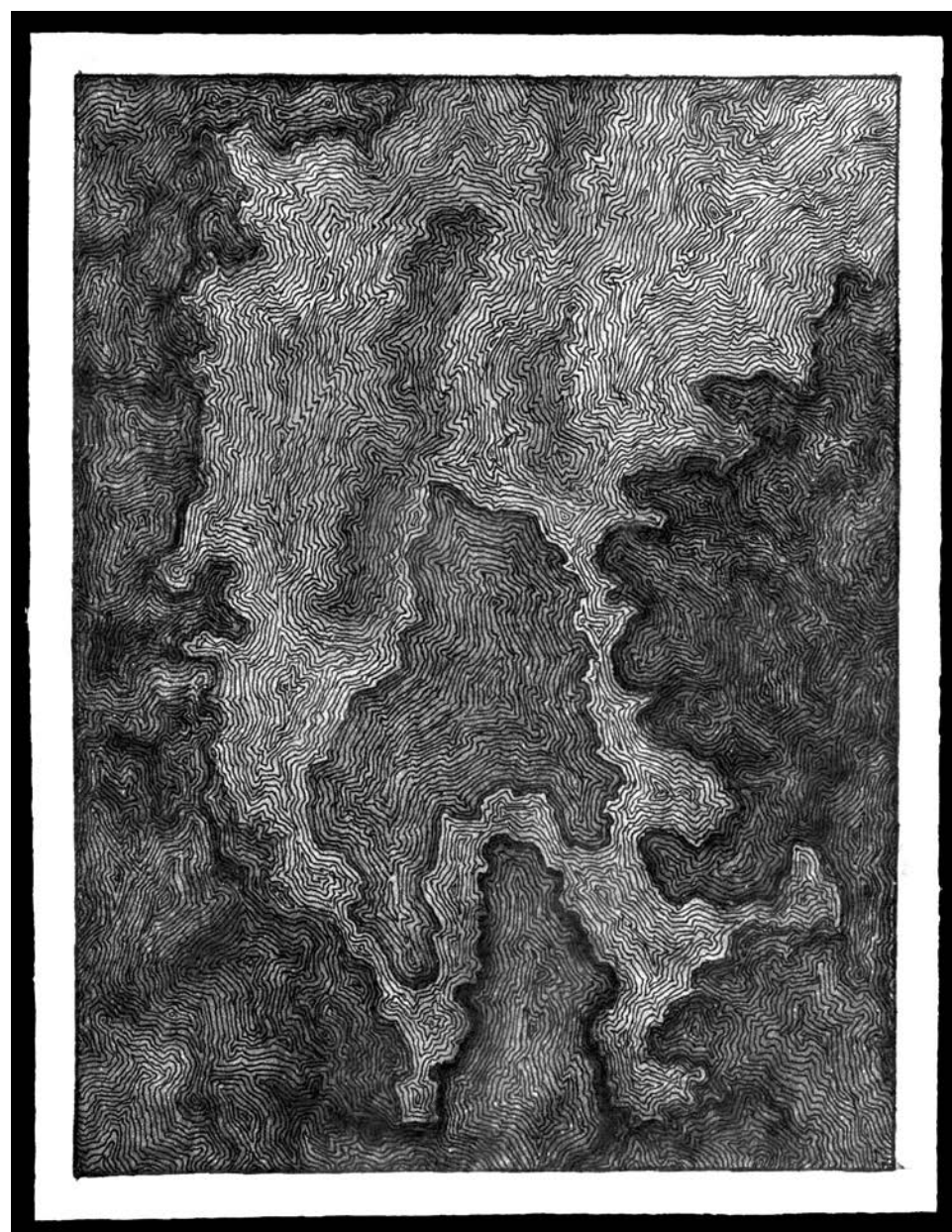


THE BREAD LOAF JOURNAL

VOLUME VI | SUMMER 2018

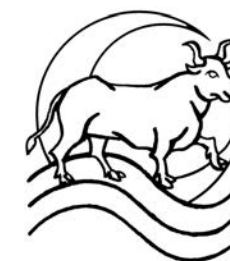
PLACE



THE BREAD LOAF JOURNAL

VOLUME VI | SUMMER 2018

PLACE



WRITINGS FROM THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH



Middlebury Bread Loaf
School of English

ART BY JOHN LEHMAN: I came to Bread Loaf an English teacher. Beowulf and Shakespeare and Borges were my bread and butter. They still are. But, now I spend the academic year as an MFA student at the Tufts’ School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. My prints and drawings are ink and watercolor meditations on the literature that brings me to Vermont each year. jmlehman.com

2018 Bread Loaf Journal

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Thoughts on Place

It’s a few years ago—broken down on the side of the road in Savannah—and a man named Bob is changing the tire on my Volvo station wagon. I’ve put 50,000 miles on the car so far, a multi-year, cross-country “drive.” A restless, compulsive wandering, marked by an aching homesick for a place I’ve never been.

As he works, Bob’s saying that, in AA, they refer to my brand of impulsive sojourn as “pulling a geographic”—craving new, external landscapes in the hopes of changing internal problems. Maybe, he suggests, the solution is stillness. Maybe, “no matter where you go, there you are.”

For our Place issue of the *Bread Loaf Journal*, “oh, the places we go!” The blush-pale mountains of New Mexico; the jagged stoneworks of “afflicted” Edinburgh; the bottom of a wine bottle. Our protagonists, poets, and quite a few moose encounter Places big and small, sweeping and local, urgent and curious.

Place sheds light on nostos, a longing for home. Place acts as twisty trap (a “net to ensnare”) and fluffy nest (our safety net). Place exists only in memory, a victim of revisionist history. Place transcends time and becomes what saves you.

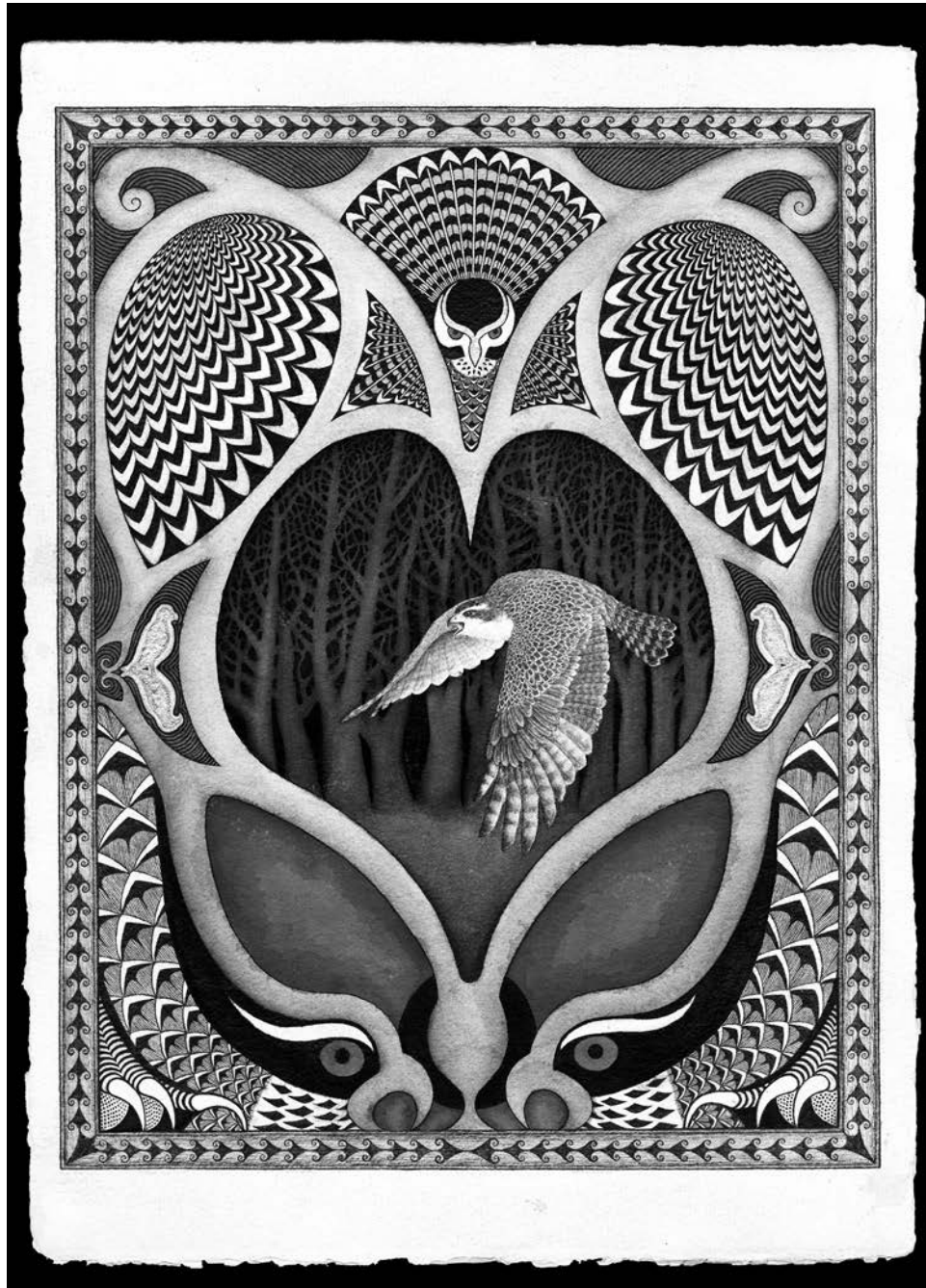
From the still space of their writing desks, each of our contributors conjured a sense of Place that eclipsed mere setting.

Surely, no matter where they go—there they are.

In happiness!



CC Perry, Co-Editor



The Worst Part of Bedbugs: An Infestina



The worst part is not the itch.
The worst part is not when you look
over at night and there it is on the bed, one
bedbug, corpulent with your blood.
You smash it with your hand, mad
with disgust. And there another one crawls.

All the next day your skin crawls
with the memory. Your ankles itch;
you smear them with cortisone. You're mad
at the landlord on the phone: Look,
you say, revulsion pulsing through your blood,
they're everywhere. I can't be the only one.

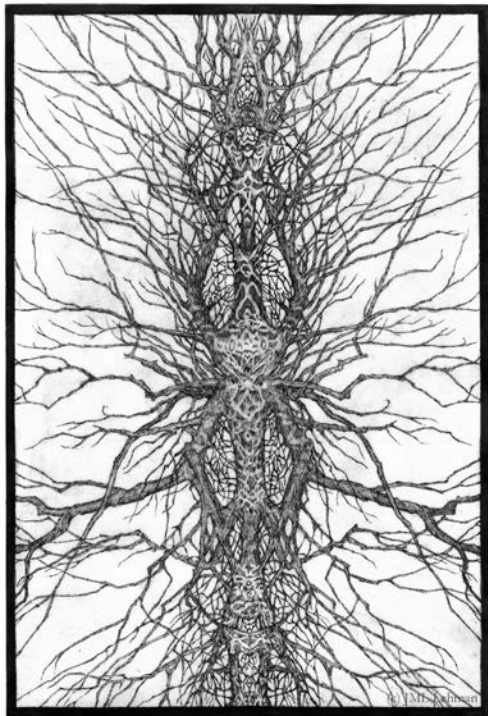
You wrap up your clothes, your life, one
trash bag at a time. Daily you crawl
through piles of the past. You sleep on sheets stained with blood.
Your life narrows to pure physicality: an itch
you'd do anything to avoid. Wherever you look
you imagine them waiting. It's enough to drive you mad.

This is not the worst part, even though you are mad
with sleeplessness. Even though you must throw out one
thousand dollars of wooden furniture. (It looks
so innocent sitting by the curb.) Still your skin crawls
with bugs at night and memories in the morning, the itch
haunting your flesh. It seems stored in your blood.

Who knew you could hate it so much: your own blood.
You hate it because they love it, and it's mad
that one small insect could drive you mad with itching.
You imagine yourself a god: with one
nod, you'd freeze them in place, unable to crawl
away, unable to breed or breathe. Look

at the destruction you would wreak. Look
at their carcasses, spilling out your own blood.
But you are human, so you leave home and crawl
onto the jet bridge on the other side of the country, mad
for escape and a sister's comfort. You want for just one
moment not to remember the itch.

Something crawls out of you (this is the worst part) when you look
at the itch in her eyes to get away. Loneliness freezes your blood.
She's mad with flight. You stand there solitary, infested, the only one.



Louisiana



There's an old Creole proverb that goes something like this: tell me who you love and I'll tell you who you are.

The great river swells and rushes southward, and when it gets to me, it slows. Sediment drifts to the bottom of my plains. It builds up, layer by layer. Thousands of years pass; I rise above the Gulf of Mexico. I am a rich delta, covered in a waving tangle of grasses and marshland and swamp. I expand, and survive storms and high tides. If you see me, you'll see a stretch of lush green, a prosperous ecology—a riot of breeding life.

There is music in the oaks and cypress, too. There is always music: the rustle of grass, delicate vibrations in a ripple of water, the calls of black-bellied birds. Tribes make their lives here, carefully treading the coastline and swamp thickets. They leave their footprints pressed into the marshes. Others find the pulse of the river with their foreign ships. They test the quality of soil between their fingers and dream of a port, an unnatural, impossible city. Cobblestones are laid over the sinking earth. I feel the vessels—packed with a bounty of people, of goods—as they push out of the river mouth and into the saltwater. Bloodlines mix. Villages are scattered like seed, and the song of language drifts up from their cooking fires.

The land reverberates with heat, the rhythm of dancing feet, of marching. In Congo Square, there are the sounds of auction, the cries of mothers being separated from their children. There is the stomp of freedom, and joyful brass bands, the twirl of umbrellas at the impromptu second line, streams of funeral processions. Culture is something lived. I thrum with a heady sensuality; with beauty, laughter, and the blues. The people love me like they do the air and the sky—with necessity.

The ground is covered with feathers, colored beads, broken glass, a resilient foliage that reclaims its territory with each passing moment. The aging joints of a streetcar jostle from bucolic parks to the dizzying buzz of the French Quarter. The pavement cracks and becomes impassable; the Mississippi, Lake Pontchartrain, look for ways back in.

People divide. Monuments memorialize monsters, and later, are razed to the ground by angry hands. There is violence in me, and also empathy. There is hate, too—but when floodwaters rise, there is only one way to go: up, to

higher ground. Even in a confusion of water, waste, corpses, there is love.

The river is held back by manmade walls. The sky fractures and rages, the levees break, and houses rise up on stilts. What is now a lake was once grazing pasture for cattle. The music can still be heard as the city is hushed by water. Packs of dogs swim the snaking networks of canals, looking for home. A man sits on his roof, peels an orange, picks up his fiddle and plays. He sings, do you know what it means to miss New Orleans? Some hold their breath, if they aren't already under water. Others adapt and grow gills.

I am water. My coastlines are indistinct. In the city, church spires and rooftops are passed by women in canoes; they touch the relics reverently with their fingertips, leave a transmission of love as they glide onward.



i tied a ribbon round the rabbit's neck



so there i was. the rain was moving
crooked in heavy sheets across the sky,
down past the bending trees, into the parted field,
a curtain waving ghostly in the morning breeze.

behind it, even the blue mountains
shifted and warbled like when i sat
shotgun and noticed, for the first time,
how the world looked wrong
past the hood of your rusted pickup.

now ever so often, these mountains here
would take a drag and empty their lungs
out into the sky. i tell you what,
the rain was really spewing now,

angry as hornets coughed up from a tree
just keeled over. then i watched the sky
go cold white grey like something sick,
realized, too, how the soft grass was so
silent now, and so green. it took what it could get,

i guess. i thought of hospital blankets,
thin but warm. i'm sorry i don't remember
how to make the grass whistle.
i decided to walk through that field

when the sun had burnt up the sog.
it felt like graduation; the aisle and
the petal caps. but, said dorothy,
you were there. and i tell you what,
it sounded just like you were, just

hissing and hissing that crazy old man
laugh. when i was young, i thought it was
the sound of the earth sizzling like grease,
then i learned it was bugs calling out

to that same sky from their little giant worlds,
but then i learned better.
it’s true you learn better
when you don’t really mean to.
anyways, i thought of you, all laid back

in your recliner, throat growling, ‘where’s
my rabbit?’ as if that stuffed bunny hadn’t been
your gift to me. you got a kick out of
making me panic, even for a minute

a hug would cure. i thought i heard you
laughing in the grass,
all the bugs laughing along.
so there i walked, chin up, and smiling,
i walked on my own—not alone, remembering

how stained fingers used to tremble
around a fistful of green, and how
you’d pick out the tallest, fattest ribbon,
put it up to your lips, a thumb on either side,

stretched heavenward, church and steeple.
you called it bluegrass when it made a sound,
but i knew you were being tricky.
it was green as green is green.
i’m sorry only green gets me remembering.

Gaps and Gores



You forgot your dog when you left. But he heard you when you came back, two-thirty in the morning, to get your stethoscope and your bicycle.

