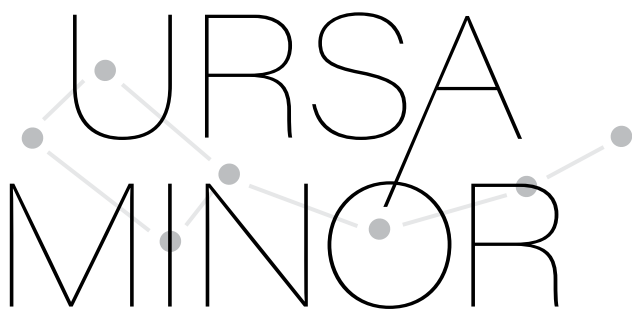


URSA MINOR

UC BERKELEY EXTENSION'S ART & LITERATURE REVIEW



Volume 4:
PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM / 2020



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Ursa Minor is an annual publication celebrating the work of UC Berkeley Extension students past and present. You can find our call for submissions on our Facebook (facebook.com/ursaminorlitmag) and Twitter (twitter.com/ursaminorlitmag) pages every fall. We accept submissions via Submittable.com and welcome work from both published and unpublished writers and artists.

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Volume 4: Punctuated Equilibrium 2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from the Editors	vii
I AM NOT ME / Sheena Arora (fiction)	1
IN THE GUISE OF THE NIGHT / Sheena Arora (fiction)	5
SUNSET / Maryam Safanasabi (image)	9
GOLDFISH / Maryam Safanasabi (image)	10
CONFIRM EMERGENCY / Laurie Blanton (fiction)	11
THE MAN IN THE SUIT / Esther Gulli (fiction)	17
PROCESSION / Scott Hovdey (fiction)	21
WHAT PAPA DIDN'T KNOW / Janet Bein (graphic story)	30
THE RESCUE / Lydia Kim (fiction)	37
FEATHERBRAINED / Victoria McAllister (fiction)	45
A SHOW OF NUMBERS / Cynthia Nooney (fiction)	49
NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones (image)	53
NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones (image)	54
NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones (image)	55
NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones (image)	56
THE ROCK / Abha Chandra (other)	57
COMMENTS OVERHEARD BEFORE A COLLAGE AT AN ART EXHIBIT / Sheldon SY Lee (other)	59
FOXES IN NUUANU VALLEY / Sheldon SY Lee (other)	63
THE ROAD / Roopa Ramamoorthi (other)	67

GIRL AND HER PET / Carrie Salazar (image)	68
YOU CAN'T FIX IT UNTIL IT'S WRITTEN: AN INTERVIEW WITH WRITER RACHAEL HERRON / Sophia Huneycutt (interview)	69
BLUE LANDSCAPE / Elisabeth Koss (image)	74
FIREWORKS / Elisabeth Koss (image)	75
SEA MONSTERS / Abigail Dembo (poetry)	76
CILANTRO'S SUMMER / Angel Johnson (poetry)	77
A LETTER TO FRANK O'HARA ON THE RETURN OF SUMMER DRESSES / Ralph J. Long Jr. (poetry)	78
A LETTER TO ARTHUR SZE WHILE CONSIDERING QUIPU AT THE MUSEO CHILENO DE ARTE PRECOLOMBINO / Ralph J. Long Jr. (poetry)	79
LUNAR INTERROGATORIES AT 8° 31' NORTH, 120° 53' EAST / Don Purdy (poetry)	80
HE'S A MATRYOSHKA DOLL / Don Purdy (poetry)	82
ANGLES / Cindy Yi (image)	83
BOBBY PIN / Roopa Ramamoorthi (poetry)	84
MUSE / Walt Trask (poetry)	85
ARRIVED AT SHORE / Walt Trask (poetry)	86
FIFTY WINTERS / Taylor S. Winchell (poetry)	87
TAKING A BREAK / Taylor S. Winchell (poetry)	88
SHADOW CLIMBING THE STAIR / Elisabeth Koss (image)	89
OLD SHADOW GOING FOR A WALK / Elisabeth Koss (image)	90
THE BACK LIGHT OF SPACE: INTERVIEW WITH JEREMY MORGAN / Stephanie Baker (interview)	91
MINDFULNESS / Yu Yan Vanessa Wee (image)	97
REFLECTION / Yu Yan Vanessa Wee (image)	98
Polyester / Yu Yan Vanessa Wee (image)	99

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: PIEDMONT AVENUE / Abigail Dembo (nonfiction)	100
CRACK ... FIZZ / Melissa J. Elbaum (nonfiction)	104
ON CANARIES AND OXYGEN TANKS / Paula Arellano Geoffroy (nonfiction)	113
DR. MARC LASHER PLACES LIVES ABOVE NORMS / Christine Weldon (nonfiction)	118
ARRIVAL: CHICAGO 1990 / Judith Goff (nonfiction)	125
GLASS / Miriam Khan (nonfiction)	130
THE TRAUMA WE INHERIT / Shauna Konnerth (nonfiction)	133
LIFE EXPECTANCY / Lisa Relth (nonfiction)	141
VISUAL PUNS / Jennifer Rupert (images)	144
MAINACHT OR GIRLS FOR SALE / Lisa Sahin (nonfiction)	145
DISASTER TYPE / Sarah Santoni (nonfiction)	155
A GROSS SAFETY TALK / John Schmidtke (nonfiction)	157
LIKE PETER PAN / Richard Turner (nonfiction)	163
CONTRIBUTORS	165

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

The editors of *Ursa Minor: UC Berkeley Extension's Art & Literature Review* welcome you to the fourth edition of our magazine, *Punctuated Equilibrium*.

This project started in 2019, before it was commonplace to hear the word “pandemic” in everyday conversation. Since then, on March 20, 2020, California became the first U.S. state to order a lockdown, slowing the infectious spread of the coronavirus. During these social restrictions, we have experienced separation from our communities, our friends, our loved ones; many others paid the ultimate price.

Then, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a Black man, was killed by a white police officer. Despite pleas by Mr. Floyd that he could not breathe, the police officer knelt on Mr. Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes. George Floyd's death resulted in nationwide calls for racial justice and civil protest that have touched every aspect of American life.

The world is changing rapidly, and we are collectively experiencing personal crises and disruptions that are challenging the inequities of our society. While we continue to practice social distancing and face uncertainties, we the editors of *Punctuated Equilibrium* have crafted a magazine of stories and art that is about people. We hope to provide a human connection by turning to artistic expression for solace.

Punctuated Equilibrium features literary works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, as well as original artwork created by current and previous students of UC Berkeley Extension programs. The magazine editors, both students and alumni, selected all the works based on criteria from our creative interpretation of “punctuated equilibrium,” a term taken from evolutionary science:

Punctuated Equilibrium is the theory that evolution is characterized by geologically long periods of stasis, interrupted by short bursts of rapid change. In this in-between time, we can expect creative explosions or devastating collapse. Think of a meteorite a mile wide, the internal combustion engine, the early days of rock & roll. Think of big bangs, ruptures in the fabric of time, life as we know it.

With a sense of tragic irony, we recognize the theme of *Punctuated Equilibrium* seems to have anticipated the altered vision of our world struggling with coronavirus and social reforms. The editorial team is deeply grateful to UC Berkeley Extension for enabling us to offer this edition to you at this unprecedented time.

And, we can never forget the brilliant leadership of state and local governments that have kept us safe, nor the unwavering courage of health professionals on the frontlines fighting coronavirus; along with first responders, essential workers, and entire communities wearing masks and social distancing to prevent the transmission of infection.

The editorial team wishes to express our gratitude to the many courageous people that enable all of us to exist in this moment of punctuated equilibrium.

Thank you for reading our magazine. We're so glad you're here.

Love and peace,

The Editorial Team

Ursa Minor, Punctuated Equilibrium, 2020

I AM NOT ME

SHEENA ARORA

SEVENTEEN FLOORS BELOW MY FLAT, the night watchman strides. Every three steps, he blows his whistle and taps his nightstick twice on the road. A shaft of streetlight filters into my bedroom through the space where the curtain panels loosely touch each other. I walk around my bed, tiptoe across the dining room, feel my way through the hallway. My eyes adjust to the dark, identifying the blinking red lights of the digital clock on the living room table. I trace the kitchen wall and turn right.

The square foyer is pitch black.

Adjacent to the main doors is the servant's room. Sprawled on a narrow bed is Joytika—my maid, my protector, the snitch. She is sleeping on her back, left forearm resting over her forehead, right hand on her belly, right leg bent and wrapped in the bedcover, left foot dangling off the bed. A straight-edge barber's blade under her pillow. A homemade pistol bundled in red fabric inside the wooden trunk under her bed.

I close her door, slide the aldrop latch in place, and slither through the main doors. In the common corridor are three apartments, all with their doors locked against the outside world. The elevator operator is slumped on his stool somewhere in-between floors. I descend the stairs, twisting my body around the winders, pausing at each landing, gliding without the sound of my breath.

In my building's main lobby, the guard sits behind a long desk, picking his nose, hushing the stray dog barking in the street. I stand at the last step, and I wait.

The guard saunters to the building's doors, lights a bidi, flicks the bud at the stray. The dog yelps. He strolls under the streetlight, unzips his pants, and urinates. The dog lifts his hind leg and follows suit.

A drunk staggers by—an old man, life etched on his face, torn shirt, pant-less. The stray snarls; the guard hushes away the man. The man throws a pebble at the guard, the stray rushes at the man, the drunk cusses and runs, and I slide out unnoticed.

I am not me. My long hair tucked under a man's wig, my eyes unrimmed with kohl, concealed behind fake spectacles. A bushy mustache and an unkempt beard glued to my face. My breasts bound tightly with a bandage, hidden under a long thick shirt, torn and crumpled. My brown jacket soiled and ripped, stolen from a drunk

on the street. My gray striped trousers, one leg shorter than the other, sprayed with cow's urine.

I catch up to the drunk, match his steps. He grunts at me; I grunt back. He mumbles; I flail my hands and act as if I am deaf and mute. We walk with the swagger of drunk men, stumbling their way to the next drink.

Discarded cigarette butts, polythene bags, empty pouches of tobacco, and toffee wrappers cohabit with the fallen red petals. Every ten feet, yellow streetlight filters through the canopy of Gulmohar and bottle brush trees. The faint *woosh-woosh* sound of the Black Bay breaks the silence. Urine-soaked shrubs overwhelm the fragrance of jasmine. A deity of Lord Ganesh dominates inside a primitive roadside temple. Two street prostitutes sleep on the ground, the younger one curled up on her left side, hugging knees to her chest, hands pillowing her head, whistling through her nose.

I light a cigarette. A sixteen-minute walk from my posh flat, I'm at Gateway of India, leaning against the parapet separating me from the Arabian Sea. One kilometer away, the metal tubes in the Rajabai Clock Tower chime two-thirty. One tune every fifteen minutes. I have until three chimes before Bombay stirs back to life.

* * *

Six hours ago, I was three hundred feet from Taj Palace Hotel. I was dressed in a pale green georgette sari that clung to me like a second skin. My shimmering gold sari-blouse was one with my dark skin. Two gold mini combs held the waves of my hair. I was the tallest at six feet and half an inch. I was the strongest—fifty pushups daily. I was the oddest. I was the smartest.

But I tried not to be.

Like other guests, I stood in a line to gift my boss's niece a gold jewelry set and a bouquet. On my turn, I posed with the bride and groom, obeying the "say cheese" prompt of the wedding photographer. I sipped cups of tea, faked my attentiveness to the groom's father's account of his Persian heritage. I submerged my plum cake in the brandy sauce, lusting for the taste of brandy.

