to church and make it just as the organist, a pasty-skinned undertaker of a man, finishes pounding out the thunderous first hymn, and you squirm in the rigid pew, your skin as prickly as it was when you dropped a hit of orange microdot during the geometry final, marveling at how your resentment toward religion runs only marginally less deep than this disease, the one robbing your mother of herself and her life, and you of yourself and your life and at how many meetings—yes, you still go to meetings two decades later because *meeting makers make it*—you've heard people say resentment is the number-one offender and how anger will move you closer to the first drink than anything, and you know you need to work these resentments out—they tell you to pray about them, and what a crock of shit that is, you can't even escape prayer in a twelve-step program—and how all of a sudden the brass chandelier above your head is swinging as if it's possessed and you wonder, is this it, and then, sweet Jesus, the blessed relief of...

Kokoro Yasume

MIA NAKAJI MONNIER

CREATIVE NONFICTION

The ghosts sit on the bookshelf beside my desk, wild-haired, wearing silk. I look at their faces, a kabuki brand of comic sternness, hoping they'll tell me something, knowing they can't.

I inherited the porcelain ghosts from my neighbor Amy, whose parents' house was filled to capacity with everything from shrimp figurines to polished-wood Noh masks. After her mother died and before the estate sale crew swept through the house, I walked the rooms with Amy, cataloging the contents of cabinets, sorting documents from recyclables. "If something like that catches your eye, take it," she said about the ghost dolls. "I don't want to see them becoming someone's Oriental tchotchkes."

I remembered the time my mom—who like Amy's grandparents was born in Japan and ended up in Los Angeles—liberated the Buddha statue from its spot outside the bathroom doors at the Unitarian Universalist church we attended. The first Sunday the old minister and his wife were gone, she and one of the choir members lifted the iron Buddha and set it in the garden among succulents on a hillside overlooking a canyon. "A Buddha by the bathroom!" she told me afterward. "How disrespectful."

My apartment has other resident creatures besides the ghosts: a family of kokeshi dolls with wooden bodies the color of toasted mochi and my skin; a couple Daruma; a pair of owls. The impulse to bring them home is part spiritual, part aesthetic, part nod to the idiot part of myself that can't see Gollum without laughing. I grew up with magical stories, not just Japanese ones, and I like to surround myself with evidence of them still.

I need evidence to remember who I am, where I come from. My parents met in Los Angeles, far from their hometowns in Osaka and Oregon. Together, we moved seven times before I finished high school in Palos Verdes, an L.A. suburb at the rocky lower lip of the Santa Monica Bay. I'm used to being the authority on nothing but mythology, a mix of family memories and ghosts.

In the dominant mythology of my family, told to us again by others, I'm the one who is okay, a story I hate for the way it separates me from my brothers, who despite everything are more like me than anyone else in the world. Their demons are more visible than mine: one because he can't hide anything, the other because his secrets have erupted. I would rather not hide either.

* * *

On New Year's Day, my parents and I meet at the pop-up Shinto shrine in Little Tokyo in downtown L.A. because my mom wants to pray for luck, mostly for my brothers, who live in the Midwest now and once went months without heat due to a shady landlord. One of them frequently sleeps in his car, even in the winter. He seems to live on instant ramen and the wildest meats he can find: chicken feet, frog legs marinated in pig blood. The other studies neuroscience and poetry, diving deep and so far always coming up again.

New Year's Day, or Oshogatsu, is the one Japanese holiday we've consistently celebrated: my Japanese mom, my American dad, my brothers, and me. When we were younger, we celebrated with traditional osechi dishes, made by either my mom or my auntie, each bearing a specific kind of luck: syrupy black beans for hard work, tiny candied sardines for a good harvest. Now that we're grown and my auntie is nearly one hundred, we meet our Japanese American relatives at an Olive Garden or Marie Callender's in the San Gabriel Valley. Afterward, my auntie hands out the syrupy black beans in tiny glass jars.

On one side of the white tent holding the pop-up shrine, a folding table displays rows of omamori, good-luck amulets, embroidered silky rectangles on cords for safe driving, love, business, passing exams. My mom chooses one for each of my brothers, which the shrine attendant passes across the table in a plain brown paper bag. My mom tucks it in the tote bag I made for her with fabric she chose from a local quilt show: on an olive green background, a repeating pattern of Daruma, the round red dolls that stand back up when you push them over, representing perseverance. "*Nana korobi ya oki*," goes their slogan. "Fall down seven times, get up eight." For my mom, they are also avatars of my brother, the one with the meats. When he lived at home, he had a row of them in different sizes lining the top of his bookshelf.

We walk to the other side of the tent, which holds a wooden altar decorated in offerings of mochi and mandarin oranges. A collection box in front bears a sign explaining how to pray: a sequence of claps and bows. The tent shrine lacks the gravity of the shrines I visited when I lived in Japan for a year during college—the path of red wooden gates, the craggy rocks offshore decked with paper garlands, even the local neighborhood shrine with its accordion-folded lanterns and Shiba guard dog. But absent all of that, the tent will do for my mom, for us. We throw our coins into the box, clap, bow, clap again, and leave the tent.

* * *

I used to wonder why I felt uncomfortable calling myself an atheist, even though I probably was, still am, one in the eyes of my Catholic, Mormon, and nondenominational Christian friends. In Texas, where I spent ages twelve through sixteen, atheists wore the label loudly, to make space for themselves in a state of assumed Christianity. But I grew up with some kind of religion, one I didn't even call a religion, one I couldn't name.

My mom is a big-time feeler. She often cried as she read us bedtime stories: *The Chronicles of Narnia*; the *Wrinkle in Time* series; Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales illustrated by Chihiro Iwasaki—beautiful books she bought with her employee discount when she worked at the bookstore in Little Tokyo when she was younger, the bookstore

where she met my dad. “This goes so deep,” or “Humans are like this, aren’t they?” are the kinds of comments she makes often, even now when she tells me about a news story she read on her lunch break. Long after her mom died, she called out for her in Japanese, randomly, like while washing dishes. She explained to me once that she thought her mom was still here somehow, scattered in the air. I pictured her dissolved like the original Little Mermaid, seafoam.

My dad, meanwhile, liked to bring us outside when something interesting was happening with the planets. Once outside a ramen shop he pointed out three planets and the moon making an arc across the sky. A woman came out of the restaurant halfway through and asked him to go through them again. My mom didn’t even look embarrassed.

As we moved across the country, these were our constants. These and the Unitarian Universalist church, less a church than a liberal collective, people craving meaning on Sundays without dogma or specificity. In Peoria, Berkeley, San Jose, Dallas, Bellevue, and Palos Verdes, we had potluck lunches, Wiccans celebrated sabbats, atheists walked out of sermons at a Christian-leaning minister’s mention of God.

My dad says he and my mom picked the Unitarian church for us because they knew that if they didn’t, our friends might take us to an evangelical church, and a couple of mine did. In elementary school, I went to Vacation Bible School with a neighbor, where we made snow globes out of baby food jars and where, on the last day, the pastor asked all campers ready to accept Jesus into their hearts to go into a back room connected to the sanctuary. My neighbor came back crying because by the time she’d gotten to the room, they’d run out of coloring books.

I wanted to be Christian sometimes. I was jealous of the Mormons’ dances, the Catholics’ conspicuous Ash Wednesday club. My religion was the ghosts of my memories and my parents’ before me, so different from my own and hard to picture from the distance of an ocean or a long state. It was friendly spirits and the fictional characters like them—Daruma the namesake monk with his legs numb from meditation, Jizo by the roadside, the Moomins’ gentle companionship, the red shoe girl dancing until her feet bled, makkuro kurosuke (soot sprites) hovering communally like a school of fish over the floors of the house in *My Neighbor Totoro*. It was nostalgia for trees that lined the neighborhood we’d just left behind—broad-leafed maples, oaks shedding helicopter seeds, the romantic ease of eucalyptus—a separating of my spirit each time we moved, the guilt of multiple allegiances, a tangle of roots below, branches above reaching.

* * *

Ingrid was the first person close to me who died. She went to the Unitarian church with us in Palos Verdes, and when I arrived at sixteen, fresh from Texas, shy, she gave me her warm, bustling attention. She had a loud, German-inflected voice, short white hair, and a confidence she didn’t waste on bullshit. The summer before I left to spend my third year of college in Japan, she gave me a ring her parents had given to her. She had no daughter, just a son ten years older than me who had been my sculpture teacher in high school. Her cancer came back that year, and she died before I came home.

After she died, her husband asked my mom and me to take clothes from her closet, and I took too many, sad at the thought of them having a home with a random person who didn't know the way she powered across the church courtyard with her arms full of fair-trade tea. Each time I gave a piece of clothing away, because it didn't look good on me, because she was in her sixties and I was twenty-two, I felt ashamed. She had cared about filling her house with talismans too. I thought it was the best house I had ever seen. Set below the street, it opened on a shaded courtyard that attracted families of peacocks, whose visits she encouraged with food. Inside on white walls was bright artwork brought back from her travels as an international flight attendant. In the backyard, a beautiful mess of fruit trees. After she died, her husband took up watercolor painting and their mantle filled with the cliffs of Palos Verdes, a meditation.

* * *

A year after college, I moved out of my parents' house and into an apartment on L.A.'s eastside with my boyfriend. My parents and I lived less than an hour apart, a tiny distance compared to the thousands of miles that had been between us when I was at college in Vermont, but suddenly I thought about their future deaths all the time, especially as I lay in bed, imagining earthquakes, bombings, random shootings, cancer, the slow creep of health problems they already had. My brothers moved away from home and, like my mom, I worried about them too. I imagined a future in which one died and left us all heartbroken but my mom forever inconsolable.

One day, for an article, I interviewed an artist whose partner died young of a rare form of cancer that began with a pain he mistook for a cramp, and suddenly I felt a cramp on the right side of my body that moved whenever I had to pinpoint it for a doctor. Sometimes it seemed to come from my ovary, sometimes it extended down my leg, sometimes I felt it just under my ribcage, which popped like a joint when I rubbed it from the right angle.

My whole body felt compromised and dangerous, and I imagined dying all the time: under an overpass where I sat in traffic, in a poorly lit parking garage. When I considered starting a new project, I imagined dying before I could finish it. Going for an early-morning walk seemed an invitation for attack. Because I worked from home, I could spend whole days in my apartment, going outside only to buy groceries down the street and check the mail, steeping in self-loathing that spiraled around and around, catalyst and consequence.

I tried to write about it, hoping to tame it through organization, but writing about anxiety felt like making a sculpture out of fog. It was diffuse, amorphous. My writing devolved into lists, the same ones over and over: things to just do already, schedule of an ideal day, contents of an ideal capsule wardrobe. I hated looking at these depressing lists, so I'd abandon them and make new ones from scratch when I felt the urge: foods to eat, old projects to finish, things I want to change. My world shrank to just me—lonely, bored, exhausted.

* * *

As we leave the shrine and walk through the rest of the New Year's festival stalls, my parents keep talking about my brothers and the good-luck charms they bought them. *It's not that we don't worry about you, they tell me, but you've always been pretty good. You're pretty much doing fine.*

I'm thirty now, which feels too old to court my parents' attention or crave their approval, but I do both anyway, telling them about stories I've written and healthy meals I've cooked as if holding out my report card for a promised Sanrio store reward. Maybe that's why, when I tell them over the years that I'm struggling with anxiety and depression, they don't seem to remember for long. *You've always been pretty good.*

For several months, I had a therapist who more or less said the same. His wife was Asian and white like me, which he mentioned more than I liked. He seemed to idealize creative jobs. "Your life is cool," he said once. "You wrote an article for *Oprah Magazine!*" Maybe I had asked him for gold stars. In the end, he told my insurance company that I'd gotten better, causing them to cut off my mental health coverage. He broke the news to me by voicemail. Was I crazy for thinking I needed help? I didn't fight his decision or even call him back. *You're pretty much doing fine.*

I knew there was a full spectrum of mental illness beyond my experience. One of my brothers went to school with someone who attempted suicide by jumping out a second-story window, someone who couldn't control his bowels, someone who took a well-meaning cliché to heart and believed his late father actually, physically lived inside him. In comparison, I was okay, privileged with mental health. But I wasn't fine.