At sunrise he lit out of here, tracked you as far as the creek. I found him sitting by the culvert. He watched the finches and moaned while the breeze flipped a lost leaf across the ruts. Dog and I limped back home. We stared at your sandals on the back steps. He nudged them with his black-tipped nose, then lifted his noble eyes to mine and blinked once.

Tonight the dog is not feeling right. He has squeezed himself under the bed frame. He doesn’t want to stay down there, yet he can’t seem to crawl his way out. Like you, like me, he’s trying to sort out what suits him best. It’s coming up on two-thirty again. Baby, I don’t care where you’ve been. There’s high pressure building over Manitoba. It will drift our way and stall. You will have need of them. Come by and find your sandals.

We ride down the night with cedar and fir, watch the bats flutter in the gray smudge. There is an owl somewhere down among the hemlocks, calling out from the gaps and gores where the survey men refuse to walk because of the copperheads. I guess this old bluetick hound of yours, now he’s mine. It doesn’t really seem fair. We both know he deserves better. And the papergirl, she agrees. She steps out of the dark and spits on the flagstones. She fans her face with her ballcap and smiles, tells me I ought to quit sweeping hot coals with a broom made of straw.

We see the dog rake the soil in the flower bed. He claws up broken bits of a clay jar, then he drags an old cloth belt out of the earth. The kid takes it from his mouth, shakes off the dirt, and rolls it around her fist. She stuffs the coil down inside her satchel. She laughs and says she’ll tell the editor that tomorrow’s headline should read Nelson loves Erin. Forever. Better than a tattoo, she says. Because you can set fire to it. She throws pebbles at the sky. We watch the bats dive at the stones before they fall. The papergirl does not speak for the one who sent her, but only for that other who dwells beyond the boundary stone. She shoots me with a rubber band and tosses a box of matches between my bare feet. She leaves the yard gate standing open and goes away from here, a soft whistle on her lips, quiet as a cradle song.

Case History



Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, 1818

Each city has been an affliction

This one most—
medieval and mossy, esophageal,
its streets blistered by curious want
gummed in the gullet
(the language of) desire like gauze
adhering to the purulence
of a still-open wound

Everything here—
of stone, sarcophagal,
the shit-streaked cathedrals,
caustic, foul-breathed closes,
(the meaning of) critics
spitting back into the tidal mouth
the same suppurating on seven (other) hills
and the poet’s throat ulcerated,
himself apothecary, without cure

Box



You walk into a small room. There are no windows; the walls are black. There is a small wooden table with two chairs, one on each side. You sit down.

A few moments later a doctor comes in. The doctor is wearing a white lab coat and has glasses. The doctor sits down, looks at you, then writes something on a clipboard. Neither of you say anything yet.

Finally the doctor says, “Do you have any questions?” The doctor does not look up.

“Yes,” you say. “What exactly happens in here?”

“This is where we perform the experiment.”

“What is the experiment?”

“We put a box on the table.”

“What kind of box?”

“Any kind of box.”

“Give me some examples.”

“Pizza box. Shoe box. Packing box. Computer box. Cereal box. Television box. Matchbox. Wine box.”

“I get the idea. Where do you get the boxes?”

“Sometimes one of us will bring one from home, but usually we just grab something from the dumpster out back.”

“Who do you perform the experiment on?”

“Everybody. Anybody.”

“Men and women?”

“Yes. And children.”

“Children? Is that ethical?”

The doctor shrugs but doesn’t answer. The doctor is still looking at the clipboard.

“They all volunteer?”

“We don’t force anyone to come in here.”

“How many subjects have you had?”

“We don’t keep track of that.”

“So you just put the box on the table?”

“Yes.”

“Then what happens?”

“It varies. The experimental group and control group are different.”
“What happens with the control group?”
“We leave.”
“That’s it?”
“Yes.”
“What happens?”
“They usually sit for some time. After ten or twenty minutes most will pick up the box and look inside, but sometimes they just sit.”
“When do you let them leave?”
“Whenever they decide to go. We don’t stop them.”
“But you don’t tell them it’s over?”
“No.”
“How long does it take for them to leave?”
“It varies. Some leave after just a few moments, most last between 15 and 45 minutes. A notable percentage stay for more than an hour.”
“What’s the longest anyone has stayed?”
“37 hours, 12 minutes, and 46 seconds.”
You sit for a moment and think. The doctor is still looking at the notepad.
“So that’s the control group. What happens for the test group?”
“We tell them something before we leave the room.”
“What do you tell them?”
“That looking in the box will make them unhappy.”
“That’s it?”
“Word for word. We follow a script.”
“So then what happens?”
“They usually look inside the box.”
You think for a moment.
“How many don’t look?”
“About one in every five subjects.”
“And what happens to them?”
“They leave. Usually right away.”
“Do you follow up with them?”
“We follow up with all our subjects.”
“What does that look like?”
“We ask how happy they are on a scale of one to ten.”
“Is there any difference between the subjects who look and the ones that don’t?”

“None that we’ve measured.”
You sit for a moment. The doctor is still writing on the notepad. You’re unsure how to proceed.
“So what happens to the ones that look in the box?”
“It varies.”
“What do you mean, it varies?”
“There are sometimes effects. Sometimes the effects take time to be noticeable.”
“What effects?”
“That varies too.”
“Give me some examples.”
“Some of the more common effects only take place once they leave the room. Many subjects get bitten by mosquitoes. Or spiders. Sometimes they just see a lot of spiders. On the sidewalk. In their living rooms and bedrooms. In the shower. That’s actually very common.”
“Any illness?”
“Headaches, runny noses, toothaches, fevers. Less common is the flu. Very rarely it’s something more serious than that. Some stub their toe on the table when they get up to leave.”
“What about in the room? Does anything ever happen in the room?”
“Yes. Sometimes they find something in the box.”
“What kinds of things?”
“Mostly household objects. Toothbrushes. Toilet paper. Staplers. Spatulas. Someone found a full set of wineglasses and a bottle of Merlot.”
“Have you noticed any patterns?”
“That’s not why we’re here.”
You think for a moment.
“Give me some more examples.”
“Cell phone chargers. Reading glasses. Pillowcases. Bleach. Hairbrushes. Shower curtains. Matches.”
“In a matchbox?”
“No. A cereal box.”
“Keep going.”
“Flashlights. Batteries. Cast-iron pots. Uncooked spaghetti. Marshmallows. Playing cards. Pencils. A bottle of extra-virgin olive oil. Condoms. Paperback books. TV remotes. Legos. Paper airplanes.”
“Give me some interesting examples.”

“Some people find money. Usually small change but occasionally large bills. One boy found two thousand dollars in twenties.”

“Any weapons?”

“A man once pulled out a handgun.”

“What happened?”

“He just left it on the table. It wasn’t loaded.”

“Anything else?”

The doctor thinks for a moment, still looking down at the notepad.

“We see a lot of free gym memberships.”

You pause. The doctor is writing something down.

“Are there any other effects?”

“We get some extreme cases. Physically speaking.”

“What do you mean?”

“There have been a few subjects who gained weight.”

“How much weight?”

“It varies. Usually just a few pounds.”

“What’s the most you’ve seen?”

“Two hundred.”

“How did he respond?”

“He could barely stand. We had to find him a wheelchair, but he rolled himself out.”

“I mean emotionally.”

“Nothing notable.”

“What else?”

“Some people get older.”

“Don’t they all?”

The doctor doesn’t laugh.

“Significantly older.”

“How much?”

“It varies. Hard to quantify.”

“What does it look like?”

“Hair falls out. Spines collapse on themselves. Skin sags, muscles shrink. It varies.”

“I’m having trouble imagining that.”



“An intern said it was like watching wax in the sun.”

You sit up a little straighter. You put your hands on your knees.

“Anything else like that?”

“One man seemed to get younger.”

“How much younger?”

“He was 85. He looked like a teenager.”

“What happened to him?”

“We never actually found him again. He’s the one who found the handgun.”

“What’s the most extreme effect you’ve seen?”

The doctor pauses. The doctor sighs and writes something down.

Then the doctor looks up from the notes and looks into your eyes for the first time. The doctor looks tired.

“One woman found a mirror. She looked at it for a while, then put it on the table. She sat there for hours. She didn’t move at all. Finally she reached into her mouth. First she put in her fingers. Then her whole fist. She kept pushing in her arm until it was past her wrist. Then her forearm. Eventually her arm was in her mouth up to her elbow. She didn’t change her facial expression the whole time.

After a few moments she took it out. Slowly. It was covered in something dark-blue—like a jelly. When her hand came out she was holding her tongue. She kept pulling and her tongue kept coming out. She was pulling hand over hand. Her tongue piled up on the floor like a garden hose. It kept coming out. We timed her. She was pulling out her own tongue for more than eight minutes. There must have been a hundred yards of it. It was all covered in blue jelly.

After that she put her hands on her forehead and pushed up the skin so it was smooth. She slid her hands back over her scalp. Her hair just came off. She kept sliding her hands back until she was holding the back of her neck and all her hair was gone. Her scalp was smooth all the way back.”

The doctor is still looking at you, but stops talking. You stare back.

“Keep going.”

“She reached back into her mouth and pulled out a tooth. It just popped out. She tossed it at the wall. Then she did it again. One by one she pulled out all her teeth and threw them at the wall. The floor was covered in teeth.

Then she took off her clothes. First her sweater, then her shirt, her pants,

her bra, her underwear. She dropped them on top of her tongue. It looked like laundry pile. She was standing in the room naked.”

The doctor stops talking.

“Then what?”

“Then she crawled into the box. Headfirst. We watched her crawl in and disappear. Her head. Then her arms. Her chest. Her hips. Her ass. Her legs. At the end we could only see one foot. Then that was gone too.”

After a moment the doctor looks back at the clipboard and starts writing.

“Keep going.”

“That’s it.”

You don’t understand.

“What happened to her?”

The doctor shrugs.

“Was she alive?”

The doctor doesn’t respond.

You’re staring at the walls. They’re a deep black. You feel like you could walk through them. Or into them.

“Have you ever performed the test on yourself?”

“That wouldn’t be ethical.”

You don’t respond. Nothing happens. You’re looking at the table now. It’s a wooden table, and you can see the ring-lines of the wood in the surface. You follow one line from one end of the table to the other. Then you look at the next line. You look at every inch of every line on the table.

“A radio.”

You’re confused.

“What?”

“Someone found a radio. Playing music.”

“What was it playing?”

The doctor pauses.

“I am the Walrus.”

The doctor gets up.

The doctor puts a box on the table.

Then the doctor leaves and shuts the door.

You look at the box.



The Politics of Staff Development



The bell rings and we have a department meeting about best practices as if there were such a thing in the ever-evolving ecological zone of classrooms—even I am a different me at ten or noon or three when the wood-filled room carries the similar sounds but never duplicated dialogue from the seemingly same lesson on themes discovered and recognized and witnessed in Alvarez’s Butterflies; the students return to me day in and day out reverberating swamps open beaches chilled mountain nights different: animated, engaged, enraged, apathetic, laughing, head in hand, quiet, sullen, curious, motivated, brusque—and I listen to my fellow educators talk about work I don’t believe in anymore or already know and there is a graphic organizer someone has made (was it Dave? Dennis? Debbie?) that everyone is coo-cooing about and I raise my hand because when I am with other teachers we treat one another like students—confined, in line, rowed, part of the whole, not individuals—and I have to wait my turn to ask if we can stop talking about best practices because they don’t really exist and could we please start talking about this Muslim ban because I have students from Yemen and everyone looks at me and my boss says we don’t have time for that but could you align that concern with a standard and I feel so mad I am becoming a student who is ready to flip a desk like that day during my first year of teaching I watched an angry young man clear a library shelf of books with one swipe and I thought—even back then before I was rogue and unflappable and the loud one at the meeting, the drunk uncle of the meeting, the Yossarian of the meeting (to paraphrase our antihero, I’m not running from my responsibilities but to them)—how much I admired that rage taking shape and I never told my bosses this but I did not punish that young man. Nope. We all just waited for him to calm down, and then we picked up the books and put them back on the shelf, and one gal reorganized them neatly because that mattered to her and I was pretty silent and let the afternoon light take control of the hush of the room and bring it back to life and that is my best practice you non-readers of Gilgamesh and I don’t know what standard it aligns with.

The Coordinate Plane



A piece of graph paper. A y-axis labeled “my affection” and an x-axis labeled “attention given me.” Penciled with lines only a ruler could make. Positive integers only. A negative parabola—a hump on a camel’s back. Drawn with a careful hand. X-intercepts at (0,0) and (0,10), reaching a vertex at (5,5).
He stood there looking at it, frowning—his mouth imitating the shape of the graph.
“You don’t understand,” she said.
“No, I understand.”
“You asked me to show you how I felt.”
“I did ask that.”
“This is how I feel.”
“This isn’t . . . what I meant.”
“I thought it was clear.”
He looked at her, the frown fading slightly, replaced with something like tender frustration. No one else in the world was Ada. Other men’s fiancée’s had no problem saying the words “I love you,” or holding hands in public, or even committing to sharing a bedroom in their new home.
He turned to the graph again. It was a comprehensive formula consistent with the sentiments of a majority of those who find their affections being ardently sought by another. It was a demand for independence, even as it recognized affection. As always, Ada found an eloquence in math that few ever find in language.
“There’s a flaw,” he said.
“There’s no flaw,” she stated flatly. “It’s simple math.”
“Here,” he said, pointing to the vertex at the top of the parabola.
“That’s the optimal point of love—right at the mean of your attention.”
“It’s a maximum.”
“Yes – it’s a vertex. There’s no flaw.”
“There’s a limit to your love?”
“It’s a calculable ideal.”
Her fiancé flipped over the graph paper and scribbled on the other side.
“Find my limit,” he said, giving it to her.

$$\begin{matrix} f(x) = 1/x^2 \\ x \rightarrow 0 \end{matrix}$$

She broke into a rare smile as she read it.
“It’s infinity,” she said.



On Books and the Body



I became a reader crouched in an empty bathtub, waiting for my little brother to poop.

I remember it as a nightly routine, though, like most things from my childhood, the fog of nostalgia mixed with family folklore has made my memories unreliable hyperboles at best, and cobbled-together falsities at worst. But this one is true, I know for sure, because I can remember so distinctly the way Suave detangling spray smelled like peaches in my little sister’s hair.

We’d assume our positions after dinner and baths. My brother would perch on the toilet, his Power Ranger pajamas clumped around his hanging feet, elbows resting on his knees. My mom would sit on a footstool in front of him. Given the lack of any other available seating, Molly and I would clamber back into the bathtub we’d exited an hour earlier, pushing aside the debris of childhood hygiene: the red bucket with the yellow handle and the bottle of no-tears kid’s shampoo with a smiling bear that still undoubtedly—disappointingly—caused tears. We’d toss aside the squishy plastic version of Ariel, with a pin-sized hole in her belly button right above the tail for squirting water onto the walls, on the floor, on your siblings, and even after the bath, no matter how hard you tried to squirt out all the water, there was always a little bit that would be left in the tip of her tail, slowly sprouting mold. (When my mom threw her away a year later, I would spend the whole bath crying). We’d shove the rainbow kid-sized loofah and small plastic spade with the broken handle to the back of the tub and squeeze ourselves in, Molly’s skinny four-year-old legs tangling with my chubby 6-year-old legs as we both leaned forward, resting our chins on the cold, hard ledge. When the porcelain tub bottom would bite into our ankles, we’d shout to pause the story just to rearrange our limbs.

It was always Henry and Mudge; it was my brother’s favorite, and I suppose being the one suffering from extreme, debilitating constipation gave him permanent first-choice of the family reading material. (At the time, of course, I considered this a massive injustice to me and my own fairy-themed book collection.) The doctor had laid out a trifecta of options for my parents, but since they neither wanted to medicate nor manually anally stimulate their four-year-old son, they were left with the third choice:

“Spend time with him in the bathroom. Make it a comfortable space,” I can now imagine a doctor telling my mom. “Try reading.”

And so we did.

As Henry and Mudge traveled to the Yellow Moon, Sam tried to poop. As Henry fought the Cold Shivers with Mudge at his side, Sam tried to poop. My mom’s voice would blend with the hum of the bathroom fan, and I’d wind my fingers in the plush dampness of the bathmat, taking deep breaths of the bathroom air: residues of a Colgate Children’s Blue-Raspberry Sparkle toothpaste and the diluted bleach my mom used to wipe down the counters (the bathroom scent an undeniable benefit of the medical situation). When Henry and Mudge tackled the Long Weekend with their cousin Annie, Sam tried to poop, and Molly and I listened—eager for Henry, eager for Mudge, eager for poop. It wasn’t just a part of the day; it was the best part of the day.

And since then, books have always been so intimately, intricately intertwined with the body and its function.

I tore through the entire *Series of Unfortunate Events* in my own feigned bout of constipation a few years later. I’d spend hours in the upstairs bathroom of our new house as neighborhood kids rode bikes, played tag, and captured the flag.

“Emily?” my sister would call, banging her fist against the door.