I didn't discuss the exodus of ninety thousand Hindus from Kashmir. I pretended Iraq hadn't invaded Kuwait. I refrained from debating the merits of Bollywood's biggest hit, *Maine Pyar Kiya*—a movie proclaiming that a girl and a boy can never have a platonic friendship. I covered my contempt with giggles when my dancing partner quoted Minister of Finance Yashwant Sinha: "Government policies today are like women's skirts. They go up and down according to the changing fashions."

I accepted my boss's daughter's invitation to speak at her son's kindergarten class. I agreed that I, an advocate who had won numerous cases at the Bombay High Court, was the best choice to lecture the children with a put-on baby voice. I raised

my glass to toast the bride and groom. I sniffed the waiter's nicotine-stained fingers, hoping to get a whiff of smoke. I let my boss pat me on my back as he announced, "Ladies are better at obeying orders."

I obeyed and said, "Yes, sir."

I didn't swear aloud when one guest smacked my buttocks. I didn't hit the groom's uncle—a sexagenarian whose folded skin stored his sweat—when he rubbed his genitals against my back during the conga line. I ground my teeth when a guest, the client I'd defended in twenty-three corruption charges, reached for his glass, making sure to brush my breast with his forearm. I didn't scream. I didn't remind them that I was not some two-bit woman.

I did nothing.

I maintained a happy expression.

I stood in the wedding-gift thank-you line and waited my turn to receive a red paper bag with gold-ribbon handles. In each bag for the men, a bottle of Chivas 18 and a box of cigars; for each woman, a bottle of perfume and a box of Ferrero Rocher.

I exited the hotel behind the groom's uncle. His wife, at the other end of the stairs, clutched her maid's forearm, hobbled down twenty steps to the main road. Gift bag in his right hand, he raced ahead without a sideward glance, distancing himself from her frailty.

My gift bag dangling on my left wrist, I walked steps behind him.

Eight steps from the road, I pointed at the crowds of tourists hovering over the parapet, taking pictures of each other, of Elephanta Caves, of the old and new Taj Hotel, of Gateway of India, of the ferries on the sea, and us. I said, "Ugh, I don't see my driver."

He stopped, turned back, and stared at the gold chain around my bare midriff. He licked his lips, "My driver can drop you."

I rushed down the four steps separating us, losing my balance and grasping his left wrist to steady myself. Giggled, "Uh, no ... these heels." The free end of my sari slipped down my left shoulder, exposing my cleavage.

He kept his gift bag on the tread, held my left shoulder, beaming. "No problem ... no problem."

I laughed, placed my gift bag next to his, shook his hand, thanked him, and introduced myself.

He said, "Why don't you hold on to me?" Offered his right arm. "We don't want you tripping again."

I handed him my gift bag, hung his gift bag on my left arm, linked my right arm through his elbow. "Your wife?"

He tapped my forearm. "She was too sick to come."

We discussed the chaos of tourism on traffic. He accompanied me to my car, gesturing away my driver, holding the car door. He held the free end of my sari as I

settled in. His breath racing, his sweat dripping, he handed me his business card. I closed the car door. He leaned through the car window, saying, "My cousin owns the best Irani café in Colaba." He caressed my forearm. "How about chai and biscuits?"

I kept his card.

Among all such business cards.

I scribbled the date and time and event on the back of the card.

I wouldn't ever need him. But I know, someday, somewhere, he would need an advocate.

I would wait.

* * *

I can wait.

I take out the cigar from my jacket pocket, sharpen the end of my matchstick on the stone parapet, pierce a deep hole in the cigar cap, and smoke. The souvenir stall is locked; its owner at home, forcing open his wife's legs. The coconut vendor sleeps under his cart, covered with a blanket. His head rests on a folded red paper bag with gold ribbons. A group of child beggars in tattered underwear huddle together, seeking security. Their limbs resting on and poking each other. Their master, reclining in a corner and cradling a half-empty bottle of Chivas 18, snores. A prostitute on her knees behind a column, sucking a man's penis, watches me and beckons me to be her next customer.

I deepen my voice and cuss like the other drunks I've studied in the past. The prostitute pulls away from her customer and screams at me, "You drunk bastard." I scratch my pretend balls and spit on the ground. I stagger to the end of the block, hundred and fifty feet, under the glare of five lampposts. For forty-five minutes, I feel free, without inhibition. Free as a male feels every moment without the restrictions of being a woman.

I can go into the temples reserved for men. I can walk the streets with no fear of being raped. I can demand the same remuneration as my male counterparts. I can experience the inside of a brothel. I can shower bills at the dancers in the beer-bars. I can shop at the cigarette stall without the concern of soiling my reputation. I can run away from the ticking clock of my uterus. I can forget about the burden of being a daughter, wife, and mother. I can harass another human without any repercussions. I can strut like I own the world just because I was born with a penis.

And like a man, I can smoke, I can drink, I can holler, I can piss under the lamppost. And I can jump into the sea and be lost forever. But that is a thought for another day. The Rajabai Clock Tower chimes for the third time. I swagger back home. On my next attempt, I'll eat at the lone food stall at the end of the third block.

IN THE GUISE OF THE NIGHT

SHEENA ARORA

IN THE YEAR **INDIRA GANDHI** was sworn in as the first prime minister of India, in the month when Ba'ath-party took power in Syria, days after John Lennon announced that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, under the afternoon sun, on the rear verandah of the mayor of Bombay's bungalow, a deal was struck.

A transaction so simple even the bees hovering over the sunflowers followed its logic.

A sacrifice of a son in exchange for the betterment of an entire family.

The life of the mayor's gardener's sixteen-year-old son Paraj substituted for the freedom of the mayor's twenty-five-year-old drunk son.

It was decided Paraj would stand in the Bombay Criminal Court, put his right palm on the Bhagavad Gita and claim that he, in a drunken haze, had rammed his Jeep into five street-dwellers in the dark of the night. He would show remorse for the deaths of one man, one woman, two girls, and an infant.

Paraj's lawyer would point at the framed photograph of Mahatma Gandhi displayed over the judge's head and plead to save Paraj from the hangman. The mayor was sure Paraj would only get a life sentence.

For Paraj's effort, the mayor handed the gardener a blue polythene bag with nine bundles of hundred-rupee notes; the amount to fetch two foreign cars for a rich man, the total not spent in ten generations of the gardener's family.

For transferring the life of his oldest son, his heir, his support in old age, the gardener was promised a large piece of land to own and to farm in his village of Mohimabari Habi. A rural settlement on the other side of India. A place without televisions and schools and movie halls. Accessible by a journey of seven days in four trains, two buses, and one bullock-cart ride.

The gardener's family kissed Paraj on his cheeks, held him tight for a few short moments, and waved him goodbye.

The sun dipped in the Arabian Sea. The beach at the rear of the mayor's bungalow emptied of lovers. The roadside stalls brightened the glow of their oil lamps.

The mayor housed the gardener and his family in the last room of the servants' quarters. He posted two guards at the door. The two guards of the Bombay Police Special Forces wore khaki uniforms, machine guns across their chests, and kukris strapped to their calves.

The mayor's orders were simple: Shoot the motherfuckers if they try to escape.

* * *

It was an average servants' room. Eight-by-ten feet, a naked bulb dangled from the ceiling. A kitchenette wedged into the right corner. A decaying study table covered with stained old newspapers. A kerosene cooking stove, a cast-iron wok, and a flat skillet nailed to the wall above. A jute cot at the left wall. A window on the wall facing the door.

The gardener and his family of six adjusted. They reasoned that it was only for a couple of hours. They needed a place to lay their heads, to check their emotions. They would wake at daybreak, be driven in the mayor of Bombay's cars to the railway station. Their new life awaited.

The gardener's family sat in a circle, cross-legged on a dhurrie. They mixed rice and lentils and yogurt, nibbled at sabzis of potato and capsicum, and shared pickles and papadums. They wished they had meat, of any kind. They drank buttermilk and devoured sweets. They didn't think of Paraj. They rubbed their bellies and burped. They chewed paan for digestion.

The youngest daughter and the youngest son slept on a mattress under the cot. The middle daughter stacked the plates and bowls in the kitchenette. The wife ignored the train of her tears. The oldest child, the married daughter, rubbed her belly, calming her four-month-old fetus. The gardener and the eldest daughter's husband opened the door to take a walk, to stretch their legs.

The guards with machine guns halted them.

The son-in-law said: We are nobody's prisoners.

The guards said: We are following orders.

The gardener said: Son, it is only for one night. In the morning, we will travel to Mohimabari Habi, to our new life.

They sat on the folded dhurrie, pushed against the right wall. Behind the closed door were the guards with the guns.

They shared a bidi, the sixty-year-old man and his twenty-three-year-old son-in-law. They watched the pregnant daughter restless on the cot, turning in her sleep. They ignored the sobs of the wife, holding the middle daughter on the mattress on the floor.

They lit another bidi.

The gardener shared his plans of resettlement in Mohimabari Habi. Explained the calculations of one life of Paraj versus the life of the entire family. He held tight to the price of his son's life—contained in the blue polythene bag. The gardener dreamt of paddy fields and cows. His head slumped on his son-in-law's shoulder.

The son-in-law imagined his life in the obscure village of Mohimabari Habi. Away from the bustle of Bombay. Away from movie halls and bars and dance clubs. Away from the woman he often visited on the side. He switched on the overhead bulb, shook his wife, and demanded they leave. To master their own life, a child was best raised in a city with books and schools.

The pregnant daughter said: I can't leave my parents alone.

The son-in-law slapped her hard.

The pregnant daughter cried, rubbed her belly.

The son-in-law said: I'm your owner. I'm your boss. I'm your decider, not your father, whose home you had left.

The gardener reasoned: Son, let's talk like grown men. After me, you are the elder of our family.

The son-in-law said: I'm not your son. You sold your son.

The middle daughter wrapped her arms around the youngest daughter and the youngest son, leading them away from the chaos to the kitchen table.

The gardener's wife sat on the cot, hugging her pregnant daughter.

The gardener said: I gave you my daughter when nobody desired you—an orphan without name or heritage.

The son-in-law said: Because I was the only one willing to accept your crossed-eyed daughter with meager dowry.

The gardener raised his hand, ready to slap the younger man: Don't insult me. I'm like your father. I treat you like my son.

The son-in-law pulled his wife's hand and said: I do whatsoever I desire with my wife and my unborn child.

The gardener's wife reached for his hand, said: Don't say so, my son. Sleep in the cot with her. She will satisfy you tonight. We'll talk afterward.

The son-in-law laughed: She is worthless. I entered her for three years to no avail. One week with you in Bombay and she is pregnant.

The pregnant daughter cried: My beloved, I've never been with another man.

The son-in-law said: She is a whore, but I own her. She will go with me to heaven or hell.

He pulled hard at his wife's hand.

The gardener's wife said: Listen to me, stay for the night. Leave in the morning.

The son-in-law kicked his wife's leg: If you don't let us go, I'll tell everyone that you sold your son.

He dragged his pregnant wife to the closed door.
The gardener's wife screamed: Dear husband, do something.
The gardener looked at the floor, saying: She is his wife. It is his right.
The youngest son snatched the flat skillet and hit the son-in-law on the head.
The pregnant wife shook her husband, beat his chest with her fist, tried to get life back into him. She wailed without a single tear.
The middle daughter slapped the youngest son, shouting: Idiot, what did you do?
The gardener's wife let out a single short scream.
The youngest daughter sucked her thumb.
The gardener rocked on his heels and asked: Who is going to share the burden with me?
His arm hooked through the handles of the blue polythene bag.
The guards, machine guns strapped to their chest, rushed through the doors.

* * *

The mayor of Bombay was roused and informed. His mother's nurse was stirred up. At three-fifty-six, when the sun still slept in the Arabian sea, the son-in-law was pronounced dead. The nurse dispensed sleeping pills. The younger children were dosed. The middle daughter spat hers out. The pregnant daughter held it in her hand to take it when the time came.