Many of my friends weren't fine either. We talked about what it meant—which proportion was about us, our chemical makeup, and which was just a normal reaction to life in a racist, regressive country and heartbreak over our parents' dreams for us. We started trading notes—experiences with antidepressants and therapy, helpful books and articles, pep talks encouraging each other to do first things first: get out of bed, take a shower, go have some coffee.

With one of these friends, I went on a women's retreat in Vermont, a two-hour drive from the town where we had gone to college. We started each day with yoga, then journaled to various prompts, learned about crystals and menstrual cups, and did guided meditation at night. Apart from my friend and me, everyone else in the sixteen-person group was white. The retreat leader talked vaguely about traditions without specifying whose traditions they were.

I tried to approach the experience with a healthy balance of openness and caution. It couldn't hurt to write down the thoughts I was ready to let go of and throw them into a fire. It couldn't hurt to manifest dreams for the future as long as I didn't get too prosperity gospel with it. And wandering the grounds, where sheep and alpaca grazed, in the clean Vermont air after a rain, felt, simply, good, as did the last day's meditation exercise, where I saw myself lying on the mulchy ground of a redwood forest, looking up into a dusky canopy.

Back in L.A., I did another meditation workshop taught by a Japanese American artist I knew. In the exercise I remember most clearly, we walked slowly in a circle in a dimly candlelit room around an altar, eyes closed, picturing ourselves walking backward

in time. We remembered our lives in reverse, until we were fetuses carried by our mothers. We pictured our mothers' lives in reverse: what they heard, what they wore, what they saw when they looked up at the sky. Then we did the same with our grandmothers. I realized how little I knew about those physical details, but I liked spending time embodying that wonder: My mom as a kid in a dress her mom made her. My young obaachan leaving her small town to study sewing. All of us looking up at the sky.

* * *

In Los Angeles, the difference between seasons, in temperature and color, is small enough that it's easy to forget what month it is. After moving so often for the first twenty-three years of my life, I had gotten used to marking time by place: the Seattle years, the Vermont years, my year in Japan. I've now lived in the same apartment for longer than I've lived anywhere else in my life. The days can slip by unmarked if I let them.

This fall I started taking antidepressants because I was tired. I had tried other treatments—I even visited a local Unitarian Universalist church but found that it didn't feel like home anymore. I kept burning out. I'd start exercising and making more of an effort to eat well, and each time for a couple weeks I'd feel optimistic and a little smug, like I'd finally figured out how to handle life. Then, exhaustion. I hadn't wanted medication—I'd watched other family members struggle with it and absorbed their distrust.

When I started taking antidepressants, I saw it as an admission, the subtle start of a new era, a daily reminder to notice life and try to nourish myself. Winter came. I decorated for Christmas with friends, stabbing cloves into mandarins to make pomanders like my mom used to do, making pom-poms, decorating a tiny tree. One of my friends took me to her hometown Christmas market in Montrose, where we listened to carolers and ate her favorite childhood cake, a Swedish princess cake with sponge, cream, and jam layers covered in green marzipan.

I thought about ways to mark the days while living in the same neighborhood. Another friend's company tree lighting. The new seasonal pastries at my favorite bakery. The pale pink bloom of the jade plant outside my building. The end of wool-knitting weather and the start of linen. Candles on longer nights. Celebrating friends' accomplishments and showing up when they needed support. Basic things, the things the static in my head had been drowning out.

* * *

I wanted to wait to tell my parents about the antidepressants until I had something concrete to report. The death anxiety went away first—so quickly considering how long it had stayed. I noticed first on a freeway overpass, the 110-105 interchange, one of my least favorites for its height and curve. The fear came with prickly skin, but rather than sparking a spiral that lasted for hours, it left.

Still, I wanted more progress: a consistent routine, confidence, weight loss, easy sleep, my writing voice back. At the shrine tent, I buy a sticker for my new notebook, one in a pack of three I'd just bought at the local bookstore, an act of consumerism to seal my

resolution to write. The sticker has a pair of foxes on it, messengers to Inari, the patron god of the Shusse Inari Shrine, which runs this festival stall. It's only when I show it to my mom that I learn the sticker is specifically for good luck in business, which she sees as a great sign for my writing.

She calls these good luck objects and rituals "*kokoro yasume*"—basically a chance for the heart to rest. Her worry is infinite, but omamori mailed to my brothers can take a bit of it and transform it into luck. When they hang them from their bookshelves or rearview mirrors, the omamori turn into reminders of my mom, our family, where my brothers were before they moved to small-town Illinois, who they are beyond their present thoughts. For me, the Inari sticker could be a daily intention, a reminder that my need to write has become just a little more insistent than my fear.

After walking through the festival, we buy drinks at a nearby coffee shop, the one that came to Little Tokyo just after I did, as a young reporter working for the local Japanese American community newspaper. Sitting on the patio, under a canopy of paper umbrellas, I tell my parents about my medication. Their faces fall in this way, heavy with care, that makes me want to both take back my words and bottle their eyes-open love for all the times in the future when I'll need it.

They have questions and suggestions: *Are you sure you want to go down this road? Did you try ashwagandha? Are you taking fish oil? Maybe meditation will help. Go for walks every day. What dosage are you taking? That's enough—don't increase it.*

By the end, I'm glad I've told them, if only to come a little more out of hiding. The next day my dad calls just to tell me it was nice to spend time together. He doesn't mention the medication, but I think I hear the subtext. It's the same one present when I call to ask if he's seen the full supermoon yet or the eclipse.

I'm trying to notice the moon's phases. I've started reading about Shinto and witchcraft, which are both based in nature—as home for spirits, as a marker of time, as a source of meaning. It's new to me, after years of death anxiety, to see evidence of time's passing as beautiful rather than bleak.

My morning routine now goes like this: antidepressant and vitamins, incense and writing. Sometimes I light the cypress incense and walk away to make coffee or take a shower. Sometimes I can sit still and write as I watch the orange glow sink down the stick, turning it into a column of ash that tumbles over in chunks. The slowness feels like an offering.

Sometimes beautiful, slow things are the most unbearable, like fragrant jasmine season or my parents' lifespans. They will end and I am already sad. Noticing hurts. Noticing is the only thing worthwhile.

* * *

Just before the new year, a friend invites me to his family's mochitsuki, a day of making mochi to eat on Oshogatsu. I went once before, when his grandfather was still alive. He had diabetes and one of his kids warned us not to let him eat mochi. Hours later, I saw him sitting in a folding chair eating mochi with both hands, looking blissful.

The family takes mochi-making seriously. It happens assembly-line style, starting with rice steaming in layered tins over camp stoves. The steamed rice goes through a grinder, then everyone takes turns pounding the paste with a wooden mallet the length of my torso. One person plops the pounded rice on a floured table, where another person pulls off pieces the right size and throws them down the table to be caught, shaped, and placed on a board to cool. At least forty people help. They've been doing it for decades.

It's easier for me to talk with people when I have something to work on, whether that's making mochi, knitting socks, or conducting an interview for an assignment. I like to ask about sensory details and hear people come to life as they talk about their processes and how they came to be. The mochi needs to be gently rounded across the top, and smooth, with a pinched seam at the bottom.

My friend's mom sends me home with bags of mochi to share with my mom and one pair of large kagami mochi for the altar offering. I don't have an altar and neither do my parents. The closest we have is my childhood dog's urn, which is a rectangular plastic box with a wooden heart tag tied around it, etched with his name, Max. When I visit, I wash an apple and put it on top of the urn. I don't think Max can taste it from the afterlife, but the exercise helps me remember him and the way he plopped down defiantly in the grass on walks. Whether ritual magic is literal or not is beside the point.

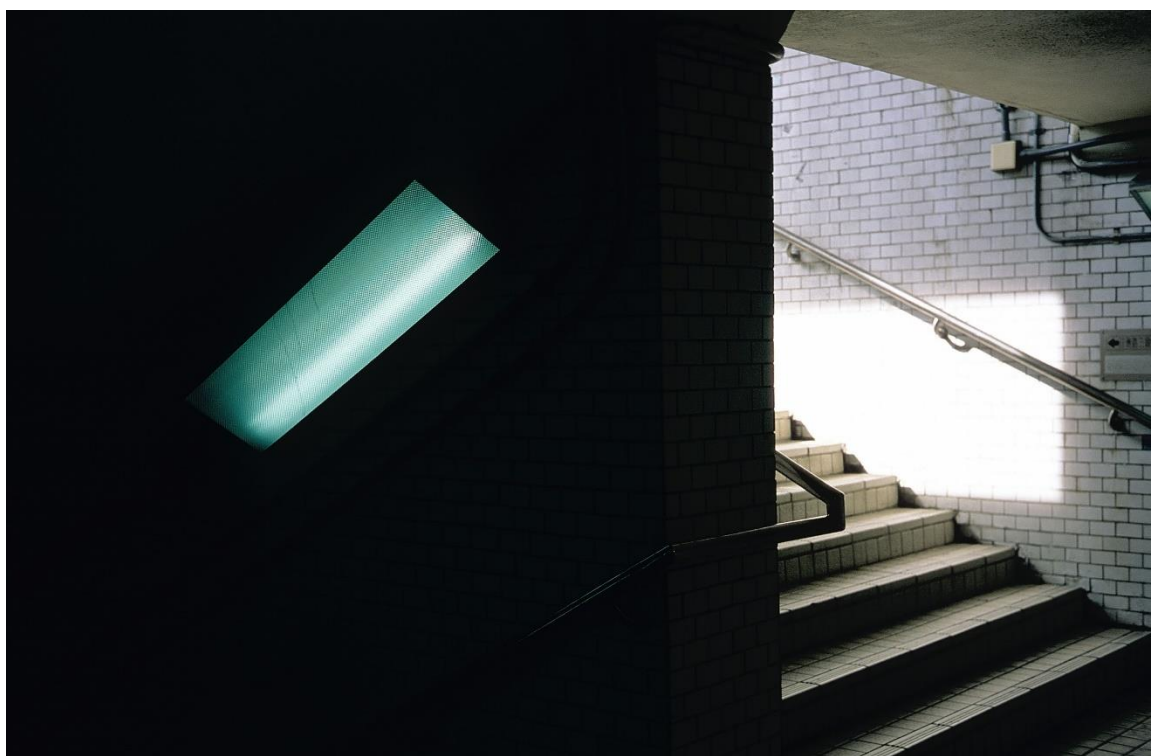
I keep the kagami mochi and put it on the ledge in my kitchen. I'd like an altar one day, for photos of my grandparents and my boyfriend's. When 2018 becomes 2019 and the mochi develops a line of mold right along its seam, I throw it out and replace it with flowers.

I'm reading about other holidays. At Setsubun in February, I'd like to eat a fat sushi roll and throw dried beans out my door to ward off demons (they'll land at my manager's step, so I'll have to go sweep them up). At Tanabata in July, I'll take time to think about Orihime and Hikoboshi, the lover-deities only allowed to reunite once per year. When planets fall in interesting alignment, I want to be the kind of person who looks up at the sky.

Tiled

EMMA ARKELL

PHOTOGRAPHY



Emma Arkell, *Tiled I*, 2017. Digital c-print, 16×24. Courtesy of the artist

Shuffled Playlist on Young Love (Not Spotify Premium because we're too poor for that)

RACHEL ALARCIO

POETRY • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

Vibrato, legato, tremolo. Keyboard karaoke; Jukebox of Youth. Wish to be: **Someone to You. You Make Me Smile**, so **Kiss Me** beneath **Vanilla Twilight. Shut Up and Dance** beneath Griffith Park stars, carve **Toi + Moi**. Kick Jansport knockoffs curbside. Fluorescent lamps blink awake. Metro maps strewn along sidewalks. We're Sixpence None The Richer. Two teens, too broke for Netflix. So chill, strum my G string; **Sing! Take Me Out**, after 3:07 rings.

Chamber

RHIANNON CONLEY

POETRY

We watch a fish tank bubbling in the waiting room,
the fish flitting like leaves. Your little hands rest against the glass,
the glass coated on the inside with a thin slick of algae, your hands
just holding on to the last, thin bit of baby fat. We watch a snail
wind his way through the green, his—what? Feet? Mouth?
Who would know?—leaving a trail that meets, finally, his shell.

The snail is a chambered animal.
That is to say his home, his shell, is a chamber to house his body,
to hold his life. The shell is a spiral, perfect clockwise calcium
winding into an equation that says, “Yes,” that says,
“This is correct,” and the snail functions. The snail’s shell
is a numerology I don’t understand
that builds itself into a home—this chamber.