“I’M POOPING!” I’d shout from inside the bathroom. At eight, I had already mastered an exasperated tone, a side-effect of having heard the tone so often directed towards me. Though I was long done, there was no way for Molly, or any of the other neighborhood kids for that matter, to verify this fact. I’d wait until I heard my sister shuffle back down the carpeted stairs before turning the page and settling back into my literary fortress. I’d read until my butt turned cold, and then numb, and then tingled with invisible needle-pricks against the cold porcelain. Only then, I’d close the book, flush the empty bowl, and head back outside.

At eleven, my mom came to tuck me in with a book in her hand, a shiny new paperback with a soft cover and friendly font. The *Care and Keeping of You* was a book written to help flesh out the details of puberty; for me, it was my whole education. There were detailed instructions—with illustrations!—on how to buy a bra, shave your armpits, insert a tampon. It was with that book, and a small hand mirror I had stolen from my mom’s vanity drawer, that I learned what my vagina actually looked like, matching the cartoon illustration

with labels to my own developing parts.

At fifteen, I discovered the sort of soft-core porn that disguises itself on the shelves of young-adult fiction: sticky-sweet stories of teenage girls falling in love with lifeguards under boardwalks, or losing their virginity to the boy next door who suddenly started mowing the lawn without a shirt on (but only, of course, after almost losing her virginity to a bad boy from the bad crowd; that’s what makes it dramatic). I read them furtively, eagerly, recklessly, giving myself headaches from squinting long after my lights were supposed to be out. I relieved my headaches with my fumbling successes. I remember my dad urging me to read Harper Lee and Toni Morrison, but I had reverted to Cecily Von Ziegeasar for a different sort of literary education. It wasn’t until college that I would learn that most of my peers had started masturbating by watching videos from the internet in their basement, not hiding under their bed accompanied by a poorly-written novel with vague sexual euphemisms.

And even now as an adult, I’ll hand new novels to my freshmen students and demand that—after they write their name on it, of course—they open the book, smell the spine, and rub the cover against their face. I’ll press the text against my own cheek in the front of the class, and emphatically jiggle the book up and down, as if this pantomime will make them more willing to do the same to their own pimply cheeks. They look at me with the perfect mixture of incredulity and judgment that fourteen-year-olds do so well.

“Why, miss?” they groan.

“It’ll help you love it!” I say.

That’s a lie, of course. I want them to rub the book against their face not because it will help them love it, but because I want them to feel it. I want the visceral swish of paper against skin. I’m who I am not because I studied literature or I teach English. I am who I am because of books, and books belong to my body. Like skin. Or blood. Or breath. Or poop.

One chilly Ohio night, when Henry and Mudge met their Careful Cousin, we heard the sudden ploop of poop breaking the surface of toilet water. We all cheered, my mom and Sam high-fiving while Molly and I banged the soles of our feet against the tub. And then, we kept on reading.

The Necessity of Pound Cake



I have mastered the art of stress baking and I am an all-weather stress-baker. I stress-baked while watching my first blizzard in Salem, in my sweltering galley kitchen in Lowell, and with my ancient, apartment-sized stove in my third floor walkup in Media. As long as I have the ingredients, the stress-baking takes place.

I started making this pound cake last summer, shortly before my arrival on the mountain. My grandmother passed away in early June and we sat our version of Shiva for days. People came and went and as the last person to see her alive, I was not much in the mood to talk, let alone tell the story of her last hours over and over to all who visited. So I retreated to the kitchen and baked: lemon and lavender scones, homemade Hostess cupcakes, a carrot cake, and two of these pound cakes.

Every member of family with Southern roots has an auntie or a cousin who makes the Pound Cake that inspires such passion that some folks literally fight over it. I’ve seen family members temporarily stop speaking because of hoarded pieces discovered wrapped in tinfoil at the bottom of pocketbooks. For decades, Miss Helene made the Pound Cake, but she stopped a few years ago when her arthritis got too bad. I never intended to take her place or to make a pound cake that was even comparable to hers, but in my grieving, I managed to do both. We didn’t give much thought to cooking that week or even feeding ourselves properly, so we ate pound cake. I had to make two because a row nearly broke out between my uncles when the last two slices went missing. It’s a good thing I shop in bulk.

Ingredients

- 1 pound of butter at room temperature (reserve wax paper)
- 3 cups granulated sugar
- 6 large eggs at room temperature
- 2 cups cake flour
- 2 cups all-purpose flour, sifted
- 3/4 cup cow’s milk
- 1 1/2–2 teaspoons vanilla bean paste

1. You will need a stand mixer for the first part. Outfit the mixer with a paddle attachment. Cream the butter on medium until it turns white. This will take five-seven minutes, maybe longer. This step is important, so be patient. Scrape the butter down periodically and let it do its thing. While you wait, preheat the oven to 300 degrees and prepare your tube pan. Use the reserved wax paper from the softened butter to grease the entire pan, including the middle and all the crevices. Flour the pan by placing a half a tablespoon of flour in the bottom of the pan and turning it around until the pan and the center are completely coated. Add more flour if needed, and dump out any excess.
2. When your butter is ready, add the sugar one cup at a time and allow it to incorporate. Again, don’t rush the process. The butter/sugar mixture should be light and fluffy before you continue.
3. Add the room temperature eggs one at a time. Mix on medium until each one disappears into the creamed mixture and then add the next one. I recommend cracking the eggs ahead of time. Doing so will help you avoid getting egg shells in your beautiful batter.
4. Now it’s time to add your sifted flour and milk. Alternate between the dry (flour) and the wet (milk), beginning and ending with the flour. This is also an important step. You can turn off the mixer while adding flour to avoid the obnoxious flour splatter KitchenAid mixers are famous for. Use a rubber spatula to fold in the flour before turning the mixer back on. The batter should be smooth and free of lumps. If it’s not, use your handy dandy rubber spatula to crush them.
5. You will have a lot of batter at this point. Be not afraid. Turn off the mixer and remove the bowl from your base. Mix in the vanilla bean paste by hand with your rubber spatula. Be sure to get all the way to the bottom. It’s going to be a bit difficult to mix because of the volume of batter, but you can do it! Put your back into it.
6. Pour the batter into your prepared tube pan. Bake at 300 degrees for one hour 40 minutes to two hours or until an inserted long skewer or knife comes out clean. The top should be golden brown and cracked.
7. Cool it in the pan on a wire rack for 10–15 minutes. Remove from pan by using a large plate to invert the cake and place on rack right side up to cool completely.

8. Serve with macerated strawberries, a berry compote, with cool whip or just eat it straight up. It will keep in an airtight container for five days, but it won't last that long.

Notes:

- Pound cakes are meant to be simple cakes you can make with things you already have. I zhuzhed this recipe to include the things I had on hand, but all purpose flour, conventional eggs, and vanilla extract will work just fine.
- This is not a vegan recipe and vegan substitutes won't work here.
- Use whatever butter you have on hand. Serious bakers will say to use unsalted butter and that's perfectly fine. If you don't feel like putting pants on to go get it, use what you have.
- Organic brown eggs make for a delicious pound cake. Again, this is optional. Room temperature butter and eggs is not.
- The same goes for the cake flour. All-purpose flour is just fine.
- Vanilla bean paste is pricey and if you don't bake regularly, you don't need it. Sub 1 teaspoon of vanilla and 1/2 teaspoon of almond extract or just 1 1/2 teaspoons of vanilla extract will work.



Feathered Things

It was a poor night's sleep.

All night, on and off, I heard
the pitter of beak clack against
roof slate, ceiling shaking
and filling my dreams with
flashes of feathers and roosts,
tiny mouths open in yearning
to the sky, to the mother, to the
promise of being delivered the
regurgitation of wholesomeness.

Maintenance told me it was birds:
a nest of blackbirds on the roof,
that "the environmentalists"
would be angry if they moved
it, but I know they're lying.

It's obvious: the eaves-dwelling
dream-disruptors can only be a
brood of poems nesting roofside.

For maintenance has not heard the
cooing of trochees above my
head at night, the soft rustle of
inky beaks against line breaks,
or felt the ceiling bulge down
under the weight combined of
punctuation and purple prose
lying entwined like nightly swans.

And the environmentalists are
actually poets, and their anger

is actually the anger of seeing a poem die, and the pecking on the roof is the beating of a heart, the beating that keeps you awake saying: “Do not move. Do not remove me. Listen to me. Listen.



Between the Snow and Knowing You’re Home



We met north of the city. It was the holidays, December. This time of year somehow rekindles and revokes my nostalgia for home. We had missed morning mass. Outside, the church doors were locked and no wonder, it was a Monday. Dad rolled down his window to greet me with his Buffalo, New York mustache, snowflakes collected on its fringes. With a stiff “get in,” I climbed into the truck, his big Dodge reeking of cologne, Brute or something like snake oil. His rosaries, hundreds of them, hang from the rearview mirror in case someone asks for one. The rosaries swung back and forth like Marti Gras beads as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“You got enough money?”
“Yeah.”
“You aren’t broke yet, huh?”
“Nope.”
“Why not become a priest, Yai-yai? Seems like you don’t mind being broke?”
“Dad, I said I’m not broke.”
“Well, how’s your truck running? Can you even drive in all this snow?”
“It drives alright. I made it here, didn’t I?”
“Yeah, alright, smart ass. Hey, how’s your grandpa, Pop?”
“Oh, you know.”
“*Well, I don’t know!* Your mother doesn’t say a word to me . . . you got a rosary at home?”

We continued to chip away at small talk as he drove his diesel slow in the snow. Sheets of ice were hidden on the road and the snow covered everything in the city. It’s beautiful, the winters in New York, but there is something unsettling when a place as familiar as home is suddenly unrecognizable, encased in three feet of winter. If you can even see the world pass the six-foot towering snow banks. Even the tall signs for Tim Horton’s or the village bars had a thick icing to them and were frosted by the powdery drift.

We drove in silence while road salt kicked up in a dust and caked onto the windshield. My dad hates the winters, hates New York, and hates the quiet,

makes him think too much—of what? I don’t know, maybe of the winters, maybe of New York? He thinks of whatever it is that makes him reach for the radio. He raises the volume over the clatter of rosary beads. Trisha Yearwood and Garth Brooks playing over his thoughts.

“You know these guys?”

“Yeah, I know of Trisha Yearwood. I’m not much for Garth Brooks though.”

“C’mon. You don’t know these guys.” He adjusted the radio louder before the song finished out. “You know something, Yai-yai, Tennessee is the best goddamn place in the whole world. You don’t believe your old man, do ya? But I’ve seen it all. I don’t know what’s gotten into you because I don’t know what the hell you’re thinking by moving to New Mexico—it’s about family! Who the hell do you know in New Mexico?”

He continued, “I’ve been there for rodeos: nothing but dust—it’s too dry! I don’t know how you stand it. Is there snow like this out where you’re at?”

“Not like this. There’s snow, but it all melts pretty quick out there in a matter of hours.”

“Hmm. Well, ain’t too bad. How much you get paid? Is this a *real* job you’re working?”

“*You know dad.* One of our cousins, Laura, is out there in Colorado and Jeff Banks is in Santa Fe part of the year.”

“Yai-yai. *You* wanna know something? When I was you’re age I stayed home. I worked for my dad. You know why? Because I wasn’t a *bum* like you and because I loved him. Do your homework, kid: (Ephesians 3:14) and (Exodus 20:12). The Bible says ‘Thou shalt be obedient to thy father and to thy mother.’ Don’t you think you’re worrying your mother sick by being out there? Sheesh—New Mexico? I don’t know what the hell’s gotten in your head, kid. You should get your ass back to Tennessee. It’s the best place in the *whole damn* world—and I’ve seen it all.”

I tried to understand his argument, but sometimes there is no reason why we end up how we do. My dad rambled on for a while in his broken script: “the fake news,” “the liberals,” “the schools,” and “the phony priests.” Vietnam did that to him, or so I’m told. He’s got all those memories in him. That’s why he worries about me. That’s why he hates the quiet: he can’t hear himself think over his talking, over the static radio, over the crackling snow under the running diesel, the rhythm of the rosaries beating the dashboard: left and right, left and right.

Meanwhile I watched as the stoic landscapes around Buffalo disappeared: the metal bellies of airplanes sailing low over Genesee Street, the thick-skinned Buffalonians outside in shorts, and the rusted-out trucks with their shining new plows going up and down the roads, saving the day. *How nice and quiet it looks out there*, I thought to myself, almost in half-desperation. Dad turned the station to talk radio. He needs something to be pissed at other than me or himself.

We were almost an hour out of Buffalo headed to breakfast when we unexpectedly pulled into a parking lot of a stone-laid church. “C’mon, let’s go. We missed church this morning—when was the last time you’ve been to church anyways?”

There was an older man outside the church getting out of a tired-looking pickup with New Mexico plates. I tried to mention it to Dad, but he didn’t hear me over the hissing winds. He handed me a rosary when we got into the sanctuary—told me, “Here, go pray.” We sat in the back and I ran my fingers along the wooden beads, as if pacing. I don’t know who my dad knows here or if it was even a Catholic church.

“Does it matter?” He hushed me. “God is God—could be Baptist for all I care.” The early mass matinee was half-filled and attended by a crowd of eighty-year-olds—God love them—infusing the scent of incense with their decaying organs.

The priest took my attention as he stood to speak his homily. His voice sputtered like something Southern. Northern Alabaman? No, not enough syllables. Was he from the Carolinas? The mountains? The foothills? My dad nudged me.

“Hey, he sounds like he could be from Tennessee. You better pay attention, Yai-yai. That is a goddam sign.” I couldn’t agree more. Some places, like an old home or an old ghost, are impossible to escape.

...

Everyone has a story about New Mexico. It’s not difficult retelling mine. It’s just long and weird: The Greyhound, the haunted hogan, hitch-hiking, and the visions. There’s rarely room for a story like that during a meal, like breakfast, which me and Dad get with his friends after church. We sat around like war veterans at a VFW, cracking jokes and taking stock of small town politics.

One of the guys, Tony, an ex-cop, spoke up under his sagging eyes. He asked me where I’ve been living in Buffalo. That’s when my dad interrupted,

“No, you know what? This punk decided to do whatever the hell he wants and move to New Mexico!” Dad gave me a snarky smirk and leaned back in his chair: satisfied. But his friends all turned to face me, “Oh, Mexico! *Must be nice!* You speak Spanish, though?”

New Mexico, I corrected them. They all ask about my time out there. “You’s means to tells me that the snow *actually* goes away?”

For proof, I showed them all the photos I’ve collected of friends, the farm, and sunsets. All the photos were staged with an ever-sunny and ever-dry background. This made my dad’s friends drool. A part of me is disappointed that I can’t tell the larger narrative about the Southwest. It wouldn’t matter anyway. My dad is absent in our conversation, arms folded and staring off at the diner’s television.

Dad paid the tab and drove me back to my truck. My feet crunched through newly fallen snow and I crawled in the cab, kicking off the slushy mess from my boots. The ignition started and I gave my dad a nod through the fogged-up window. Despite his stubborn, impatient nature, there is something I can appreciate about my father: his willingness to wait until my engine turns, starts, and I am on my way. Before I drove off, he shared something that was almost like a smile, and waved.

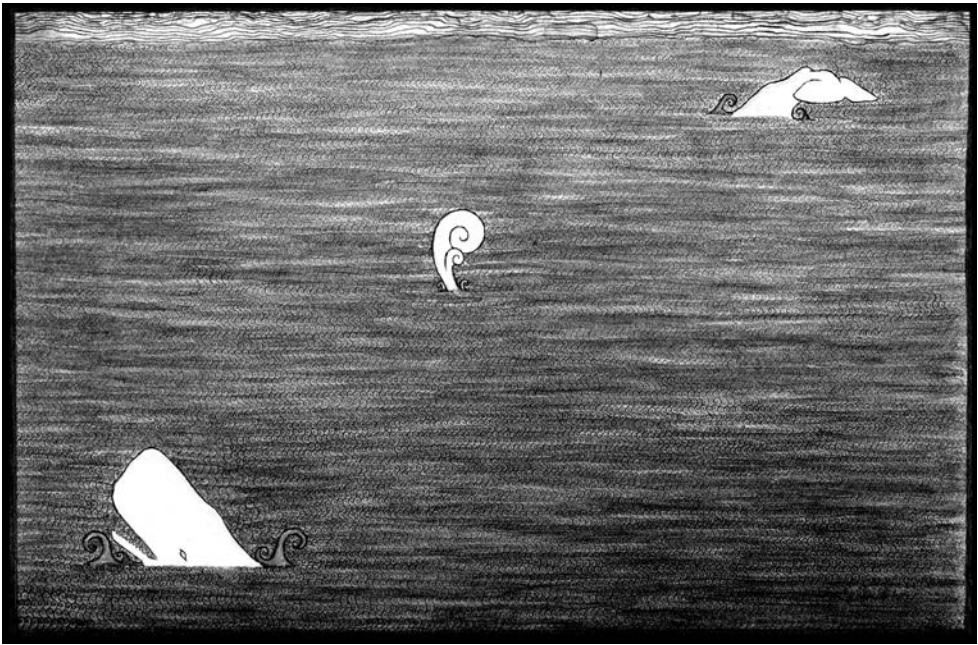
Every time my dad smiles I’m reminded to never stop believing in hope. To assure him, I’ll tell him that I will still go to church or believe in church. Of course, I don’t. But I’ll say things to appease him. I don’t feel guilty about it. Besides, there is enough guilt and doubt out there, especially here in Western New York.