In the guise of the night, the gardener's family, hiding their grief and fear, were ushered to the beach. One guard followed. One guard stood outside the locked doors of the last room of the servants' quarters. Inside, the son-in-law lay motionless, skull cracked, in a pool of blood. Body uncovered.



SUNSET / Carrie Salazar

My work investigates the overall scope of marginalized women in religious societies through the depiction of symbols and aesthetics in traditional Iranian imagery, literature and poetry. I use iconic symbols in pop Iranian culture, such as a lady sun (*khoshid khanum*) or goldfish (symbol of knowledge, awareness and wisdom) to express a contemporary take on traditional narratives.

Painting on unprimed canvas doesn't allow for mistakes and has a sense of immediacy, and its raw quality acts as a metaphor for purity and innocence. In my paintings, the orange resembles henna (a traditional plant-based dye for skin, hair and fingernails in the Middle East) and represents femaleness, the beloved, the motherhood. To create a sense of diffused light, I spray a bright greenish yellow underneath the figures, which is a metaphor for innocence of holiness. At the same time, it acts like neon light used in advertisements, which also represents woman's body and pleasure, or the "male gaze." The black rolled on top of the objects is a symbol of male power and its ability to control and restrict women. It also evokes chador (the black veil that Muslim women have to wear) or the hejab. The hejab is particularly significant to me because it has a broader and deeper meaning in Persian poetry and Shi'a religion. It can be used not only to cover the reality from seeing, but also to hide the truth. The greenish motifs (*Islimi Floral*) and patterns in my paintings are symbols of life and growth. My patterns are inspired by Islamic architecture, Persian rug designs and historic Persian visual books.



GOLDFISH / Carrie Salazar

CONFIRM EMERGENCY

LAURIE BLANTON

THERESE'S BUBBLEGUM-PINK NAIL grazes the screen as she gasps for air. She grasps her phone and presses the emergency button—digital red light penetrates darkness. The screen commands, confirm or cancel. Purple-lace teddy itches against her fair skin. Her belly presses into the sandy linoleum floor, Adam on top of her, his thick arm caged around her neck. She wanted to give him a night to remember. This isn't what she had in mind.

The evening started okay. After her shift at Java Cup, she stopped by Grove Market to pick up fixins' for a romantic dinner. Adam was leaving on a road trip to Reno, the Second Sin City, with his ex-Marine buddies in the morning. Therese had been dating him only a few months, and when wild boys got together, well ... she didn't want to think about it.

Walking down his street towards Lovers Point, Therese got lost in the sun shimmering over the sapphire bay. When she saw him kneeling in the driveway by Lucy, his beloved Harley, he became her beacon. Sweat reflected off his bicep, highlighting the Star Wars tattoo he'd gotten in honor of his friend Luca "Skywalker" Cambriano, who shot his wife then swallowed a bullet after his fourth tour in Afghanistan. Therese coughed to make him aware of her approach.

He was focused, fidgeting with something near the tailpipe. Lucy was his first love—he said she'd saved his life. Therese didn't understand, but knew she'd never match that. She coughed louder, balancing brown bags of groceries in her arms. He shifted from his rigid kneeling position and looked up. Icy eyes gazed through her, then at her, before seeing her. Taut muscles relaxing, he smiled, revealing dimples. He stood, took the bags from her and set them on the driveway, then wrapped his thick arms around her and kissed her with a force that made her feel safe and desired. He was having a good day.

"Hello, little one." He leaned back, absorbing her with his eyes.

"Hello." She felt light-headed.

He released her from his tight grip and she swayed. He scooped up the groceries, bounded up wooden stairs, and was through the front door of his two-room beach rental before she regained her balance, still aflush. She caught her breath, pressed down the pleats of her yellow sundress, then walked up the stairs. The two brown bags sat on the card table in the kitchen, nestled between an overflowing ashtray, a Harley maintenance manual, and a stack of unopened mail. She glanced back towards the bedroom. Adam was crouched in front of the closet.

“Whatcha doin’?” She wondered why he hadn’t gone back to work on his bike. He often lost his train of thought, started something, didn’t finish it. She tried to point it out gently, keep him focused. It was one of the ways she helped him.

His shoulders tensed. “Loading my pistol.”

“Why?” She kept her voice light. She was used to guns. During her wilder days, she’d slept with more than one guy who had mounted a hunting rifle above the bed. It was familiar. Her grandmother kept a pearl-handled pistol in her nightstand.

“It’s going in my saddle bag.”

“Oh. Okay.” She wondered what his weekend plans were but didn’t feel she had the right to ask—their relationship so new and all.

Chewing her lip, she unpacked the groceries into a humming refrigerator and white metal cabinets. The last item in the bag was a sweating jug of Chablis. She unscrewed the top, poured a Route-66 mug full to the rim and took a big gulp. She ran tap water into a silver stockpot and put it on to boil. Unwrapped the steaks. Rubbed the meat with oil, salt, and pepper. She rinsed the romaine lettuce and cherry tomatoes. Scrubbed the potatoes and cut them into quarters.

She grabbed a cigarette from her suede fringed purse, stepped onto his rickety front steps, lit up, and exhaled into sea air. A few months ago, he’d come into her coffee shop, teased her about the butterfly she’d crafted in the foam of his latte. “Pacific Grove is Butterfly City,” she’d said, avoiding eye contact, wary of the electricity between them. She admired his curly dark locks and beard—he looked like a pirate. He came back at the same time every day requesting different shapes in the foam. Her attempt at a parrot made them both laugh.

It was a steamy May evening and his tiny space reeked of stale smoke and ripe male. Her bare feet stepped from splintered wood to worn linoleum. She left the screen door open. She used a paper towel to wipe sweat from her forehead and cleavage.

Grabbing another paper towel, she patted the romaine dry. Tore the leaves and threw them in a Rubbermaid tub. She cut the cherry tomatoes in half and tossed them on top. The water boiled. She dropped quartered potatoes in one by one.

“Babe, you seen my lucky bandana?”

“Um, did you wash it? Maybe you folded it and put it in the drawer next to your socks?”

She heard a rustling and slamming of drawers. “God damn, you’re a fuckin’ genius.” He ran into the front room, red square of cloth clutched in his hand, picked her up, swung her around, and gave her a big, wet kiss.

“Thanks, babe. You know me so well.” He set her down and was gone as fast as he’d come.

She opened the rusting refrigerator door and grabbed the jug of Chablis. Refilled her mug. Stepped out for another smoke. On tiptoes, salt-worn steps beneath bare feet, she peered through the streaked window. He was kneeling motionless on the floor, staring at neatly folded rows of clothes laid across his air mattress. She grazed her finger against the dirty glass, started to tap, then sunk down onto the steps. She lit her cigarette and pulled her knees to her chest, tucking the scalloped hem of her dress around them.

She’d gotten his name eventually. Adam “Atom Bomb” McKenzie, honorably discharged from the United States Marine Corps after three tours in Afghanistan. She’d never have guessed him a jarhead with all that hair. So many lattes and he never asked her out. So, she invited him to her poetry reading.

She’d been so nervous that night. Curled her auburn hair. Used heavy eyeliner to accentuate green eyes and glossed her lips—an invocation for words to drizzle like honey from her mouth. In skinny jeans and low-cut blouse, she recited poems from her chapbook, “Escape Tunnel – Bama to Cali.” So glad she’d memorized them—his presence made her tummy flutter.

He’d told her the haiku was his favorite:

*Squealin’ rebel pig
Run away and don’t look back
Dreams thrive in Cali*

Back inside, she placed fat-threaded steaks on a roasting pan and slid them into the broiler. She drained potatoes in a plastic colander. Mashed them with butter and cream, salt and pepper for taste. She flipped the steaks. The smell of meat and potatoes thinly covered the salty tang of sea air.

She heard a buzzing noise. “Adam?” She peeked into the back room. Saw a half-packed camouflage duffel bag, a rifle balanced on the bureau, his laptop open on the desk. She tiptoed towards his laptop screen and saw Google Maps, smelled marijuana. He had a medical card for it—it helped him. The warped bathroom door was ajar. He must be trimming his beard, she thought, tiptoeing back to the kitchen.

She set the table with chipped blue plates, mismatched silverware, and paper-towel napkins. She opened a bottle of Bud for him, then peeked into the broiler. The steaks looked and smelled done, though she wasn’t sure. She mostly ate fish. She pulled them out, transferred them to a cracked serving dish, and covered them

with foil to let them rest. She leaned against the counter, hugging herself. He'd told her he loved her poetry that night—rebel dreams and all, but mostly she'd *felt* he loved her.

She poured Caesar dressing over the salad, sprinkled it with Parmesan, covered the plastic container and did her salad-toss dance, shimmying her shoulders and bouncing the tub off her hip like a tambourine. It made him laugh, unless he was in a mood. Once, he asked why she wasn't a stripper; she'd make more money that way. She danced alone, giggling, hoping he would hear and come watch.

"Dinner's ready." Her voice was sing-songy. Sand stuck to her feet as she walked to the back room. She would sweep later, after he was gone. He was making progress—more things in the camouflage bag than on the mattress. It was difficult for him to prioritize, but once things were lined up, he went into military mode like the good zombie soldier the Marines had created.

He stuffed a white t-shirt into the bag, looked up blankly, then smiled with recognition. "You're beautiful." He studied her with laser eyes. She tensed, awaiting further judgment. He inhaled and grinned. "It smells delicious."

She blushed. His compliments made her feel good, particularly after a life of criticism. "It's a good thing you got book smarts, girl," she remembered her father saying, "cuz you ain't gettin' no man with that sour puss." She'd slept with every asshole in a twenty-mile radius to prove him wrong.

She served dinner, giving Adam the bigger steak, a huge heap of potatoes, and as much salad as she thought he'd eat. She was the one into "rabbit food," as he called it.

"Yum." He dove into his plate and was scraping it clean before she'd made it through half of hers. She pushed her plate towards him.

"Thanks, babe." He stabbed his fork into the piece of steak she'd just cut, dragged it through the last of her potatoes, and stuffed it into his mouth. "Gotta get back to it." He chugged down his beer. "Mind if I put the game on?"

"Sure, no problem." She pulled her plate back, took tiny bites, chewed slowly. She'd forgotten to light the candle as a centerpiece. So stupid. She needed to try harder if she wanted romance in her life.

She finished dinner alone, the Kings game in the background. He was in the driveway working on his bike, the orange glow of the porch light barely illuminating his efforts. She scraped the remains of her dinner into the plastic-lined trash bin, cleared the table, filled the scratched ceramic sink with dirty dishes and began washing. She stared at her cheery pink nails through soapy suds. She should have picked up dish gloves at the store. Damn shame to ruin a good manicure.

Therese felt indebted to Adam. Couldn't imagine what he'd been through. He'd made a sacrifice that she and the men she once idolized would never make. Her conservative, gun-toting pop had dodged the draft. And while her willowy, intellectual

ex-fiancé liked to pontificate on the politics of war, seducing young male Marxists had been his real ambition.

Up to her elbows in suds, humming the theme to *Facts of Life*, she almost broke a glass when Adam's strong hands circled her waist, picking her up. She squealed as he bit at her neck. She looked at the grease under his fingernails. "You're going to get my dress dirty."

"I like my women dirty." He laughed, moving her aside to wash his hands. "You're so good to me." He kissed the crown of her head and walked out of the room.

Dishes done, she didn't know what to do with herself. He'd planted himself in front of the TV, but she didn't want to watch the game. She wanted to make love before he left, but he was rarely interested. She'd bought a purple-lace teddy—a bit slutty for her taste—because she hoped it would entice him. She knew his medication affected his libido, but still cried when he rejected her.

She pranced in front of the TV, rosy nipples poking through lace, a string threaded between her butt cheeks.

