

THE BREAD LOAF JOURNAL

VOLUME IV | SUMMER 2016



WRITINGS FROM THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

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Middlebury Bread Loaf
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Introduction

Welcome to the 2016 Bread Loaf Journal: Writings from the School of English. Jessica Filion and I are thankful for all who submitted their creative work. We had the difficult position of selecting and curating this year's Journal from a large field of compelling work. The pieces we selected are in conversation with each other and part of a larger discourse; they represent voices that make Bread Loaf unique. It is our hope, through this edition, to provide a microphone for these voices to join the greater narrative.

So here we are. Please enjoy, share, and join in the conversation contained in the 2016 Bread Loaf Journal.

—Leo Connally, *co-editor*

Grab It Fast or Let It Loose

LIVINGSTON MILLER

You better grab it fast
this world,
or let it loose.
The politic has
returned to bodies:
no choice but to
pay attention
aimless on the
halted highways
who will teach us
how to return to
the world of things
without borders
how to make
what will last
who will make it rain
on this scorched earth
when we have
it again under our feet?
We got to go down
you said, but rise
or fall, we're heading
for catastrophe. It's
a choice of what
kind of violence
we want to endure,
the sharp pain of
bullets and billy clubs
or the dull pain
of bleeding out slowly
through debt and
prison cells.
Or maybe it's

not a choice, or
just is for me, but none of us
are really free, some know better
than others.
Morning is so close to the night
so close to terrors.
Who are you and what
have I done to hurt you?
Where are you going?
Where is there ever to go, really?
We'll build a public
out of the nothing
they have left us, or we'll
take it from each other's
desperate hands.

Love Lorn Loon

JOHN LEHMAN
from *The Owl Who Would Not Fly*



from Tahawus

LEO CONNALLY

I. A great abscess pooled in the heart of the county. Only remains of reeds thrust through its stagnant water; it frothed and foamed at the edges. At night she could hear loons echoing from the lakes in the distance. It had been years since she'd seen any life breaching the water standing in front of her house. No loons called and swam intruders away from their nests. In fact, she couldn't ever recall wildlife wandering in the area. Even as a girl, the area surrounding Tahawus seemed barren. The Iroquois called it "Cloud Splitter" and stayed away. They had no reason to be there. The hunting was much better at the headwaters of the Hudson, just to the Northwest. It wasn't till she walked into that forest that life erupted in shocking flourishes. Ferns and moss padded the forest floor; birds swirled and chased above; millipedes crossed over deer paths leading to the river's edge. To her, that was all a bit much. What with all the movement and the noise and chaos of life unfurling. She'd take the quiet, thank you. Norbert, her tabby, provided all the life she'd ever need. Where she sat, all was still. The chalky water stretched out for acres in front of her. She did her best not to think of her father's clouded eyes those years before he passed: his pupils swirled behind the same milky white to make contact. The comparison, while apt, turned her stomach. It was best not to think of those things.

Even as the mine declined, she stayed. The manse at the edge of the water was hers and as was her duty, she stayed to maintain what her family had built. She wasn't alone. Lord no. It wasn't always quiet either. The men came and went with each workday. From her porch she saw the dust trail rising each morning in advance of their arrival. It rose from the forest and dissipated into the dawn. The men brought noise, with their trucks and tools and all the digging; they hammered and loaded and swore and smoked. The blast furnace hollered and heaved until the whistle blew. And with that the men took the noise from Tahawus every evening. The dust rose from the pines and descended down the mountain. The men brought the noise and the dust to the pubs that still supplied Canadian whiskey; when the pubs went dry, they brought it to the cabins and shacks that pocked the forest. And when they were done, they wound further down the mountain and brought it back to their hamlets and dens and families waiting for them at the door. They'd all left an hour or so ago.

The mountain, once again, was hers.

As Tahawus's last resident, with the death of her sister last year, she had a duty to remain. She was the chief benefactor to look after her family's holdings, after all. Sure, the buildings needed some work. But what with how things were going, what could one do? The Southern wall and chimney of the old furnace collapsed into the lake some years ago. From certain angles, the remnants appeared as teeth thrusting from the mouth of the water. She rocked and reminded herself that they weren't using it anyway and didn't need her attention. As a keen and wise financier, she prided herself at that kind of judgment. Why take on the extra expenditure of rebuilding when there was a perfectly suitable replacement? She smiled at the thought. Many things pleased her. She found more things each day. Her house, for example. She noticed just the other day how the paint curled back from the boards. The brown lifted and rolled to reveal the splintered grey. A fool would have a fresh coat immediately slapped on. At what cost? Did she need to impress Norbert? Certainly not! She rocked and laughed at the thought. How improbable! What a waste of capital. Better to sit on the money for more important things.

Norbert scooted out of the way of her rocking. He certainly didn't want another paw caught. He brushed up against the porch columns and lay at the base. She saw his lids grow heavy and fall with the sun. She rocked and rocked. It wasn't until she heard tires flinging gravel aside that she slowed her movements. Lights washed from side to side across the pines winding up to Tahawus. Dust plumed from the car's wake. "Someone must have forgotten a house key", she thought. "A worker left his new lunch pail and he had to come back." She knew that no one came back once the whistle blew. They all left. She sat erect, fingers splayed across the armrests of her still chair. Norbert fled under the porch as the car pulled up.

A car, blacker than the glassiest black, stopped at her door. Chrome touched off its curves in the dying light. "This is not a car filled with workers," she thought to herself. The dust kept moving after the car halted. Its lights cast out and over the lake. They seemed to rupture the surface and probe, stir the silt, churn it all up. She remained seated as the car door began to open. In the last light of the day, Alette Labauve held fast to her homestead.

II. She reached inside the door and flicked on the porch lights. Alette Labouve hadn't used them for years; they crackled and hummed with the nearly forgotten electric life. She wasn't surprised that insects weren't pulled

from the forest to the light. That was a problem she didn't have to worry about. Light poured onto the wooden porch planks, down the wide stairs, and soaked into the patch of psoriatic hardscrabble where a front lawn should have been. It stopped just short of the car that had just pulled to her door. Its high beams cast across the lake, illuminating the ruin of the old furnace, and the empty factory. She heard a few steps sliding confidently in the dust. A tall leather boot stepped into the light. A gracefully slender arm followed and unlatched the back door. The shadow stepped aside and held the cabin open. A man that Alette had never seen stepped fully into the light.

Alette hadn't had visitors in years, not socially, anyhow. Sure, the workers came by and dropped off her groceries and mumbled about their insignificant lives. "Bark eaters. Or was that what the Iroquois called the Algonquin?" After a history like her family's, Alette felt ashamed by her simple confusion. They'd come by from time to time and tip their dirty little hats and tell her how their families were doing down the mountain. She'd smile, the best she could without looking insincere, and hope they'd get back into the mine. They never made much sense to her anyway and their time was better spent digging.

Tea. She remembered that she'd offered her visitors tea. Iced. Never sweet. But it had been years since she'd had a proper visitor and she couldn't determine if her current guests warranted such a gesture.

"Evening, madam." The speaker stepped into pool of light and tipped his hat. His charcoal three-piece soaked up the light. From where she sat, she couldn't make out his eyes. "My apologies about the abruptness of our visit."

Alette straightened herself on her rocker. She wished that she'd properly dressed for the occasion; she pushed a button through an eyehole of her frock. Finding the hole too stretched to hold, she clasped the opening together with her fingers. "Good evening. Can I help you folks?"

"Ms. Labouve, you must be confused by our arrival. Name's Wallace. Wallace Baldwin." He thrust forth his right hand as he walked to the porch. Dust lifted under his leather soles.

"Pardon me if I don't get up."

He placed a foot on the bottom step. Though now coated in dust, you could still see the shine. "No, that's fine. I'll come to you."

"Better just stay where you are, Mr. Baldwin."

"All fair with me." He held his hands aloft like a preacher before erupting into tongues. "One thing I get right is respecting the rules of a house,

Ms. Labouve. And as this is your place, and has been your family's place for so long, I respect what you've set in place."