I felt it, though, as I went past the airport, as I caught the Skyway, as I turned off onto the 599 to cheat the south toll, and as I ran the circuits of villages down to the Southtowns of Buffalo. I felt it in the cold air, crisp and visceral as home. That’s when I noticed that my nostalgia was for the familiarity of an old depression. Was that why I cared so much about the handyman too tired to fix his own dilapidated house, the quiet couple sitting in diners for hours just to get out of the cold, or the desperate Christmas decorations up year-round?

Fortunately, the roads were different in Hamburg, clear of snow. Nothing seemed to have changed when I arrived at my grandfather’s farm. It was

two o’clock and everyone in the house was asleep for a nap, exhausted from doing nothing all day. The snow started falling again. I milled about the house discovering fur piles from the dog that passed away. The basement was in the same shape that I had left it a year ago, the television on mute showing a CSI rerun.

Upstairs, one of the bedroom doors was open to a small twin-size bed. I crawled in, remembering the rope-suspended, horsehair-packed mattress from my childhood. It had been around all this time and still offered a hard sleep. At least it was warm under the sheets. For some time, I laid there quiet, relishing the solitary, soft sound of snow on the window sill. Thoughts about my dad crept in my head, as did the thoughts of what he said about New Mexico, New York, and Tennessee. And I thought about what he said about family and the choices we make. I thought about how sometimes we must leave home to know we were home in the first place: go too far before finally arriving at where it is we need to be. I had one of those thoughts before falling asleep, one of those profound thoughts that changed my life. *Would I remember this thought*, I wondered, right before I closed my eyes and drifted off?

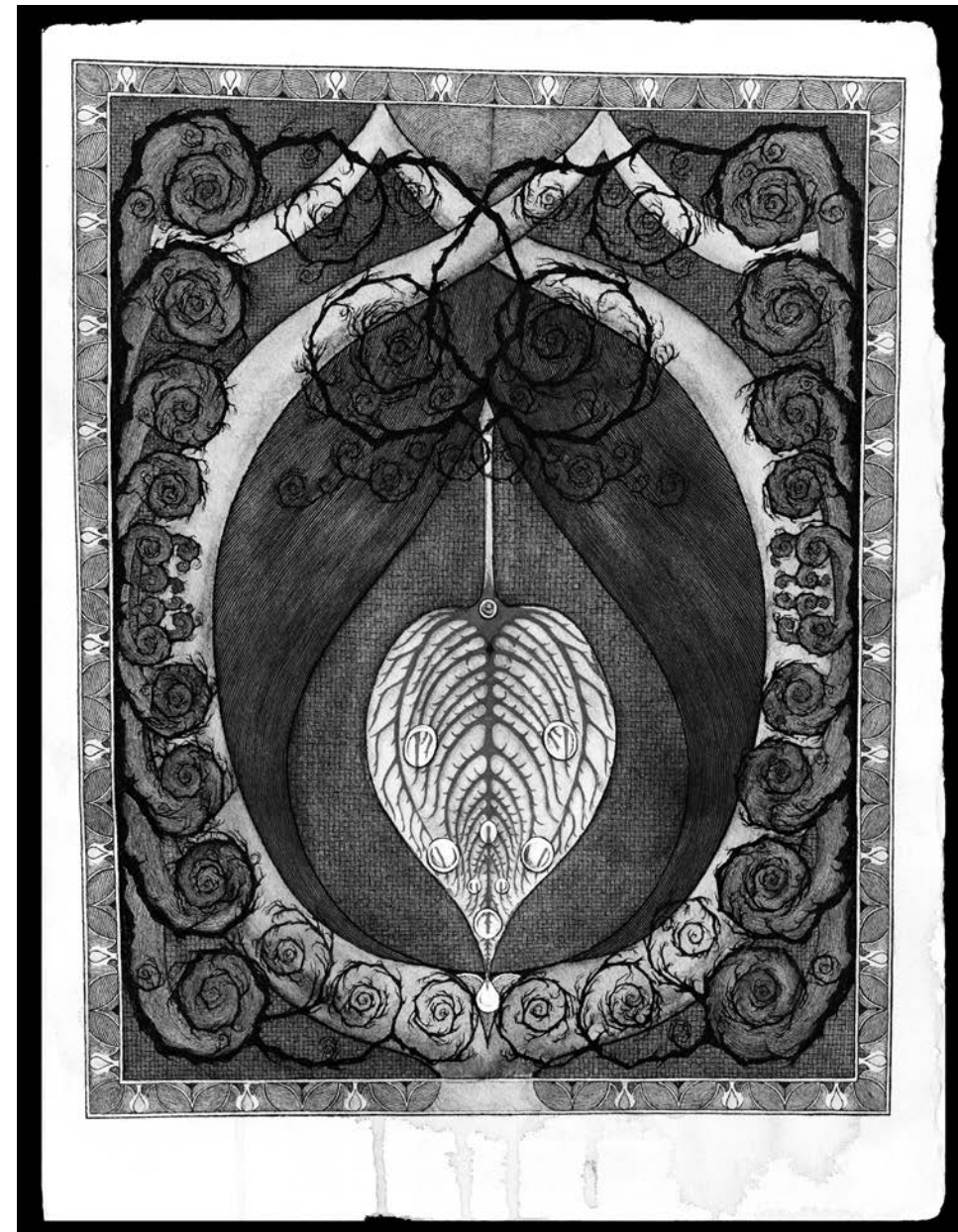


Wenzhou

But then upon our descent, there was grandmother's home embracing the Pacific: duck tongues, and *yang mei* berries crushed against our lips, reddening blooms like the way her plastic pouch of blood, vacuum-sealed, would dribble color back into her cheeks: persuade the clench and release of the heart, somewhere, a fist opens into the radiating heat of a sun and the folds of time tent outwards under such daylight: she is young again, running her hands through wet, rinsed, rice, its plentitude swirl in sweet sheets. When she looks out the window, it's only her children, chasing a rooster through the tallness of the grass, the sky, unpunctured.



XU LI



Hamlet on TV



I
Claudius slowly walks toward Hamlet, driftwood drawn
like a cross over his shoulders.

Cue music.

II
Quick cut to Ophelia, on the balcony, enigmatic
smile and all. Who is that guy she’s with?

III
Enough with the Ophelia stuff.
We cut away from Ophelia.

IV
The camera pans back, and we see
that Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not
Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Huh.

V
The ship sails headless, but it never leaves
the ramparts, gliding above it
at certain hours of the night.

VI
In a Shakespeare play, it’s not over
until everyone is dead
or everyone is married.
Depending on what type of play it is.

VII
By the time Ophelia drowns, we know
what type of play it is.

VIII
The plot quickens.
Hamlet knows that the blades are poisoned,
obviously. We see it in his eyes,
a grinning abandon, switchknife-serious,
when the camera cuts from the blades
to his face,
then back
to the blades.
Of course the blades are poisoned, we see him thinking,
everything is poisoned.

IX
The Ethan Hawke version is notable
for starring Bill Murray
as Polonius.

The Franco Zeffirelli version plays up the incest stuff
and stars
Mel Gibson.

And the Kenneth Branagh’s version stars
Kenneth Branagh.

X
“This? This? You expect me to correct
this?” It’s almost funny. He just keeps saying it.
“This? This?”

XI
We realize, as the camera pans back right at the moment of his death,
that we have been Hamlet
all along.
That as he kissed the mildew at his father’s tomb,
we also kissed that mildew.

XII
At the end, there is no Puck
to tell us that no harm’s done
and all is dream.

Only Fortinbras, waltzing in
to snatch up
the crown.

XIII
The whole movie has been a tour of Hamlet’s psyche
but was also a tour of our own, he explains. We nod thoughtfully.
Hamlet is the only character who could have written us, he continues. Sure.
This is spooky, but profound. We frown and continue nodding,
only now more slowly
and emphatically. Fortinbras takes
a bow.

Square Footage



Stephen’s nametag read: STEPH, which as you can imagine, caused a great deal of confusion for his clients, who didn’t know whether to call him “Steve” or “Stef.” He always nodded politely and acknowledged the confusion with an outstretched hand: “Just call me Stephen,” he would say. “That works best. The company gives us nicknames to make us seem more approachable.”

He liked explaining. He did it for a living. Explaining the specs of an apartment, of a building, of the DMV. What types of people lived where and for how much. He knew the consumer history of appliances and materials and the history of the neighborhoods and buildings. He thought of the people there as coming and going in waves. This wave now was mostly young folks from far away with long and short hair and tight clothes who were willing to pay a lot of money to live in a building with big windows. Stephen’s building did not have big windows. It was a large concrete edifice that frowned on the street below, far away in the NW quadrant. There was a liquor store across the street, between his building and another big frowny building. Sometimes he went to the liquor store to buy schnapps in little bottles, which he drank in front of his TV at night, over a small plastic dish of rotisserie chicken. He often made frozen Brussels sprouts, lightly salted, to eat with his chicken. There was one 8” by 10” window in his living room, which looked directly into the building across the street. The blinds of the unit opposite blinds were always drawn closed.

Stephen was lucky. Many of the units in his building were under rent control. His was one of them.

On this particular day, a drizzly day in September, suspiciously inclement, Stephen was showing one of the company properties in Eastern Market. The couple was young, and they looked identical. They were dating, or maybe cousins, or maybe close friends. He would wait to see how they touched one another—if they did at all—and use that as a clue. He shook the first man’s hand, who introduced himself as Evan but then hesitated.

“Just call me Stephen,” Stephen said. “That works best. The company gives us nicknames to make us seem more approachable.” Then he reached out the same hand to the other gentleman. “Ivan” that man said, with a thick European accent, and Stephen looked quizzically.

“Yes, we’re aware of the similarity,” said Evan. “Evan and Ivan moving in together. A match made in heaven. Lord knows what we’ll name the kids.” His hand drifted to Ivan’s smaller back.

“Hopefully not something too different,” quipped Stephen. “Ethan? Ervin, maybe? For the sake of consistency.”

They all shared a laugh together.

“Well shall we?” suggested Stephen, and he led the way up the stairs.

The unit was spacious to say the least. It had been awhile since he had shown this property. Then it got sold to a different person, by a different agent, and Stephen was unable to make commission on it.

The door opened to a large rectangular living room, which was distinguished from the kitchen only by a large granite island. The walls were white, the floors were chocolate brown. The kitchen had gray cabinets and chrome appliances. The appliances were all new. At the end of the rectangle were two rooms and a bathroom. One bedroom was spacious, with two walk-in closets and a master bath. The other bedroom was smaller, with only one closet. The walls in these rooms were white too, but the floors were carpeted. A light gray carpet.

“So,” said Stephen, “what do you think?”

Ivan and Evan surveyed the room. Ivan tugged at the blond hair outside his ears and Evan rubbed his own cheek. Then Evan said: “I don’t know what to say. I love it. How about you, Ivan?”

“I like it very much. I think it’s perfect. There’s lots of space.” Then he turned to Stephen. “The building is new, yes?”

“Indeed. Well, no. The building has been here since the sixties; it used to be a hospital. Well it was dorm space for doctors and nurses. But the hospital was struggling so it sold this building to our company and we redeveloped it.”

“Hmm, interesting” said Evan.

Stephen worried; maybe he shouldn’t have included that detail. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant thing for a client to think about, a luxury building where a hospital once lived. Yet he thought about it, with a metallic taste in his mouth, all the time.

“May we look around more?” asked Ivan.

“Surely,” replied Stephen, and he meandered over to the tall windows that overlooked the Capitol.

The unit was three stories up. Below, people walked the restaurants and

shops. This was a busy spot on a Saturday. Everyone—from the District, Maryland, and Virginia—congregated in Eastern Market on weekends to visit the farm stands and the flea market to buy things from local artists and vendors.

The apartment was prime real estate. Stephen wondered if they knew how much it cost: around \$550 K. For a two bedroom. Outrageous. And this is why, his thoughts tumbling, this is why everyone who grew up here—good decent people who bought homes, who opened businesses—homes, businesses and neighborhoods that thrived for years, with schools that often thrived, but yes sometimes struggled—couldn’t afford it. Nor did they understand all of it: where a local hole-in-the-wall once was, emerged a new bar with drinks twice as expensive; the grocery store where he went on Thursday nights for twenty years—owned by the Barnetts—swallowed by the yawning maw of a Trader Joes. And now everyone went there, even the people that frequented the Barnetts’ store.

Well, he supposed, that was the swing of things. Though, it didn’t seemed to him justified—fair in the least—that landlords were evicting people for petty reasons—that old, historic buildings were getting knocked down for bigmetalwindowed, luxury apartments, with pools and bars, in neighborhoods that were once reserved for the sequestering of people who were denied loans elsewhere, that school district was getting resegregated under the guise of *test scores*, that suddenly, women and men, with nice clothes and Audis, who said in the same breath to people he knew his whole life: “what are you doing *here*? In my neighborhood” and “I voted for Obama.” That all of these communities were once sucked of their wealth, deprived of opportunity, labeled as violent. And now—and now?!—the people who built lives there were being driven out, forced away, out of the town of Marion Barry, in the name of development and prosperity, development and prosperity that—

“We’ll take it,” Evan said. “Is the price on the website accurate?”

Stephen’s face broke into a rubbery smile and said, yes, yes it is—but let him double check the folder he had with him, right here, in his bag.

*

Stephen had charted the change of the region over the last few years. When the first buildings went up in a neighborhood now called NOMA—north of Mass Avenue—and the Navy Yard, he didn’t know what to make

of it. For awhile it seemed okay. More people coming in meant more money. More money was good. He knew people—other people who grew up here—who bought property for cheap, years ago, who were underwater for a little, but now were waiting for the development to hit them. They didn’t care what was happening to everyone else. This was perfectly understandable to Stephen, too. People needed a place to live. And yet he still felt unsettled—specifically with his job. He was morally against what was happening. But wasn’t he directly responsible for it? His job inextricably tied to this new predatory economy. He benefited directly, for example, for leasing Ivan and Evan their apartment at Eastern Market.

The next day, his supervisor—a man named Charles—praised him. “Great Job, Stef,” he said, clapping his hand on one of Stephen’s broad shoulders. “Keep it up—and maybe you could afford a unit like that someday.” Charles was 12 years Stephen’s junior. His nametag read: CHARLIE

*

Stephen leased a few more apartments, sold a few more condos. He couldn’t figure out what was different: he had always made a few jokes, began with a warm handshake, kept his temper about his nametag. At home he went home to his frowny apartment, drank his schnapps and ate his rotisserie chicken and Brussels sprouts.

Until one afternoon: a notice under each door. A notice detailing that the building was being demolished. The owner had sold it. Stephen called the housing bureau.

“Aren’t there mechanisms preventing this?” he raged. “Yes sir, but an investigation found your building unsuitable for habitation and your owner decided to sell it.” “I read the flier,” he said. “But I’ve lived here for 16 and a half years. Unsuitable how?” “That I don’t know, sir. I can transfer you to someone who does.” He passed Stephen on to someone else. “I believe sir,” said the new woman, “that the inspector found a crack in your foundation.” “There’s no crack in that foundation. The building’s been standing for 42 years.”

“I can pass you onto the inspector, sir, if he’s in, the one who did the inspection. If you’ll please hold . . .” Stephen said no thanks and sat down again. He pushed a brussels sprout through oily chicken and drained a tiny bottle of schnapps. He looked from his living room to his kitchen, from his kitchen over his wall and the framed pictures of himself as a young man with his late parents and childhood friends. There was one of him in a track uniform, another one of him with his prom date. His eyes read the spines of his books—everything from political science to horror—and darted to his record player, the cardboard worn around the vinyls. Every square inch of this one bedroom, his home. It was his. It had been his for almost 17 years. And now? He put the brussels sprout in his mouth and mashed it into a soft pulp—a tasteless green paste. Then he swallowed and gulped it down with another nip of peppermint schnapps.

*

The next day at work, Stephen did not tuck in his shirt. He did not arrive on time. When he went to show a unit to a young couple, somewhere in SE, he deliberately forgot their names. When they stuck out their hands to introduce themselves and said “how do you do, er, Steve?” He said, coolly and clearly: “Actually it’s Stephen.” He did not make a joke when they walked in. He showed them the unit. “Well here it is.” Then with a flourish of his arm: “All 512 square feet of it.” They poked around. He told them about the materials and the appliances. “The flooring is cheap, plastic shit,” he began, “and the appliances look nice, but they’ll be in here to fix them every other week.” “Ha,” the man said, “they sure don’t make them like they used—” “And, frankly, the guy who was here before didn’t treat this place too nicely. It used to be a school—can you believe that?—a beautiful red brick building, with hardwood floors, crown molding. Hand-cut, hand-laid everything. Made in 1871, just after the Civil War. And the guy who lived here—worked on K Street—trashed the place. There were stains on the wall. Holes in the countertop. Trash everywhere when he left. And we just cleaned it up.” “Well,” said the woman, “that’s unfortunate, we’re sorry to—”

“And half the block has left since they finished renovating this place. Actually the term *left* only applies to some of them. *Forced out*, would be more accurate. Do you know on what grounds?”