"Wow. Adam likes."

A warm glow surged through her.

"Yes!" He pumped his fist, looking around her. The Kings scored a goal. "Going to bed?"

"Yeah, I guess." She blinked back tears. "Good night." She kissed his cheek, twirling one of his curls.

"Be there soon." He smacked her on the ass, sipped his beer, and stared into the TV.

Soon was always relative. He lost track of time. Hated night because of the terrors. It was 10:00 p.m.; he might be in bed by 3:00 a.m. When they'd first started dating, she thought "soon" meant a few minutes and waited up. Not anymore. She lay diagonally across the air mattress and tucked his pillow between her bony knees. If she wasn't getting any, she would get a good night's sleep.

* * *

A seagull squawks outside. She squints at digital red numbers. 4:45 a.m. She rolls over. Adam isn't in bed. She untangles herself from coarse sheets—doesn't notice chilly air seeping in through cracks of the clapboard cottage, just thinks of the fifty dollars she wasted on a sexy getup.

She grabs her phone, turns on its flashlight, and tiptoes into the front room. He is in the corner hunched over his footlocker, head in hands, hidden in his black hoodie.

"Adam," she whispers. "Adam, come to bed."

He doesn't move. She taps his shoulder. He rears up with hollowed-out eyes, the tight muscles of his face contouring his skull. "I'm sorry. So, sorry," she says as he tackles her to the floor.

Her body is rigid, sandy linoleum pressing into her cheek and through purple lace to soft flesh of breasts and belly. Her finger shakes over the phone, its red light giving the room an eerie glow. "Press to confirm emergency call." She turns her head so her trachea is in the crook of his elbow and sucks in air, "Adam, it's me. Therese."

His arm tightens around her pale neck. "Shut up, you fucker."

She bites the inside of her cheek and squeezes her eyes shut. "Adam, please. I love you." She's never told him that. Hasn't said it to anyone in years.

Her heart beats fast in her ears and throat. Pressure builds on her throat. Thin eyelids aren't enough to keep eyeballs in her head. This is it, she thinks. She doesn't believe in God. No peace to make, except with herself. She sinks her teeth into his arm.

Adam yelps like a wounded dog. He tightens his grip and twists. Therese sees white. She shrinks into herself and feels the air release from Adam's lungs. His weight is heavy on her. His arm relaxes and he rolls away. She curls into the fetal position and tries to steady her breath. Fireworks in her eyes, roaring in her ears.

Morning light filters through the tie-dye scarf tacked up as a curtain. A crow lets out its first caw of the day.

"Fuck!" he yells at the half-painted ceiling. "I hate this."

She slides across the cold floor, nuzzles into his arm. "I know, babe. Me too."

He pulls her close, kisses her forehead. "I'm sorry."

"I know." She curls into him, her racing heart synchronizing with his.

Wrapped up in him, she wants this moment to last. Feeling safe, warm, and protected is a luxury. Adam's breath has slowed, but his heart continues to race. He raises his arm, cocks his thumb and pulls his index finger again, and again, and again. He is in a firefight shooting enemies she can't see. The battle continues.

She edges out of his embrace and rolls towards her phone. Cancels the emergency call. The red light fades. This is not her California dream. He'll be gone in a few hours. She sighs, and her forehead sinks into the gritty floor. There must be something better. She cocks an imaginary gun in her hand and whispers, "Aim higher."

THE MAN IN THE SUIT

ESTHER GULLI

NO ONE STARTS OUT thinking they'll grow up to be the kind of guy who betrays his country. You can't major in espionage at Georgetown; the priests don't grant absolution for it. No, sirree: they will give you up in a New York minute. Especially when they find out you're working for the Russians.

When I started college, I thought maybe I'd be a doctor—you know, help people. But my first-semester chem class took care of that. Then I was a history major. The Jesuits screwed up by teaching me to think for myself and giving me access to libraries full of philosophers. Whatever got started at Georgetown got finished off after I signed up for a tour in Vietnam. Yeah, I was that asshole who volunteered. I went looking for answers after my kid brother got drafted and died at Khe Sanh. He's buried at the veteran's cemetery in Pittsburgh. At least he doesn't have to worry about all that anymore. But me, I still see them, those kids running around with napalm. I can't unsee it. I knew I'd never be loyal to a country that could make soldiers do that. After Nam, I moved to Maryland and met a guy from the Russian embassy in my apartment building. Things got complicated.

Most of the world thinks I'm an academic. It's the perfect cover for someone in my line of work. The Center has someone do my research and writing for my academic appointment so I can do my real job. I'm a handler, the go-between, connecting Russian intelligence headquarters in Moscow and spies living as ordinary citizens. I used to manage a dozen assets; now it's just the Fishers. They're as American as apple pie and doing mighty important work for Mother Russia. We've been doing this for close to three decades. Mr. Fisher helps us get intel from deep inside the State Department, on the Russia desk. He does it all from right here in Peoria now. A couple of years back, we had to relocate the whole family from D.C. after Mrs. Fisher got made. The FBI intercepted one of her drops, and they traced all the documents back to her job at Treasury. It was a shame. For a time, she was our number-one asset. She sat just outside the door of the Treasury Secretary's office; touched every scrap of paper that came across the Secretary's desk. The amount of data we sent back to Russia was mind-blowing. We had dollar figures tied to every defense authorization, every penny

sent to an ally, every financial transaction related to building the information super-highway. Americans do love a paper trail. Now, we've got Mrs. Fisher working at a USDA site. She steals seeds to help crop production. It's still valuable, I tell her. But I can tell she misses being part of something so important to Moscow.

Today, though, my work falls under the category of *other duties as assigned*. I'm helping the Fishers' daughter Sheri. She's worried that Lane, her religious-zealot boyfriend, might try to kidnap her and make her elope or something stupid like that. I was against this Lane business from the get-go. But Mrs. Fisher thought it would help with their cover and would give Sheri a shot at a normal life. I could tell Mr. Fisher was in my camp. They don't need complications like this.

Sheri is a great kid. I've watched her grow from a pig-tailed toddler on a trike to the girl who rushes home to make dinner for her family every night. If I had a daughter, I'd want her to be just like Sheri. She wants to be a nurse, but I think she'd make a hell of a spy. I'm not letting this bozo get in the way of her future. Lane A. Dean, Jr. just might have to have an unfortunate accident in his cherry-red Camaro, maybe end up in Kickapoo Creek.

When Sheri told me about her situation, she said she was fine with having the procedure, that a kid was the last damn thing she needed. If anything, she was thankful it might get her out of having to go to church all the time with Lane. But I could tell by the way she bit her lip when she talked she was sweet on him. Sheri wasn't husband shopping—nothing like that. "He's the first guy I've slept with that was a virgin," she told me. I think that made her feel special. Sheri tells me things she can't tell her parents, like I'm the cool uncle.

I've been standing out here for over an hour. A few of the boaters have given me odd looks. It's not every day you see a man in a suit at the lake. It's starting to get dark and I'm almost out of cigarettes. I wish Lane and Sheri would wrap this up. This time of year, the sun goes down so fast. If you look away for a second, you'll miss any chance of seeing that last burst of color before she slips below the horizon.

Sheri's only a year older than that boy, but she looks like his babysitter the way she holds herself so proud and tall. She could be a runway model with that figure of hers. I can tell Sheri wants to go just by how she keeps rubbing her hands across her blue jeans and tugging at her sweater, and by the way she keeps pulling herself closer to the edge of that picnic table. Not Lane. He could stay all night. That boy looks like he might cry. But I don't feel sorry for him; don't feel sorry for anyone who's a fundamentalist. I told Sheri when she joined that cult they call "campus ministries" that maybe she'd de-program some of those kids. She said it wasn't like that. "Most of them can't help it. It's just how they were raised," she said. They can help it. Everybody has a fucking brain. God's not going to save you from all the evil in the world.

Across the lake, some old fellas are calling it quits, packing up the tackle box, and reeling in the lines. It looks like Lane has, at long last, surrendered too. He's kicking gravel all the way back to his Camaro, and leaving my Sheri sitting on the damn picnic table. Just driving away. I knew he wasn't a real man. But that's a better outcome. I sure as hell didn't want to have to tail them to the clinic to make sure he wasn't taking her to Vegas.

After he splits, Sheri walks with purpose to my car, her silky blonde hair swishing with each step. I start the engine to get the heat going while she stares ahead, her teal-colored eyes fixed on something on the other side of the lake.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says. "I broke up with him. It was the right thing to do. You need to drive me, though—that's what the clinic instructions said."

We start down the road. "We're going to the one on the other side of town," she says and gives me the address. "The last thing I need is him showing up." Sheri pulls down the visor mirror and looks at her freckled face. She wets a tissue with her tongue and traces under her eyes, then tosses the soiled tissue in the wastebasket I keep in the console. She takes out a carnation-pink lipstick, dots it on her full lips and rolls them back and forth to spread the color, then flips the visor up with a hard snap.

Sheri is tough. Never takes crap off anybody. She'd be good at this work. It's not the path her parents want for her, but they may not have a choice in the matter. She's good at keeping secrets.

We pull up to the clinic. I look over. She pulls another Kleenex from her purse and blows her nose. "Allergies," she says.

We sit in the car for a bit. Then finally, she speaks. "It was an accident. We were careful." She shreds the tissue for a while, then looks up at me. "I'm being stupid."

"You don't owe me any explanation." I'm not her father, and it's not my baby.

"I know," she says. "It's just, sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to have been a normal kid, with a chance at a normal life."

I stay still, not knowing what to say. Would a typical American teenager have kept this child and raised it? Probably not.

"I miss D.C. I hate that no one knows me, the real me. Sometimes even I don't know who I am. My parents tell me stories about what it was like for them growing up in Russia, but I've never been. It's not my home. I'm an American."

It's good she's telling me this and not her parents. It would break them. "I haven't been there either," I say. "But I believe in it. For me, it's more of a feeling." She gives me a half-smile. "Your parents are doing important work, Sheri. They are saving lives every day and making the world a better place."

"But what about my life?"

Before I can answer, my phone rings: it's a number I don't recognize. I answer, and the person on the other end says, "Your dry cleaning won't be ready until Thursday. Is that a problem?" My heart is beating so loudly in my chest; I am sure Sheri can hear it. "I understand," I say and hang up.

It's a message from the Center, the worst possible message. My life's work has come down to this moment. The white-blue light from the street lamp floods the car, giving Sheri's face an angelic glow. Her slender fingers are still working the Kleenex, oblivious to how her life is about to change.

"My dry cleaning won't be ready until Thursday," I say.

Her head pops up, and the beautiful blues of her eyes disappear, overtaken by the deep black abyss of their pupils.

"We have to meet your parents and get to Canada. Now!"

She looks out the window and then at me and reaches for the door handle. "Sheri," I say and stop myself from saying more. I want to scream *don't!* But it's her choice. The consequence of what she's about to do races through my brain. There is no time to debate; even seconds have penalties. The Fishers could be in grave danger. We are all at risk of dying if I don't throw this car in reverse. If she gets out of the car, she will never see her parents again. She knows this. My dear, sweet Sheri is staring back at me. Her whole life she's done everything we've asked of her. I open my mouth to speak and say nothing. She's nineteen, and she has free will. Time is not my friend, and she is not my child.

PROCESSION

SCOTT HOVDEY

IT WAS AT MY AUNT'S FUNERAL that I decided I was going to lose my virginity. I was in a pew at the church, sitting next to my intended conquest: Alexis, the son of my father's childhood best friend. Alexis was two years older than me, and his family lived a few blocks away back home in Mountain View. Like our fathers, we too had grown up together. When we were children, we had a natural curiosity about one another. Tag usually turned into exploring each other's bodies in the detached garage before dinner. We held steady in this routine until suddenly we didn't. After his high school lacrosse career landed him at a university in Chicago, we only saw each other over the holidays.