Your heart is a chamber, though flawed,
the walls refusing to close enough to call what it is
a home. I’ve never been good at math, but spend these doctor visits
counting. How many cells must grow to form tissue,
how much tissue must grow to stop your murmuring?

They tell me it will close; the hole, it will close.
When I think of the math I realize that maybe it never will—
the leak in your tank always trickling, always leaving a trail
of blood, oxygen—the chamber forever weak.
We watch your heartbeat on the echocardiogram,
the glowing white image made of numbers, made of electricity,
arranging data, a current, into something meaningful,
and they say, “We don’t need to see him again anytime soon.”
It’s fine, but not fine. Functional, but who can know?
“Call us if you see any symptoms.”

The hole isn't closed. I'll be writing this poem
for the rest of my life, wishing I knew how to do math.
I'll be writing about how I failed to build you a body correctly
like a snail who builds their shell counter-clockwise.
Fine, but not fine. Functional, but maybe not.
Who can know? Call us if you see any symptoms.

At the doctor's office I don't ask how my body
could have done this to yours, and
if there were another little hearth constructed inside me,
built from one cell into many, the chamber made into a home—
would it, too, spring a leak? Who can know?

Walking Poem

JAN HARRIS

POETRY

there are mornings when your dog doesn't want
to walk and you see a purple flower and think of
Mary Oliver and the time you saw her walking her
dog as you looked out the gym window and you
wanted to drop the weights and run through
the snowy parking lot and out onto the road to
bow down in adulation oh Mary Oliver that she
should exist that she should walk her dog that
the light did not curtsy before her and the traffic
did not stop you thought but you did not run into
the street or cry out at the wonder of Mary Oliver
walking down the road as she would have cried
at the glory of the snowy parking lot and walking
her dog and your neighbor's purple flowers that
you noticed this morning in that blanket of humidity
when your dog didn't want to walk when unlike Mary
Oliver you could find no wonder in any of it except
that you almost could feel Mary Oliver's joy at the
miracle that flowers exist at the miracle of your
stubborn dog who is so like you resistant and
demonstrative in the face of summer's radiating love

Descent

MITCHELL NOBIS

POETRY

How many corners are there in a brain? How much can hide there? Earlier today, someone mentioned those Absolut ads from every magazine in the '90s—how many of those ads lurk, forgotten? The corners of my brain must hold 500 Absolut ads like some bottle-shaped papier-mâché speakeasy door hiding what I really want to remember with marketing bullshit. Right now, somewhere in my brain is the name of the non-André 3000 member of Outkast. This, I want to remember, but my synapses aren't playing. His name is hiding behind an Absolut Atlanta ad where a crowd of Braves fans sit in the shape of a bottle, doing the Tomahawk chop and hollering about how John Rocker played the game "the right way." My synapses are kids looking at their desks instead of the teacher's eyes. My synapses pretend they don't hear me when I shout, "Are you even listening?" My synapses refuse to check the corners. My synapses are aiding and abetting my descent. I listened to the entirety of *Aquemini* last night while driving to and from a basketball game that we lost by four, and still, I got nothing. Surely he says his name somewhere in *Aquemini*, but his name has already walked slowly down the steps of my brain and hidden itself in a dark basement corner, behind that Absolut door and next to a box of comics full of characters I'll never remember either & a stack of VHS tapes from Michigan's championship run in '89, of which I'll remember next to nothing either. The rest of the basement is drowned out by 30,000 Braves fans robbing Mark Morrison & shouting

You lied to me, all these pains you said I'd never feel.

You lied to me, but I do, but I do, do, do

Return of The Man

as they shift, like a tight marching band at halftime, from that Absolut bottle to that White Power hand sign they keep catching white boys doing in the White House because what, you thought they wouldn't appropriate gang signs too? So I refuse to Google the trivia because maybe just maybe my synapses aren't dumb, maybe they're hiding beauty in the basement, away from the Nazis, maybe in all the dark corners, my synapses bear-hug Ororo Munroe & Loy Vaught & Big Boi, waiting, breathing, flexing, tense.

To a Small Copper Butterfly

PETER MARCUS

POETRY

I've only ever known you as a replica
of the heart, tiny lyre, book of smoke.
I listened to you breathing once you
settled on my wrist as if the mortal
pulse is nectar, then watched as you
passed above my lolling body—a silk
fan painted with a bamboo footbridge
leading into distant, mist-shrouded
mountains. By the malachite river
you fluttered over me like a skilled
hand suturing a wound. Your antennae
soundless as the nothingness of
your song. I will leave this shining
riverbank with you, going wherever
you go. I sense we aren't far, *Lycaena*
phlaeas, whom the Greeks referred to
as a burning flower. The heft of these
massive fallen trees anesthetized by
sunlight. I understand now, why you
brought me to this hidden infirmary
of maple, linden, oak, and pine—all
slumped, collapsed, keeled over.
And among them, one plain casket:
open, unoccupied, filled with light.

Meantime

KATRINKA MOORE

POETRY

Who knows what people believe
Uncertain landscapes shift

overlap Relics of a past
that may not have happened

I think we're in a meantime neither
beginning nor end

Between earth and sky ever-
cycling despair and hope

That porous border where
self touches outside

wild like a full-leaved tree
grown from a seed lucky

enough to have landed
in an auspicious site lucky

in the weather
the sunlight

Zoloft: TWO WEEKS: Cold Turkey

MATT MORGAN

POETRY

Now that it's mostly gone—
the electricity shorting out
in the rolling barrel drum
of my brain—now that
that's gone, the zaps—
the brain zaps—such a bad science word—
the unusually non-technical term
for such a nasty night sky.

Turn of the neck too fast, zap.
To see what's in the other lane, zap.
To see what's flying so low, zap.
To see how tightly we unfold, zap.

* * *

What is the lowest dose of language
that can still move a body past war
with himself? A sugary placebo,
I no longer trust the way I dissolve.

Justice Favors Fortune

KRISTA NAVE

POETRY • WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

Fortune was holding his hand, whispering in his ear
assurances like rotten raspberries
too soft on the tongue, turning to mush and dribbling down his shoulder

the judge was piling smooth white stones on one side of the scale
that the Lady J had lent him (he promised to take good care)
one for every A, touchdown, friend, times he held the door open for an old lady,
fingers on his hand, digits in his phone number, years left in his life
until they were spilling over onto his desk
on the other side, a single solo cup (color: red)

his lawyers had their own stones, black and jagged
they piled them on my arms, legs, breasts, apex of thighs
reverse *peine forte et dure*
spit in my mouth and called me cassandra
(nobody ever blames apollo
or brock
or bart)

the jury came out singing with a sheet cake
cut into it, pink for girl, blue for boy
white for Not Guilty, no yolks in him
gobbled it up amongst them
sweetness stinging their teeth

he filled with helium, rose to the ceiling, bounced off the lights
his parents pulled party horns from their pockets
wet with spittle, *blow*
filled the room with raucous

Fortune told me, don't be a sore
loser

self-portrait as alice in wonderland

ESTHER RA

POETRY

the art of disappearance is easy to craft & words distance
as well as describe *white keys* *bruise bloom every*
blessing & blow *a surprise* I had yet to name all of my
tears my eyes are still flooded with childhood & I
am not the quickest of learners I chew on pebbles
as if they were sand I mistook myself [again] as a savior
I mother my mother I hide from my father how hard
to unsmog every window today I label each wound
with blue tape I mark miraculous rabbit holes down
I mean what I say but don't say what I mean which is to say
I'm still learning still young still hopelessly lost
O God are you here in this dreamland of dormice
and murderous queens or are you just a rosegarden
slathered in red paint O a cat without grin | a grin without cat
I see the bright smile not the claws & my friend—
how are girls mad & courageous enough to still love
after this all this after men [*eat me to enter*]
no door is worth all this shrinking & I'll be here
though Wonderland fade goodbye whiteknight
goodbye dear old friend every unbirthday
I tremble & toast with tealeaf every day
I am mad wonderful & reborn

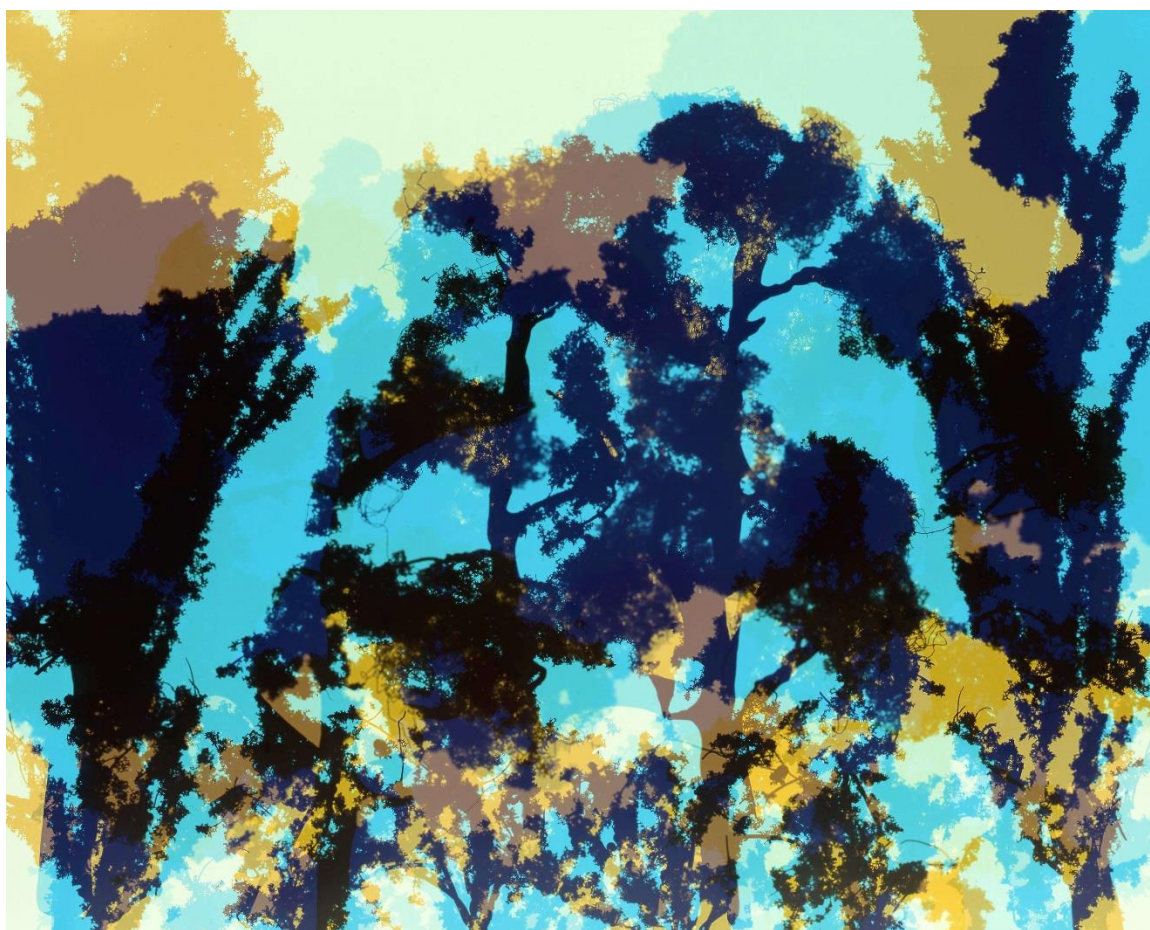
Fauxrest

DOUG FOGELSON

COLOR PHOTOGRAMS



Doug Fogelson, *Fauxrest No. 4*, 2016/17, color photogram, 24 x 30 inches



Doug Fogelson, *Fauxrest No. 8*, 2016/17, color photogram, 24 x 30 inches



Doug Fogelson, *Fauxrest No. 13*, 2016/17, color photogram, 24 x 30 inches

Materialism, Exhibit 43: Woodpecker and Ash Borer

JESSICA REED

POETRY

Here comes a lesson in telling holes
from holes—an emerald ash borer,

a woodpecker: did the woman who fit
a year's refuse into a quart ball jar mean

to make her waste precious? Vertical splits—
one digs for the other. This foraging damage.

Consider the life cycle of the ash, the percussive
taps of the Picidae, and even that beetle sent

from Beijing to France. The crater carved out
of one life by another. Strange inversion,

a made thing: the art of gutting what we need—
a sacred absence, what comes to matter.