She was pleased with his courtesy. Young men these days certainly lack the proper courtesy. Especially young men from the city. And she could tell he was from the city with that damn accent. He was right though: her family had been here a long time. Alette took time on her daily walk to mark the dates in the family plot. Antoine Labouve was the first. First to arrive and first to be put to rest. 16___. Those last numbers had worn away long ago. As hard as she tried, Alette couldn't make them out. But that was no matter to her. She knew all the tales of heroic Antoine Labouve! Just the thought of his name sent the hum and crackle of life through her; she could feel long forgotten muscles tighten and expand. Like his courage ran through her. Let her pull more air into her lungs. What he went through and how he fought for this land! His land. Rightfully his. How she wished that she could have met him. Her greatest disappointment. But Alette knew that she shouldn't get taken by such flights of fancy. Antoine would have to live in the tales from her childhood. She'd remember to spend more time with Antoine on tomorrow's walk to the plot.

Wallace held his hand out once again. Warmed by his uncommon courtesy and respect for family, Alette reconsidered her previous stance. Though resolute, she could listen and be swayed; she knew that was one of her greatest leadership traits. It is one of the reasons her workers respected her as they did. She was not above a gesture of kindness, from time to time. Wallace, sensing her beginning to soften, stepped up. From that closing distance, she marked his hand before taking it. "Goodness," she thought, "with all those scars on his knuckles, he must be a factory man." It sanded her delicate palm as they shook. Her fingertips brushed across his callouses. Realizing he was simply a worker, possibly a worker that gained an inheritance from a far off family member, she felt less uncomfortable with her old house frock. He was just a man that used his hands, not a man that used his mind. That type of man, she knew, she could handle.

Their moment of warmth was interrupted by a Loon's call. It must have come from Lake Sally, just over the ridge. The call hung in the air and echoed off the broken factory wall, the furnace still cooling from the day. "A pleasure, Mr. Baldwin. Now, as it is late, how can I be of service?" She could hear Norbert scuttling under the porch. From her position, Alette noticed two boots standing on the edge of the light. She'd forgotten he didn't come alone. Alette

regretted her momentary softness to the stranger. And to think, she almost offered tea.

“But I’ve been rude. I’ve forgotten to introduce you to my friend.” He turned and called into the night. “Dot, would you be so kind?” The figure resting by the car stepped fully into the light. She moved with impossible swiftness. Everything on her was slender and yet in no way delicate. And the way she dressed! The poor thing must believe she’s an aeroplane pilot. Flight jacket and short-cropped hair. Silly thing. She looked ridiculous and no one has told her. Dot nodded and stepped back from the light to her post against the car before Alette’s greeting escaped her lips. She noted how Dot’s silhouette faded into the scenery.

“Glad that you had the chance to meet her. It takes a while for Dot to warm up.”

“Your business, Mr. Baldwin?”

“Of course. Seeing that you have such a lovely homestead, with such a past, and such an industry...”

“It is not for sale, Mr. Baldwin. It’s been in the family since Samuel de Champlain.” Alette knew that many pined for her land and her business. Once she got a whiff that someone was interested, she was quick to shut it down once and for all. It was hers now and she’d never let it go.

“I know how important it is to you. I just want to be neighbors.”

“I don’t need neighbors.” She slid forward in her rocker. “I am here for a reason.”

“You see, Ms. Labouve, you do. Neighbors that stay out of each other’s business, if I may be so bold.”

“And what business are you referring?”

“The mines. The horrible accident up here a few years back. Terrible thing, Ms. Labouve. Read about it in the papers.”

“Ha, the papers. The papers know nothing.”

“All I know is what I read in the *Times*.”

At this, Alette smiled. She had no need for the papers. She liked to make up her own mind. And what with her keen sense of judgment and reason, why did she need to waste her money on someone else’s thoughts? And if she were to read a paper, she would certainly not read the *Times*. That came from the city and nothing good came from the city. Her sister used to frequent the city. She talked and talked about it. “Oh, Alette, do join me next time. There’s a

new show opening that I’m just dying to see. Oh, you must come.” Her sister was fond of the city and even fonder of boasting about it. Well, when she died last year, in the city, where did she end up? She ended up here, buried in the old family plot. We have history here, sis. You can’t just move it all to the city. Silly, she thought. So when it came to reading the *Times*, Alette would rather not.

“It was terrible. A tragedy for us all. I rec...”

“Some Iroquois got trapped in, right?”

“Yes. The mine just folded in on itself and killed them all.”

“All trapped? All killed?”

“You heard me. ALL.”

“Well, Ms. Labouve, it’s incredible. If you dig, especially in this land, it is incredible what turns up if someone keeps on digging. I’m sure all that digging would do a number on a person’s fingertips.”

“You’re sick. Don’t think you can use our trag...”

“Someone kept digging, didn’t he? Someone made it...”

“Shut your mouth. No one invited you here. I’m asking you to leave.”

“... down the mountain and onto that club your brother-in-law runs. Now correct me if I’m wrong but it’s my understanding that the man ruined quite a few duck tartares by running those bloody nubs down the dining room window. Bad for tips that night, I’m sure. But he did do you a service by tipping off your thugs. What is it that you mine, anyway? It’s not the best stuff to breathe in. Right?”

“You’d never.”

He unbuttoned his blazer and removed a flask; he took a long pull before passing it back to his associate. Dot had moved closer. How had she not noticed?

“You don’t know what I’ll do, Ms. Labouve.”

“What do you want?”

“I’ll be back with what I want this time next week. Just wanted to introduce myself.” With that, he receded down the porch, the steps, and into the waiting car. Dot closed the door behind him and pulled out. The lights of the car washed over the stagnant lake, the furnace, the conveyers, and the empty rail cars waiting to be filled. They washed over the family plot and the plugged mouth of the mine. Alette watched from her porch to make sure the dust followed them down the mountain.

Properties of Water

HENRY CHUANG

the island halves a pair of docks
i try explaining this
on every continent
to different pianos that i find

the ballad between my hands
&
a valley between my fingers

take rain for music
whenever it plays it plays
incessantly
tapping old folktales through
rhythms on the window

but Blue
you speak in a sun-shower
so in response i make a hands dance
to soft frictions in your
's' consonants

the corazón is not to hold
and less to keep; our conversation
reminds me of the wind how it travels
across the pacific and arrives
with as little forethought

with you as hello

time

is wet
folds, collects
stops & stoops—
like water in a stilling-pool

Parakeet

KATHERINE CROWLEY

We gave Junior a parakeet for his birthday. I hated the squawking from the start, and I've been afraid of birds since I saw the Alfred Hitchcock movie in college, but everybody on the Internet was recommending it. Patrick and I had checked all of the best websites—kidshealth.com, parenting.org, parentingmagazing.net—and they all seemed to agree: to give a child the chance to see their pet die before they see their grandparent die is helpful. It makes the grieving familiar.

I went to PetSmart the day before Junior turned eleven. I browsed the aisles, trying to decide which would make me less physically repulsed, a rodent or a bird. The rodents were small enough that I could imagine them slipping through the cracks in the cage and biting my toes at night. The little hamsters literally looked like a tuft of disembodied hair that I could pull from my hairbrush. And the birds were chirpy enough that I thought I might never sleep again.

I walked down the aisles, looking into all the little animals' beady black eyes, repeating to myself It's for Junior. It's for Dad. It's for Junior. It's for me. And then I finally decided on the birds—a single, standard parakeet was reasonable at 35 dollars. I tried to find the oldest, grayest looking parakeet in the store and then asked the teenaged PetSmart employee for all of the necessary parakeet accouterment.

"Would you like a UV lamp to maximize the parakeet's quality of life?"

"No. Thanks."

"We recommend the parakeets have at least three different toys to prevent boredom. They often enjoy a swing to perch on."

"I'll just take the one perch. Thanks."

"And you'll probably need three sturdy dishes—one for pellet, one for fresh food, and one for water. Two at least, for food and water."

"Two's just fine."

He asked if I wanted to hold the bird, to tote it from the store's cage to the cage I was about to buy, but I refused, so he grabbed the little thing from its perch, and clutched it in one hand like a tennis racquet. The way he was holding made me wonder what would happen if he squeezed.

When the cart was filled—a giant cage, a bag of seed, and a gallon of pellets amounting to \$126.45—I swiped my card and left through the automatic doors.

On the walk through the parking lot, I had a nauseous feeling that kept surging up into my throat. It's for Junior. It's for Dad. It's for Junior. It's for me. I put the parakeet and its pellets in the trunk, as far away from the driver's seat as possible.