“I’m sure there was a perfectly reasonab—” the man tried to respond.

“What do you call reasonable?” Stephen, said, pivoting on his toes. “A man playing music too loud when he dances with his partner? A landlord taking the door off to get a family short on rent to leave? Two people smoking a joint? Are those reasonable reasons to take someone’s home away from them?”

The woman stepped up. “Thank you,” she said. “You’ve been very helpful. I think we’ve seen what we came to see.” She grabbed her bag and her man by the arm. Stephen showed them out. He didn’t shake their hands. He didn’t say anything as they walked away. When they rounded the corner, he went back into the building and into the unit.

Inside, he walked the cheap laminate flooring. He opened and closed the rickety cabinets, the chrome refrigerator, the sleek, black dishwasher. Then he did it again. Harder. Scuffed the flooring. Slammed the cabinets and the refrigerator and the sleek black dishwasher. He ran the water in the shower and the sinks. Turned the A/C on full blast. He paced around the room, recalling the memory of the schoolhouse before: with its deep window sills, the golden floorboards, the ornate carvings on the front door. He paced frantically, the same path, over and over, with nowhere to go. Then he stopped. He was in front of the bigmetalwindows. They halted him dead in his tracks. Stephen looked through them: the low row houses of all colors in front of him, the brand new park with the postmodern fountain. High rises behind it. People on the streets in blankets. Children riding past them on bicycles. More cranes looming beyond.

Stephen looked through the tinted glass and saw nothing on the other side. He ignored the houses, the park with the fountain and the high rises. The children on bicycles riding past the people in blankets left no impression of recognition on his face. The towering cranes were talons in the sky, ruthless and sharp. Standing frozen, eyes outward, he looked through this window for a long time, seeing nothing of himself in the faint impression of light reflecting off glass, glaring at the cranes lining the sky.

We Run in Burning Sands



MARIELLA SAAVEDRA CARQUIN-HAMICHAND

Cuban people
Sun-burnt people
yelling
“un pastelito y un cafecito”
College students in community classes stopping at the nearby McDonald’s to pick up two apple pies for \$1.99
Downtown streets rushing while homeless men
patrol for kind eyes and a hand slip into the pocket

Rushing, rushing to work
Brickell kids look sharp in crisp shirts that still contain starch from the dry cleaners
Constant honking

The stillness of complacency

washes over this place.
Waves crashing
howl of hurricane winds

We run in burning sands
Some of us couldn’t outrun them though

Salty air, humidity
Tears that dried from when they took my father
Heat on your forehead
Sand in your bikini bottom
Grains on your tongue
Tastes bitter though

I still miss the sweetness of his morning coffee
Instant coffee he whisked with a little water
before adding the milk
Gas fumes smoky
Skidding on asphalt
Checkpoints that derailed our car

He tried to switch seats with the passenger
but the police officer saw his game
Pulled us over
I couldn't say
Why, But then he was taken
Handcuffed in a business suit,
I looked away

Sudden rain
Umbrella flipping over in the rain
Wet

Escaping to carpeted bus seats
that leave a mark on my thighs
Because we can no longer drive

I make it home
Kissing mami cheeks to say hi
So much honking from today
Don't know how to make it go away

While tourist diners eat skirt steak
with chimichurri sauce in between their teeth



DENNY GONZALEZ

How You Got Here

You're forty-seven, homeless, and you meander through the streets of Paris. You haven't had a bite to eat all day because you're broke and people won't give you money to buy even a slice of bread at the baker's. You wait until the bakery closes and you think the baker will throw out the day's supply of bread. You're told that he is taking it to his family, who has plenty.

You walk alongside *la Rue d'Hauteville* and see the young couples kissing each other as they hold hands and cross the street. The snow begins to fall. Your blue hand trembles because it's frostbitten and you only have one glove. You use it as a sock because a dog took the other one and ripped it into shreds. The other hand is wrapped in medical bandages because your knuckles are broken. The cold December air makes your bones snap with every subtle movement because you're forty-seven and homeless.

You look at the moon, because it's the only thing that promises to come back after it leaves. It's full tonight and it shines bright, hovering above the city like your wife does in heaven. Cassiopeia resides beside it.

It was her favorite constellation; you remember that because it was the first thing she told you about herself. She loved stars and animals: her favorite animal was a tiger. It was yours too, for a little while, then you switched to wolves. When you cuddled that one unseasonably warm night in September twenty-nine years ago, she asked you why. You never answered her straight.

You knock on the door of the only place you know that could house someone like you because you're forty-seven and homeless: the church. You knock on the door of the rectory. You see a window dimly lit by candle flame. The curtain dances in the night air and pauses. The shadow doesn't move. It just stays in its place, as if it wishes you weren't there. You knock again, because it's almost midnight and you're cold and hungry and need a place to sleep. No one comes. You decide to take a piss, so what better place than on the rectory itself?

You know the bar on *la Rue Laffitte* is still open, so you decide to say "*Bon-soir*" to the people there. Philippe should probably be there; the two of you generally stay there until the bar closes anyway, talking about the Treaty and what it means for the country and Europe. You think that the Treaty will last a few more years, but Philippe is more positive; he thinks that Williamson from

the United States and his United League of Nations will prevent future wars from taking place. You want to correct him, but you realize that he’s drunk, so you bite your tongue. You wish him a good night, and Guillaume, and Frederic, and Aimon. *Good night, good night, good night, good lads. Good night.*

Before you walk out the door and back into the night, Guillaume comes up to you and asks how the job search goes. You lie and say that it’s going well, but you haven’t been searching for a job in six months. You say that you might work at a newspaper agency because of your experience writing, but the press is looking for more, younger people. He nods and says “*Bonne chance*” and wishes you well. He shakes your hand—he’s always had that precisely firm handshake.

You leave the bar and realize that it’s even colder outside, you’re still forty-seven, and you’re still homeless and hungry. And, worse now, it’s starting to snow again. You look up and see a girl in a window throwing out a cigarette onto the ground. She’s naked and beautiful, and her hair is so short. You would never have your daughter cut her hair that way, or even smoke. You love your daughter, but you never got to know her because she was never born—not like you planned. You remember how Therese always wanted a daughter, but you never had any children with her.

You wrap your Ulster coat around you as you shiver in the December chill. You forget that there’s a hole in its side because two weeks ago, a terrier mistook your coat for food because it’s homeless, just like you. You’re just like a terrier. The wind begins to pick up, leaves and filth and dirt gathering together in holy communion. You huddle over and hug yourself as you walk along the streets and make a left onto *la Rue du Faubourg* and question why you haven’t seen the signs for the *Champs-Élysées* yet. You know it’s nearby, but you cannot make out what is two feet in front of you let alone a city block.

You mutter under your breath. “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” in an entranced way. You hold onto your chotki and continue to mutter the phrase as you trek through the snowy urban hinterland, and press your face against the wind blowing in your direction. You can feel the mucus in your nose freeze. Your grammar school taught you your letters, how to tie a tie, and, more importantly, how to pray. A cat mews out to you in the alleyway nearby, and it walks up to you. Its black-splotched with bald spots on its body, especially near its tail. It strokes its head against your leg, then purrs. It sits, and wags its tail to and fro like the clock the factory used before it closed down.

“Here, kitty,” you say, taking off your cabbie hat, picking it up. You stroke along what fur it still has, and you talk to it as if it were your unborn daughter. You soon let go, because you see a policeman walking by. You settle into a standing fetal position and then you run, holding down your body, huddling over, and jumping behind a pile of garbage. You hold your breath, and stare out at the alleyway, looking at the tall hat pass by.

You sigh, relieved, and open your coat pocket, looking for the only photograph of you and your wife that you have left. You feel a tear alongside the bottom of your blazer pocket. You stand up and kick an empty can of pumpkin.

You wait until morning, when the soup kitchen will open and you can beg Fr. Pierre for entry.



Moose



After returning to this place
for several summers now, I too can
share that I have seen a moose.

I met this abrupt beast
as I jogged the graveled 7A-
South, bounding deeper into the Green

Mountain forest, shrouded
by fern, by beech, by white birch,
by oak, by disordered assemblages

of displaced Norwegian
spruce, by dappled light and
rippled water: this riotous

excess of green, this leafing, this
new root, this ceaseless rebirth —
amidst this resounding echo of our past

forest’s uprooting, this ghostly
mountain, this inherited memory of
our splintered time. The path is pebbled

with black and white butterflies,
smooth as skipped stones, clustered in
momentary cairns. An owl swoops

above and roosts above, alighting
on a rambling bough, who-who-ing
down to my sound. Descending into

the forest, my skull pounding
with uncoffined languages, unrooted
memories, my uncivil and unquiet breath.

This is now twilight. This is now
the final summer of my youth.
This is now my life, this

gasping flight into the gloaming
forest, this attempted atonement,
this incomplete absolution.

This human stench sweats off
in surges: springborn fawn and
skittered doe in sudden fright.

Nightwind’s gnash through
staggered limbs: beating heart,
bloodied brain, ragged body.

Footfall, limbflex, descent:
bouldersound, creekcall, night
hawk and batflap: moonrise overture.

There: a violet dusk. There: a
gathered shadow. There: an unshaped
presence. There: an unbound being.

And there: a moose! Mouthdrip: wetfern
and frond: new life; decay. Moosebody:
monolith: immediate, irreducible:

massive mudborne thing: boundless and
strange, obscured to sight, crowned with
a forested diadem, unsceptered and unthroned

sovereign. Moose-gaze: unsounded,
inscrutable: mountain pool, vault
of unseasoned sky: terror of signification.

This moose: This unlanguageable
being: This instant of transfiguration:
This unmistakable musk of the real.

This moose scoffs and stares
in the blue dusk, and with sudden
grace returns to the forest.



Maine Pit Stop



I switched off the radio and slowed down. Town center was still a ways away, but the line of cars had already started. The shops ought to be having an excellent day of it. Same with the old food shacks. They probably had an hour wait already, and it wasn't even eleven yet. Here was Route One's classic retail bottleneck, squeezing a highway's worth of cars in search of beaches and lobster rolls into a one-lane, crosswalk crisscrossed, oh-so-quaint New England village.

This place always put me on edge. It wasn't the too-hot sun scorching my unairconditioned car, nor was it the delay or the capitalism, either. Not really. The whole street just felt somehow hostile like it was glaring at each car in the slow parade of would-be Vacationland vacationers. If a stretch of road can harbor resentment, this one did.

I deserved this treatment like the rest of us, but did I need that now? No. I needed gas. That's what my dash was telling me. They say when your meter hits E you still have some twenty miles left in the tank, probably more. That way guys like me won't roll to a sad stop in the middle of an intersection. But, the orange arrow pointing to E made me nervous. I knew I had more than enough to get to the house and back. Everyone else must have arrived by now. I'd get the gas, though.

I signaled the left turn and sweated for the full minute it took to pull into the Irving station. I'd been here before. This time it was pump number three for me. I slouched against my Civic and smiled when the loudspeakers took up Creedence. "Have you ever seen the rain comin' down on a sunny day?"

I had. Mrs. Daly told my first-grade class that a sunshower happens because the devil beats his wife whenever he can't stand the sun anymore. Vintage projection. Today, no sign of rain. The man at pump four had sunglasses on. Maybe the devil just got himself some shades, too.

The numbers on the screen settled on \$28.12. The math didn't seem to add up, but it was going to be high anyway. I'd been thinking I'd grab a slice of pizza while I was here. It's not bad for gas-station pizza. But \$28.12 for gas. I'd have to go without.

The pump prompted me for a receipt. "Yes, please," I said aloud and pressed the button. Nothing came out. A message appeared on the screen.

“Go inside for receipt.” Fine.

I walked in and withstood a blast of unnaturally cold air. There was a line at the register. I walked over to the pizza stand to see what they had on offer. Lobster pizza? No way that’s real.

The woman behind the counter was on the phone, and the customers in line were fidgety. Her mussed hair and uniform made her look like a harassed soldier. Not infantry, maybe a colonel of the Confederate Army a day before Appomattox. The floor was well waxed. I tapped my feet. Was that Bryan Adams they had crooning from the ceiling speakers? I doubt he ever meant a word he sang. Yeah man, I’m also finding it hard to believe. We sure are in heaven.

“Can I help you?” the cashier asked, hand on the phone receiver. Apparently, I’d drifted toward her. When I met her gaze, the shock of her hard eyes startled me. What was I doing here? Everyone I wanted to see would be at the house already, and the dog would want to go out. I needed a receipt? For what?

I mumbled something about the bathroom. The woman pointed.

A sudden, painful urge to pee took me. This was a message I could understand. I staggered toward the restroom at the back, down the corridor, past the walk-in beer cooler.

I tried the handle to the men’s room. Locked. I slumped against the wall, trying not to think about this awful need to urinate. Did that woman do this to me somehow? Was this the real reason I stopped for gas? Not to pump up but to pump out? It didn’t matter. The pressure was sending shock waves through me. I thought I was going to be sick. I thought I was going to piss myself.

All I could do was distract myself. I worked hard to envision the bathroom. This station took care of its restroom, not like the graffiti-crusted jobs they have everywhere else. Clean, with tan tiles, a Winslow Homer on the wall, and a basket full of sea shells. That basket had a nice doily to sit on and an antique-looking, white cabinet for a pedestal. What a relief last year when I found extra toilet paper in there. Plus, for a single bathroom, it had a urinal, too.

I was salivating over that urinal when the door swung open. An old man bent over a four-pronged cane was struggling to shuffle over the lip of the threshold. I took his arm, holding the door open with my free hand. He stank of the jasmine air freshener.

“Here we go, sir. Almost out,” I said. The man smiled and said something I didn’t catch. Just a bit farther and the men’s room would be mine.

As soon as the man had cleared the path, a sun-burned boy ran up and ducked into the bathroom. He yanked the door from my fingers and slammed it shut.

I sighed. My anguished bladder throbbed. What of it? It was just another part of life now.

Minutes passed. The pop crap they had going gave way to that “Summer Breeze” tune. It’s an eerie one to listen to when waiting for a gas station toilet. I think they wanted it to sound pleasant and languid like a nice summer’s day, but that’s not the effect. And what’s with those lyrics?

The old man I’d helped hadn’t gone far. He was peering into a fridge full of sodas. What a funny old dude. He was holding up his double-pleated pants with his thumb. His name, I decided, was Mr. Jasmine.

Mr. Jasmine caught me looking at him. I forced a smile.

He tapped his wobbly cane over to me. “Why not use the little girl’s room?” he said.

“Thanks, but I can wait,” I said.

He leaned over and squinted. “I’ll keep an eye out for you.”

“No, really. I have nowhere else to be,” I said.

“You’re sure about that?” he asked.

Who was he to ask me that? I knocked on the men’s room door to get rid of him. No response. I knocked again. Nothing. I jiggled the handle, to see if the kid really was in there. No dice.

“Just use the other one,” the old man said. “I don’t have anywhere else to be either.” He winked.

I looked at him. What was he on about? I hesitated. I had nothing against using the lady’s room, not really.

“Alright, thanks,” I said.

I reached out and yelped. The door shocked me. A bolt of lightning had burst from the lady’s room door to smite my hand. Sure, a very small one, but the same idea. Electrons were banging around, and I was caught off guard.

Mr. Jasmine grinned behind his thick glasses. “It does that to everyone. Not to worry. I’ll be right outside looking out for you.”

He kept smirking at me, so I took the lady’s room door and stepped inside. No lightning this time, but I didn’t like being treated like a little kid afraid

to pee without grandpa to hold my thing for me. I lifted the lid. No urinal to enjoy in here. I unzipped ready for release, ready for relief, but nothing came. Really? Nothing at all? I tried to squeeze some out, just wring out a drop or two. I strained like a middle-aged man who forgot his FloMax. I zipped up again and let the seat fall. I guessed I never really had to go.

I looked around. This was the mirror image of the men’s room I knew. The sinks and toilet bowls shared a wall and in place of a urinal, a wicker deck chair. Did people really sit in that chair? It was a nice bathroom and quiet. The ceiling speaker must have been disconnected. Everything was just as clean with those tan floor tiles that made the warm lighting warmer. There was a white cabinet, too, probably packed with t.p. and on top, another doily and a basket. Instead of sea shells, this basket had some pine cones.

I plucked one out, felt its sharp edges and admired the spiraling scales. This thing really grew from a tree and held the seeds of a generation that might outlive us all. Somewhere, there might still be a great big pine that made this perfect package for its babies. Maybe, a bunch of trees stand around their mother now, all making food and breathing out oxygen in the sun.