Raptor

HILARY SALLICK

POETRY

Sitting by the window with Lisa
I saw a hawk in the winter tree
The hawk opened its wings soft
flash of underwing

and drifted down even closer
to a lower branch It was a small hawk
with white breast of vertical striations
and long rounded tail my brief glimpse
before I stepped away called up the stairs
for others to come see

and Lisa was exclaiming *It moved to the fence!*
It traded places with the squirrel They did it again!
Look what they're doing together!

* * *

The last day of the year I'm alone
water trickling through pipes stillness
out the window the shadow
of the hawk

With binoculars I find it
high in the spruce breakfast
in its yellow talons

The orange eye takes me in the head
turning turning Now it bends
to pull apart the bundle
of feather bone organ air

It tears methodical
lets the inedible bits fly
works down
to fuel

* * *

Throughout the day a pen
a page a broom a sink
fire and water
a window

Stalwart women speak
trudge to bus wait
essential work
of hands of spirit of duty
moving room to room

Look out the window there it is
drooping and swaying and turning upon itself
the world that surrounds
the hawk

One foot in front of the other
a broom a brush a wing
parts jointed together
we are

* * *

You want me to get you a drink?
young man to old woman
Water or something?

A Coolatta

What kind?

Coffee but it's gotta be light-light

He goes out

Oh sugar she moans
sitting in her purple shirt

her sagging body
tethered to oxygen
She reads a magazine
waits to see the doctor

* * *

At night I imagine it folded
into itself on a branch

wrapped in wing of feather
against trunk of spruce

The whole cold stirring night
it dozes

Morning hunger it feasts
on a smaller bird

and I come back to life
like flow of spirit slow

into speed underground
with sound and cadence

with grammar
of thought

* * *

It lifts dives lands
all it can do
I follow its motions
and name them
a kind of doing

I plunge toward contact grasp
air only veer back up
ground far below stirring with potential
Then the particular
flickers the subtle movement browsing
unconscious Dive again
toward scent of it
wholeness of wing at work

I strike
warm fighting being stilling

Up to branch of tree I
squeeze life becomes
object possession cooling
in my hold I begin
to take the thing apart piece
by piece tossing extraneous
bits I work down to
the essence I eat
what I need

* * *

Or I myself am prey quiet among leaves
wandering after what I need
when thing of terror comes
down I had known
it was possible lived my life
in the awe of its presence
I never forgot it
and I had to forget it
In the truth of both I was seeking
the nubs of buds at ends
of branches I
was following taste of fuel seed to
seed then arc of wind of
dark soundless heat

I wake with instinct
slip to safety among tangle
of branches dense where
I stay separate

* * *

I slept again dreamed
two hawks in the tree
never before seen large white
with red crest on head and
back a pair of them
as they lifted off
side by side across sky

Now I think
how like chickens they were
and their presence had a kind of
domesticity though there
were the hawk's wide wings
its strength and the blade
of its beak

* * *

With greater understanding
more is possible

so I imagined managed
coming and going into it

slowly why not
why so hard

* * *

Facing sunset— dome of cloudy sky
upward beams from below
pink undersides of purple clouds—

we're part of something
larger than life

A bright darkness now
high and huge
the blue draining of light
turns to teal rose

the clouds like spills
of warm ink

* * *

Oh my it just sailed by
veering in flight
one wing tilted higher to
make the turn between
the houses wide wings close up

flashing of nearness
gone

An Interview with Jeffrey Lo

Jeffrey Lo is no stranger to a busy creative life. In 2016, we published his short play, [“Where You’re From”](#) in our IX Lives issue. Not long after that, he let us know that he was workshopping a full-length version of the play around the Bay Area. Why not partner with *Exposition Review* for a staged reading in Los Angeles? We jumped at the chance, and held an *Expo Presents* Staged Reading—the first of many, thanks in part to the success of [Waiting For Next](#).

Meanwhile, Jeffrey has not slowed down. As a director, he has productions scheduled through Summer 2020. As a playwright, he spent 2018 writing a new play each day while also developing new full length work. His plays are now produced around the country. You can’t go into a theater in San Francisco and not have someone in the room know who Jeffrey Lo is.

Lauren Gorski and Jessica June Rowe, Editors-in-Chief, recently caught up with Jeffrey to find out more about his recent projects and how he manages a creative life differently today than he did when started.

Expo: We know that you had a reading of *Waiting for Next* at the San Francisco Playhouse in October 2018. First of all, how has the play evolved since we first saw it?

Jeffrey Lo: It’s been a wild writing process. When we did the reading last October, it had been a year since I had even looked at the play, which is one of the longest periods of time I’ve had between writing a play and staging a reading. We learned a lot and there’s still so much we’re discovering.

ER: Did you work with the same actors who inspired the play, Max Tachis and Wes Gabrillo?

JL: Yes, but I wanted to have a different director to have a new point of view and work with someone who hadn’t lived with the play for as long as we have. The director, Giovanna Sardelli, was interesting to work with. She would look at the play scene-by-scene and ask: how much *less* could these characters say and the audience still understand what they’re feeling or doing?

What surprised me the most was how between myself, Max, and Wes, our perspectives had changed since we started the play. Over the year, Max and Wes had

gotten engaged, and I moved in with my girlfriend. Because the play is about growing up, our own growth directly influenced the play and made it change over time.

ER: We loved following *[“The 2018 Project”](#)*, in which you wrote 365 plays over the entire 2018 year. What you inspired you to take on the challenge?

JL: I usually blow off New Year’s Resolutions. I try to better myself all the time, not once a year! Then, at the end of 2017, for whatever reason I felt like I needed to do something.

I listen to the Bill Simmons podcast. He’s a sports writer and runs the website *The Ringer*. He did an interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates, an author and journalist, in November 2017. Both Simmons and Coates were reflecting on the fact that they don’t get to write as much as they used to when they were small-time columnists. They were worried they lost the ability to do it. They likened it to a boxer having to practice every day and needing to keep your muscles moving. So, I convinced myself to work on my writing “muscles” and write one play every day.

[Listen: [Ta-Nehisi Coates on Storytelling, Challenging Obama, and the Kaepernick Situation](#)]

Overall, it was a success. There are a handful of the plays I’m quite happy with. I also ended up writing a first draft of a full length play. Of course, there were times I would get out of a tech rehearsal at 11:50pm and I would only have 10 minutes to write. Those days, I had to remind myself that it wasn’t about writing something good, it was about writing *something*.

ER: What did you learn about yourself as a writer?

JL: I learned not to edit myself until I finish a draft. I can write a version that doesn’t work now and deal with that later. It was an exercise in allowing myself to let go. The point of writing a first draft is not to share it with the world, it’s to get to the end.

When I was working late or stuck at rehearsal, as I said, I had to remind myself that this project is not for anyone else. I could write whatever’s on my mind. The world is no worse for it; I’m no worse for it. I’m going to take those 10 minutes to write.

Other times, I had something I really wanted to explore and I was committed to exploring it. All of us as writers have that experience. We have this great idea and we think, *next time I have time to write, I’m going to look at that*. Then, a month later, we finally have time to sit down and we aren’t thinking about it anymore. But for a year, I made time every day to explore all of my ideas. Maybe in the future, I could look back if there is anything worth playing with or pulling apart.

I will also say that because I was writing every day, I could feel myself writing faster. Back to the boxer metaphor, the writing muscle was used to being active every day and when I had a substantial idea I could write through it rather quickly.

ER: To create something new every day is not only a creative commitment, but it's also a time commitment. Did you have a plan of how to dedicate the time to write?

JL: I should have... that would have been smart. On January 1st, I finished the first play at 11:55pm and I thought, *uh-oh, this is not a good start*. Then, I had another idea for a play and kept writing through the night. I didn't give myself a time limit.

For each short play, I wanted to write beginnings, middles, and ends. Some people thought I wrote 10 plays in a day to have backups, but I never did that. I wanted each play to feel very present. I might've written two plays in a day sometimes, but not often.

In hindsight, I should have done it when I woke up. The worst part of the project was that I would think about the need to do it throughout the day. I stressed myself out. If I could do it again, I would have woken up, spent 45 minutes writing and then go about the day. Whatever comes out, comes out.

ER: Looking back, what were your favorites?

JL: Definitely the ones I leaned into as writing exercises became my favorites and I thought were really funny. There was a play called: "This Page Intentionally Left Blank" and that's that what it was! The first page was blank and the stage direction was a note to not perform it.

[Read: ["This Page Intentionally Left Blank"](#)]

I had another memorable play when I was in the final previews for a show. It was one of those days where I had to write and was really tired. The whole play was a meta monologue about how I'm not copping out of the project by doing a monologue about being tired. It's interesting because I was trying to feel better about not writing something as I was writing something.

[Read: [This is Not an Excuse \(A Play About Not Jeffrey\)](#)]

There's also a few others that mean a lot to me for various reasons.

[Read: [I Forgot You Wouldn't Be Here](#)
[Ingat](#)
[Millennial Artist of Color](#)
[Why I Kissed Who I Kissed](#)]

ER: You talk about making sure each short play has a beginning, middle, and end. You also talk about how writing exercises allowed you to lean into some fun ideas. At Exposition Review, we publish flash and 10-minute plays, celebrating the short form. What are your

thoughts on short plays as a writing exercise vs mastering the short play in its own form. If there is a difference?

JL: The short play has the ability to make a huge impact on the audience. Done right, (which I'm not saying I've done it right, because I probably didn't) it gives you the opportunity to play with tension and expectations. Last summer, I produced a night of 10-minute plays by female playwrights as part of our New Works Festival with Theater Works. It was cool to share short plays with our audience, who may not have seen experienced them before.

What I love about short plays is it forces the audience to fill in a lot of gaps for themselves. For example, Aaron Lobe's *Ideation*. It's a full length play about a group of consultants. The first 20 minutes you have no idea what they are consulting about but it sounds like they are trying to commit a mass murder. Then the play unravels and reveals more information. After I saw it I thought, what if the play ended at 20 minutes? You'd have no clue what was going on!

[Read Script: [Ideation by Aaron Lobe.](#)]

ER: That might be a great idea for a show.

JL: That's a wild thing to think of as an audience: that's all we got?

ER: Even before The 2018 Project, you've always had a lot going on. Between a full time job, directing, writing, and producing—how do you manage burn out?

JL: I don't say yes to everything. Early on in your career, it feels like you need to, and I had a time in my life when I did say yes to everything. I have a complicated relationship with that time, because some people see that as what started my career as an emerging theater artist in the Bay Area.

I was working on projects non-stop. If anyone needed something, I was the person to do it. I owe a lot of relationships that I have now to that time. But, by the end of it I was very unhappy.

I also went through a break up. To avoid thinking about it, I went on overdrive. I kept working and trying to prove something. I even wrote a break up play, which turned out to be the first play of mine produced outside of college. It still gets performed around Valentine's Day. Actually, I spent three Valentine's Day in a row watching a different production of this play!

[Read an excerpt: [A Sad Kind of Love Story](#)]

The point is, I eventually burned out. I realized I needed to fix something because as an artist, if I'm putting a mirror to society to reflect life—I actually have to live life. If all I do

is work in theater, go to sleep, wake up, and work in more theater, then all I'm qualified to work on are productions about productions. I had to take a step back.

Now, I have more opportunities because people know who I am and I can collaborate with a lot of organizations. I also take days off where I don't work on anything related to theater, including seeing shows.

I used to ask myself if a project would help my career, and I've learned to change the question. Because, yes, everything is going to help your career. But, is it actually fulfilling?

ER: How do you choose which projects to work on next, now that you have the freedom to choose your own?

JL: I'm one of the only artist in my family, so when I decided to be in theater, I had to figure out my why. Why do I need to be an artist? Why do I want to do this?

When I decide on a new project, I ask myself if this project is actually going to be artistically fulfilling for me. Does this have anything to do with my mission as an artist?

ER: Those are great questions to ask.

JL: Side bar, also very helpful to ask if you are an artist applying to grants.

ER: So, what's next?

JL: Theater Works just announced their upcoming season, and I'm going to be directing *The Language Archive* by Julia Cho. This one brings me full circle.

A few years ago, I was in a directing apprenticeship where we had to write an essay on which show we wanted to work on as an Assistant Director. My first choice was *Ghost Light* by Tony Taccone and my entire essay was about how I wanted to work with the Artistic Director of Berkeley Rep. My second choice was *The Language Archive*, and my essay was about how much I loved the play. The theater company gave me my second choice, *The Language Archive*. They told me it was because that's the show I really wanted to work on. The show itself.