Dad called me on the drive home, and as the phone's ring played in surround sound on Bluetooth, I contemplated whether or not I wanted to pick up. Siri's voice elicited a panicked series of squawks from the trunk, so I tried to truncate the headache symphony by picking up.

"Hello?"

My father screamed back into the telephone, mistaking the echo from the Bluetooth as a sign that I was very far away. "Hello! Lisa! Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad. I hear you."

"Lisa? Yes, you can hear me? Good. I have some bad news, Lisa. Some bad news. I can't live in this place any more. Not one more day." He stomped through the last words with a decisiveness and clarity that did not befit his situation.

I paused, trying to decide whether he needed sympathy or sternness. He had just moved into the Memory Ward of the Assisted Living because his paranoid behavior had made the main floor impossible. He had called the police twelve times in the past four months. He had called when he discovered a couple of "lost cans of green beans" from his pantry. He had called when he saw a flame in the personal toaster oven. He had even called when he found a stray winter hat on his loveseat. It had been his hat. He had taken it off after a walk around town.

"Lisa? Are you there?"

"Yes, yes. What's wrong with the new room? Isn't it all the same nurses?"

"Yes, a lot of nurses here. They're all here. But this room is always moving, and the conductor is driving me crazy. Keeping me up all hours—day and night. I just can't take it any more, Lisa. I can't live in motion."

Motion? He was never in motion. What conductor was he possibly imagining? I caught myself before almost soaring through a red light. The abrupt stop brought about a tantrum from the trunk: the parakeet was up in arms.

“Lisa? What is that terrible ruckus? Are you okay, Lisa?”
 “It’s coming from out the window. I’m driving, Dad. Can I call you when I get home?”

“Sure, yes. Call me when you get home. Be careful, Lisa. Take care.”

I tried to understand the meaning of my father’s imaginary train for the rest of the ride home, but the sound of the squawking interrupted any cogent thought processes.

When I arrived, Patrick was waiting for me on the porch. I got out of the car, leaving the shopping bag, cage, and parakeet in the trunk. I asked Patrick to bring it all in and to wrap the cage in paper for tomorrow. I hurried into our bedroom, in spite of his protestations. “But what’d you get? Who’s the newest member of the family? Tell me everything!”

I couldn’t get to my computer quick enough. I opened the laptop, and got up a browser window. Google: “What does it mean when an old person thinks they’re on a train?”

My stomach churned at the collection of possible websites. The first answer came from MentalHealthcare.org. I clicked before I could think. I couldn’t stand to read the first heading on the site, but couldn’t stand to not, either. “Psychosis.” “The word psychosis describes a set of symptoms that include delusions (believing something that is unlikely to be true—that members of a secret society are conspiring to hurt you, for example), hallucinations (hearing voices, for example) and confused and disturbed thinking.”

I slammed my computer shut, and, too frustrated to face Patrick or my phone, I laid down. I fell asleep to muted chirps from beyond the door to our room.

In my dream, I was face to face with the bird, but my father’s thick, hairy arms replaced the wings, and my father’s baby blue irises and thick tortoise shell glasses replaced the bird’s beady black eyes. First the bird was the conductor of the train, and we were moving fast through time and space. But then I heard the call of a station stop, and suddenly the bird was outside, flying through a countryside of color, squawking and squawking a painful and ugly valediction.

Tongue’s Diction

LINDA FLYNN

When I was twelve, I kissed the back of my hand in the shower,
 imagined kissing a boy like that, knew I wanted to,
 but not quite yet—
 the water allowed the kiss
 to wash off as quickly as I had thought it up,
 and cold streams of water
 purged me of these—
 not fantasies,
 something more removed.

There was nothing cleaner
 than curling into my white sheets
 with cold, wet hair
 and a library book, pushing my feet
 against the tension of the covers tucked
 into the end of the bed,
 warming the space with scissor kicks.

Then, I wouldn’t have been able to imagine
 the confusing words a tongue
 would or wouldn’t say
 to avoid saying what the body wanted,
 capricious tongues seeking
 momentary, muscular exactions.

As Long As You Follow

RACHEL COFFIN

They sat above the celebrating crowd in the old treehouse of Camilla's backyard. Not one of the three had been up the runged ladder since childhood, but when Harriet cast aside the bridal bouquet she had caught moments before and called for Liz and Laura to follow as she hiked up her bridesmaid's dress and began to climb, they shadowed her as quickly as they had when they first met as sixth graders at Girl Scout Camp; there was a part of them still hungry for Harriet's breed of bossiness. Having reached the treehouse lookout, the girls watched each grouping of the bride and groom's social circle press against the other until the party raged as a mass of acquaintances on the patioed landscape.

Harriet opened the bottle of bourbon. She had brought the liquor for them to drink with Millie in her old bedroom, the way they had before the Aerosmith concert they tried to sneak into when they were fifteen. But there had not been time; Harriet herself was unapologetically late, and as soon as she arrived she was swept into Millie's childhood bedroom alongside Liz and Laura to be dressed and made-up.

The wedding guests were drunk. Most had begun vacillating between bursts of recklessness and bouts of exhaustion, husbands and wives confronted with halcyon reminders of what they had once hoped to be. Their rasping voices—lifted in merriment or argument or mourning—carried above the wistful notes of the music of Millie's teenage years: the Bruce Springsteen and James Taylor songs all four of the girls had played on long afternoons while they waited to be summoned to one cluttered dinner table or another. Candle-lit lanterns were strung on twine from the treehouse rooftop to the lowest branches of the old maple trees, and around those same branches a vast array of twinkling string lights twisted before looping over the heads of the guests and weaving through the latticework of the pergola.

Harriet had not seen the treehouse since the girls' last summer sleepover eight years ago. Laura had been scheduled to leave for Dartmouth the next morning; their anticipation made the night dense and fleeting. Millie insisted they stay up to write messages in each other's yearbooks. They had each saved a page exclusively for this purpose, had been crafting lines filled with the type of sweeping expressions they would later come to realize were only indicative of teenage friendship. They were drunk and tired, but Harriet told jokes to

keep them awake, and they spent hours laughing over the lives they envisioned for each other, lives filled with rockstar husbands and international travel.

The string lights cast a fuzzy haze as the night settled and the dancing distant cousins flailed their limbs. It was the candied image of a wedding in its final, euphoric moments. As below them the discarded remnants of dinner began to congeal and the toasts full of overwrought well-wishes began to fade into yawns, the three girls sat in a row on the porch of the treehouse, their legs dangling through the pickets. They wore identical dresses in the same lilac taffeta, sleeves bulky with ruched fabric.

Harriet drank as the flower girl from the ceremony screamed in laughter and began weaving around the tables. She was being chased by a good-humored Aunt wielding a fork. Behind Harriet lay scattered on the floorboards waterlogged textbooks and the final fragments of a Fleetwood Mac album cover Millie had tacked onto the wall the summer Liz's parents divorced. The treehouse's contents and even the cheap brand of bourbon seemed a relic from a distant past to which Millie, ribbons braided into her curly hair and veil bobby-pinned into place as she adjusted her wedding ring at the request of some overbearing distant relative, no longer belonged.

The rain began just after the cake had been eaten, and the guests scrambled to cover their heads and save their satin shoes, pressing against each other as they fought to pile into the kitchen of Millie's parent's house. Harriet scrambled under cover of the treehouse roof. Liz and Laura followed, moving from their place on the porch to resume the positions they had vacated years ago. They sat in silence. From the place they scrawled bawdy postcards to make Laura's brother laugh over in Vietnam and the place Liz let them copy her Calculus homework and the place where Harriet first kissed Millie and the place Millie was waiting when the three of them showed up to drive her to the senior prom, Guns and Roses blazing on the tape deck, they watched the rain fall.

Harriet watched Millie pause at the back door. In a year, two more of the girls would be engaged or married; Millie would be pregnant. Harriet remained in awe of the domesticity unraveling before them.

The sudden silence of the night was jarring. Millie, hair loose around her thin shoulders, stood in the rain and breathed in the final moment of her wedding day. Harriet tried to believe that in the hazy glow of the dwindling lights, in the backyard of tire swings and summer cookouts, they were finding the same fleeting moment of remembered peace.