Without thinking, I tossed the cone up in the air. It hit the ceiling speaker and bounced off at an angle. I lunged to catch it, but it glanced off my fingertips and rolled behind the toilet. I got on my hands and knees. It felt creepy to paw around back there where I couldn’t see. I pulled the cone out but hit my head hard on the toilet bowl. The pain stopped me noticing at first what was dangling from the pine cone in my hand. A used condom, snagged on one of the cone’s tiny protective barbs. A spasm sent the pine cone and condom flying across the room. God, the juice was all over my hand.

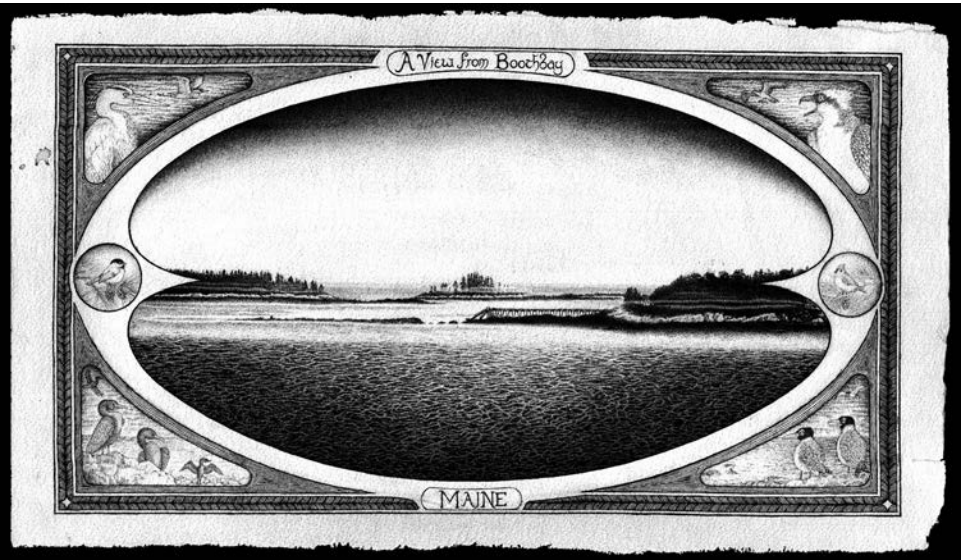
I washed my hands several times and sank back into the wicker chair, out of breath. I felt like I wanted to cry, but I didn’t know why. The silence in here, the cleanliness, the nice basket of pine cones all seemed to press in on me now.

I rubbed my eyes and blinked. There was that Winslow Homer print on the wall. It was the dim sunset painting, identical to the one in the men’s room. The same silhouette women carrying the same empty lobster trap across the same granite slabs along the Maine shore. Homer had painted the ocean on fire, while the sun just peeked over dense clouds. The ladies had their backs to the sunset glory, faces in shadow. There was a sailboat out there, too, crossing the blazing waters, but it was also dark. It would’ve been menacing if it weren’t so small, so insignificant. The label in the margin said, “Sunset, Saco

Bay by Winslow Homer, 1896.” I wished the ladies could turn around and witness what was happening behind them, but they were stuck forever in twilight darkness, nothing to show for a hard day’s work. Did they ever get a vacation?

I picked up the pine cone and left. I did not touch the fallen condom. Outside, I heard the door to the men’s room close. Mr. Jasmine was gone. Of course. Something awful was playing on the radio, but I didn’t listen. The woman behind the counter gave me a funny look, but I ignored her, too. I walked out into the sun.

Traffic really wasn’t so terrible. When I got to the house, everyone was out already, probably for a late lunch. The dog was sleeping on the couch, but she didn’t mind me scratching her ears. I scooped her up, and we walked down to the shore. She did her business by a tide pool full of algae and mussels. I picked up a handsome pebble. She sniffed a dead crab. We sat down on the rocks and regarded the light shining on the waves. I threw the pine cone in.



FELINE

Feline
Quiet, Patient
Stalking, Watching, Hunting,
Show that Lion who’s Boss,
McNulty!



STACEY MITCHELL KING

To The Night’s Meadow, He Wonders—
But Why Is It Here, This Place?

AMY SCHWARTZ



This lolling Mother’s lap
Lush and dreaming
Offering soothing sips of mountain vapor

This hovering lumination
Transposing Sky to Earth
Rewriting constellations

This tumbled ley line
Carving Time
Pulsing tranquility
Electrocuting bare foot sole

—here, Trees speak—

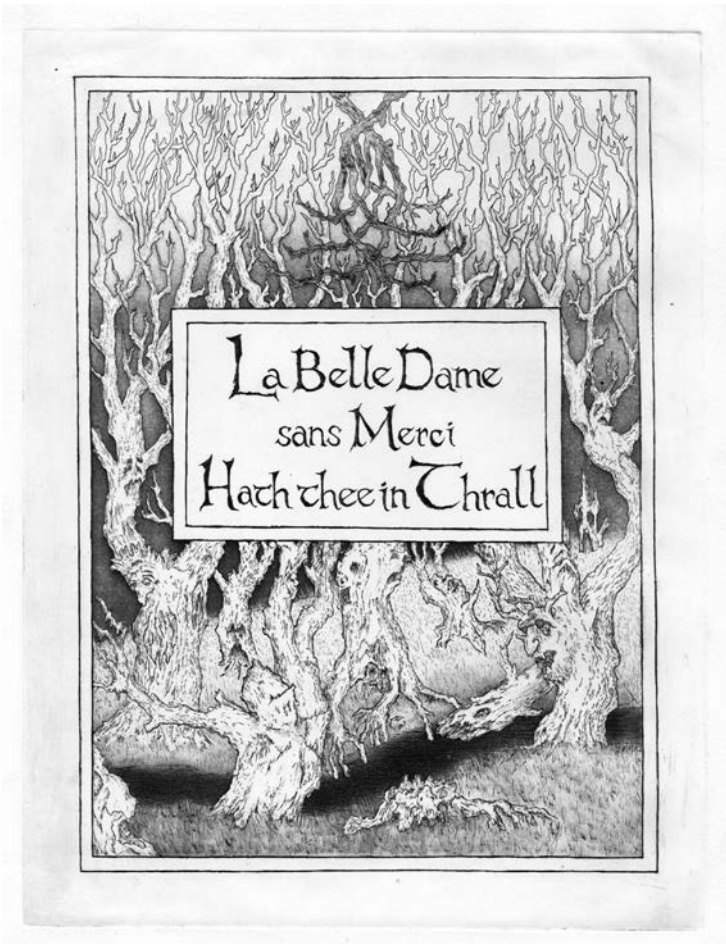
Waves of laughter travel and shake
purest Life from a
thousand twinkling boughs

Reach—just behind
verdant dirt
Run fingers—over
countless quivering blades

Find—the answer
To the longing
To the shadow’s slant

Breathe deep,
this
surrendering
of
Heart

It begins somewhere
between the
Whispers of petal-medicine
and Jupiter’s unwavering watch



Discipleship



On most summer nights, Peter was awake while the others slept, straight-backed and cross-legged on the patch of beach house roof he had come to claim as his own. He reached his rough perch of asphalt shingles by stepping barefoot onto the bedroom windowpane and hoisting himself through the opened dormer window. As a kid, he’d crawled through on hands and knees, telescope clamped under his arm and the quilt from his bed bunched around his neck and shoulders. He moved tip-toeing and careful back then, convinced he would trip and fall to a gruesomely fractured death. Now, confidently turned thirteen, he was no longer frightened by the scare-tactic statements his father used as warnings when he found Peter asleep on the rooftop. Now, he stepped through fully upright. There was a sense of pleasure in moving without caution, trying on the movements signalling an assertive control of body. He had once seen Jack Wilson from down the beach, in one clean movement, hop from porch railing to beach and then duck to turn a somersault.

Sometimes from the porch beneath him he heard the mumble of his parents and the clicking of ice cubes in glass tumblers, or, on nights his father drove into town to stay the night with his grandmother, the quiet static of a late-inning Red Sox game his mother twisted radio knobs to find. She listened on some kid radio, one of the relics of the beach house, left behind by his Uncle at the end of a forgotten childhood summer years before the days of Peter and his brothers and sister. From inside the bedroom he shared with Henry and Thad, he could hear the mosquitoes hum their protests at the night’s humidity. He was solitary in a way impossible to be at the house in the suburbs, within the blue-shuttered world of crowded carpools to Sunday School passing kiddie pools and their bobbing Barbie heads.

He picked at a scabbed-over mosquito bite on his knee. He was disciplined. To pass the time he bit off the edge of his thumbnail and spat it over the edge of the roof. The night was dark, clinging to his shoulders as he turned towards the side of the house. He’d fought with Jack Wilson, so he knew the older boy wouldn’t be waiting for him perched in the seagrass between their cottages. Peter looked in that direction anyway. His eyes were used to searching for the glare of Jack’s old camping headlamp, and he found that his body was secured by this routine: he sat still, eyes fixed, waiting to be freed by the

flashing signal they had first agreed on in the second grade. But the breeze caught the seagrass and revealed nothing but Jack’s absence.

Friendships between Jack and Peter lasted only summers at a time; Jack’s fisherman father didn’t keep up with the phone bill and neither of the boys was patient enough for letter writing. Theirs was a hurried, unwavering friendship, fraught with the desperate need Peter felt to squash a year’s worth of companionship into two months of summer vacations. Jack once laughingly admitted to imagining Peter as he was in his life after the beach, in September: buttoned up in some private school uniform, surrounded by other boys who were less perceptive but more self-involved. Peter lied by telling Jack he never thought of him in the winter. In actuality he told himself elaborate stories about Jack in December, wrapped in a knit scarf and tracking footsteps through the snow on the beach and then watching snowflakes bob up and down on the lazy winter surf. Peter had taken to spending summer memorizing baseball statistics. He once caught Jack trying to read up on astrological science.

Eyes adjusted to the night sky absent of Jack’s morse code signal, Peter shifted his weight and lay flat on the roof, sliding closer to the edge until the heels of his bare feet slipped into the cool aluminum of the rain gutter. There was an expectation and then a relieved sense of familiarity as Peter turned to gaze above. His body was taut and tired from swimming back and forth against the current earlier that day. He had raced Jack again and again and again. Jack won every time.

He pressed against his cheekbone where he could feel the bruise forming. Jack had hit him with a closed fist. But it was Jack’s snorted grunt of derision, heard as Peter turned away and tripped over the old rowboat, that still stuck in his mind.

As he breathed in the sight of the constellations, his arms spread wide away from the sides of his body. He squeezed his eyes shut when he could not find Jupiter, distracted as the static hum of the old radio emerged from the living room window below and one of his brothers began mumbling in his sleep, the sounds of his family breaking the lullaby of nights alone above the beach. Twisting his palms to face the sky as if expecting fallen meteors to drift into his opened hands, he disciplined his eyes to search out Leo, Virgo, Titan.

Jack liked to tease that if Peter could only knock off his habit of over-swinging at even the easiest of pitches, he would make good second base material. *You’re just the right combination of density and brightness*, he’d joked.

Kissy Kissy



Sunflower cherry bay sweet snow pie
purple tree gold bed
honey blue sky

Cranberry lilly pad
cottonwood bark
poppy rose blue bell meadow meadow lark

Duckbill buttercup little puppy tongue
yellow bird haystack
wine butter rum

lemon silk rose pine apple-wood berry
cherry of the daffodil
whey of the dairy

wood thrush red breast blue footed booby
bobolink cockatoo
owl eye ruby

bluebird diamond wood brown brown barn
pink avocado
wool wax yarn

sunny in the grass grass dark in the field
I’ll race you to the hayloft
bumblebee, teal.

H2O



MAUREEN HENDERSON

1929

Adding up columns in the ledger, she pauses and lays down her pencil. Again she’s seen him turning in the depths of the river. He’s never face-down on the surface, never a bloating corpse.

Because she’s doing math Winnie begins to wonder: is there an equation to somehow estimate how a part of Frank could make it back to the waters of his birth, all the way back to Marseilles?

How long might that take? What factors should be considered? Wind and ocean speeds and temperatures, currents tracking east, the rate of deterioration of the body in water. Activity of predators.

She’ll make the journey to France, someday. She’ll wade into the bay and wonder where he is.

1928

Other bodies float ashore in the spring, found by Scouts on the beach. Two more are dislodged from debris at the bottom. Diving stops as winter comes again.

It’s Winnie’s hope that his body is never found. Better to think of him at home in the element, eyes closed, wearing what he wore to the ferry that morning. His chin bobs slowly to his chest; his limbs twist softly in the current. Drifting out to sea, dissolving in peace.

1927

In court, the company first takes the position that the accident is not their fault. An act of God, a cost of doing business on the river. The argument doesn’t hold: fifty dead is too high. *The Linseed King* should never have made the trip. The company changes its position, blames it all on the captain. The Supreme Court will decide the case, but not for many years.

1926

December 20th

6:52 a.m. The ship is under. All in the cabin are drowned, and most of the crew.

6:50 a.m. Frank, on the deck, tries to pull men from the tilting cabin. He’s been a captain, he’s been a soldier, he’s been in charge. Where’s the actual captain? He gets a man out but is thrown against the gunwale, landing hard on his neck.

6:48 a.m. Midstream, an ice floe gashes through the bow.

6:30 a.m. The *Linseed King* leaves port.

6:10 a.m. Ferry arrives. The crowd rushes onto the boat, many squeezing into the windowless cabin.

5:30 a.m. Men responding to a day-labor call await the boat which will take them over the Hudson to New York. Frank’s made the trip before: a well-paying gig. It’s also a shot at a full-time job, at a plant producing linseed oil. The twenties have not roared for him.

4:30 a.m. Frank slides from their bed, slips into overalls, kisses her naked shoulder goodbye. She rises on an elbow, salutes with her other hand, sings “La Marseillaise” with a thick Jersey accent as he leaves, laughing.

1924

Coming back to himself at last, and coming back to her bed.

Debris from the Storm



KIM COOPER

You sit at your kitchen table pressing your thumb into the side of a half-full can of beer while counting the stacks of plates and bowls on the shelves before you. When you catch a glimpse of yourself in the glass oven door, your hair teased out by the sides of your ears and your cheeks slightly puffy and red, you realize just how drunk you are. Your friends came over for lunch and drinks, but you kept drinking after they left, empty cans accumulating before you, and you lost track of time.

In thinking about how many beers you’ve had since lunch, and in trying to count how long it has been since then, you get thinking about how you never even noticed the time, and you start believing maybe that’s the real issue. You think back to five years ago when it started, press your hand to your temple, and close your eyes against the blurring edges of your kitchen counter. You take a deep breath, inhaling the stale scent of warm beer, and you remember the breath you took the first time you saw her.

On the first day of your new job, you stood outside your office in a circle of people and she looked at you from the corners of her hazel eyes. You felt weightless, like you could float away and the only thing that could keep your feet on the ground would be the touch of your fingertips on her arm. All you wanted was to place them on her shoulder, to slide them down her muscled, tan arm like a stream over rocks, or maybe like a feather over a blade of grass. You wanted to feel that friction. And you did. She smiled at you, asked if she knew you from somewhere, scrunched her eyebrows together, and tilted her head to the side. The sound of her voice lit you on fire and you burned, burned, burned. You loved it. You threw yourself into it, and in three weeks, you’d throw yourself into her bed.

You open your eyes for a moment, cross and uncross your legs. You fall heavily to one side of the chair as you negotiate gravity for the fourth time that afternoon. You think about the first time she invited you over. She wasn’t supposed to—there was someone whose picture hung next to her bed. You weren’t supposed to either—there was someone in Europe writing you letters, writing you emails, telling you she loved you, that she’d wait. You knew it was a bad idea, going over there, but you could not shake the thought that she was the best idea, the most brilliant idea, the fucking sexiest idea. So you went.

You looked at the picture next to her bed. The girl in it was beautiful, and you wondered why she’d risk her for you.

You got on her bed, but not in it. You stayed near the edge where her shimmering skin, her tight muscles, her lips, the perfectly rounded underside of her ass, were far enough away to avoid a mistaken touch. From that position, you thought, you would need to leap: you would need to throw the blanket off your lap, put one hand against the wall behind you, push off and twist your body toward her, legs on either side of her waist, your hair falling next to her face. But you knew you wouldn’t do that—she would. You knew this because every time she lifted her leg up to readjust it, she inched it closer to your thigh, the tips of her toes a whisper against your leg. You burned, burned, burned.

You didn’t start this way though. When you first went over, you stood at her kitchen table sipping a beer. You rested your face in your hand, played with your hair, and made eye contact only if she called your name. And she did. *Lady*, she said, *come with me into my room*. With your elbows resting on the table, you cradled your neck in your hands as your head dropped down toward your feet. *You know I can’t do that*, you said. She smiled, *don’t be crazy. My drunk roommates are on their way home*. Just come in. So you did.

You can’t remember what you talked about once you sat on her bed, just vocal vibrations as words fell out of your mouths in a gentle hum. But there wasn’t anything gentle about the currents of heat running from your hips to your fingertips. You wanted to detail the way you could feel your pulse in every inch of your body when you looked at her. You wanted to tell her that you felt like you knew her from somewhere too, that from the very moment you saw her you wanted to be part of her, to press your palm to her palm and not know which hand was yours; you wanted her to know that the girl in Europe seemed so insignificant compared to her.