Aunt Doreen's heart attack ended a nine-month hiatus from seeing one another.

I did not think much of Alexis between our gatherings—at least, that is what I hoped he believed—but every reunion offered a chance to revisit what was below his belt. These festive encounters were nothing more than passionate second base (or third, depending on one's definitions), but the Alexis I had handled those nine months previously was not the Alexis who was sitting next to me. He was still charming, of course, but my childhood playmate had grown up. He had stubble, his cheeks and jawline were more severe and, on the whole, he moved with a confidence that can only come from years of compliments and being the object of others' desires and knowing it. I resented that about him, but I also thought it was hot.

So, there we were, sitting next to each other in a pew, mourning my Aunt Doreen, a woman I really only remember spending one summer with who, according to my father, cherished me since I was born and whose main joy in life came from church. She tried to convince everyone to go to church, my parents included, but she seemed especially invested in my finding a home in God. Every card she sent, even for Valentine's Day, referenced Him, and whenever we spoke on the phone, she told me she was praying for me. In my more insecure moments I suspected she could smell the sulfur on me. Yet she was always pleasant.

While my father cried for his eldest sister and my mother patted his back in a rare public gesture of love and support, Alexis rustled for something in his pocket.

We were incredibly close to each other, despite the church being only two-thirds full. (It was an *intimate* service, my mother would later say.) Our legs touched at the thigh, something that seemed mildly flirtatious when he first sat beside me in my otherwise empty row near the back. I felt his hand reaching inside his pocket, rubbing against the side of my leg. It felt nice to be touched. I blushed and had to reposition the service program so that I was holding it over my lap, a brassy image of Jesus levitating towards me over the bulge in my pants my mother had bought me for the somber occasion.

Alexis took his hand out of his pocket and placed it on his thigh, his fingers hanging off the edge of his muscles, the perfect place to tease me. He started to rhythmically move his fingers back and forth so that he was stroking the side of my leg, just above my knee. He was gentle, yet persistent. I gripped the program. It crinkled. I took a deep breath to release the tension and nerves within me. He was pleased to hear my contentment. He slowly turned around to confirm that nobody was sitting behind us. Knowing we were safe, he rested his head against my shoulder. I could feel his stubble through the thin fabric of my shirt and sweater. I rested my own head against his, but there was no stubble on my cheek for him to feel against his forehead. I had what felt like only a thin coat of fluff down in comparison.

“Are you okay?” he whispered, his voice nonetheless strong and sweet.

“Yeah,” I whispered back. “I’m great.” It was true.

My mother politely coughed. My heart fluttered. Alexis lifted his head, sat upright. He gently held my hand, his index finger and thumb lying dangerously close to the Lord and Savior.

* * *

The reception was held in a private room of the hotel where most of us out-of-state relatives were staying. The mullioned windows were open to combat the determined heat of October.

I was standing next to my father at a table covered with croissant sandwiches, fruit salad, and glasses of wine and champagne. Serene porcelain doves from Aunt Doreen’s private collection acted as weights to keep the napkins from fluttering away, their edges soggy from the wine bottles’ condensation. Behind the sandwich tray, nearly concealed by the lilies Alexis’s parents had sent, was a photo of her. She looked younger, maybe fifty. The photo was in black and white and slightly out of focus, its frame cream-colored wood. Modest. (My mother had taken me to Target the day before and asked me to choose it; I think she thought it would help me process.) My father—who, not counting that day’s service, I had only seen cry once since we learned of Aunt Doreen’s death the week before—was sipping Merlot and staring at the photo, too tired to talk or continue receiving condolences. He didn’t like to display

emotion, especially in public. But the service at the church didn't count. There, it was appropriate. It was to be expected.

I put my hand on his shoulder and he looked up at me with surprise. We never really touched. *Men don't do that*, he used to say.

"I'm sorry about Aunt Doreen, Dad," I tried to say soothingly, pushing harder onto his shoulder. He didn't pull back. "I know you loved her very much."

He smiled at the photo and looked like he might cry. He nodded vigorously, as if to prevent any tears from coming out, and when he spoke his voice cracked: "She loved you too, Denis." He turned to me. His face and neck were splotchy; he looked like he shouldn't have been standing. "She always wanted what was best for you."

He set down his glass and put his hands on his knees, doubled over as if he was going to be sick. After a moment of uncertainty, he promptly crumbled onto a leather armchair, the banker's lamp on the nearby table weak enough to cloak him in some dignity.

In so many words, what he said about Aunt Doreen was true. Between her cards and phone calls and infrequent visits, she tried to guide me into making good decisions. That summer she spent with us—the summer before I started my freshman year of high school—she introduced me to Laney Pruitt, the new (*newish*, really) girl down the street she had met at the church where she was a visiting parishioner during those few weeks she stayed in our guest bedroom. That January, Laney had transferred to the high school I would be attending. She was a cheerleader, an aspiring student council secretary, and she had quickly risen in the ranks of Key Club and National Honor Society. I think Aunt Doreen envisioned us having a wholesome relationship.

She loved you too, Denis. She always wanted what was best for you.

"I know she did, Dad, and I always appreciated that about her."

He patted me on the arm with his left hand as he covered his face with his right. Tears dripped down his wrist and wet his cuff. I bent down and tried to hold him. We didn't hug much then, and we still don't now. His love was known, factual, but rarely demonstrated. He pulled away and patted me again, and then looked toward the lamp to collect himself.

"Do you want a drink, Denis?" No sooner had he offered me his glass than I heard a gasp behind me. In a floral blur, my mother swooped in, called to the scene by an uncanny sense that something inappropriate was about to happen.

"Hugo! He is a *boy*," she said. "He is only eighteen. He cannot drink!" Every syllable was scathing. Alexis had once described my mother as being enamored with being appalled. She held her glass of cranberry-flavored sparkling water closer to her, high against her chest, a statement of superiority more than anything else.

My father stood up, swayed a little, and viciously pointed at her, his Merlot sloping over the top of his glass and staining the rug below.

“He is not a *boy*, Marie! He’s in college. Leave him alone!” He considered whether he had said his piece. He hadn’t. “Show him some *goddamn* respect!”

Uncle Ted stopped talking to Pastor Claudia and Aunt Charlotte smiled awkwardly at Aunt Doreen’s scandalized friends. Gladys, who had introduced herself as Aunt Doreen’s best friend, dropped her plate of grapes and paled, steadying herself against Aunt Marianne, already wobbly with her two canes. Grandma Crenn held up a finger to silence my cousin Mitchell and tsk-tsk’d loudly, expressing the entire room’s disapproval of my father. Understanding his impropriety, my father lowered his glass and his eyes. He leaned against the paneled wall. He was done for the evening and looked like he was about to spew his grief.

My mother gave me her glass of sparkling water and dutifully walked over to my father, shepherding him past the fireplace and out into the hallway.

The assembled returned to their respectful, dulcet murmurs.

Now alone next to the table, I set down my mother’s glass and looked around the room so as to look like I was doing something. No one cared to return my gaze, except for Alexis.

He excused himself from an older man and walked toward me with purpose. He ran his fingers through his hair—he was growing it out in an attempt to look like Tim Riggins—and then he smiled at me, making relentless eye contact. His charcoal suit hugged his body—the front of his pants was mercifully tight so that I did not quite have to remember what lay behind his zipper—and even in the dim light I could see that the gold stripes of his tie brought out the amber in his eyes.

He stood next to me. We both rested on the table, its sharp edge making the back of my legs pulse along with everything else. We looked at the group scattered throughout the room. We listened. I could hear some remembering my Aunt Doreen, others discussing the bank bailout, and a frenetic few who were celebrating Obama’s continued gains in the polls over McCain for the election that was less than a month away.

After a moment, Alexis offered me his own glass of wine. He, too, was too young to be drinking. I declined. I hadn’t ever had a drink, despite what my father assumed and my mother feared. He set the glass down behind him.

He didn’t speak. I wondered if he would.

“I was glad to see you again today,” I finally said. I knew where I wanted to go in the conversation and in the evening, but I didn’t know how to get there. “I mean, despite the circumstances.”

Alexis smirked and repositioned his right foot. The wooden sole of his shoe tapped against the rubber one of mine. I looked down. I might have even closed my eyes.

“I’ve been thinking about you, too.”

A moment.

“Really?”

Another.

“Yes. But maybe ‘thinking’ isn’t the right word You know I’ve always had real feelings for you, Denis.”

I swallowed.

“I did not know that.”

“Of course you did. Or was I not clear enough last time I got you alone in my garage?”

I looked up at him. He was impressed with himself, his freckled lips forming a mischievous grin. I could not help but laugh and suddenly I felt comfortable, even desired. In that moment I decided.

My mother approached the table and grabbed her glass of sparkling water, separating the two of us. “Your father is trying to find the brandy,” she said to me discreetly, ignoring Alexis. The slight glare she gave me was unnecessary. I knew how she felt about Alexis. She had once described him as having always gotten what he wanted; the apparent ease with which he moved through life was something dirty to her.

“Hello, Aunt Marie,” he cooed. “Congratulations on the new job. Denis told me the organization created the position especially for you. It sounds like you’ll be doing some wonderful things.”

When we were messaging each other in the days leading up to the service, before we knew for certain that he was going to be able to attend, I told him about how my mother had wanted to leave city government and return to advocacy work with a non-profit in Palo Alto. She asked me to do mock interviews with her. She did brilliantly.

Softened by his compliment, she perfunctorily squeezed his hand. “Thank you for representing your family today, Alexis. It means a lot to us that you’re here.”

His parents had paid for his hotel room, even though he went to school only half an hour away. My mother had rolled her eyes at this when I told her, but she did not protest, and my father was pleased with the news. Alexis said his parents wanted him to be there for me.

My mother exhaled deeply. She put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me on the forehead, standing on tiptoes to do so. I had grown used to the look of resignation in her eyes, but now there was a flicker of relief. She glanced at the photo of Aunt Doreen then absentmindedly rubbed her right ear, fiddling with her royal-purple tulip earring. It had streaks of gold, the purple gently eroded by years of nervousness, and the edge of one of the petals had been reduced to an irritated pink, like a still-healing scar. She walked back out into the hallway to attend to my father. He was whimpering near the doorway, swaying in his intoxication and sorrow. My mother placed a hand on his elbow, then his shoulder, and allowed him to fall into her arms. She kissed the top of his head, too.

I looked away and cleared my throat. Alexis's hand found mine along the edge of the table. Some light pressure, reassurance. *I know*. Then his fingers danced over my knuckles.

He leaned into me. The heaviness of his body was a comfort I didn't know I needed. I looked at him, and his eyes called back the sensation I felt while sitting in the pew. His smile was the only dorky thing about him, but it worked well. We stood, slightly turning to one other. He held my gaze for a few moments before inching closer, so that I was staring into his tie and our knees had no other option than to push into each other.

A part of me was worried that everyone would see, and therefore everyone would know, but in that moment it didn't seem to matter. He did not care to whisper when he spoke to me:

"So, are we going to do this, or what?"

* * *

My funeral clothes lay folded on the towel rack next to the bathroom door. From floor to ceiling, baby blue tiles were squared by bold lines of grout, the banal mosaic occasionally interrupted by the white porcelain toilet and sink or the silver shower and light fixtures. The vent hummed loudly, but I could still hear Alexis's music. He was playing Joy Division from his iPod. *Closer*. His favorite band, his favorite album.

The fluorescent lights were harsh. The pimples and dry patches on my face were humbling. My blemishes had never before seemed so prominent and criticizing. The down on my cheeks made me look plump, but my eyes had more life to them than I expected. My hair was still damp. The coolness was refreshing.