I have never let go of that experience.

[Check Out: [The Language Archive](#) by Julia Cho, directed by Jeffrey Lo this Spring]

To learn more about Jeffrey Lo, check out his website:

<http://www.jeffreywritesaplay.com>

DIANE VS. DIANE VS. DIANE

MATT DENOTO

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS: DIANE Adult woman.
 NARRATOR Adult, preferable tall
 PLAYER Adult woman (will be portraying AGNES,
 MUGGER, and SHANNON)

SETTING: A blank stage.

* * *

LIGHTS UP on DIANE looking pleasantly benign. NARRATOR enters and addresses the audience.

NARRATOR Once upon a time, there was a person named Diane. This is Diane. And she is about to enter the annals of unwritten history. Unbeknownst even to her, she is about to become the very last human being on the face of the earth to return a movie to Blockbuster Video.

DIANE holds up the DVD.

NARRATOR It is a copy of the 2001 romantic jukebox musical *Moulin Rouge*.

DIANE I've rented it like thirty times. I should've just bought it by now, I know, but...

NARRATOR Before the evening is over, she will have befriended a giant squid, eaten a dagger, and slain a wagon.

DIANE You mean slain a dragon?

NARRATOR I do not. Her journey began innocently enough. Diane thought she'd swing by Blockbuster on her way home from a failed romantic encounter.

DIANE (*walking in place*)
It wasn't a failed romantic encounter. It was my ex-girlfriend trying to... I don't know.

NARRATOR The ex-girlfriend, Shannon, had suggested they meet at church.

DIANE Which, yeah, seemed odd, but, Shannon was always kinda...

NARRATOR More specifically, Shannon had suggested they meet in the church community room. On a Tuesday night.

DIANE She brought me to her Gamblers Anonymous meeting. She meant well, wanted to show me she was trying to change...

NARRATOR It was weird. The encounter never recovered. Diane snuck out while the others prayed with their eyes closed.

DIANE But hey! Whatever! Sure, some dates are... pfft! It's fine. I'm weird too! I bet I was the only person at that Gamblers Anonymous meeting with a DVD from Blockbuster.

NARRATOR She was. If she had gone around and made a bet with every person at the meeting that she had a DVD from Blockbuster Video with her, Diane would've walked away from that church community room with six thousand dollars.

DIANE What? I'm not going to bet with people at a Gamblers—Really? Six thousand?

NARRATOR All of a sudden—

Enter PLAYER as AGNES (older), who is searching high and low (mostly high).

AGNES Diane! Diane!

DIANE Uh, hi. I'm Diane.

AGNES Oh, not you, dear. I'm looking for my pet. She got loose. Will you please help me find her?

DIANE Oh, uh, okay. I guess I've got some time. I love animals. Is your Diane a dog or a kitty or...?

AGNES She's a giant squid.

DIANE A what now?

AGNES About thirty feet long. Tentacles. Likes water and Freddie Mercury. Does not like hot sauce, as I recently learned. I was just trying to spice up dinner. Thought it might be fun to try something new, but no. Drama queen.

DIANE Oh, uh, okay.
(*meekly*)
Diane!

AGNES Diane! Come out, you big silly calamari!

DIANE I never heard of anyone keeping a giant squid as a pet.

AGNES That's because it's a "giant" pain in the ass. I caught her thirty years ago, back in my commercial fishing days. Planned to sell her off just like all my other catches, but then she fixed me with that one big eye of hers and, well, I just couldn't. So I took her home, salinated the pool in the backyard and she's lived there ever since.

DIANE You could've put her back in the ocean?

AGNES Well, I guess I have a bad habit of holding onto silly things too tightly, you know?

NARRATOR Diane considered the fact that it was the year 2018 and she had a Blockbuster Video DVD in her hand.

DIANE I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to look over this way, by the footbridge.

AGNES Thanks, dearie. Diane! Diane!

Player exits. Diane walks.

NARRATOR	<p>Diane stepped onto the footbridge over the town's small lagoon. During her on-again-off-again relationship with Shannon, the two of them had taken many an evening stroll across the bridge. Shannon would regale Diane with stories about her days in the circus, and teach Diane some of the tricks she used in her act. Those were the good days, and Diane allowed herself to get lost in her reverie, until—</p> <p><i>Enter Player as MUGGER, brandishing a knife. She gestures at the DVD.</i></p>
MUGGER	Hey! Gimme that!
DIANE	Oh, uh, I can't.
MUGGER	Don't be stupid! Hand it over!
DIANE	I can't! I have to return it to Blockbuster so I can rent it again next week!
MUGGER	Do you want me to stab you?
	<p><i>Diane reluctantly holds out the DVD. Mugger tries to take it, but Diane doesn't let go.</i></p>
MUGGER	Let go!
DIANE	YOU let go!
	<p><i>They grapple over the DVD.</i></p>
NARRATOR	<p>The two grappled over the DVD. Until—</p> <p><i>By this time, Narrator has crossed behind the grappling women. Suddenly, time slows down for the women as the DVD and knife both go flying in the air (i.e., Narrator slowly raises one in each hand). Narrator tosses the DVD O.S. Diane and Mugger both look stunned (in slow motion).</i></p>
NARRATOR	<p>The DVD and knife were knocked into the air. The DVD flew off the bridge and into the lagoon, much faster than the knife was falling, in a way that would've baffled physicists, if any had been around to witness it.</p>

The knife spins at the apex of its flight, before it begins slowly falling, point down, towards Diane's gaping mouth.

NARRATOR As the knife plummeted towards her face, Diane remembered the sword-swallowing lessons she'd received from Shannon. She instinctively straightened her posture, opened her throat, and suppressed her gag reflex.

Narrator lowers the knife into Diane's mouth (behind Diane's head). Diane swallows with a big gulp as time speeds back up to normal.

NARRATOR There's probably a lewd joke to be made here about lesbian sword swallows, but—

DIANE (to Narrator)
Watch it!

MUGGER What the hell? Did you just eat my knife?

DIANE Sorry!
(gasps)
The DVD!

Diane shoves Mugger out of the way and runs to the edge of the stage. She leans partly O.S.

NARRATOR Diane leaned out over the rail of the bridge, peering into the icy blackness of the waters below. Her mind raced as it struggled with whether to dive in after the DVD or not. So preoccupied was Diane that she didn't notice the quickly approaching threat.

MUGGER Hey! I'm not done with you!

NARRATOR Not that. I mean the cold, slimy appendage wrapping itself around her torso.

Mugger raises a fist and storms at Diane. Just before she gets there, however, Diane is yanked O.S. with a yell. Mugger swings her fist, but hits only air.

MUGGER What the—!? Oh my—Oh my god! It's a giant squid! Somebody! Oh god! It's tossing her around like a ragdoll, whipping her this way and that! Help! I can't look!

Mugger turns away. From O.S. comes the sound of Diane PUKING. The knife is tossed back on stage.

MUGGER

Oh hey. Sweet.

Mugger picks up the knife and exits, whistling happily.

NARRATOR

As Diane the cephalopod ravaged Diane the human, Diane the human couldn't help but notice that her life was not flashing before her eyes, as she had heard happens in life-threatening situations like this. Instead there was only a simple question. Why? Why had she allowed Shannon back into her life, given their sordid history? Why had she rented *Moulin Rouge* again instead of just buying the damn thing? Why hadn't she relinquished the disc to the mugger? Why? And in that moment, the pain of not knowing the answer, the pain of not knowing why she did the things she did, was deeper and more profound than what was happening to her body. Which is saying a lot, because she was getting totally fucked up. Finally she realized, if she wanted to find the answer to that question, she might need to live past the next few minutes. And so, her survival instinct kicking in, she did the only thing that might get her out of her current predicament. She sang.

DIANE

*Inside my heart is breaking,
My makeup may be flaking,
But my smile still stays on!
The show must go on!
The show must go on!
I'll top the bill, I'll earn the kill,
I have to find the will to carry on!
On with the, on with the, on with the show!*

NARRATOR

In case you don't recognize it, that's "The Show Must Go On" by Queen, as performed in the 2001 romantic jukebox musical *Moulin Rouge*.

Diane leaps back onstage, as if having been set down by a giant squid, looking severely disheveled. Enter Player as SHANNON.

SHANNON

Oh hey baby! I'm so glad I caught up with you! Are you all right?

DIANE

Shannon?

SHANNON What are you kidding? Of course it's me, baby! Geez, what happened?

DIANE You came for me?

SHANNON I sure did! I'm gonna take care of you good!

DIANE *(looking past Shannon)*
Oh, and you brought your whole Gamblers Anonymous group with you.

SHANNON Huh? Oh, yeah yeah. We all wanted to make sure you were okay. So listen, baby, you got that Blockbuster DVD?

DIANE What? The DVD? No, I think the squid took it. That's okay. I think I'm gonna buy a copy.

SHANNON Aw, are you sure? Maybe you could just go back and get it? Cuz, you know, I know how much that movie means to you.

DIANE And you have six thousand dollars riding on it?

SHANNON Whoa! How'd you know!? I mean, no, what? Six whats?

DIANE You keep coming back, and I keep letting you. Like an addiction, and this is me falling off the wagon. Well to hell with it. I'm done with that and done with you. This wagon is done. Gone. Oh! Hey! I'm slaying a wagon!

NARRATOR Told you.

SHANNON Aw, come on! You want a cut? Look, show us the disk, I'll give you four percent.

DIANE *(looking past Shannon)*
Shannon keeps two grand emergency cash in the glove compartment of her car.

SHANNON I do not! That is—Hey! Come back here!

Shannon exits, chasing the group.

NARRATOR In spite of the events of the evening, Diane felt better than she had in a long time.

DIANE Does seem rude not to return the DVD. None of this is Blockbuster's fault.

With a SPLASH, the DVD is tossed back on stage.

DIANE Cool! Thanks Diane!

NARRATOR And so, with newfound resolve and seaweed in her underwear, Diane arrived at Blockbuster Video. Only to find—

DIANE What the shit!? Out of business! When did that happen?

NARRATOR Earlier that day, was the answer. But though the doors were locked and the windows boarded, the return slot was still open. So Diane did what she had come to do. Because she'd learned it's never too late to let go.

Diane tenderly holds out the DVD, then drops it. It falls awkwardly to the floor. She looks down at it.

DIANE Kinda blew the moment, huh?

NARRATOR *(shrugging in agreement)*
I wasn't going to say, but...

Black out.

End of Play.

A Place by the Fire

CHARLES DUFFIE

SCREENPLAY

FADE IN:

EXT. SKID ROW - NIGHT

Dark streets lined with abandoned warehouses. Downtown Los Angeles shimmers in the distance.

Two homeless men warm themselves at a flaming trash can.

THORNTON looks relatively new to the street. Middle-aged, thin, stubble on his face, clothing not too soiled. He wears glasses with the right lens completely missing.

SAM is a veteran of the row. Elderly, overweight, sweat-stained skin, scruffy beard, dingy clothing.

Sam sniffs the air.

SAM

Smell that?

Thornton squints his right eye and peers through his one remaining lens. He searches the dark street.

THORNTON

I don't see anything.

Suddenly, a man-shaped silhouette appears ten yards away. The silhouette CRACKLES with energy and pulses with light. Thornton and Sam stare, growing more scared as the light brightens. They shield their eyes and stagger back--

But just as the light reaches a blinding intensity, it's gone-- leaving a man standing where the silhouette had been.

This is RICHARD SURREY, 30, neatly groomed and dressed in Victorian-era clothing. He looks around, disoriented.

Richard carries a MECHANICAL CYLINDER about the size of a loaf of bread. The device, covered with dials and switches, looks crude by modern standards but smokes with raw power.

Richard sees the two homeless men and walks over.

RICHARD
Impossible! I can't believe it!

Thornton and Sam exchange a wary glance.

RICHARD
Just look at yourselves!

Thornton and Sam try to tidy themselves up.

RICHARD
If homelessness still exists, then
poverty still exists! If poverty, then
crime! If crime, then violence! If
violence, then social degeneration!

The two homeless men stare at him, blank.

RICHARD
I see public education is still doing a
bang-up job. What's the point of time
travel if you can't get anywhere?

As the truth sinks in, their cynical eyes fill with awe.

THORNTON
You're a... time traveler?