A kiss had been on your mind for so long that when she said it, you almost didn’t hear her, you almost didn’t believe her. *All I can think about is kissing you*, she had said. You looked up at her, made eye contact immediately, and said *what?* as if you hadn’t ever considered placing your hand behind her neck and your finger on her lips, pulling down, parting them open and touching their insides, soft and warm, the ones you stared at for the past three weeks. She didn’t repeat herself; she knew she didn’t need to. So you said again, *you know I can’t do that*. You felt betrayed and hopeless with those words on your

lips. You did not believe them. You hoped she didn't believe them. You thought about the wall behind you, pushing off of it, your legs over her waist, your hair in her hair, rolling around her words—*do I know you from somewhere?*—in your mouth until you could taste the way she wanted you on your tongue and you said, *I can't kiss you, but I can't leave.*

For a moment, you both let silence, hot and damp like air before rain, fill the space between you; you wondered if she would obey your words or if she knew you were full of shit. Finally she said, *fuck it*, and she kissed you and her lips were fire. You kissed her too, and that fire in her lips both heated and cooled you and you wondered if anything could get better than that kiss. You questioned everything you knew about sex because that kiss pulled at every string in your heart and pressed lightly between your legs. Still, you accelerated and your hands ripped off her clothes, your tongue traced her body, your hips pushed into hers, your teeth closed around her shoulder, and your lips smoothed over her ear. You did not let her touch you: when her hands pulled at the band of your pants or slipped under your shirt, you wove your fingers between hers, directed her hands to the back of your neck, and with palm on palm, you pressed them both into your flesh to imprint them there, to keep them there. This, in your mind, was better, safer. But you did not think about the girl in Europe. You didn't feel badly for what you did, and as you watched her head dip back behind her shoulders as you drew yourself into her, you knew what you were doing was falling in love.

You think about all of this alone in your kitchen, the one that you designed together. You did fall in love that night, you think. You fell in love that night and the night after, and you fell in love in the mornings when her hands on your rib cage were the first thing you felt. You fell in love when she kissed you outside the airport before leaving for a trip that would take her away for the first time since you met; *fuck it*, she said again, *I don't care who sees*, and she kissed you in a way that made you feel like you could disappear, that you could be swallowed by her lips and live weightlessly within her, not caring about gravity. You can remember every detail of that kiss, of every kiss, and of every night she molded you with her long, slender fingers, but now you cannot feel the fire that once burned. But now you cannot believe the cold morning kisses on the corner of your shoulder, and you wonder how many more she will give before she is swallowed by the silence of your turned back.

You open another beer and listen to the hiss of the carbonation jolting out

of the can. You shift your gaze from the can to the oven to check the time as if acknowledging the passing of another twenty-five minutes will sober you up. *Three twenty-five*, you say out loud, and the dull sound of your voice startles you and compromises your balance once again. You sit up straight, realizing that you need to take yourself seriously, and you start doing the math: your friends came over around twelve thirty, nine beer cans line the table before you, and three years ago you asked her to move in on the late October day when you when you stumbled upon this kitchen table at a yard sale. She had climbed on top of it, thrown her arms to the sky and said *yes, yes, yes, yes, yes* until you met her up there on the table and pulled her back down. The time on the oven, nine beers, five years, and you've fallen out of love. You remember the day you spent crying in bed, her body lying useless and warm next to yours. She ran those slender fingers through your tangled hair and smiled at you through the corner of her perfect mouth. *Just let me in*, she said; *let me help*. You couldn't do anything but cry, and her hands in your hair felt like they were around your throat. You didn't know where your sadness came from, but you knew it belonged to you, to only you, and that it wasn't hers to cure.

You look back at the time, hoping it moved backwards but knowing it wouldn't, and it dawns on you that she'll be home soon. You know that, even if you clean up all the empties and brush your teeth, she'll know you're drunk. Worse than that, she'll know why. You start to feel dizzy, and whether it's all the math and measuring or all the beers, you can't help but wonder if you'll ever forgive yourself for falling out of love.

You wonder if you'll ever talk about it. You wonder if you'll ever have the courage to tell her. You take another long sip of your beer and swallow slowly because you know she's terrified, clinging on to the lonely, tattered scraps you give her. When you kiss her, her lips don't feel like fire, and that burns you right down to your core. You remember watching a storm with her once on a dock, thunder unpacking itself in the sky, lightning illuminating the storm's debris. She rested in between your legs and you wrapped your arms around her, your lips against her ear, and you whispered to her that you wanted to watch the next one thousand storms with her. Now in the moments before sleep, she presses her forehead into your back and tries to hold your skeleton, and you know she knows you're a liar.

As you drain the last sip of beer, you think about the conversation you had with your friends a few hours back. One of them told you about her little sis-

ter’s heartbreak, how she spent four nights in a row sleeping at the foot of her parent’s bed in tears. *How could a young love like theirs be real*, you asked, *isn’t she too young to know if she was ever in love?* Your friend called you insensitive, and moved on with her story. You think about that now, and figure she might be right. After all, you were once unafraid. You once trusted your heart. *We were just smooth*, you think, *we sang. We grooved*, you say, and again you realize you’re speaking out loud, pushing the moisture on the table back and forth with the sway of the can. *We grooved, we grew, we grafted together; we loved fierce, we loved hard, we loved until all our love was smooth, too smooth. Yea*, you say, nodding your head in agreement with yourself, *she’s empty, we’re flat, and I’m gone.*

You decide not to clean up the empties. Instead, you open another beer and hold it tightly in your hands, the cold moisture from the can dripping down your wrists. You know that if you’re a mess, and if the kitchen is a mess, she’ll have something else to say other than: *Why are you disappearing? Where have you gone?*



The Fox Hole: A Fable



Once upon a grassy knoll beneath an old oak tree
a fox named Finnick dug his hole and lived there happily.

The hole was small, and simple too, but Finnick didn’t mind.
It kept him warm in winter months and cool in summertime.

Of all the places in the world his little legs had roamed,
Finnick loved this place the most and proudly called it home.

But, one day, Finnick heard a songbird singing in a tree
and had the thought, “What if that bird is better off than me?”

Thoughts like this gave way to more as discontentment grew,
till Finnick finally left his hole in search of something new.

“I’m off to find the place for me,” he said with head held high.
“A bigger, brighter, better spot that’s sure to satisfy.”

First, he found a sturdy tree – though climbing it was tough.
He fell too many times to count, but made it soon enough.

Higher up, he reached a branch that had a cozy nest.
“What a view!” he gladly said. “This treehouse is the best!”

But, suddenly, a hawk swooped down and flung him from the tree.
“THIS IS MY HOME! GO BUILD YOUR OWN!” the hawk squawked
angrily.

Shaken up a little, Finnick made his way again,
higher up a steep ravine and ‘round a narrow bend.
Coming to an open cave, he smiled with delight.
“Home, sweet home!” he said with pride, “This cavern is just right!”

There, along the shaded walls, he found a place to doze
on something smooth and soft as moss – a boulder, he supposed.

No! It was a grizzly bear who woke in agitation.
“HOW DARE YOU,” the Grizzly roared, “DISTURB MY HIBERNA-
TION!”

Finnick ran his little legs as fast as they could run,
racing up the mountain’s edge beneath the blazing sun.
Panting as he reached the top, he turned his panicked face.
Thankfully, the sleepy bear had given up the chase.

Then, beside a rock, he found a bed of flowers and grass.
“The sun is brighter here!” he said, “I’ve found my home at last!”

But just when he had cozied up and started to unwind
an angry, sneaky-footed cougar swiped him from behind.

Finnick plunged into the gorge and tried his best to fly.
“Happy Landing!” called the Cougar, waving him goodbye.

Thankfully, a rushing river softened Finnick’s fall.
Currents, swirling, sent him hurling like a cannonball.

On and on for many miles, he spiraled, spun, and swam,
till, at last, the current slowed and led him to a dam.

Crossing to the other side, he came upon a lodge,
beautifully designed with different branches, sticks, and logs.

He made his way inside the lodge and dried out all his fur.
“A river home!” he said, “Now that’s prime real estate for sure!”

But, suddenly, a mama beaver charged in with her kits.
“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND!” she yelled, and gave him quite the hit.

Finnick splashed again into the frigid mountain river.
“This c...c...cycle’s got to e..e...end,” he stammered, as he shook and shivered.

Climbing back to shore, he smelled the most delicious scent
and followed it into the forest, drooling as he went.

Nostrils burning, stomach churning, Finnick finally saw
a house that, in that moment, seemed to him the best of all.

Through the door and down the hall the sweet aroma grew
and led him to a steamy pot of tasty, homemade stew.

But just before he took a bite, a lady with a broom
gave a shrill and piercing cry and chased him from the room.

“PAWPAW’S GONNA CATCH’YA! YOU CAN BETCH’YER PAWS ON
THAT!”
She yelled as Finnick slipped away and she slipped on the mat.

Now, his little heart was racing faster than his feet.
Up and down, and all around, he darted in retreat.

Coming to a wooden shack, he stopped and sniffed around
and muttered quite disgustedly, “This house smells like a hound!”

Sure enough, there at the door, a bloodhound’s face appeared
with wrinkled fur, and snappy jaws, and floppy, droopy ears.
“Looky here,” the bloodhound said, “I caught myself a thief;
shoulda’ never come here, fox, cuz’ all ye’ll get is grief!”

Clouds of dust rose all around and sounds of yelping, too.
Finnick wriggled, writhed, and wiggled trying to breakthrough.
Slipping under gangly legs and past a painful bite,
till, at last, he reached the woods and disappeared from sight.

There, he hung his throbbing head
and drooped his tattered tail,
aching from the bruises he’d acquired along the trail.

“Finnick, you’re a silly fox,” he whimpered in fatigue.
“Look how much this journey cost—and what did it achieve?”

Thoughts like this gave way to more as Finnick then departed,
toward the path that led him forward back to where he started.

Wearily, though wishfully, he hiked the mountain trail.
Up the river, through the forest, down the grassy dale.

Finally, he reached the knoll beneath the old oak tree
and climbed into his little hole as happy as could be.

Gazing through the quiet den he’d dug with his own paws,
Finnick saw the little things he cherished most of all.
A teddy bear, a woolly bed, a chewed-up tennis shoe;
seeing now, through different eyes, made all these old things new.

“This place is not that sunny, but it’s safe from hawks and lions.”

“It isn’t by a river, but at least I’ll sleep in silence.”

“It isn’t bright and open, but it keeps out hounds and bears.”

“It’s still the greatest spot for me and nothing else compares!”

Then he closed his sleepy eyes and yawned a happy yawn.
“Home,” he whispered in the end, “was right here all along.”

Buscando/Imaginando Mi Abuela Negra



In her book *Borderlands-La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldua claims, “The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer is a nahual, a shaman.” Her statement endows the writer and narrator with magical, Protean, shape-shifting abilities, such as time-travel, turning into another person, or rewriting an entirely different version of an event or history. Especially in the genres of nonfiction, it is a tremendous power and responsibility to be wielded cautiously. The writer must be constantly pausing to reflect and interrogate their motives.

In May, my father told us he had done Ancestry.com’s DNA testing and the most surprising thing about his results was that 15% of his background was estimated to be from Togo. A quick Google search on my phone informed me that Togo was in West Africa and the most populous tribe to have been kidnapped and trafficked to the New World was that of the Yoruba. I had heard the saying, “Cada Cubano tiene una abuelo negro,” multiple times but it had always remained a hazy, vague abstract. Now suddenly, I had concrete evidence of an ancestor, most likely female (a black man pairing with a white woman would have been highly unlikely), who was enslaved. I was immediately curious and fixated but my grandmother, my father’s mother, couldn’t handle the news.

“Eso es del lado de tu papa. No es mi familia.”

When my father pressed her that the Ancestry.com interpretations explained to him that his proportions of 85% Iberian and 15% Togo were very commonplace to individuals from Cuba and Venezuela and that since Negros greatly outnumbered white Europeans on the island so 65% of Cubans are estimated to have African ancestry, she only snapped, “Cambia el tema.”

Since this conversation, I have been gnawed by curiosity, wondering if this ancestor was a housemaid or a laborer in the sugarcane or coffee fields. It pains my heart to think if her body was invaded by her white owner or someone else with power over her. Or maybe she fell in love with his son and he made promises to marry her and provide for their child but did not have the

freedom or intentions to follow through with them. I wonder as the process of “mejorando la raza” succeeded and each generation of her children and grandchildren became subsequently lighter and resembled her less, if they ever came back to el campo to visit her.

The fact that I don’t even know her name or if there was more than one of her in the different branches of my family’s lineage grieves me. Writing out a story that resembles her own is one way of remembering her. I want to do right by her. I want to undo the added trauma of her erasure and I think the research, imagination, and writing might afford me some redemptive power.

An Excerpt from Ibiola: The raiders came in the middle of the night. I’d been sharing a mat with grandma that week as her lungs were weakened by the rheumatism in her chest and I was the only person in our family not disturbed by her constant coughing. My sisters and their children were able to escape to the woods when the war-cries tore us from our dreams and huts were set afire. I didn’t want to leave Grandma alone and I was trying to find a pile of prunings from a teak tree to cover ourselves in when a loud bang exploded to my left. I saw the small bullet explode just next to me, its gunpowder creating the tiniest fireball resembling the most precious of amber. The whole earth went half mute and my body heaved in nausea, as if the explosion were inside my brain, deep in my ear. I could not hear the footsteps of the raider approach me. I only saw him a second before he clubbed me in the ribs and immediately on my skull then the whole world went black.

I know that exploring the blackness in my lineage will turn up much heartache as I learn about the traumas suffered by enslaved African women trafficked not only to Cuba but the whole rest of the world. I know that I have nothing new or original to say on the topic of slavery. I feel like an imposter and an outsider for even considering that I have any right to compose in the 1st person. The 1st person perspective is a position of authority, especially if the writer is not the speaker living the actual plot of the narrative. I think I do come with honorable intentions to the project as my first priority is to resurrect and honor my specific ancestor(s) but I feel totally unqualified and overwhelmed for the task or responsibility of undoing the erasure of blackness in my family. It is really for them that I write this story but I am already bracing myself for their onslaught of petty excuses. The lack of interest that hides their refusals of her existence. But I think she does call me, commanding me to tell her story even if the only audience is this writer and a few trusted readers/editors. She only needs one to acknowledge her existence to still be remembered.

Marietta



She tells me to close my eyes and imagine a container—somewhere I feel safe, protected. Contained . She tells me that the first thought is the best thought, but my first thought is your hands filled with the ocean, and me inside a canoe inside the ocean in your hands. I know that won’t do, so I distort the image until your hands separate to release me and all that is left is an endless vast ocean and me lying on the cold floor of the canoe, rocking to the sounds of the waves, a clear sky overhead, a deep darkness below.

It is the blue canoe from my home by the river, where I made my sanctuary on the crooked planks sinking into the muck of the swamp, where I would go when life got too heavy to hold, and rest my head and slow my breath to the rhythm of the cattails, and savor the salt in my lungs and on my skin, and remind myself how small is my life under this great globe of stars, and could I instead be one of them?

She tells me to close my eyes and imagine an animal or a person, some living thing to bring comfort and support in my container. She tells me that the first thought is the best thought, but my first thought is you and my second thought is that I don’t like animals, especially in my canoe. I try again to change the image but nothing comes to mind. My definition of comfort and support has only ever been you, but all that is left is me, alone, in an endless vast ocean, lying on the cold floor of the canoe, rocking to the sounds of the waves, a clear sky overhead, a deep darkness below.

It is the kind of alone that takes courage at first, so I travel to the coast where memories exist before you existed and I am all at once me, my canoe, the ocean, contained. I swim out into the vastness, to nothing but sky and sea and I do not turn around but keep swimming until I sense the below and it rises cold to touch me. For a moment I feel the familiar panic of nothing, but the sounds of the waves, a clear sky overhead, my breath—bring me back to my container canoe, and onward farther and farther still until nothing else exists except the euphoria of existence.

When I reach the shore I collapse on the heat of sand, the ocean still teasing my toes with its kiss. I am panting, out of breath, choking on air. I am laughing again and cannot stop laughing. I am hopeful, supported, contained in alone.

The Song of the Reed



I grew with my family of reeds in a cluster by the riverside. We loved to watch the deep, beautiful water pass us by and to drink it in through the mud around our roots. We listened to the wind as it whispered through our leaves and laughed as it clacked our trunks together. But one day, the wind blew in a sound we had never heard before: something was moving through the mud.

“I think there are some good ones over here,” a voice said. A man and a boy walked toward us. The boy carried a basket, the man a rounded blade.

“Yeah,” he continued. “Here they are. This’ll make a nice one.”

The cut was quick.

“No!” I cried.

I was wrenched loose. My family tried, but they couldn’t hold on to me. My leaves were still tangled with the others as the rough hands pulled me away. I was tossed through the air and fell inside the basket made of old dead reeds.