I took a deep breath, inhaling some of the lingering steam from my shower, and attempted to exhale the anticipation that only made me ache. I wrapped my towel around my waist, knowing this was for effect more than anything else, and stopped a stray drop of water that was trickling down my shoulder.

I turned off the bathroom light and opened the door, half of me standing on plush carpet and the other half on cold tile.

"It took you long enough," he said, with an attempt at playfulness. He did not sound impatient. Tentative, rather. The light on the bedside table illuminated his form: his broad shoulders, the defined muscles of his arms and chest, the tasteful hairiness of his legs. My body was softer than his—that, I always knew. He held a pillow over his lap. Despite his determined smile, I could tell that he was nervous.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

Perhaps his goosebumps came from the air conditioning.

“Yeah, I’m great,” he said. The grin he had been holding faltered, but it was replaced by something truer.

I walked toward him. He watched me carefully. I sat on the edge of the bed and opened my towel. He kissed me, hesitantly, softly. I put my hands on his pillow and paused. He nodded. I threw the pillow to the foot of the bed. It made a satisfying *thud*. Without fanfare, he pulled off his briefs. They landed near the ironing board.

We kissed for a long time and did other things until he gently turned me onto my stomach. Half of me was on the still-damp towel, the other half against the starched, scratchy sheet. He put his hands on my hips, where stretch marks webbed over my bones and crept toward the small of my back. With his thumbs, he made arcs here, until he moved toward my spine and followed it to its end, releasing pressure millimeter by millimeter until I was imagining his fingers.

He picked up a condom and packet of lube from the bedside table. I found his iPod near the comforter and played something new. Our favorite band, our favorite album. He fumbled with the condom wrapper. I looked behind me—he was flustered, strands of his hair sticking to his forehead.

“I’m sorry, Denis,” he said, sitting down on the backs of his legs and heels.

I held out my hand. He put the unopened condom in my palm. His fingers were warm and sweaty, either from his heat or mine, I do not know. I like to think it was from us both.

I wiped my fingers on the towel.

“There. Got it,” I said, a moment later.

“Yeah?” He tucked his hair behind his ears, looking entirely joyful.

“Yeah,” I said. I wanted to laugh, so I laughed.

I gave the condom back to him.

I lowered the music.

He asked me if I wanted the lights off. I shook my head no. He used his knees to spread my legs further and the stretch was delicious.

* * *

That summer Aunt Doreen came to stay with us, she encouraged me to take Laney to the movies. She suggested we see *The Terminal*.

“I don’t really think I want to do that,” I said. I was sitting in the rocking chair in the guest bedroom and she was folding her laundry, hanging her sundresses on my father’s wooden hangers. They swayed in the doorway, lightly buffeted by the ceiling fan. She made a point of keeping her underwear and bras in the basket, but I did not get the sense that she was self-conscious. Perhaps she was just trying to be polite.

“That’s okay, Denis. Would you like to see it with me?”

On the way home from the theater, she told me about her church. Their pastor was a woman, and all kinds of people attended. She asked me if I had ever considered going to a service. The church where she had met Laney reminded her of her congregation back in Chicago. She said it was progressive, very welcoming.

"It's important for a young man like yourself to have community, Denis," she told me.

I both did not know exactly what she meant and knew she was trying to initiate a conversation that I was not ready to have. Only in that past year had I realized that what had started as something physical had grown into something more, something scarier. I still hadn't told myself. Alexis never needed an answer. He didn't ask, and I didn't venture to tell him. Did it need to be vocalized between us? I tried to let it live in the unspoken, but I only buried it.

I focused on the eucalyptus grove visible from the off-ramp. We would be home soon, but I didn't know her well enough to trust her not to push.

"I don't know if I believe in God, Aunt Doreen."

We were at a stop sign. The turn signal clicking away in the silence, she confidently pulled out into the intersection and raised her hand in thanks to the driver who yielded to us.

Now safely on the street that led directly home, the turn signal quieted, Aunt Doreen let the steering wheel smoothly correct in her hands. She took a moment to look at me. I didn't know if she expected me to say anything.

"God still loves you," she said, returning her eyes to the road. "And I love you, too."

* * *

Alexis was sleeping. I now knew that he slept on his side. He was drooling slightly, his head tilted inward toward his right shoulder, where a scattering of acne scars crested over his back and mingled with freckles. His breaths lifted the ends of his hair. I kissed him above his ear, holding my lips there for a moment, holding my breath so as not to wake him. He breathed deeply. He smelled sweet and sweaty; he smelled like him.

I put my clothes on in the bathroom, used my fingers to comb my hair into something tame, and then gently closed the door to his room. The hallway was empty. It seemed likely that everyone had either gone to bed or gone home.

I went back to the room where the reception had been held and found my father sitting by himself in front of the fireplace. I sat in the leather chair opposite him and looked at him; his eyes were bloodshot and he supported his head with his left hand. He pulled a glass of brandy to his lips and took a sip. He looked at me. Although we made eye contact, I don't think he saw me. He gave a vacant smile, as if he was remembering being somewhere far more pleasant.

He took an empty, although previously used glass from the table next to him. The brandy was hidden behind one of the legs of the chair. He pulled the bottle up and poured me a glass, though smaller than his, and gave it to me. He looked me in the eyes, and this time I knew he could see me.

“I don’t care what your mother says, Denis. I think you are old enough to have a drink.” He raised his glass to me, enunciating his words with great effort. “You are a man now, and I love you very much.”

I took a sip of the liquid. It burned my mouth and throat on the way down.

I began to cry, and he cried as well.

I chose this project, because I came across an old photograph of my mother from the time she was a girl. It looks like a professional photograph in which she is posing with her brothers, sister, and mother, who is barely visible in the back.

Finding the photo made me start thinking more about what my mother might have been like as a child. I remember a story she told me about roller skates, and that is the basis of the story.

This is the first time that I used a digital art tablet, rather than working solely with pencil, pen, and watercolor. I had thought it would be easier to use digital art tools, but it probably took me more than twice as long because I had to learn how to use the software.

Since I am retired—after more than thirty years of working as a technical writer—I was able to take as much time as I wanted, and I learned a lot.

My mother was born in 1912 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She grew up in a traditional, old-fashioned family with very different rules for the males and females. Despite chafing at the inequitable treatment she received, Mom remembered her childhood as being very happy.

Unfortunately, my mother was not able to break away from the patriarchal family structure when she had a son and daughter of her own. As I get older, I am more and more aware of how hard it is to break old patterns.





Sophie wants to roller skate...



It's DANGEROUS!! You girls could fall down and break an arm or leg!



But you encourage me and Harry to skate?



That's right, Papa.



I don't want to talk about it anymore! **NO SKATING for the GIRLS!!**

Well then, let's all settle down. I still have a lot of sewing to do.



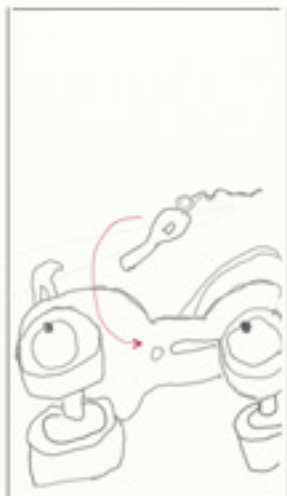
After I finish the stockings, I will hem the new dresses I made for the girls. They can wear them for our family photograph next week.



Meet me at the park tomorrow at 2 pm.



The next day, both Sophie and Esther went to the park to meet their brothers.



Later that afternoon...



But soon Papa would be home from work.



The boys can't
meet us today.



But I know where
the skates are.



Shsh!



Whee! I feel so free!
Me too!

Let's race!



Oops!!



I can't stop!

Ouch!







I thought the girls said it was too hot to wear long stockings?



But the stockings look so nice with their pretty new dresses! Don't you agree?



THE RESCUE

LYDIA KIM

AN UNMARKED URN SAT ATOP THE STONE STEPS where a priest had set it before dawn.

The Girl took the urn with both hands and hid it in a corner of the scullery. She glanced at it often for several days, in between scrubbing mud-covered vegetables and turning animals into meat. The laundry's steam coiled her hair, sharp lye burned her eyes, and the endless sweeping turned her chestnut-brown skin gray. The room's pockmarked walls trapped grease and smoke, and the only sounds were the gurgle of boiling water and hiss of the hearth-fire. The Girl worked, ate, and slept here in this windowless room. She had done so since the Stepmother entered the household some months earlier, when her mother was still alive but weak and ill. So, it was a comfort to have the urn nearby, to touch it for reassurance before sleeping, to see it upon rising. The urn was the only thing that belonged to the Girl, and she feared it might be discovered.

After nearly a week, it was time. The Girl finished the day's work and crept away with the urn through the walled streets. She moved quickly despite her aches, swollen knees, and empty belly. Her split lips stung when she licked them. She did not want to release the ashes within the Kingdom to collect in the gutters or be trampled by hooves. She wanted to bid farewell with care, to let her mother travel far away on the wind.

Soon, she found herself alone at the edge-road that marked the boundary between the Kingdom and the Forest. It was rock-dry and bare; not even the cockspur weedlings would try their luck here. The Girl clutched the urn to her chest and willed herself to open it. The walls of her throat drew together, trapping the sounds of mourning in her chest. But across the way, the Forest looked lush and dark, with quick movements in the dense undergrowth. She wanted to cross the edge-road and pour the ashes into the depths of those shadowy woods, but her feet froze. *Just go*, the Girl thought. They would be looking for her soon at the house. But her feet would not move beyond the boundary, and her hands would not shake loose the ashes.

A person's ashes stink of hot metals and feel like a road in drought, bits of bone like pebbles in the grit. The ashes do not melt away when rubbed between my fingers. It is a wonder that flesh can burn to rubble, like a house. It is a wonder that a woman who once held her lips to my injured knees and fevered cheeks could be reduced to this mound of ash.

Finally, the Girl drew a long, cracking breath, opened the urn, and freed her mother's ashes into the wind, and they swarmed, a surging murmur, sweeping around the girl in a swell of brilliant black. They spiraled around her before shooting into the Forest, carrying the Girl's scent: dank and brackish like lost wood soaked by sea brine. The wind carried the ashes over roots and rocks, all the way to the black-booted feet of the Wild Woman, who reached out a strong, dark hand and captured a handful. She threw it into the branches above, where velvety dark blooms burst forth from every crook. The Wild Woman sensed the Girl standing at the edge-road, afraid to cross over and afraid to return home. She sensed the Girl had no one, as her father had taken another wife and turned away from his only child. The Wild Woman knew, as the Girl did not yet, that orphans are strong, for they have only themselves, and that orphans are whole, for they know themselves fully. The Wild Woman knew, as the Girl did not yet, that underneath her sadness would be a lethal heat, one that burns to make way for new life. The Wild Woman smiled at all that the Girl would discover soon.

The Girl stood alone in the rosy dusk, the empty urn in her arms. Where a soft memory once lived, there was just a hollow. The wind brought the Wild Woman's laughter to the Girl, who strained to listen. The laughter didn't mock; it welcomed. Where there had been mourning, there was a prick of something hot and new. The laughter gently plucked a long-stilled muscle in her throat. Slender branches emerged from the dark Forest and coaxed her onward. The wind nudged her, the rising moon lit a path, but the Forest looked too eerie, too distant. *Who was laughing?* she wondered, but she couldn't move forward. She turned back into the Kingdom, back to her windowless room. *Who was laughing?*

The next day, the Girl woke and looked at the empty space where the urn once sat. Sadness rippled in and out like ocean waves, a bit less bruising each time, washing up the grit of anger instead. The air and walls were too close, the steam from the wash pail noxious. She felt a quickening in her stomach when she remembered the Forest. She wanted to run to the edge-road to hear the mysterious laughter on the wind, plunge into the quiet dome of its woven branches, and show her face to the moon. But first. *But first.* She rose in the near dark, dressed herself, and began the day's work. She slit the throats of several limp-necked chickens, spun them in boiling water to loosen their feathers, and set them to roasting. She scrubbed the laundry and the plates. She swept up the day's dust and, finally, uncurled her back and stood.