Sam points at the mechanical cylinder.

SAM
And that's a... time machine?

RICHARD

Yes, yes. Just spin the time dial and off you go.

Richard turns slowly around, gazing at the ruined street.

RICHARD

My day was full of such promise!
Scientific discovery! Social progress!
We laid the foundations for a new golden age! I skip one little century into the future for a glimpse at paradise on earth, and what do I find? You. This. Has nothing--?

As Richard turns back around, Sam punches him in the face, knocking the time traveler out cold.

SAM

Nope, nothing has changed.

THORNTON

What'd you do that for?!

Sam picks up the cylindrical time machine. He smiles.

SAM

Always wanted a time machine.

Thornton's eyes light up.

THORNTON

We can go back and invent Google. No! Facebook! We can take the great novels and symphonies and paintings of the twentieth century, go back and pawn them off as our own! We'll be geniuses! Rich geniuses! Top of the heap! Get any woman we want and make love to her over and over and--

Sam SLAPS Thornton.

THORNTON

What'd you do that for?!

SAM

I was a banker once upon a time. I've been to the top of the heap.

THORNTON

I was a teacher once upon a time. I've never been to the top of anything.

SAM

There's nothing at the top of the heap
But another heap.

THORNTON

Then what do you suggest?

SAM

I don't want to run at the head of the rat race. I want to escape it.

He nods down to Richard, still unconscious on the asphalt.

SAM

Unlike this poor bastard, we have no illusions about human nature. The future! New gadgets, new cures, new distractions—so what? It'll be the same old us. The same old context. We need to escape the modern, mechanized system that turns a man into a cog.

THORNTON

You mean, go back instead of forward?

SAM

Why not?

THORNTON

Back to a simpler time.

SAM

Exactly! Back to when a man built his
life with his own hands.

THORNTON

A clean, honest, real life!

SAM

That's it!

THORNTON

Answering to no one but my own soul!

SAM

Yes! Yes!

The two men gaze at each other, worked up. Their eyes fall to the
time machine.

SAM

You game?

THORNTON

Spin the wheel!

Sam puts a hand on the time dial--and spins it.

Shimmering light appears around Sam. Thornton grabs Sam's arm. The
light extends around him as well.

The light grows brighter. The CRACKLING silhouette swallows the
two men and EXPLODES.

EXT. LONDON - 1840 - NIGHT

Light EXPLODES and fades, leaving Sam and Thornton standing on a
narrow London street.

MEN, WOMEN, and CHILDREN crowd the dirty lane. Aged before their
time, backs bent, eyes dimmed, they look like the cast from
Dickens' worst nightmare.

Everyone stares in terror at the two men.

THORNTON

Looks like London. Mid-1800s.

SAM

We were in New York. How'd we end up in London?

THORNTON

This is just a theory, but I think we step out of the space-time continuum. We don't move an inch or age a breath. Otherwise, we'd grow younger and vanish on the day we were born.

SAM

But we were in New York!

THORNTON

We don't move, but everything else does. Earth rotates backward under our feet. So when we step back into the space-time continuum, it's like sticking a pin in a spinning globe.

They notice several men and children warming themselves around flaming bins. Everyone stares.

Thornton adjusts his glasses, squinting. Sam sniffs.

THORNTON

Farther back?

SAM

Much.

Sam spins the time dial.

EXT. RUSSIA - 1700 - NIGHT

Light EXPLODES and fades--and the two men find themselves on a snowy plain in Russia.

Scores of RUSSIAN SOLDIERS stand in the snow. They look as tattered as their flag fluttering in the cold breeze.

A CAPTAIN sits atop a gaunt horse.

Everyone stares in surprise at the two men.

Thornton and Sam stare back, shivering in the cold. Sam sniffs as Thornton squints through his one lens.

THORNTON

Russia. Around the time of the Peter the
First, I'd say.

Glancing right, they see a group of wounded soldiers warming themselves around a pile of burning wood.

A few soldiers advance, swords raised.

THORNTON

Time to go?

SAM

Way back this time.

Sam gets a good grip and spins the dial hard.

EXT. SOUTH AMERICA - 1493 - NIGHT

Thornton and Sam find themselves standing on a moonlit beach.
They've never seen anything so beautiful or unspoiled.

They gaze in wonder, turn to each other, and smile. Then, turning
all the way around, the smiles freeze on their faces.

Dozens of SPANISH SOLDIERS stand guard over a crowd of ARAWAK
INDIAN PRISONERS. The Arawaks sit on the sand, warming their hands
at a small fire.

Everyone stares, wide-eyed, afraid.

Thornton adjusts his glasses, squinting. Sam sniffs.

THORNTON

Looks like the second voyage of Columbus.
1493 maybe.

SAM

God, how far back to we have to go?

THORNTON

Europe, Russia, South America...

SAM

Going to spin the hell out of this thing.

He winds up and gives the dial a ferocious spin. Thornton takes Sam's arm as light shimmers around the two men.

THORNTON

If the Earth is turning under us, it's
only a matter of time until--

EXT. OCEAN - NIGHT

The men appear in the middle of the ocean. They sink immediately,
then flounder back to the surface.

Treading water, Thornton awkwardly adjusts his glasses, squints
through one lens--and sees SHARK FINS.

He grabs at Sam, who turns and sees the oncoming sharks. Sam
sniffs, eyes widening.

Thornton clutches onto Sam, who barely manages to stay afloat. He
struggles with the time dial.

THORNTON

Spin it, spin it!

EXT. EGYPT - 2500 B.C. - NIGHT

The two men, drenched to the skin, appear on the steps of a
pyramid, high above the ancient Egyptian desert.

Thornton loses his balance and falls forward. Sam snatches his
coat and pulls him back.

THORNTON

Thanks.

Turning, they climb up a few steps to the flat top of the unfinished pyramid. From here, they see the Great Sphinx of Giza, staring at them from across the sands.

Thornton squints. Sam sniffs.

THORNTON

2500 B.C., give or take a century.

Looking down, they see hundreds of small fires in the dark.

SAM

What's all that?

THORNTON

Slaves.

SAM

Still sitting around a fire. Still trying to keep warm.

THORNTON

Give me that.

Thornton tries to take the time machine. Sam pushes him away.

THORNTON

You're not doing it right!

SAM

It's a wheel! You spin it!

THORNTON

You're not going back far enough!

SAM

We've gone back thousands of years and nothing has changed!

THORNTON

Then go back farther!

Thornton leaps on Sam.

The two men fall and wrestle, their hands slapping at the dial, whipping it faster and faster, the light around them growing brighter and brighter--

EXT. PRE-HISTORY - NIGHT

The two men lie on the ground, looking up at a sky almost white with stars.

They sit up--and see a group of PROTO-NEANDERTHALS gathered around a fire. The proto-Neanderthals look barely human. They stare in terror.

THORNTON

You've spun us back half a million years!

SAM

Me?! That was you!

The two men stand and look around at the landscape. So primitive and beautiful. The stark beauty is overwhelming.

Thornton squints through his one lens and smiles. Sam sniffs. They gaze in awe at the unspoiled world. A garden of Eden.

THORNTON

I think we did it. We escaped history.

SAM

We can live like real human beings.

A huge ROAR rips the night like a saber-toothed tiger on steroids.

Sam and Thornton turn in time to see the proto-Neanderthals throw dirt on the fire and scatter--leaving the world suddenly dark.

The ROAR explodes again, closer.

The two men stare out into the starlit shadows, their primal fears kicking into overdrive.

THORNTON

History sucks.

SAM

Let's give the future a roll.

THORNTON

OK, but not too far.

The ROAR comes again, closer. The two men leap at the sound.

SAM

I'm going as far as I can!

THORNTON

Wait--

SAM

The future's all we got left!

Sam grabs the dial, about to spin. Thornton pulls Sam's hand away. He talks rapid-fire, fueled by fear.

THORNTON

Look, I've been thinking about the
Earth's orbital path and how this point
here

(points to feet)

could, over millennia, cross the orbital
path of--

The ROAR explodes behind them. They leap out of their skins.

Sam spins the time dial and keeps it going, his hand slapping it over and over as shimmering light surrounds the two men.

EXT. THE MOON - THE DISTANT FUTURE

Thornton and Sam appear on the surface of the moon--and immediately gasp for air. They whip around, panicking.

Thornton mouths the words, "I TOLD YOU!"--and SHOVES Sam.

In the low gravity, the shove spins Sam around and around. The time machine flies from his hand, tumbles through mounds of lunar dust, and disappears over a crater's edge.

Thornton and Sam stare at each other in terror, then scramble after the time machine.

They fall to their knees on the edge of the crater, staring down into a vast black hole. They clutch their chests, faces filled with the knowledge of certain death.

But as the two men look up, their expressions change. Eyes widen with absolute awe and love, like seeing the face of God. Sam reaches out a hand, pointing.

A heartbreaking calm comes over them, their dying stares fixed on something in the distance.

They fall over, faces in the dust.

Dead.

CAMERA PANS UP

from the two men, revealing their last point of view:

The Earth, shining across the blackness of space.

The small blue planet glows like heaven.

FADE OUT.

Humanimals

LAUREN CARLY SHAW

VISUAL ART



Lauren Carly Shaw, *Humanimals: The Show*, 2012. Barbie Doll Legs, Shells. Courtesy of the artist



Lauren Carly Shaw, *Humanimals: Mother and Child*, 2012. Shells, Doll Parts. Courtesy of the artist



Lauren Carly Shaw, *Humanimals: Peeping Tom and Sally*, 2012. Shells, Doll Parts. Courtesy of the artist



Lauren Carly Shaw, *Humanimals: Reaching Out*, 2012. Barbie Doll Legs, Shells. Courtesy of the artist



Lauren Carly Shaw, *Humanimals: Sheepish*, 2012. Barbie Doll Legs, Shells. Courtesy of the artist

Anna Considers a Cocktail

RUBEN GRIJALVA

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS:	ANNA	Female, 30s. Sharp-eyed and fast-talking, with a mind that moves too fast for even a quick tongue to keep up. She's holding back two tons of heartache with a carefully constructed wall of snark.
	WAITER	Male, 35-45, Hispanic. Hyper-accommodating, we should feel the tension between wanting to make a customer happy and wanting to make all his customers happy. His English is good enough to work in Casco Viejo, a tourist district of Panama City, but sometimes Anna talks too quickly and metaphorically for him to catch everything completely.
	DARRYL	Earnest and solutions-oriented, if lacking in imagination. Believes deeply that life is a series of engineering challenges, and doesn't get those who don't get that.
	EARTHWORM JIM	Male 30-40. We only see him in the luckiest—can you believe it—moment of his life. Can double-cast Darryl as Jim, if necessary, with clever use of wardrobe.

* * *

LIGHTS UP on ANNA, at an outdoor cafe table bathed in tropical sun and cumbia music, dressed in a breezy, colorful ensemble appropriate for a hot, humid day doing nothing: floral prints, no sleeves, hat. A WAITER buzzes in with a colorful tropical drink.

- WAITER Here you are, señora.
- ANNA Thank you so much.
- WAITER De nada. Taste, make sure is good for you.
- ANNA Yes, I will, it looks so...
- Anna holds up the cocktail, takes a deep breath, lets it out. The waiter reflexively mimics. He waits patiently while she watches the afternoon light flicker across the ice cubes.*
- ANNA This is the best part, you know.
- WAITER It's very nice, yes.
- ANNA This moment, I mean. In all likelihood, everything goes downhill from here.
- WAITER No, no. It's nice day.
- ANNA Yeah, but it's a fundamental law. The tyranny of entropy: every road goes in the same direction.
- She whistles, sketching the road's descent in the air with her finger: falling, falling, crashing, a mouthed explosion.*
- WAITER (no idea, but hoping to be agreeable)
Okay.
- ANNA See, if I could freeze time—the best of all hypothetical super powers—I'd freeze now. I'd stay right here, just... staring at this glass.
- They stare together for a moment.*
- WAITER It's nice glass, yes?
- ANNA So nice.
- They stare some more. He's getting antsy.*
- WAITER Nice taste, too. Maybe I come back in a—

- ANNA No, please, stay a moment, I need—see, right now I’m kinda at the top of the roller coaster, okay, and from here I can see everything: the lay of the land, where I’ve been, where I’m going. Can you see it?
- WAITER (*no idea, agreeable*)
Oh yes. Looks very nice.
- ANNA Yes, *very* nice. So tiny, so abstract from up here. Like a map. The trees, buildings, the people, *especially* the people. So tiny they don't look like people. Just dots on a map—but in a good way, a way that lets you see them more clearly. Right?
- WAITER I think so.
- ANNA And I’ve just finished this jarring ascent—clack, clack, clack, clack, clack—all noisy and jostling, and you can’t really think clearly during that part, you know?
- WAITER Yes?
- ANNA And any moment I’ll be headed down, with all the adrenaline and wind in my face, and that doesn’t lend itself to perspective-taking either, does it?
- WAITER No?
- ANNA No. But for one short moment I’m up here, all possibilities laid out clearly below, and the clacking lets up, and I’m here teetering in perfect silence. With a cocktail.
- WAITER Nice cocktail, yes?
- ANNA So nice. For all I know, it’s the best goddamned cocktail in the whole world.
- WAITER Gracias.
- ANNA Or the worst.
- WAITER No, not the worst.
- ANNA Or middling.
- WAITER It’s a good one.