That night, the man and the boy sat together beside the fire pit, their sweaty hands covered in soot. Beside them lay a bundle of dried brush for the fire and several long iron rods. I lay in the basket by the pit, feeling lonely and afraid. I missed my family. I missed my home. I felt my life was slipping away.

“Give me the iron,” said the man. “Gotta get it hot.” He worked the rod into the glowing red coals until it, too, glowed. Then, he lifted me from the basket. The end of the rod pressed into me with a burst of fire. It caused no pain, but left a perfectly round hole.

“You start here with the first one,” said the man to the boy. “Then you put another one here about two finger widths from the first.”

He continued to press the rod into me until seven evenly spaced holes dotted my dried, hardened trunk.

“The last one needs to be four fingers from the others,” he said as he burned one final hole.

A wisp of smoke drifted up from each hole as the man set the rod back into the fire. Gently, he held me for a moment in both hands examining his work with a careful eye, before laying me down upon a cool, wet stone.

“O, that’s a good one,” said the boy as he lifted me up for a closer look.

“It’s no good unless it sounds good,” said the man, taking me back.

He placed me against his lips. As he breathed, very softly, I felt a warm tone vibrate within me. I was amazed. By the river, I had felt the wind in my leaves, but I never knew it could pass through me. As it did, it mingled with all the sadness, fear, and loneliness I had felt since I was cut from the riverbank. It lifted all my longing to return to the river in the valley, to be near my family, near the deep, beautiful water. And suddenly a warm, sweet sound rose from me, as a smile blossomed among the soot and sweat on the man’s face.

“That’s a good flute,” he said as he passed me to his son. “Treat it with care.”



One More Song



When most people think of karaoke, they probably think of a dimly lit bar, flickering lights supplemented with the glow of neon beer logos decorating the sticky walls. They might see a microphone or two next to a small machine with buttons and wires jumbled on a low stage in front of worn wooden tables and rickety chairs, and, in the spotlight, a lone singer who has been emboldened by alcohol and friends to step up onto the stage and sing their rendition of an '80s classic in front of a room full of dark faces because *Why not? They're all strangers here!*

But, when I think of karaoke, I think of dinner parties.

I think of an uncle’s living room that has had the furniture pushed to the side to make room for the wide array of food about to be set onto the plastic covering laid out on the floor. I think of the aunts who have spent all day or weekend making dishes—eggrolls, fried noodles, rice, roasted duck, rotisserie chicken, baked catfish with a tomato sauce slathered all over, salads, and fried tofu—for a party of thirty. I think of the stacks of cases of beer—Heineken, Corona, Dos Equis—that all the uncles have brought over and will probably finish even though they shouldn’t. I think of laughter and loud voices speaking over each other in a rush to share a story about the week’s work or their thoughts on the news or *remember when* stories. I think of the twelve or fifteen aunts and uncles (who aren’t even really my aunts and uncles) sitting around the feast of food, making plates for each other and asking me if I want any fish from their side of the circle because I look like I haven’t been eating enough fish and *you know fish is good for you*.

I hear the clinks of beer bottles around the circle, and I hear *Vo! Cheers!* as the middle-aged men go bottoms-up. I see the hustle and bustle of the aunts in the kitchen as they prepare more plates of food to replace empty ones, hear the gasps as they spill the latest gossip about a coworker or distant neighbor, and taste the noodles they insist I try before sitting back down again. I think of my mom bumping hips at the sink with an aunty, fighting over who will do the dishes. I hear my mom asking the host aunt if she has had anything to eat yet, and her gentle chiding to go eat while she brings out the rest of the plates. I taste the carbonated fruit punch made from frozen juice, 7-Up, and pineapple juice. I smell the barbeque wafting into house from the backyard as the uncles

go in and out for smoke breaks because we may be Vietnamese but we’re also Texan.

Then the lights go dim.
A disco ball lights up.
The smoke machine is turned on.
And microphones come out.

Test 1, 2. 1, 2, 3. Testing.

And, I remember how the dimming lights and microphones shrieking with feedback became the signal for so many moments—how, as a child, it meant running to a bedroom to avoid the booming of the stereos as adults sang the same songs every weekend about Vietnam, love, loss; taking turns as Player 1 while our parents took turns as star of the show; flipping through TV shows we could finally watch because our parents kept us up so late; going back and forth between rooms while a new song was chosen to sneak food into the bedrooms;

how as a pubescent adolescent, it meant hiding with my cousin from my uncle who kept calling us to sing; trying to avoid singing in front of the adults after spending the previous months learning to read and sing their favorite karaoke songs too; sheepishly going to the front of the room after being found hiding in the closet by my relentless uncle; finally singing what he had picked out for us and quietly smiling at the applause as we returned to our regularly scheduled TV shows;

how, as a teenager, it meant getting to pick my own songs; sitting on the sofa or floor next to my mom and flipping through the songbook to find melodies we sang together at home to pass the Sunday afternoons; laughing with the aunties and teasing my dad as he wiggled his hips and danced his same old moves; being asked to sing that one song from before that some uncle really liked; finishing a song with a big round of applause, another quiet smile, and passing on the microphone to the next person, just to have it all repeated again.

Now, I think of how I don’t sing quite as much, and neither do my parents; how I’m not home as much anymore to pass Sunday afternoons picking up new songs with Mom; how Mom jokes my house is not a home until I get my

own karaoke system; how time, age, and distance have made dinner parties smaller and less frequent, though still always long; how we hardly know which songs to sing anymore.

*

On a Saturday afternoon, I find myself sitting on the living room floor in front of my brown leather couch, student essays strewn about in piles of “graded,” “not graded,” and “look at again,” with a purple pen in my hand hovering over a close reading of a monologue from *Hamlet*. *Planet Earth* plays on in the background, a sad attempt to fill the silence while not distracting myself, but I’m distracted anyway by a white fox who dives headfirst into a pile of snow as he hunts for his next meal.

My mother calls as a vibrantly colored bird finishes his mating ritual, and I hurry to mute the TV. She asks what I’m doing and if I’ve eaten yet and what I plan on eating for dinner. I tell her I have plans to have dinner with some friends, and she says that’s nice. I ask if they have plans for that evening.

“Your Uncle Hung invited us over for a dinner party, so your dad wants to go, but I don’t know.” She’s calling during a lull at the nail salon but will probably not get home until late that night. “I’m just so tired now.”

I encourage her to go, to have fun, to be with friends, and maybe even sing a little karaoke.

That night, I meet my friends for dinner at a nearby restaurant. When we arrive, the hostess shows us to our table and gives us time to peruse the menu. We talk about our day, the new gossip at work, our plans for the week, and *Remember when?* Our food comes out, neatly presented and garnished on large ceramic plates. I awkwardly fumble with the nice cloth napkin and unusually large silverware as I dig in to the Cajun Shrimp Pasta.

We talk about taking another trip somewhere together like our last one to Las Vegas, and I inwardly cringe when someone brings up our karaoke adventure, one that I had insisted on having. I remember with some distaste the smoky bar at the back of the casino, dimly lit with neon beer signs and a low stage at the front of the area next to a DJ booth. I had gathered up the nerve to sing “Feelin’ Good” by Michael Buble, forgetting how difficult a song it actually was, and lost my place in the middle of the song when a seemingly drunk or perhaps simply clumsy girl tripped onto the stage. After helping the

poor girl up, I shakily finished the song and dashed back to my seat to a small round of applause from the room full of unknown faces. Is this what karaoke was like for other people?

The waiter clears our table and takes our credit cards, and a friend says we should do that again, but I think to myself that I will never karaoke like that again.

But even so, as we leave the restaurant at a reasonable hour, I think of *my* karaoke, and of the nights we spent with the bass of the speakers beating in time with our hearts, the songs of mothers and daughters ringing in our ears, the laughter of familiarity echoing in the halls into the late night, and the encouragement of friends to pick up the microphone because *Why not? There are no strangers here.*



The Day a White Sedan Died in Middlebury



The Vermont mountains brood
like old men in a cigar bar, crowned
by wreaths of wafting smoke, their mouths
spill the history of centuries—the French explorer’s lake, Allen’s Boys,
Deere’s steel plow, Bread Loaf, and the Homer Noble Farm.

Today they’ll tell of the Blue Spruce Motel
52 years in service on Route 7 in Middlebury,
whose paint, faded to the shade of evening clouds, has been licked
black by flames who gorged on its vitals
and left charred bone where walls once cradled sleepers.
The roof that sheltered 23 lives
last night smoldered and smashed on shoes, travel toothbrushes, charging
cords, and one girl’s note-filled copy of *Paradise Lost*.

Firetrucks mimic a stalled funeral procession
in the aftermath of their work,
a red-light buffer between gawkers on Route 7,
who slow their Subaru worlds on wheels in awe
at the white sedan fractured by the foyer frame
and the uncooked lawn pocked
with Red Cross tents, arm-crossing officials, and passersby
magnetized like flies,

and the families who don’t know whether to sit or stand or sob
for their singed haven, still seething like Etna,
where the snubbed smoke lingers bitter
and bent on taking every ounce of them they’ve left inside:
the postcard purchased for Mom, a hiking boot, a post-it reminder
of a meeting at five, and a silver right earring dropped
by fingers that now lace into a stranger’s solitary grief.

Foreign Creatures



Compared with the gray-on-gray Pittsburgh building-scape that I’m used to, New Mexico’s distant, pastel mountains—framed by uninterrupted blue—should feel to me like a breath of the spirit, restorative, and contenting. But nature, for me, has often been fraught with fear. I worship time and efficiency; I fear getting lost. I know too that lost among the wild, I am nothing more than blood to suck, noise to alarm, or a creature to defend territory against.

And yet I have ventured here, to walk alone this morning.

In this place, perhaps the being that is most safe is the one who knows nothing of what walks or paws or slithers around it—like this red rock, covered with soft mold grown over months and years of undisturbed rest. The mold is pale green and black with small mouth-like pores at the densest places. The result of time and rain and shade slowly spreading the softest of shields across the rock’s surface.

The bark on the branches that create this shade is broken and peeling from the unrelenting Santa Fe sunlight, twisted in such a grotesque fashion as to seem as though it is trying to escape. Cobwebs and mossy leaves grow across the branches; the tree too has settled into the passing of time.

Branches snap and I turn my head to look. No other traveler emerges. I’ve packed a taser in my bag, though. I’m not any more trusting of people than of serpents when I walk alone.

The shadow of a crow flying overhead casts a dark spotlight on a graveyard of broken branches, some with still-fresh wounds from where they have snapped off their mother-trunk. The branches appear as though they are growing out of the ground, twisted like snakes, yet reaching upwards. Each smaller limb veering away as separate spines.

Again and again, I swat at the buzzing behind my ear or the ambitious little insects who land directly on my notebook. I decide to return to the trail-head.

Along the path, pinecones—only an inch or two tall—blossom like flowers between the red sandstones. A lone cactus with short, round pads guards the exit to the way back. But there is another path a few paces away. When I turn onto it, I almost immediately frighten a small brown lizard, his tail a perfect camouflage amid the sticks and branches lying beneath a tree. He hurries to form a statue atop a small rock in the shade.

We stare at one another, both distrustful of the other’s origins and intentions. His body is almost like a snake’s, but the simple presence of legs and eyelids makes him somehow charming to me. He watches me with such resolve that I can’t even see the slightest movement of breath in his lungs. But when I crouch closer to see him, he turns his head at once. He moves headlong—onward, forward, sudden. Like a series of still frames from a movie.

I yield the trail to him, returning the way I came.



Transposed Sunrise



LUCINA SCHWARTZ

One of the days in Rome, Mama told me she wanted to wake up early, before dawn, and watch the sunrise over the city. Did I want to come? Yes.

I slept badly that night, half-awake, so that when I felt a waking hand, I felt it as something anticipated a moment before. Mama and I dressed in the dark and climbed the hill in the dark. There were steps, and a balcony and railing that we could lean against at the top, going along a long path. We stood and chatted a little to warm ourselves.

The sun, when it came, came liquidly, like honey poured over a tilted plate: creeping, viscous, gold. I watched it come over individual buildings. Beside me, Mama murmured her admiration, so that I was with the sun and the buildings and her at once. When the sun was up, Mama wanted to photograph me. The light, she explained. She must have seen in my skin the same rosy gold I saw in the eternal city’s buildings.

The remembered gold, not just the idea of avoiding another hot hike midday, gave me the idea to go up the Hill of the Muses before dawn. I went alone. My roommates were late risers and really I didn’t want company unless it could be my mother, and it couldn’t. Her dawns were seven hours behind mine.

I slept badly the night before and heard my alarm as something anticipated in half-wakefulness. I dressed in the street-light coming in through my balcony window. I checked for myself in the bathroom mirror and again in the hall mirror, then stepped outside. The clammy, noxious air, the grey of night things, the mottled green-grey night clouds, surprised me. Greece, I thought, was not a country of damp or green-grey. I walked on, and saw that the monuments, as I approached the Acropolis, were lit such an intense white that they seemed to be blaring light, themselves. The Acropolis was lit up too. Past it, I came to the wooded park at the base of the Hill of the Muses. I emerged onto the clearing at the top more quickly than I expected, the slope being gentle and furnished with steps.

Up there, my only companions were a monument with a few columns, which looked like several candles fused together from the side, and bats. I’d brought cherries from the market in a plastic bag, which I ate while sitting on a rocky ledge. I wondered how far out I should go, whether I should try to get closer, by a few feet, to the city below, which was lit here and there with bright lights like the monument behind me. I thought that if my mother were there, she would have suggested sitting further back. I imagined losing my glasses or my bag over the ledge. I regretted not bringing a jacket for the clammy air. I tried not to think of the bats.

Putting these discomforts aside, I really looked at the city. It went as far as the mountains to my left and center, and as far as the sea to my right. I saw the sea if I squinted. The streets of the city ran in all directions and the buildings looked like piled boxes—whites, beiges, creams, and pastels—piled boxes with windows, with smaller boxes on top and sticking out sides, as if someone very large had been playing with blocks.

I thought about poured gold sunrise but I didn’t see one. The grey sky lightened gradually, and the city lights turned off, section by section, leaving the buildings forlorn in the new, dim day. A few sections had already turned off before I noticed. Then I turned to the Parthenon, which was no longer lit up either. I was surprised to see the colors of a slight sunrise behind it. The clamminess had gone from the air, too.

I came out from the hill to a waking city. I smiled at cats and people. One man greeted me good morning. I saw a loaf of bread sitting on a bench, alone and unwrapped, thought of touching it, and didn’t. I went home a different way, alongside residential streets and a highway, and listened to garbage being picked up, and food being delivered, and trucks and cars. Walking, I could hardly believe the hours before dawn had been gloomy grey-green, and clammy. Who else had been up to see it? If I could hardly remember the feeling of the before-dawn in this early morning, how much harder would it be once I had slept and woken up to the dry heat of the late one? Should I sleep? I wondered, taking large strides.

When I came into my apartment, I felt suddenly exhausted. As I lay down, I only managed to think of calling Mama later and saying that I loved the waking city, before I was asleep.

Bad Run at English Camp



Well I left my hat in Oklahoma and my commas in Oxford
To chase tropes and flies on the mountain
Sweating buckets, drinking by the gallon
I even skipped the summer of Fallon

Having a bad run at English camp

Word has it that my comments are out of line
Now Allegra is my only friend
Didn't get the memo on Birkenstocks
So I showed up wearing loafers and socks

The suggestion list never ends
And the less I know, the more I learn
Breaking college vows
Tipping sacred cows

Having a bad run at English camp

Short on sleep
High on starch
When I'm not writing about cats
I'm counting all the ankle tats

Stopped trying to read close
And took up tea leaves
Waiting here for Lefty and Godot
But Guffman is all I'll ever know

Having a bad run at English camp

No need to get your feelings hurt
But you can print it on a shirt

Having a bad run at English camp



Afterword

Where are you, reader, as you turn to this final page of the Bread Loaf Journal? As I write this (at Carol’s, on a cloudy Friday morning), I imagine you curled into an armchair in the Blue Parlor or laying in the grass under an unbroken blue sky, perched on a bench listening for a train’s whistle or leaning back in your airline seat as the plane takes you home. I hope that wherever you are, wherever you’re going, the journey we’ve taken in these pages has brought you closer to something we might call home—whether that’s a place or a thought or an idea about yourself. With any luck, wherever that is, I’ll see you there soon.

Thank you to Dana Olsen, our communications manager who guided this adventure all the way from Oxford, to Valerie Costello for her graphic design expertise and her incredible flexibility when we wanted to try new things, to John Lehman for his wonderful generosity in bringing the journal to life with his artwork, and to Elaine Lathrop for her coordinating genius. Thank you also to all our incredible contributors, and everyone else who submitted their work; there were so many beautiful, thoughtful, profound pieces submitted that we could have made two journals instead of one. I hope that those works we could not include will find their own place in the world. Finally, thank you to everyone on all three campuses for building this place together. May it always bring you closer to the place you’ve come to find.

Cheers,
Lauren Frantz, Co-Editor





Middlebury Bread Loaf
School of English