The Stepmother entered.

She was a proud woman, this new wife. She had wormed her way into the widower's home before there was a space in his bed and into his affections too soon after the funeral. Now, she hobbled about her new home on damaged feet, with a cane she used as both a crutch and a weapon. She was burdened with her own daughters, two quiet and frightened Sisters, but from the first day, she set upon the Girl. The Stepmother burned the Girl's books; twisted fistfuls of her hair when giving orders. She sensed in the Girl a defiance that angered her and wanted deeply for the Girl to swallow the world as it was, as she had done. So, she banished the Girl to the scullery and cornered her there daily, tapping the stone floor with her cane's metal tip.

The Stepmother's eyes were drawn to the full dust-basket in the Girl's arms.

The Girl stood still.

The air crackled. The Stepmother circled.

The Sisters watched from the doorway, silent witnesses.

In a flash, the Stepmother smashed the dust-basket with her cane, sending billowing cinders into the Girl's eyes, into the simmering soup, onto the still-cooling bread. Everywhere.

"That stew is ruined," said the Stepmother.

The Girl trained her eyes on the stone floor.

"Throw it out and begin again," said the Stepmother.

The Girl did not nod or speak. A prick of heat in her chest began to bloom.

The Stepmother raised her cane, but the Girl did not flinch. The Stepmother pushed the tip of the cane into the evening's meat pie and slid it onto the floor, where it spilled its innards onto the mounds of dust.

"Disgusting," she said.

She trod a path through the cinders and hobbled away. The Sisters watched, forlorn. They slipped small candies from their pockets and placed them under the Girl's downcast gaze as they followed their mother out.

The Girl gazed at the broken pie, the mounds of dust, the empty spot where the urn once sat. Slowly, she began to fill the dust-basket again. Her brown arms turned a chalky gray once more, but her eyes felt hot and dry. When the scullery floor was cleared, the Girl ran to the edge-road, stood under the blue-black sky, and looked again at the dark Forest on the other side. Laughter snaked out from within, hundreds of eyes glittered with welcome. A hunger swallowed her sadness and, in its place, a storm began to swell. But still, the Forest looked too dark, too distant, so she turned back to the house. Unlike the Sisters, she was needed there.

The Stepmother was eager to be rid of her two daughters, the useless, soft-hearted creatures that they were. The Sisters could not marry until they had attended the Ball, and they had, at long last, come of age. They were called to appear the following night.

The Ball is an old story.

Every girl born in the Kingdom had heard the tale of the Ball on every birthday: Once upon a time, a radiant maiden appeared at the Ball and captured the Prince's heart, but she ran away at midnight, leaving behind one glass slipper. Heated, provoked, and unsatisfied, the Prince looked for her desperately. He pursued every clue, first with hounds, and then with soldiers. He grew despondent, then furious. The old storytellers say he never found her, never took a wife, and died an angry man.

Ever since, the Kingdom's maidens had to appear at the Ball when they came of age, dressed in white, a parade of maybe-brides. There was the improbable prospect of royal marriage, if a girl should own the foot that fit the impossibly tiny glass slipper. But even so, the maidens did not come willingly, as the whispers about the Ball promised great violence: toes chopped off, heels carved away. Desperate mothers mutilated their own daughters and blood was shed in the Great Hall, month after month. The maidens wept and struggled; their hands bound as hooded strongmen loomed behind them. The courtiers watched and jeered. The hems of the white gowns soaked up the blood, stained forever with the cruelty of this ancient spectacle. No maiden's foot had ever fit, but every Prince for generations continued the gruesome tradition. The Princes never married any of the maidens, of course. Princesses from foreign lands arrived to join hands and royal families. But the tradition continued, and the Kingdom crawled with women hobbling on their disfigured feet, married to resentful men who ignored them in the light and rutted away on top of their limp bodies in the dark.

The Girl had also come of age, but the Stepmother forbade her from joining the Sisters. The day of the Ball, the Stepmother entered the scullery. She picked up a carving knife, plunged it into a sack of lentils, and split it wide. The Girl watched as they poured out of the wound into the cracks of the stone floor.

"Sweep," the Stepmother said, stabbing the knife into a plucked chicken.

The Girl faced her squarely and met her eyes.

The hearth-fire hissed. A rage tensed the Stepmother's pale neck. She heaved a whetstone at the Girl's face, striking her on the temple. The Sisters gasped. A crack of light exploded in the Girl's head, sending her to her knees.

"Pick up every one," the Stepmother said.

The Girl raised a hand to her wound, a storm gathering behind her dark eyes. The walls hummed with a buzzing silence.

"You stupid girl," the Stepmother said and hobbled out, trailed by the Sisters.

The Girl looked around the room, the greasy walls, the piles of bones. She watched blood from her wound drip onto the lentils and disappear between them. She looked down at her feet, dirty and whole. She closed her eyes as the storm surged inside her. It rolled in great waves of anger. It moved her feet, marched her out of the

scullery, through the walled streets, all the way to the edge-road. The expanse was bare, empty. She looked across at the dark chaos of the Forest. A larger wave crested in her heart. The Girl took her first step, then another, and soon, found herself facing a thicket of black branches and night-colored blooms.

She turned her shoulders back, spread her chest wide. She ran, eyes open, into the dark.

Inside the Forest, the Girl felt warm, wet air smoothing her skin. She saw massive, cinnamon-colored trees and whispery dark branches steeping together in a canopy of dark violet blooms, and underneath, bushes heavy with clusters of purple-black berries. She saw girls of all ages, strong-footed, jumping and chasing one another. They leapt across stream-stones and dared each other to touch silver-backed fish. She saw the girls were not afraid to yell until snakes wriggled away, not afraid to plant their feet into the earth and stretch out their arms, starfished against the sky-glow. They saw the Girl; they knew she had met her storm. They grasped her hands tight and together they ran from the rising moon, lungs burning, sweat drying their skin tight.

The Girl ran until her legs ached, and then loosed her anger into howls. She stomped her feet into the earth and left her mark from tree to tree. She stared into the eyes of the fox until it smiled and darted away. Together, the girls spun around the trunks of old trees, stained their lips with berries, and washed each other's feet in the river water, whole feet and cut feet side by side. Together, they gathered with the Wild Woman in the warm night, ringing a scarlet fire, leaning on each other's knees.

Long ago, when the Wild Woman was a girl not yet of age, she too had stood at the edge-road separating the Kingdom from the lush, dark Forest. She came to edge-road every evening, stealing away from her cold family, watching the Forest beyond, willing herself to take the first step. Finally, the evening she was called to the Ball, she chased her desire across the dead expanse into the pitch of the Forest. Here, her hair flared into a lush halo, her raven skin shone in the moonlight, and her voice poured out and shook boulders with its power. She built fires and slept under moonlight. She shattered rocks with her rage and witnessed miracles with her new eyes. She ran, she healed, and she laughed. She tumbled, she sang, and she shouted. She left behind her girlhood, stretched her hands out to the window of the endless sky, and every night she called the Girls to her.

The Wild Woman knelt before the Girl and pressed their palms together. A pulse flowed into the Girl's heart and set it to beating, deep, steady, and sure. The Girl's palms grew hot and the heat spread up her arms, across her chest, and pooled in her heart. It burned away her calluses, her old scars. She felt her anger alight and dance. When the Wild Woman released her hands, the charred palms stung in the open air. As the Girl watched, astounded, the raw pink flesh healed into planes of

smooth, glossy skin. Old lifelines had burnt away, and no dust would bind to its fresh surface ever again.

The Wild Woman's eyes gleamed like broken glass. The Girl saw in those eyes an orphan who had healed her own heart, who had traded silence for rage. She saw she was not alone, for there were hands that would pull her into the treetops, and mouths that would call the Girls to join in being wild and whole.

The Wild Woman stood and gestured to the way out of the Forest.

"The others," she said.

* * *

The morning of the Ball, the Sisters wept as they bathed in preparation, washing their feet last, carefully. They were brides in search of a husband they did not want, terrified of the evening ahead. They tied themselves into their white dresses. They perfumed their necks and rouged their milk-white cheeks. Their hands trembled as they reached for white blossoms to pin to their hair and were surprised to see among the stems the Girl had left at their door two velvety dark blooms, petals warm to the touch. In their hair, the flowers glowed a deep indigo.

In the King's Great Hall, countless candles blazed white, and every unforgiving surface was perilous to the vicious courtiers who had to tiptoe on the polished floors and avoid touching their silks to the oiled marble walls. The King did not believe in bread, only circuses, and the plentiful strong drink fed the crowd's brutish anticipation. At the bell, the carousel of chatter jerked to a stop. The hushed air vibrated with bloodlust as all the shiny, bloated faces turned inwards.

The maidens sat in a line along the nave, hands bound before them and mournful faces turned to the floor. Their skirts were raised above the ankles to reveal their bare feet. A murmur stirred the court as the Girl entered last, face shining, eyes dangerously bright, the soft velvet folds of her shadow-black dress sweeping the floor. When she took her place next to the Sisters, she was a dark bud in a sea of weeping white.

The Stepmother recovered quickly from the shock of seeing the Girl, eager to offer her daughters first. She gestured to the Sisters to stand, and she took hold of the axe, as the hooded strongmen pressed the first Sister's foot to the marble step. The drunken crowd gasped as the axe swung above the Stepmother's head and down in a wicked curve. The blade sliced through flesh and crunched through bone. The Girl heard the muffled shriek. A crimson puddle flowed towards her and broke around the toe of her shoe. A roar collected behind the Girl's lips.

"Bring us the slipper!" cried the Stepmother.

The court boy hurried forward, and the Girl heard the sickening squish of a butchered foot being forced into the glass trap, then the carnivorous *aah* of the crowd when the slipper failed to fit.

"I have another daughter!" cried the Stepmother, desperate. She had waited so long; she had two cursed daughters when most had only one. The hooded strongmen brought forward the second Sister. The Stepmother swung the axe again, and a row of toes like a bloated cockscomb fell off. She twisted the glass slipper over her daughter's mutilated stump and again, it failed to fit. The crowd tittered, greedy for more. The Sisters collapsed onto one another, their wide faces pale as the moon. Red stains bloomed upwards from the hems of their white gowns.

"Are you finished?" the King asked.

"Well," the Stepmother said, embarrassed. "There is the Girl."

The crowd turned to the dark-eyed Girl in the shadow-black dress.

"Bring her forward," said the Prince, suddenly alert. He turned his face, all bulges and greasy crevices, towards the Girl. His plump fingers curled into a fist when she stood. She pricked his curiosity, this straight-backed Girl. He would enjoy draining her pride.

The glass slipper, smeared with the Sisters' blood, perched like a gruesome ruby on the stone steps before him.

The Girl approached and raised the slipper to her face.

She inhaled the animal tang of pooled blood.

The Girl's eyes blackened, and the storm in her heart grew wide and wild. The Girl held the bloodied glass slipper aloft with both hands. The light from the canopy of candles above scattered through its many facets onto the cruel faces in the Great Hall, dotting them in scarlet blotches. The Girl's breasts, throat, and arms stirred with the rage of a thousand mutilated girls, a thousand forced brides wide-eyed in the dark. The Girl heaved the slipper down with a force that shattered it into hundreds of deadly slivers, the crystal blast echoing through the stillness.

A rage unfurled in the Great Hall.

The King smashed his fist, shattering the goblet before him.

The Prince barked with fury.

The hooded strongmen lunged for the Girl, but she darted past their grasp.