ANNA In all likelihood, it's middling—most things are—but still, right now, it could be everything I've ever wanted.

WAITER (*sudden confidence—this is my domain*)
You no like it, I get you something else.

ANNA Ah, but then it's too late. Once I drink, the descent begins. Already, we're off to a bad start. Drink's no good, do I send it back?

WAITER Yes.

ANNA What if that hurts your feelings?

WAITER It won't.

ANNA What if I don't like the next one either?

WAITER I bring you something else.

ANNA No, that's no good either.

WAITER I bring another.

ANNA I can do this all day.

WAITER Me too.

ANNA What if I realize I've made a terrible mistake?

WAITER I fix it.

ANNA What if the first one was right after all?

WAITER I bring it back.

ANNA What if you can't?

Across the stage, DARRYL enters with dress shoes in hand, prepping for a night out.

DARRYL I don't understand why the hell we're still talking about this!

ANNA (*from the table*)
You don't—really?

She sets down the drink, stands and crosses to DARRYL. Waiter watches patiently as the scene unfolds.

- ANNA You *really* don't understand why we're still talking...
- DARRYL Come on, please don't—
- ANNA ...about the fact that the last time you went to one of these stupid things...
- DARRYL A year ago!
- ANNA That's right, congratulations are in order. It's the one-year anniversary of your hummer from Debbie What's Her Fuck in the company parking lot!
- DARRYL This isn't helpful.
- ANNA Did you call her? Send her flowers?
- DARRYL Come on, Anna, I can't—
- ANNA I don't know—what's traditional for parking-lot hummerversaries?
- DARRYL I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! There! That's, like, eleven thousand I'm sorries so far. Please let me know when I'm approaching an acceptable number.
- ANNA (*to Waiter*)
See, he *says* it sarcastically, but he actually believes if he hits a certain number a switch will flip and we'll be good as new.
- WAITER (*innocent, sticking up for the guy*)
I think he's pretty sorry.
- ANNA (*not sticking up for the guy*)
So do I.
- DARRYL (*putting on shoes*)
Are you going to get ready or not?
- ANNA What, you think I'm going to let you go alone again?

- DARRYL (*for the thousandth time*)
She doesn't work there anymore!
- ANNA Is the parking lot still there?
- DARRYL Come on, Anna—
- ANNA Will there still be booze? Do you still think I'm "physically and emotionally distant in a way that leaves you vulnerable to the positive attention of other—"
- DARRYL We're not supposed to weaponize what we say in therapy!
- ANNA (*to Waiter*)
This is technically true, but, in my defense, everything *he* says in therapy is jargon calibrated to make the therapist happy, which is, you know—
- WAITER So annoying.
- ANNA Exactly!
- DARRYL I don't know what else I can do, Anna. Just tell me what I can do. Please.
- ANNA (*to Waiter*)
This part is sad. Because I don't think there's anything he *can* do.
- DARRYL I know you've been under a lot of—and I'm really sorry about your spider.
- ANNA (*to Waiter... or is it?*)
Unsolicited advice: if you yourself are an open wound, do *not* attempt to scratch any adjacent open wounds in hope of diverting attention from your own pus. It only increases the chance of infection.
- WAITER/DARRYL Okay.
- ANNA It's not about the spider, Darryl.
- DARRYL Well, you haven't really talked about it. You haven't really mourned—

- ANNA It's just a stupid fucking spider.
- DARRYL Not to you.
- ANNA (*crossing back to Waiter*)
Technically, it's a whole stupid fucking spider *species*—I'm in the uncharismatic species racket. You know: dying out fast, but not as cute as a panda bear.
- WAITER Oh, I love panda bears.
- ANNA Everybody does. But you know who nobody loves?
(*She pulls up a picture on her phone, shows it to the Waiter.*)
The Dolloff cave spider. *This* is the little fucker I've dedicated *my* life to saving.
- WAITER (*cringing*)
That's a ugly little fucker.
- ANNA Not an easy cause to champion. "Anna, you make an impassioned case, and I really hate to say this, but—I fucking *hope* that thing goes extinct."
- WAITER Me too.
- ANNA Well, everyone's prayers have been answered. The population's taken a turn for the worse. Donors think it's a lost cause, so The Pacific Institute for the Preservation of the Dolloff Cave Spider is ending, my job is ending, and this ugly little fucker will be ending soon too, missed by nobody. Except me.
- WAITER Sorry.
- ANNA I don't know why—I've always had a soft spot for creatures so ugly they lose arguments before they start. That must be why I married Darryl.
- DARRYL Hello?
- ANNA (*running back over to Darryl*)
Okay, that wasn't nice, but it was a little funny. He's not the worst-looking guy, just, you know—middling. And he was right: I *was* "physically and emotionally distant in a way that left him vulnerable to—"

- DARRY Can you say something, please?
- ANNA (to Waiter)
My mother always told me, "If you can't say something nice, say something cryptic."
(to Darryl)
Are those the same shoes you wore last year?
- DARRYL What? Okay, you know what—
(moving to exit)
I don't care, I—I'm just going to go. I can't—I don't know what else to do here.

Darryl exits. Anna folds up, takes a deep breath. She stands, grabs a suitcase, and starts to pack.
- ANNA (to Waiter, as she packs)
A car is considered totaled when the price of fixing it is greater than its Blue Book value. I think this concept should be applied more broadly. Sometimes, you just know it's the end, because the cheapest option is to spring for a new beginning.
(She looks at the suitcase, half-packed, and stops, unsatisfied.)
Like, completely new.
(She pulls out only her passport, leaves the suitcase, half-packed, walks out of the room and back to the table.)
New clothes, new toothbrush, new travel-sized toothpaste—you can buy them when you get there. New city, new country, new cafe... new cocktail.

Seated again, she holds up the drink.
- WAITER It's a good one.
- ANNA Could be.
- WAITER Why you choose Panama?
- ANNA You got a lotta ugly fuckers that need saving.
- WAITER True. Lotta spiders too.
- ANNA (laughs)
That's good.

WAITER So he cheat, you leave. I hearing it all the time.

ANNA No, his cheating wasn't the problem. Mine was.

WAITER No!

EARTHWORM JIM enters, stands by Anna.

ANNA Yes! With the deputy director of The Center for the Protection of the Oregon Giant Earthworm at Uncharismatic-Con in Tucson. People in the ugly-little-fucker world call him Earthworm Jim, though I think his real name is Bob or Brian or something. And yes, because I know you're wondering, he did ask if I'd like to—

EARTHWORM JIM ...see *my* giant earthworm.

ANNA And yes, it was a gross thing to say, but he was tongue-in-cheek about it, and I could tell he just couldn't help himself.

WAITER So, you fall in love with Earthworm Jim?

ANNA God, no. Did you hear what he just—no. I fell in love with the moment before that charming line, when we were standing outside his room...

(She stands up, makes eyes at Jim.)
 ...just making goo-goo eyes, when all possibilities remained: he could be the world's greatest lover, the world's worst, though, as you've probably guessed, he was—

WAITER Middling.

ANNA Always a solid guess.

WAITER Thank you.

ANNA No, it wasn't about Jim, or even about Darryl finding out—which he didn't, of course, because when I do something wrong, I do it *right*.

Jim exits, carefully.

WAITER Of course.

ANNA The real problem is that time—which I cannot *actually* freeze—is the process of possibilities collapsing. A spider dies out, a romance

(Con't)

goes flat, a knee goes funny and is never quite the same, doors close so quietly you don't even notice they've closed, only that the room feels a little smaller. *That's* the tyranny of entropy. And I realized, in the goo-goo eyes of this stranger—this somewhat novel variety of middling—that the only way to slow that collapse, to keep from getting crushed by it, is to kick a few doors back open. With blunt force. And that part can hurt.

Darryl returns to the room, looks around for Anna.

DARRYL Anna? Hello?

He sees the half-packed bag. He sits—crushed, confused.

ANNA A lot. But on the other side of that pain, if you supply enough fresh energy to the system, from trade-show trysts and 747s and tropical sun and beautiful cocktails...

WAITER Thank you.

ANNA (*staring at the cocktail again*)
You might just, if all goes well enough, I think you can actually have a...

WAITER You have happy ending, yes?

ANNA No. "Happy ending" is an oxymoron—there's no such thing. There are *only* happy beginnings.

WAITER (*suggesting she drink, finally*)
Okay, then. To happy beginnings?

ANNA (*holds up the drink*)
Alright then. To happy beginnings.
(*She takes a deep breath.*)
Don't let me down, my friend.

WAITER I won't.

She drinks. He waits anxiously for her reaction. She smiles, nods as if to say, "Pretty fucking good."

End of Play.

I sat there

FATEME BANISHOEB

VIDEO POETRY



[WATCH VIDEO](#)

I sat there not where I had chosen
I sat there not where I was most comfortable
I sat there not where I could be invisible
I sat there where you asked me to hold a space
I sat there where I couldn't see
I sat there where I resisted you
I sat there where I didn't want to face my limits
I sat there where I had to surrender
I sat there where my hands had to create
I sat there to write the unknown

I sat there

Bic and Gumby

TRINIE DALTON

EXPERIMENTAL



As fall comes the desert grows brown, dry and cold, and moving sand whispers against the withered plant-stems. The Sky Fawn has ceased to rule the heavens and in his place has come the boisterous west wind, whose guardian spirit is the Panther. For a few weeks he reigns supreme, but he too must leave the sky to the Bear, who, among his many other functions, is the guardian spirit of the north wind.