It Depends What You Mean By Know

BECKY FINDLAY

Do you know French? Or Italian?
 I wonder if we'll understand each other
 better if we speak in tongues, each of us
 in words the other doesn't know.
 We won't be scared anymore, knowing the other
 isn't fluent, or proficient, at whatever this is—
 Name it, then, and wonder how close
 sounds are to the meaning. Meaning—
 I don't know what you see in me.
 All romance languages have one word in common:
 No (at least in sound).
 But there are so many ways to agree—
 Si, oui, sic, ita, a nod, yes, so
 We can only find more ways to get by.
 Sometimes I like what you say
 More than I like you.

Tovah

SAMANTHA ALVIANI

Her body moved with the burdens of a blooming age. She was a lanky, skinny thing, unaware of her gait as she wandered noiselessly through the familiar filtered light of the woods.

It took the death of her mother and the second marriage of her father to claim the woods. From her earliest years of life, she kept these memories: the sensation of being held close, a basket of books spilled across the warm sheets of her mother's sick bed. A day at the beach, fistfuls of damp sand, looking up into the sun-soaked sky to see her father approaching, shoulders low in defeat. She remembered waking up during a thunderstorm. Angry streaks of light painting the walls of the dark house, her dad padding into the bedroom in an undershirt, hoisting her up on one hip before heading into Ben's room. When mom died, dad curled into himself like a small animal burrowing into dark ground. She remembered the sense of him there, the steady tenderness, but eyes that were hollow sadness. She remembered the weight of his guilt, the way it overwhelmed the springs of the bed when he sat, stroking her hair.

Dad met Esme, Esme became another mom—and along with Esme came the sweep of land, and this thick crease of woods that she made her own. The aged, sun-washed farmhouse grew out of the rolling middle of a soft, green expanse of hills, corn crops, and placid-eyed cows. The woods gently skirted the house, stretching far. In here, solitude could be held close, like smooth stones collected in a pocket. Most days, she ambled towards the perimeter of the trees with a book in hand and a sandwich tucked in the band of her shorts. She'd settle on the leafy ground dappled by sun, sitting with her back to the spiny skin of a tree, reading a volume of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Tovah lived inside books, and she collected the words inside them. So far this summer, she had blazed through *Little Women* for the third time, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *True Grit*. When she emerged, sticky and drowsy from the heat, she'd often find her brother standing knee-deep in the silky murk of the pond, contemplating the future of a stripped skiff left behind by the previous landowner. Sometimes they'd listen for frogs, belly down in the cattail groves, taking them captive in jam jars stolen from the kitchen.

Vermont summers were languid and dense with humidity that left skin damp to the touch, the air a perpetual thickness of warm chlorophyll and the

coupling of insects, animals, an endless birth of flora and fauna that crowded and carpeted the floor of the hemlock and sugar maple grove. Ambling under the crowd of trees, she bent down to inspect the migration of a woolen caterpillar, then a cluster of late-blooming nightcaps. Even in the dimming woods the heat was thick, her braid an uncomfortable weight on her back, the escaped tendrils sticking to her skin. She squatted close to the ground. An object, rusted and crumbling, pushed out from the dark humus of the soil—a small, palm-sized sculpture of two entangled figures. She examined it. She had found others like it, once when she was making seed holes in the garden with Esme, another when she tested the structure of an ancient tree house, nestled in a sagging corner. Her family collected them without ceremony, using them as doorstops and tucking them into the network of shelves that the house boasted—between rows of spices in the cupboard and on bathroom ledges crowded with toothpaste and bars of soap.

She brushed off the dirt and the red rust stained her hands. These fused figures fed a curiosity in her, a spreading heat that was embarrassing, confusing, and altogether beyond her capacity of exploration. Back home in Boston, she had unearthed a box of videos in her friend Katie's attic. So this is it, she had thought as they sat upright and rigid, wordless and wide-eyed, both tuned to a sign of creak in the stairs. What they were doing, what they were seeing, felt all kinds of wrong. By the time they had made it through half of the contents of the box, they had rolled quilts across the attic floor so they could lay side by side, shoulders touching, enraptured by the discovery, by the growing warmth that neither had felt before, that neither could admit to the other. "What do you think it feels like?" Katie had asked. Tovah wanted to understand it, but she was caught—somewhere between the child she still felt like, and the burgeoning girlhood that was urging her body to shed its skin and evolve into something else entirely.

She heard a rustle of leaves and the crack of young saplings from her left, and she started. Her stomach sank. She turned to see a boy, a few years older, tanned, dusty, with a sheen of sweat above his lower lip. She squinted through dark lashes.

"That's my dad's, you know," he said evenly, with an ease of property. She was silent, ignorant to her tight, clammy clutch of the treasure in her hand. "When he didn't like one, he'd throw it as far as it would go back here." Tovah stood, still appraising him. The surprise of him left her without words. "I was

born here," he offered, filling the silence in the air between them—"I'm Eli," he said, adjusting the weight of a dark green backpack.

She hadn't met anyone near her age since they'd been coming here, and a kind of wonder budded as she imagined other people living in their house, other people—other boys—knowing the woods like she did. Other boys that were born here. "I'm Tovah," she managed, cautiously. He nodded with a curious start of a smile on his lips.

He looked down, kicking at the leaves absentmindedly, antsy. "Well I'm off to the river—I'll see you around." He was already starting with an easy stride away from her, on his way down the side of the valley.

That night she lay in bed in her lightest nightgown, restless with the knowledge of this new thing that was alive and glowing in the pit of her stomach. Not a crush like some she'd known of in school. For some of her friends, it was a longing to be a part of things—to enter some sacred new frontier of wanting, and being wanted in return. This was new, and deeply felt—meeting the boy in the woods had invited a strange curiosity that had gripped her all day. She still bristled at the thought of him invading a place that she felt protective of. Tomorrow, when she sat down with Esme to shuck ears of corn and snap bright pods of green peas, she would ask her about Eli—about the family that lived here before them, and the man that spent his days shaping metals and throwing them into the trees.

She got up to open the window, and moonlight spilled across the tread-worn floor. Back in bed, she settled, eyes resting on the dusty ceiling beams. She loved the cool of the night air and the way the valley seemed to cup her in its hands. Ben snored evenly in the room next door. She could hear dad and Esme blowing out the citronella candles that kept the mosquitos away on the porch below. A band of coyotes yipped and howled their freedom, piercing the clear night.

Of Stars and Sand

SUNGBAE PARK

It's hard to remember, to be honest, but we were happy once. Memory stretches like the desert horizon...you can see it all the way from the here and now, but you have to squint your eyes real hard, and even then it's hard to make out the shapes in the murky distance. And experience blurs our vision even so; heat waves undulating in the air above the sand play tricks on our minds. So. We were happy once.

The years have stacked on, built on brick-like days filled with suits, briefcases, clocking in before sunrise, out after sundown. We take over-stuffed subway cars to under-staffed offices. We yearn for the past, a distant, vaporized past that is so far removed that it may as well have been merely a mirage. But the memory of it, it tugs at us, both backwards and forwards, at once drawing us back into the well of nostalgia—we clink glasses to it—but also pushing us forward, for what else do we have to keep us going? We try to pinpoint the moment during our reunions and nights out. It must've been in college, late nights, freedom at last, no more drills and the hazing and the digging, the endless digging and the filling of dirt. We were free then. Weren't we? Or were we just free to roam another cage that we were too blind and self-absorbed to even notice? We order more soju. Someone's dropped another glass, someone's vomiting in the bathroom. It is night. It is morning. It is night again...

Sometimes we wake up in the middle of the night and take a walk. We like to go to the playground under the moonlight and bask in its cold heat. Our destination is always the same: the swing set. We kick our shoes off and wiggle our toes into the well-worn patch of sand below. We grip the sand with our toes, grabbing as much as we can between them, hold them up as high as we can and then let go. Most of the sand falls off, but some always remains and we like that feeling of permanence even as we know it's temporary.

We were happy in a simpler time. Or had we already succumbed to the hypnotic grind? Perhaps it started with Byung Joo. When we first heard about it, we were ready to go on a retreat into the Jiri mountains. We had bought plenty of ramen and pork belly and Cass to wash it all down. We had not seen it coming; we didn't even know he was on depression meds. Why would they have prescribed him so much, we wondered. Our days were filled with anger

more than sadness. We organized protests—against what we don't remember now and didn't care then—and went on a hunger strike that lasted almost the whole day. It's hard to fight against something we can't see.