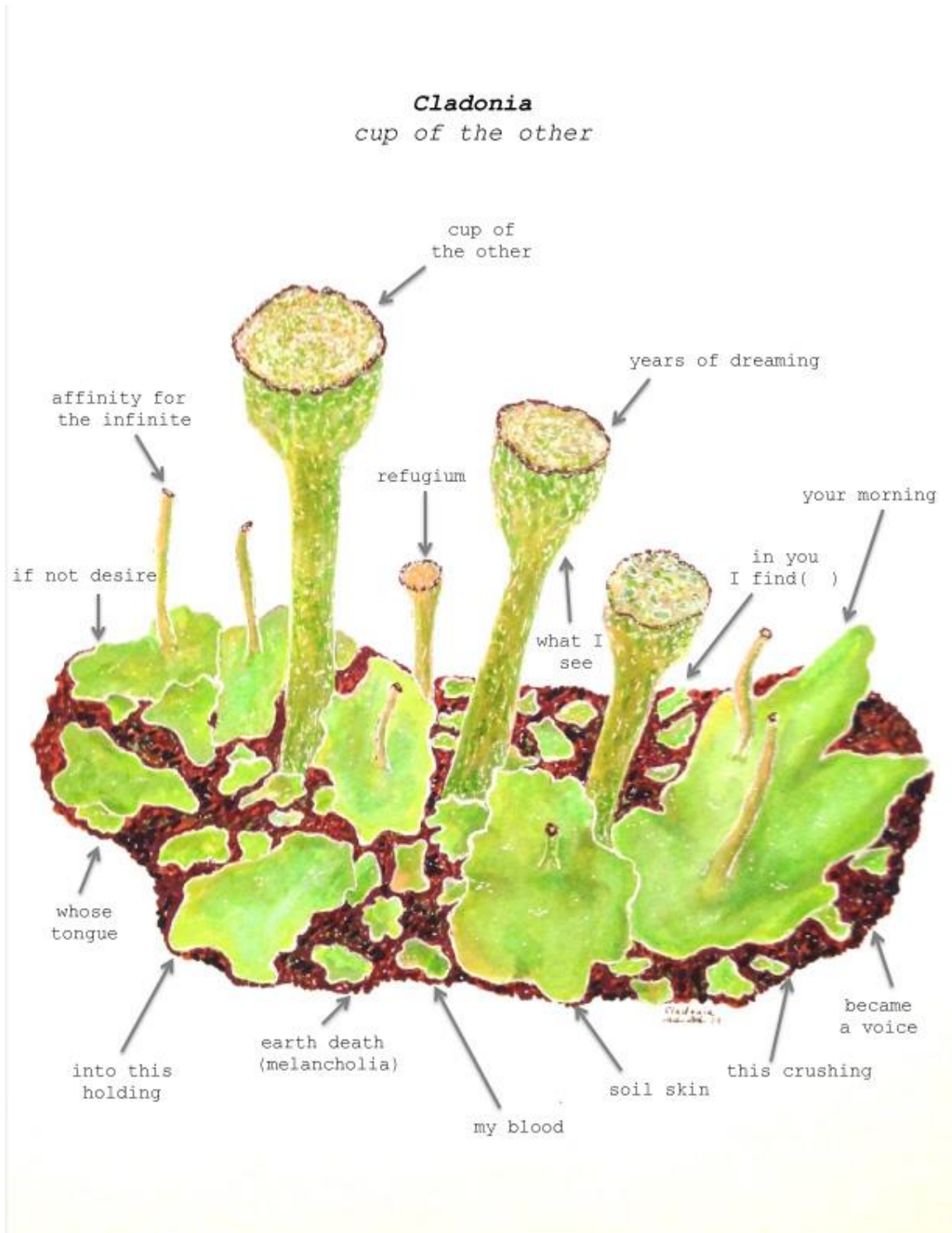
Little green man stepping in and out of books, you are the best-read clay figure I know. Entering and exiting texts head first, you know how to act around literature, dancing literally with it in the Kachina ceremony, buying armor from a blacksmith, slender body stiffening in a meat locker while trapped in the robot book. Your band plays benefit concerts to save small farmers losing their lands to the bank. Your dog, crying pearls upon hearing beautiful music, is the moneymaking hero. You are an anti-corporate antiquarian and a romantic, like George Harrison; lately when I see palm tree trunks swaying in the breeze like giraffe necks, I see your bendy body. Your red horse is grumpy. Dear Gumby, what kind of pen do you write with? I write with blue Bic, medium point. Bic is ubiquitous, available anywhere in the world. I am writing this till my hand hurts, sliding Bic across the page to make flat sculpture. I chewed several pen caps in my youth, but today pinch its tip and enjoy the faceted tubing that I imagine being smooshed, while still pliable plastic, through hexagonal factory die-cast perforations. What does it look like when you make love with your blue girl, Goo? Descriptions of elasticity are dirty talk. Does she ravage you with office supplies? Hole-punch you to watch you self-heal, press you for fingerprints, sever appendages with her X-acto blade to observe your regeneration, earthworm style? I am tempted to hurt you just to witness a miracle.

We shot our way out of that town for a dollar's worth of steel holes, the cowboy says bitterly in Peckinpah's *Wild Bunch* after he's robbed a bank for sacks of slugs; I bet raw, silty clay feels that way wending its way through mountainside crevices veined with harder stuff. Gumby, you're always melting your way out of jams, splattering into walls and recomposing yourself as effortlessly as a man straightening his bow tie, multiplying into five selves like a Hindu god, do you have any tips for a woman who seeks spiritual integration with her surroundings? Mind over matter, Gumby, you embody enlightenment, express ultimate union with your neighbors in the form of rainbow rolls. I try daily to meditate and to believe what gurus say, that we each contain the universe; falling asleep to your cartoons at night is my way of praying. But I can't feel it yet. I feel like bamboo shoots being munched by a panda, like a lamprey has latched onto me, and I wonder how you clear that plasticine brain of yours, keep your thought-herd from overgrazing the self-reflection pasture? Tell me the truth: are you high all the time?

What Happened to the Sky

REBECCA DURHAM

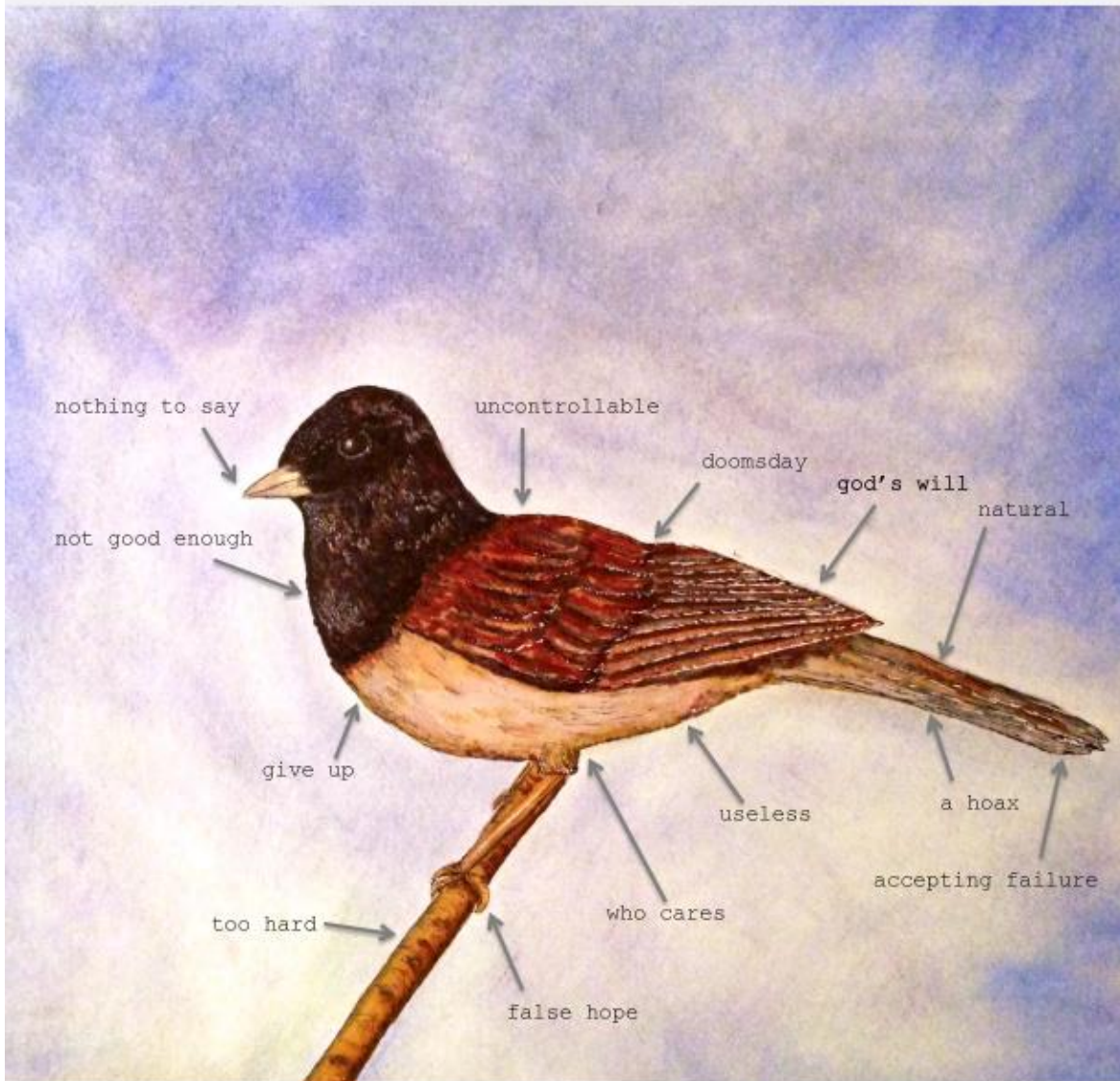
EXPERIMENTAL







Dark-eyed Junco
nothing to say





On Light and Leaving

L.I. HENLEY & LAURA MAHER

EXPERIMENTAL

Call:

I like to take long walks at dusk, summer still
rising up from sidewalks, or where there are no sidewalks, dirt,
the street. I like to look into the light from my neighbor's windows,
not into their windows exactly, but the light from within.

The lights in my neighborhood burn like I like to think
my body does: not a thing in movement exactly, but the edge of energy,
possibility, warmth.

Light can do this.

It can make me think that my body does not
define me, does not
possess me, does not behave like a house I live in.
The light can be turned on or off. Can glow white or yellow, can show
the depth of a space. A room off a room off a room. A place to throw a voice.

A light like an echo or a memory.

I like long walks, but when I write to you I have to speak
to my poem to remember.
I say, *Poem, don't leave me. Poem, stay.*

Years ago, when I was sick and sure I wouldn't walk again,
I spoke to my body this way.
I said, *Body, don't leave me. Body, stay.*

Does a body know a thing before a mind has taught it?

At dusk tonight, the orange edge of a sunset could be seen at the tree line, far off,
past the familiar slope of roofs, the angle like praying hands

beginning to come together, or like prayer itself.

The light can do this,
make me think about praying.

A plane left a sharp trail, the light like a zipper to the evening sky.
I tried to get a picture for you, but an iPhone at dusk
does not see the light like I do.

Years ago, before I was very sick, before I knew anything
about bodies, my high school boyfriend and I drove
to the top of Campbell, to look at city lights and kiss. From far off, the lights looked
dangerous. Or it was these risks: the driving, the parking. The aloneness.

We sat on the hood of his parents' station wagon
and waited to get the nerve.

He had a small notebook
stored in the glove compartment to record the mileage
to every tank of gas. What was learned, I still don't know, except I knew
I liked his hands reaching across, his hands catching in the light
pouring from the windshield, his hands reaching across but not touching
my thighs, the lead scratch of pencil on paper.

How precious it can be to desire youth and maturity at once, light and dark, touch and
absence.
I said, *Don't leave me*. It hasn't.

I wonder: do you pray? Find any usefulness in your memories about your youth?
Do you see a light in the desert like a beacon or a warning?

It's summer now, and perhaps it always has been—the light can do this.
Closer than my own body's hum, this light. The bats, called by dusk, their small bodies
cast against the sky, and all the while, I've walked beneath them, talking
to myself, the poem, saying: *don't forget*.

* * *

Response:

We've never met, but I can see you
or the *you* I've conjured from a long stare
into campfire fed by greasewood,
this you taking walks in a desert

somehow sister to my own, bats overhead, bats seen
and unseen like webs,

like halos around the moon, with or without
the knowledge that the bones of bats
are similar to those in your hands.

Does a body know a thing before the mind has taught it?

For over a year, I too lost the ability to walk
for more than a few minutes at a time.

Standing was also a chore.

I remember, once, abandoning a full cart of groceries,
unable to stand in line a second more.

We were living in a resort town, yet another desert.
Jobless, we told our neighbors we were retired.

My husband would carry me, at dusk, to the community pool
where I would swim with just my arms.

The water against my skin was painful.

Just the pressure of existence, a weight that encompasses, drowns a stone.

Even the white cotton sheets crushed against me, everything heavy,
spackled with grit.

Surely my body asked to be taught what the heat had done,
what dazzling mirage had taken shape,
wind-spun and dizzy on the salt flats?

What happens when the mind loses the scent,
can't recover the tracks
of the body, or worse, sees the footprints gone into the shimmer
that looks so much like water?

Have you ever sunk yourself to the bottom of a pool, legs crossed,
eyes open, just to let your breath
right itself in globes of leaving light,
just to be sure a part of you still knows
which way is up?

Listen—if I have ever prayed,
it was in that community pool at dusk,
body prone in the breaststroke, arms parting water,
arms carrying the rest of me forward,

my body's gliding as good as any answer,
the same bats as now snatching
emerald beetles from the air, seen and unseen,
having blessed me all along.

Heresies

MADRONNA HOLDEN & DAVID WALDENBERGER

VISUAL ART & POETRY



sunset storm west eugene

You and I, painter,
are full of heresies
unbuckling the rough
belt of reality.

With your luminous
heresies of color,
you curl the clouds
furious with passion,
bringing their blush
to your orange climax.

Thus your storm invites us
to dream with it—to become
intimate enough with moist things
to take up residence in a raindrop
before and after it finds the great sea.

To dive into a spear of grass
so as to become one of the
unnumbered things of this world.