We drink to exhaustion, work to oblivion. We eat the food that our wives make, peek our head in the nursery, go pick up jars of kimchi from our in-laws, drop the baby off with our mothers, go to a wedding, a birthday, a promotion. We wake up one day, stare at the ceiling for a while, take the 51 to the 63, take the elevator to the top and throw ourselves off the roof.

We are seventeen years old. We sit in a dingy, smoke-filled room, sucking on our cigarettes and slurping on cup ramen. The hum of the PCs fills the room, punctuated with the click-click, click-click-click of our mice. We are like the mice, pushed this way and that at various speeds and patterns, but never leaving the pad. We are always moving, yet going nowhere. But we're too exhausted to give a damn. So we click on, falling headfirst into the computer screen, finding solace in the flashing movement of pixels, drawn like moths to a flame except we know it will burn us to ashes. Time passes us by unnoticed like a seasoned pickpocket. Some of us never make it out of there.

We are nine years old. We've snuck into a warehouse with doors loosely chained. It is full of toys, a magical sight. We've never seen so many toys before: boxes and piles of Gundams and crossbows and miniature hoops. But that's not why we're there, and we piss on the unopened box of Mazinger Z and its offensively high price tag. We sit in a circle around a makeshift fire, official-like, our bikes scattered around the dimly lit warehouse. We pass around the glue, sniffing it. We giggle, and punch each other. It is how it's done. We feel light-headed, then nauseous and puke in the corner. Silence our companions, we take our bikes home, leaving the fire to consume the rest of the glue, along with the warehouse and the dreams of someone we don't even know to bother to pretend to exist.

We are five years old. We wake up in the middle of the night, our feet still dragging in the powdery sands of our dreamscape, breeze whirling around us like a guide beckoning us. Nobody is home. Our parents have gone to wherever adults go, and we sit there, our heads gently swirling back into shape. We go peek our heads into every room, half by habit, half by necessity, and find nothing. So, we walk outside into the cold, dark night air, and look up. Stars stare back in stern silence. We see little stars, big stars, families of stars, armies of stars. It's a society of stars that look down on us. They are many, but from

what we can see, we outnumber them. We don't know that what we see is a reflection of ourselves.

We are two years old. We are being pushed on the swing and at first we are nervous. We have a good grip on the chains (or so we think) and the wind does feel good in our hair. Gently, we swing back and forth like a pendulum, testing both the force of gravity and of time. Our confidence grows with the incremental increase of height and speed. "Harder," we say, and with each push we fall into a hypnotic rhythm of rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall. "Harder!" we yell, growing bold. The wind starts to sing and the world buzzes by and we lose ourselves in the moment. It's exciting, truly, to reach for the skies; just a little harder, just a little more and we can touch the sky with our feet. So, we reach, toes pointed star-ward, and stretch ourselves until our heart races and our bones ache. Then there comes the moment when we grow light-headed from it all, not knowing where we are going or where we are coming from, and most of all, not knowing how to stop. We need to get off this thing, we are going to puke, and nobody can help. All we know is that we must do something. So, we take a deep breath, let go of the chains, and launch ourselves forward. Whether we will reach the stars or hit the ground, we don't yet know.

Insomnia

SAMUEL HUGHES

In *100 Years of Solitude*, Marquez tells us that when the insomnia plague was ravaging the village of Macondo, the villagers started forgetting everything,

where they came from, the names of their parents, what to call the objects and animals in the house, what they had just been doing, their own names.

His error is leaving out what they remembered, the way they repeated to themselves over and over the words their wife screamed at them the night she left,

the argument over politics they had once in a bar, the one they would have won, if only the other man could have seen reason, the way their parents used to speak to them when they behaved badly.

These are the things we forget when we sleep, the things that could have been different, but weren't, the kind of things that Dante put people in Hell for.

I miss a night of sleep, then two, then start wondering how many it would take me to forget how to do it. What is the difference between never waking up, and dying?

Ask Me Tomorrow, Not Today

DEREK BURTCH

On March 31, 2051, the world agreed on something. Well, most of the world agreed. There really is no ultimate consensus with 12 billion people. This was the closest the human race would get to total acquiescence.

On this special Friday preceding the customary day of tricks and hoodwinking, everyone in the world decided to stop writing for two weeks. Given humanity's long history of conflict, guile, and selfishness, I am sure you have a tough time believing that this happened. As the narrator, I can tell you that it was hard for me to believe until I bore witness to the events of April 17, 2051. Believe me, it happened.

The world stopped writing for Francisco Rasher. They did this for him because he was extremely close to having read everything in existence. He was scheduled to be the first person to do this since Immanuel Kant. The world hadn't seen a spectacle like this in a very long time and they were curious to see if it could be done.

You may still have a tough time believing that this happened (or is going to happen, as may be the case for some of you). Let me make it easier for you to believe with a frame story.

In 2026, Sony started distributing the most influential piece of technology since the iPhone. They marketed the Hippocampal Brain Implant (HBI). This device allowed human beings to download information to their brains using an artificial neuron transmitter. This device, once surgically implanted into the subject's hippocampus, could receive any data via wireless transmission and would recode it to send the proper neuron patterns out into the "Cerebrasphere" (Sony trademarked this word). Once the neurons were released, the brain locked those memories in as if they had come from stimuli in the natural world. This left the remaining "print-only" media as the sole pieces that had to be "read" in the old, natural sense. The only reason I'm telling you this is for narrative feasibility.

Some authors or estate managers would not allow their pieces to be available for BU (Brain Upload, not Boston University. Most authors or estate managers were okay with the library at Boston University). This still left a sizeable body of works in "print only".

Holdouts aside, what Sony's new little darling of technology did was

leave the most accessible road to Kant's feat since he reputedly got everything in print under his belt in the 18th century. Francisco Rasher realized this and began his quest for absolute knowledge.

This story is not about how Francisco accomplished the task. I can tell you in two sentences how he accomplished it. He downloaded all available information (yes, he had to pay for more data to fit everything in his brain). He read everything in print. It took him 25 years.

This story is about the day Francisco imparted what he learned through his Herculean task. More specifically, this story is about the two minutes that Francisco spent on stage informing the human race about what he learned now that he knew everything, or at least was aware of everything.

Two weeks after the world stopped writing, Francisco finished. The last book he read was *Hop on Pop*. He decided to leave any children's literature for his last print reading. He wanted a cool down after a marathon.

On April 17, 2051, the citizens of Westville lined the sidewalks and curbsides of State Street. The parade wormed its way toward the center of town, and the citizens followed behind the caboose of the parade. By noon, the entire town stood in the lawn outside the town hall waiting for Francisco to address them. Behind them, news crews waited for him to address the world. On the side of the stage, Sony executives waited for the event to be over. Francisco had agreed to sell them his brain (transferred to a flash drive [with the print-only books encrypted]) once his quest was finished.

The clear skied, fresh aired, flawless spring morning was interrupted by Francisco walking up the stairs of the stage to the podium. His gait was slow and decisive. He scanned the audience, took in a deep breath of Persephonous air, and remained silent. He was taking in the spectacle of it all. The t-shirt vendors selling his likeness. The food trucks with Francisco Rasher themed beef brisket or gourmet frankfurters. The religious crazies who were either hailing him as the messiah or denouncing him to be in defiance of God's will, an abomination. He stared blankly at it all, feeling nothing but the throbbing wound on the back of his head. A smile formed on his face, but he did not put it there.

An impatient shout came from the crowd of wolves, "What's got you so happy? Say something!"

“Ask me tomorrow,” replied a calm Francisco, “but not today.” The crowd took this in as some brilliant Confucian quip. Satisfied with the silence, Francisco started the end. “I have reached the end of my journey,” he paused with a grimace, “and I still can’t figure it out.”

Rasher dug into his pocket and pulled out a foldable pocketknife. Roger Kingsly, one of the Sony executives slowly leaned forward in fear of Rasher’s next move.

“Shit, look at the back of his head. He’s been trying to dig it out. Grab him before he ruins our data,” Kingsly sent security to the stage.

Rasher put his hand up to assuage any fears of what his intentions might be and the security thug hesitated. “Don’t worry fellas, I just need this to open this little ditty.” That same faux-smile disarmed the security guards, but Kingsly still held his body forward with unease.

He reached under the podium, and pulled out a manila envelope, which was assumed to hold his manifesto, his epiphany from the 25-year information journey. The envelope actually contained an Ortiges 7.65 semi-automatic pistol. Francisco, to the dismay of everyone there, placed the muzzle of the pistol to his HBI, and pulled the trigger.

The Sony executives clambered to salvage their purchase, and a panic went up amongst the citizens. The entire world just witnessed the “smartest” man alive blow his information all across the Westville Town Hall. Morrison and Munro matted to the risers. Stein and Spinoza splattered into the crowd. Plath and Poe projected onto the podium.

Mayor Bell ran to the microphone and attempted to quell the hysteria.

“Please, please, remain calm! Everyone remain, calm!” He screamed. “We may be able to fix this!” With this he had their attention. After a deep breath, he asked, “Does anyone know if he created a backup?”

Dead Letter

JESSICA FILION

July Bronx. Fourth floor walk-up. Windows open. A formerly red, grey fire hydrant spills water onto the street. We’re lying on my itchy cerulean Ikea carpet. With you this is the beach, not Orchard, Jones, or even Brighton. This is *Boca Chica*: sipping water out of coconuts, eating fresh fish, drinking Brugal. I’ll remember us like this: your head in my lap, Cisneros in my hands and on my lips, the ceiling fan a soft blur.

Do you remember the time I drove us home drunk? Well, there were lots of times. This time I ran around in the rain outside the bar and then decided it was too cold to drive in my wet clothes. Off came my shirt and skirt or... maybe it was pants. I drove from one side of the Bronx to another in pink lace underthings. I wanted fries right then (no burger, I was still pescatarian), we went through the drive through at McDonald’s. I thought no one could see how naked I was because of the car. But of course they could see. Of course.

Do you remember how I offered fries to the cops who pulled up next to us on Fordham? They had been waving and gesturing in our direction. They waved away my offer smiling. I thought I was being friendly. I thought they were being friendly. Everybody’s my friend, when I’m drinking. Can you imagine what would’ve happened if we’d been pulled over? That would’ve been a fun explanation. “Well you see ossifer... I was playing in the rain... Yeah we were at a bar but you’re not listening to the story...It’s super funny.”

You only rode home with me for my safety. Or so you said. You didn’t live near me. Didn’t have a license to drive my car yourself. Refused my invitations to stay over. You took a cab home. You did that often, endanger yourself for me.

Do you remember our trip to DC? We stayed at my cousin’s house in the same bed. You made fun of my mixes: strictly boleros and neo-soul. Wondered why I didn’t have any fast music to help us stay awake during the late night driving. We had some amazing crab cakes on U Street. Walked around the park with the prettily tiled fountain. Talked about moving there. Dreamt in possibility.

I left you with a friend of yours so I could visit my ex-boyfriend in Baltimore. How did I not see how fucked up that was?

You know my cousin asked if there was something she should know

about us? I, perpetually in denial, confirmed the yeah, of course, we're just friends. We were never just friends.

There was that other time I passed out on the bar, after confessing my love for you, after verbalizing a fantasy of you and me in the bathroom. I threw up, sobered some, drove you home, drove myself home. Then I showered and had the guy we met at the bar come pick me up. We had sex. After I told you "I love you but..."

Maybe it would've been better if we'd actually had sex. Maybe I would have been terrible at girl-girl sex and then your heart could've broken less. Maybe you would have been the asshole instead of me. Maybe we needed the fantasy to have burst sooner. Maybe your absence wouldn't be a phantom limb.

I will forget the different person you came back from DR to: the avoidance, the cold distance, the silences. I will forget how you dreamed of me with my mouth taped shut. I will forget how you thought yourself so stupid for loving me.

I don't remember when you became a part of me.

I will remember who I forgot to be.

I will remember the us of July Bronx, of Shakespeare in the park, of Indian on the west side, of DC.

I still do fucked up shit to myself through other people.

Lament

MERIDITH JAMES CARROLL

I am drunk on prosecco and strobe lights when I twist out from under myself and fall to the floor. You slip me into your bed, tuck me in like a sister, pull the fat wool blanket around the glints of my bare shoulders. When morning seeps in, the soggy breath on your cheek, you lift my throbbing body out the door into rainfall, the grey sky shedding its old dank skin. Nipple peeking out of your white lace slip, you slide me into the backseat, a miracle to get no notice from the driver's attending eyes. We are both barefoot but only your feet get wet. As taxi speeds me down rain slicked roads, you crawl back up the stairs. Shut the bedroom door with no lock, pull off your spiderweb's dress, pour into bed. The creaking floor. Woodgrain worn sallow from years of oily feet, shifts, signals: he's arrived. The roommate with tearstained breath, with thorns in his side. In a house of crumbling ivory brick he plants strong against the mattress, snarls If you don't love me, I'll die dire enough to act on it. But there he is, living, so there you are, a ghost digging fingernails into the bedsheet as his sweat fogs the room. He rises over your body, I sink into bed.

I remember when you wouldn't call it rape and I tried to and I remember when you called it rape and I didn't want to. I remember when he asked us to kill him because he couldn't do it himself and I remember when we said no so he slapped his own face until the skin was red raw. I remember when he asked Do you think I'm a bad person and I remember staying in the room long enough for him to ask the question. I remember when I left the room.

I was supposed to be the one to sleep in your bed to feel your breath on my neck in my sleep to twist your hair into a crown of braids when you needed armor to bombard the crackling floor and fall next to your laughing body snuggled in the blanket to stop him after he kissed you the first time. To be the one to say no when you couldn't.

It is you who needs to be carried out into the rain. It is your getaway car in the driveway. You are the one with dry feet and it is your new bed waiting at the end of the slick black road.

Stillbirth

HANNAH PULIT

My daughter is dead but my wife still has to deliver her. Frances is keening, her moans feral and sharp, like the orca cries from the documentary we watched months ago, when marine park employees captured wild whales to kidnap calves away from mothers, to bring them back to lives in concrete tanks and to teach them to backflip and wave their fins and slap their tails, creating a tidal wave that crests over children licking whale-shaped chocolate ice cream bars. On the television screen, the ocean churned into a froth of black, white, and blue, an aquatic bruise.

Frances tugs violently at the neck of her hospital gown, running her fingers back and forth along the inner collar as she pulls at the fabric, and a nurse reaches to gently pull the hand away, checking the IV in the dorsum of Frances's hand.

"We'll be starting soon," she tells both of us, as though Frances and I are one entity, and I, too, will soon be injected with hormones to make my uterus contract, will soon be screaming with effort, laboring for a lost cause.

I hold Frances's other hand, the one not stabbed with a needle, the one that's encircled by the flimsy plastic of her identification bracelet—lime green, as though we're at Coachella, not an obstetrics ward. Her grip on my fingers fluctuates: at some moments my knuckles crack under the pressure, and at other moments her hand goes entirely limp. "You can do this, Frannie," I murmur to her. She rocks her head back and forth on the flimsy hospital pillow, her eyes closed, as though she can't bear to look at the swell of her own stomach.

When it's over, the doctor will ask us if we'd like to hold our daughter. She will be swaddled in the standard-issue newborn blanket, white with blue and pink stripes, like a snow cone. She will be smaller than the doll we practiced putting diapers on, but her head heavier, and we will look down on her and wait for her to stop playing this joke, to open her eyes, to draw breath on a life that will never be.

Frances's hand contracts around mine as the oxytocin begins its steady drip into her veins. The doctor is gowned and masked, the nurses at the ready. I feel as if I'm the hunter dropping the net into the whale pod. I can see the white patches around the mothers' panicked eyes, the zipper of orca teeth as their mouths cry in protest. I rest my forehead against Frances's hair. "Push," I tell her.

Grief Grows Up

CAITLIN HAMRIN

The birth was exhausting but quick. Instantaneously what was not now there amid the milky tears.

At three, my body had yet to come back. The tantrums had taken priority. I couldn't apologize in the grocery store anymore. Doctors told me this was appropriate developmentally.

At seven it began, telling me "no" and "stop" but also why. It grew fat, sullen with its braced limbs flailing and scooping up the cat.

The Man in the Black Hat

CHRISTOPHER MCCURRY

Three days ago she comes up to us and tells us she's a big girl and she's ready to go to the bathroom, get a drink of water, and go to sleep all by herself in her own bed.

We look at each other and nod our heads.

After she falls asleep without a single tear we go immediately to our room and take off our clothes.

We lie naked and touch each other without blankets.

Hello, I say.

Do I know you? I must, but funny thing I can't recall your name.

Let me see if I can help you remember.

I'm awfully forgetful.

It's the weekend so we sleep in late. She sleeps until breakfast. We have to go in and wake her up. She's kicked the princess covers off, but her hair is still matted with sweat and her face is splotchy red. When we shake her, she doesn't want to wake up.

*

The man in the black hat appears that week. She tells us he stood in her doorway and asked to come. We ask her if he was scary, and she says he was not. We tell her it's nothing, a shadow, the absence of light. She says no it is real life. Okay, we say. We eat our breakfast, scrambled eggs.

She says he climbed into bed with her. He was so tall his feet hung over the edge. It was so silly, she tells us. She slams her empty milk cup on the table and we jump and she laughs.

*

She wants us to leave a pair of shoes in the closet for the man in the black hat.

We argue about it.

I'm all for imaginary friends, I say.

It's weird though, that he only comes at night. And that he gets in bed with her. It's all weird.

Don't over think it. It's good that it's different. Different is good.

We leave a pair of green Crocs I got as a Christmas gift from the in-laws in her closet with the door open. She looks at them for a moment before saying he will like them.

In the morning they are gone. We decide that this behavior is attention seeking and choose to ignore it. She doesn't bring it up herself. She plays in her dollhouse. A game with royalty. All the princesses are sleepy and must take naps, but can't fall asleep. They are too excited. From what? They can never say. Eventually one of them will get hurt. The one with the missing leg or the one whose hair she cut down to the roots so the holes where the hair sprouts from the plastic can be seen. She'll need to go to the hospital. She'll eventually die, and there will be a parade of all her friends passing by her body laid to rest on the dollhouse bed.

*

A pair of my sweatpants is missing, an old pair with the elastic all stretched out from the extra weight I've put on.

The man in the black hat is wearing them in the drawings she brings home from school on construction paper. He looks like a circus performer without a face. She has done a good job drawing the Crocs but still they look like a dinosaur's feet. We laugh at how silly he is, and she scolds us.

He doesn't like to be laughed at, she says.

We tell her this is no longer a game we like to play and throw the drawings away.

She tries to force my hand from the trashcan lid and tears the corner of one of her drawings, the one with the man in the black hat outside the house holding hands with her. On the other side we stand with frowns on our face. She collapses on the floor crying. She stays there until dinner and won't eat.

*

You cry in bed as we discuss what to do. It's just been a bad day. I rub your neck for you and the flat oily space between your breasts because it calms you.

You say I think we should move her back into our room for a little while. Let her sleep with us again. I think it's the stress. She's acting out and can't explain it, so she made this up to cope.

No she's fine, I say. Listen, it's just a phase she's going through, like when she couldn't stop saying shitass. Or when she liked to wear sandals on her hands.

Why can't it be normal?

Who wants to be normal?

Me. I do. I want to be normal.

We aren't mad at each other, not exactly, so we turn the light out and go to sleep.

*

A blue cardigan you wore once then put in the laundry because a bit of leftover spaghetti made a greasy mark on the on the sleeve vanished last week. You mentioned it casually, but I skip out on work and stay home to look for it and the shoes and the sweatpants.

Nothing turns up.

*

You're pregnant and we celebrate by ordering in Chinese. She's happy with the news and we all laugh and slurp up our lo mein in a race. You and I want a boy this time. All of our fortune cookies contain good news so we immediately forget about them.

That night I dream we have a boy, he comes out of you without a face. Your afterbirth looked like a pile of laundry that someone had been sick on, red and gray and green. The placenta washed around in the tub like something on ice. I didn't want to look, so I didn't, but it was in my periphery and hard to not look. I don't tell you in the morning because it wouldn't be normal and you are smiling when you wake up. We make love before she comes in the room and asks to watch a show.

*

The man in the black hat hasn't been around recently. I ask her about him when you are at the Baby R Us preshopping for the registry with your friends. She shrugs her shoulder when I ask where the clothes are. I get a little angry, but not too angry, just raise my voice a little above a shout. I expect her to cry, but she doesn't. I leave the room but come back a few minutes later to apologize and ask if she is hungry for lunch. Sure Daddy, she says.

*

The doctor is very calm when she tells us that something is not quite right with the child. There's no heartbeat. That's strange she says. You are looking up at the ceiling waiting for the sound we both remember first hearing your first pregnancy, the patter of a heart new to life. Your face, before it darkens with worry, is poised as if to receive a blessing.

There's no heartbeat. There's no baby. There was a baby, but it died.

*

On a stool in the kitchen, she's kicking the underneath of the breakfast bar and drawing something in a notebook.

We don't ask her to stop.

Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the one having a baby she says and laughs.

Please Excuse My Absence on Your Very Special Event

SEAN CLEARY

I tried my best to pick the best Sticky Teriyaki chicken wing for you. Which chicken wing is best, you may want to know, in the Whole Foods buffet under the office building, next to the big green courtyard next to the Ether Dome that sat below your hospital room (seeing the trees is not experiencing them, you say, but you can experience the best chicken wing, so I went).

To set the scene: the Sticky Teriyaki chicken wings sat in a gelatinous substance that oscillated me between a desire to run my finger through it as if it were a smoothly frosted cake, and an acknowledgement that it needs to be picked up and slid into the bin like a pile of potato salad gone to fly at your department's mandatory Fun Day picnic ("We did not invite the accountants" was the standard joke that rings through the ears as the thud of the potato salad is amplified by the plastic bin). But these wings, the buffet in its whole, the Whole Foods, had something else that divided them from the normal of the hospital crowds, the city crowds. The people milling around it were the same ones in the cafeteria, or the Au Bon Pain, in the hospital. Scrubs. Or Dried eyes. Or taking away the children. Or forgetting about it (me?). Or lunch break. Or trying to seem as though it is only lunch break. But all of them twirled around the buffet with me in a wonderful ballet that smelled of the divine mixture of the chicken, the peas, cooked kale, asparagus, and the garlic and salt laced fillers: nine-dollar-a-pound mashed potatoes, soggy rice, palate smothering béchamel-n-gruyere mac-n-cheese. I swirled and swirled and thought of the beauty of it all and how much you would have enjoyed how well coordinated, how precise it all seemed, like smoke swirling in precisely aimed air currents, or the bright yellow of radiation on an X-ray. It was amid this contemplation, and halfway between a calculation of the price of a single elbow of mac-n-cheese that I noticed only a few wings remained in their Sticky whatever, six, maybe four. Their smell ran together with the rest, and it might have been this mélange of scents that drove all of us to the buffet. It brought me there, it drove me to it. But it also drove away the distinctness of the hospital that invaded even the cafeteria. The hospital was where things are figured out in their singularity: things were on charts, Y-and-X axis calculating. And just as

that, in the cafeteria I could smell the thin smell of an old everything bagel with a nickel's worth of butter. Or the burnt Vienna Roast coffee. Or the Baker's Fresh Double Chocolate Chip Cookies. But I did not smell them together. In Massachusetts General Hospital odors do not lift off; they are captured by something mid air and tackled to the floor. And that's why I went to get you the best Sticky Teriyaki wing.

Here is where we trot out the numbers. I wanted to leave them out, because my disgust of them and their shuttering wholeness had driven me to the wonderfully mingling scent buffet in the first place. In the Whole Foods you could say I transcended the data of our lives in my imagining of the best, the perfect chicken wing. But I have to recognize them—deal with them so to understand their shortcomings. It is very likely, statistically, that all of the best wings were already taken by the time I arrived at the buffet, and that it's unlikely that the four-to-six best wings remained on my arrival, and even more unlikely that these were the four-to-six best, the most perfect, wings in existence at that wonderful moment in time. But approaching statistics using probability as your guide doesn't tell you about anomalies, like the anomalies of colorectal cancer afflicting the young and healthy, or of the likelihoods of treatments working, or the so-called-one-in-a-million miracles that happen near death. But you may say, 'Paul, don't waste time with these musing and philosophical jabs at statistics and diagnosis and anomalies and the things we tell ourselves when we're lucky, or unlucky, or want to be fucking lucky just once in our lives, just grab the fucking wings and get back here.' But that ignores two important facts: one that I was there in some contexts, avoiding coming back (as were others at the buffet, it always seemed every time I found myself there in these last two weeks), and two that to make the claim that this was in fact the best Sticky Teriyaki wing, and thus make the whole effort worth it, that effort of leaving you and my guilt over part one of this 'list of facts' leading me to missing...

When I looked back, although there may have been six wings at one point in my musings, only four then remained. And across the buffet from me, tongs in hand, was a woman with the sort of forcefully dried eyes that I have come to recognize as the eyes that come from the Blake Building and its brightly lit panopticon of intensive care on the twelfth floor. Though, I will say, I had not seen her there in our own journey. Or she could have broken up with her boyfriend. The buffet in the Whole Foods in the office building next

to the green courtyard next to the Ether Dome under your room is destabilizing like that, I said to myself as I stared her down and with my own set of tongs reached in unison with her toward those four wings. The four best wings possible.

So, they must be the four best wings for me to have at first been demure about it, oh, sorry, but then instead of being demure, and then polite (oh you have them, I insist) I parried politeness and thrust forcefully into the belly of antisocial behavior, spilling its rancid guts into the already sopping yellow rice. I didn't grab the wings one by one. But instead, with a sweeping motion, I scooped them all toward my end of the buffet with one prong of the open tongs, allowing the other to split the gelatinous wave of the Sticky Teriyaki sauce in front of them as if they were the Israelites fleeing Egypt.

"Okay," she said. "That's not very nice. But, Okay." Her face had grown cold over the sneeze guard; between cardboard containers and friendly reminders of the pricing of the buffet, I saw her nose twitch, her red eyes glare into the defiance of injustice. And maybe not even this injustice, that of these wonderful wings.

"I'm sorry," I said. Not very sorry at all. After all, these wings were for you, or at least their aroma was for you, and as you couldn't really experience the trees, that was important, I'd deduced.

Foreseeably, there would be more wings. I twitched an indication of this. Movement began in the kitchen adjacent to the buffet. A man cooking pizza in his black hat and uniform stopped abruptly at the sight of this showdown. Maybe he too, knew the importance of these wings. Their glory.

"I think we should at least split them," she said in a tone of voice that indicated her reasonability and my pig-headed prickishness.

It made me freeze, that voice. The wings weren't yet in my container; we both still held our tongs; we both stood there with identical containers of mac-n-cheese waiting to feel the slight spring of its elbows at the weight of the wings.

"You can wait for more, there's more coming out, see, they'll bring more out in a couple minutes," I said, attempting, but failing to urge my body to squeeze the tongs and grab the wings one by one. But I couldn't just grab a single wing; that would be too dangerous. She could swoop in as I ranged to my container with the first wing. We could lose one of the brethren, and then we would only have three, or God forbid, two wings. Both posed problems, with

the three wings I lost the natural harmony that graces all bodies, that symmetrical wonder of life's two hands, two feet, two nostrils, that we find so attractive. But if I just stood there and waited for her to back off, what if she didn't?

"I have to go," she almost cried. "I need to get out of here."

While we stood, lines grew from the registers. The express lane blinked and blinked with an alcohol purchase.

"Are you going to let me split them, or not?" she said.

"They're my wings," I said. "I had them first, and they're..."

She reached over in frustration, like being frustrated with a child who has gotten ketchup all over his shirt and rubs it across his chest like a soldier stunned by a mortal wound. But I swatted her away with the tongs.

This, she did not like. Her head swiveled around in disgust looking for the manager.

I almost growled. It was for you! The wings were for you, how could she not know?

Her gaze caught that of an employee. "Excuse me," she said. "Excuse me!" But then she broke into a sob. Dropped the tongs. She crouched down below the ledge of the buffet. She hugged her knees, she forgot about Sticky Teriyaki and about possibly, probably, their best incarnation sitting there carefully guarded by my tongs.

"I'm sorry," she said, standing up. "It's just, I don't know what to do anymore. Take the fucking wings."

A manager had walked over, a tall bald man in his thirties. He had a beard. Thick glasses.

"It's nothing," she said to him. "We were fighting, we were arguing over wings. What the fuck are we doing?" she asked.

"Did this man hurt you?" said a passerby pushing a cart full of groceries, a watermelon strapped into the fold down seat like a child.

She looked over at the man. The whole place seemed to stop with concern.

"Did this man hurt you?" asked the passerby. His eyes were old. He must have been seventy.

She looked over at me; her red eyes had become pink and puffy and viscous with tears like weeping sores. "No he hasn't," she said defiantly.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just, they're for my wife, like..."

“Did this man hurt you?” asked the old passerby again. Insistent that I did.

The manager turned to the old man. “Please, sir,” he said.

“We could have just split them,” the woman said. “They could have been both of ours.”

“That wouldn’t work,” I said. And then in a flash of brilliance I lowered my container down into the buffet and scooped up all of the wings.

“Now, come on,” said the manager. “Come. On,” he said, putting emphasis on each word, so fucking disappointed in me, it seemed.

“Listen, I’m going to buy these wings,” I said. “And I’m going to bring them back to the hospital. I’m sorry, but I need to.”

A man appeared with another tray of wings, but stood off beyond our scene like some fool, holding up the tray at chest level with oven mitts.

“See,” I said, gesturing over to the new wings with my chin. “See there’s more wings right over there.”

“That’s not the point,” the woman said. “That’s not the point of all this.” She burst into sobs. “You’re so goddamn selfish. It’s just...why can’t we share?” She wretched into her incantation of share. She repeated it twice. Three times. Four times, in memory of those wings.

I turned to leave and the manager stepped in front of me.

“Please,” I said. “This is ridiculous.”

“Sir,” he said. “Calm down.”

It was getting late. We were standing there. Frozen. The rest of the place sprung back to life. It was a stalemate, her sobbing, me holding my container against my chest as if it were a baby. The manager in front of me holding up his hand like a traffic cop. These had to be the best wings in the world, I told myself. Compromise was not possible, because if I compromised, if I split it down the middle than it made this whole escapade seem unworthy of the time I spent away, of the impulse I had felt to flee the room just before. Maybe I should sob, should wretch, I thought, I should tell them they are for my wife. I am here for her.

I stepped forward into the waiting arms of the manager.

So, I am sorry I missed you and your leaving. Maybe I knew I would when I fled at first. I wouldn’t call it conscious, it can’t have been. And I did come back with the wings and they were delicious. I couldn’t have been gone more than half an hour. An hour tops after the cops came and after the woman

and I sat in a seat in the cafe, waiting for our turn to talk to the nice patient men. They were not happy with me. I couldn’t explain to them, the wings, what they were. Just get back to your wife they said. What are you doing? they said. Don’t you know, they said, as if they knew that I was missing your very special event right then. So I sped off.

I ate the wings in the ICU waiting room because I didn’t want to go in after you had left, knowing, as I did, that you wouldn’t feel the trees, that you could only see them, and that, well, it is not the same.

“Crime is soaring, schools are failing, government has lost control, and Lawrence, the most godforsaken place in Massachusetts, has never been in worse shape.”
—Jay Atkinson

I AM NOT DAMNED

YULISSA NUNEZ

I am not damned, I am empowered.
You see my superpower is...teaching.
I use every single fiber in my being to
mold youth into confident resilient
young men and women,
who you can't hold back by saying they're
from the so called “damned” City of Lawrence.

I am not damned, I'm motivated.
I'm from undercover dreamers and believers
fighting each and every single day to educate
our youth on how to
move mountains and be themselves because
there is nothing worse than a person who falls for
anything 'cuz they don't stand for nothing.

I am not damned, I am neglected.
I didn't always see myself as
a proud product of Lawrence.
Hiding in the dark, suppressing
all feelings and emotions because
nobody would understand or cared enough to know.

I am not damned, I'm driven.
I wear my heart on my sleeve like Weezy.
I no longer hide but shine bright
because mami says, “echa pa' lante Yulissa sin miedo
porque asi es la vida.”

I am not damned. I am diverse.
I used to say: I'm not supposed to be a teacher though
'cuz teachers don't look like me,
with my glowing brown skin, curly hair—not to mention
the fact that I'm a gay female. And yes, I may have
my low income, first generation, college graduate credentials,
but I am not damned.

I am adverse
because now I teach.
I teach students to not limit themselves
because of who they are or who think they should be.
I teach students who look like me and
aspire to do great things...like teach!

I used to see a world that had no place for me, but now... I know better.

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JESSICA FILION

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—Oliver Sacks

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For the love of words,
Jessica Filion



Middlebury Bread Loaf
School *of* English