She ran to the Sisters and clasped their hands in hers. In her grip they felt their hands burn, and in her eyes they saw laughter and fury. She raised them onto their severed feet and pulled them into the blinding dark outside. Their gowns fell from their bodies. They heard the stomping of the hooded strongmen behind them. They heard the barking hounds abruptly stilled by the blood on the discarded dresses. The girls ran, lungs burning, faster and faster with each step, a rousing pulse flowing through the Girl's hands into the Sisters'.

They fled across the darkened Kingdom to the edge-road, into a ring of fire encircling a shadow-black coach led by two steaming night-mares, where the Wild Woman sat up high, holding thick reins, black-booted feet pressed against the iron brake. She watched for them, ready. Black coils shot from her head in a fierce nimbus, and her eyes gleamed. When she saw the Girls, she opened her mouth and laughed a wave of thunder. The Girls leapt aboard the coach. The Wild Woman called to the horses, and they charged away towards the other Girls, who had saved each other from every Kingdom in the land.

FEATHERBRAINED

VICTORIA MCALLISTER

I DIDN'T OPEN THE BIRDCAGE, only the window. But Charlie Feathers is missing. I only stepped away for a moment. Now he is gone.

Five o'clock teatime, Charlie was safe in his birdcage, iced tea and treats ready on the table. I stepped into the bedroom, just to freshen up. I fluffed my hair and tried my new tangerine lipstick. Such a striking contrast to Charlie's feathers—cerulean blue, sun gold, and lime green.

And now the carnage—orange slices stuck to seat cushions, and a damp, white streak smeared on the windowsill. No sign of Charlie. But the straw sunhat I decorated with his long tail feathers is torn—the feathers strewn on the floor. I can hold them but hardly see them. Because seeing is believing. And I can't believe Charlie is gone. I keep waiting for a whisper of wings, the grasp of perching claws, his sweet whistle, "Who loves Feathers? Gimme a kiss. Gimme me a kiss."

I've searched my rooms. He's not on the curtain rod, or up on the bookshelf, or sharpening his beak on the coat rack. He isn't behind the sofa playing hide and seek. He was preening in his cage when I laid out the tea treats.

"Look, Charlie, oranges with cinnamon sugar for you, ginger cookies for me."

"Time for treats," he answered.

I stepped away for the teeniest, tiniest moment. Just to freshen my face.

He chattered, "Hello, Handsome," to himself in the gilt mirror over the sofa while I dusted my cheeks. Just a touch of blush. He hummed his favorite aria from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*: "♪♪ aAHH aHH ah ah ahhh."

"♪♪ Ahh Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha HAAA," I replied.

The *Queen of the Night* is our song.

I was plumping my lips when I noticed the silence. Dead silence, like that moment before the body falls after the gunshot in noir films. I looked out and Charlie was gone, the copper-cage door dangling loose on a hinge.

I didn't open the birdcage. Only the bay window. I always like to catch the first breeze on hot afternoons. The view from our townhouse goes on forever—apartments,

warehouses, shopping malls, endless highways full of rush-hour traffic. Gulls, crows, and starlings. So many birds, but no sign of Charlie.

“Oh, Charlie Feathers, you promised not to leave.”

Down on the sidewalk, hot, sweaty passengers are climbing off the six o’clock B-Line Express Bus. I lean out and shout “Hello, down there. Have you seen my parrot? His name is Charlie Feathers. Blue, yellow, and green. Please tell me if you see him. Ring the brown buzzer. I’m Loretta Wells. I live up top in number three.”

No one is listening. They’re all on their way, texting on phones, jostling backpacks and bags. Staring at their feet as they scatter towards home.

I lean so far out I’m on the brink of falling, “Charlie Feathers. Feathers, Feathers, Feathers. Come home my handsome boy.”

Oh dear. I wonder if Mr. Chedwick is watching, peering through the shutters of his great, green house across the road. It makes my heart race to think so. Such a shy Old Bones, my secret admirer, with his broad chest, and his bald head all glossy and smooth as a new-laid egg. What else does he have to do in that big house all alone?

Every night Charlie and I peek at him. Promptly at eight, he opens the shutters in his study, pours a whiskey, and watches Turner Classic Movies—*Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The Lady Vanishes*. On Tuesdays, Mr. Chedwick watches musicals. He loves Fred Astaire. Sometimes, Charlie and I sing softly along.

I’ve never met him, Mr. Charles Chedwick, Jr. But in the morning, when I’m making toast, I peer at him through my kitchen curtains. He always looks up at my bay window when he steps out in his bathrobe to check his mail. Once when he went off in a cab, I slipped over and peeked in his mailbox. I found his name on a water bill.

The sun is sinking towards the Walmart. Cumulous clouds are gathering. Soon it will be dark.

Oh, if Mr. Chedwick (sometimes I call him Cheddie) is watching now, what a spectacle he’ll see. I rescue the torn hat from under the tea table and climb onto the window seat. The cushions squish under my feet. I take a deep breath, grab the window frame, duck my head, and squeeze myself outside onto the sill. There is no ledge, only edge, and I’ve never had a head for heights. My knees are bobbing like a runaway sewing machine.

The hat in my free hand flaps in the wind. My only hope is that Charlie will see it. Because it’s his hat really. Ever since I first sewed his lovely tail feathers into the band.

“Who’s your Sweetheart?” I had asked as I stitched.

“Gimme a kiss. Gimme a kiss,” he answered and nibbled my nose.

When he first molted, I cherished his feathers like baby teeth. I washed them and smoothed them—saved them all in a carved ebony box. All except those glorious

tail feathers. Bright as jewels they were. So long and lovely that I longed to wear them. So, I made our hat, which made me laugh. “Look Charlie, we’re going steady,” I told him when I first tried it on.

That was August, his first year. Our rooms were so hot and sticky by teatime that Charlie tried to bathe in his water feeder. Splashing everywhere. Rattling his cage with his wings.

That’s how our sunset vigils began. I’d bring iced tea and oranges in from the kitchen, unlatch the bay window, and carefully carry him to perch on the window seat. At first, I clipped his wings to keep him safe. We discussed it often, and gradually I trusted him.

“Fly me to the moon, Charlie,” I’d say, and we’d sing, “Let me live among the stars.”

“You wanna fly free, Charlie?” I’d ask. He quickly learned to say, “Fly free. Fly free.”

Charlie’s flight feathers grew, and he loved to fly from room to room. Now he keeps me company on my shoulder in the kitchen, steals trinkets from my jewelry box in the bedroom, and watches *The Secret Life of the Zoo* on my laptop with me.

Where is he? A crowd has gathered. People are now staring up and pointing at me like I’m a mad woman. I shout down, “Don’t panic. I won’t jump. I’m just a bit dizzy. I’m looking for my parrot. This is his hat.”

There’s a man on his phone, waving his arms. I hope he’s not calling the police. I’m panting with fatigue.

Slowly, I lean out over the sidewalk waving my sunhat—first sedately, then frantically. “Charlie Feathers!” I shout. “Time to come home, my beautiful darling. Time for us to sing the *Queen of the Night*.”

Over the traffic, I hear rattling and thumping across the street. It’s Mr. Chedwick pushing trash bins down the driveway from his garage to the curb—first rubbish, then recycle, then compost. I’d love to ask whether he’s seen Charlie. But he is too obsessed with lining the bins up a foot apart, smallest to largest; black, blue, green. He could be choreographing *A Chorus Line*. Never once does he look my way.

Maybe he’s pretending not to see. Could dear Cheddie be jealous? Cunning enough to find my spare key, slip upstairs, open the birdcage, and free his rival? It’s a breathtaking thought.

Or is he deeply embarrassed his daft neighbor is out on a windowsill, screeching like a parrot? I must look a fright. Suddenly, the sidewalk sways. It’s a dizzying, long-way down.

Sheet lightning flickers. Soon it will rain. I am truly desperate.

“Excuse me, Mr. Chedwick. Have you seen my parrot? He’s a macaw. His name is Charlie Feathers. I raised him from a hatchling.” Mr. Chedwick stares up, speechless.

It's fully dark now. A siren wails. The crowd is dispersing. Thunder rumbles, a giant circling overhead. Charlie Feathers is lost, and I'm a sobbing mess of smeared eyeliner and tangerine lipstick, clutching a crumpled hat.

Of course, Mr. Chedwick didn't sneak into my house. He takes out his trash, perfectly dressed in khaki slacks and a sports coat. He doesn't sneak anywhere. Mr. Charles Chedwick, Jr. isn't "Dear Cheddie" at all.

I breathe in the darkness and exhale the *Queen of the Night*: "♪♪Ahh Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha HAAA." I want to shatter the chandeliers of all the world's opera houses.

Then silence. The absolute silence of a world waiting to be rocked by storm, paused on the brink of a downpour. I close my eyes and wait. Maybe lightning will strike me.

Instead, a deep baritone calls up from the street. "Steady there. Don't fall. He'll need you. I read parrots can live for a hundred years."

It's Cheddie, dear Cheddie, looking calmly up, his bald head quite handsome under the streetlights. "Try searching your closets. I imagine he's quite clever. Maybe leave your windows open. After this storm, by daylight, he'll be eager for home."

"Tomorrow, yes! Of course he won't fly tonight."

"What about TV news?" Cheddie says. "How many parrots sing Mozart? Call them. They'll have the whole town searching. I have an orange tree behind my house. He might come there. Tomorrow, if you'd like, you can sit in my garden and sing *Queen of the Night*."

I smile. "Charlie loves oranges."

Dear Cheddie, such a sly Old Bones, my secret admirer, with his broad chest, and his bald head all glossy and smooth as a new-laid egg. I slip back inside. Maybe he would like some tea. Maybe he can fix the birdcage. Maybe he would like a hat.

A SHOW OF NUMBERS

CYNTHIA NOONEY

FIFTY-SEVEN TIMES FROM MIDCOURT SEATS you saw Kobe Bryant play. Fifty-seven times with your ex. Brad taught you to appreciate Kobe's fadeaway and high-flying dunks and you gave him a number twenty-four jersey, Lakers ball cap and car flags, that purple and gold leather jacket, tickets to Kobe's final game. Brad took his brother, and you stayed home, pulling out your eyelashes, making a neat little pile on your desk.

Then, there was no Brad—well, no *you and Brad*—and three years later Kobe was gone. Hearing the news made you anxious and sad, so you swallowed three cannabis-infused beans—two blueberry and one espresso—then took your dog for a walk. Seconds later, a man from PG&E called, said your service was going to be disconnected. It was Sunday, so that seemed strange. Your adrenalin was surging because of Kobe and the steep incline of the sidewalk. It was sixty degrees and you were wearing gloves. The man on the phone said you could pay the outstanding balance by credit card. Now your mom was calling too. The screen inquired, Do you want to put the current call on hold and accept hers, or send her directly to voicemail? You chose the latter because her question was always the same. When are you coming home? It's been two years.

You wished her life wasn't only about yours.

* * *

Back when Kobe and Vanessa were engaged, you would see her at a salon in the Palisades with her mom. They got pedicures side by side. You went for Brazilian waxes and blowouts. You dated frequently then, believed you had potential. This was before Brad. No tweezing between visits, Claudette would tell you, you'll get ingrowns. You liked how piously Claudette melted the wax, how deftly she removed the strips. Her deeply lined face reminded you of your mother's, though your mother would never wax someone's labia. In that tiny sacred room, you almost felt loved.

Once, Vanessa held open the door for you. You exchanged smiles, her breath a Malibu breeze—all wildflowers and waves. Get ready, honey, you felt like saying. Good luck. You'd just been photographed in *People* with a burgeoning director who forgot to mention he was married. Your sordid naïveté on full display. Your mother embarrassed, screeched into the phone, Leave that demonic place. And your retort: I'll do what I like. That's when you began tweezing the tiny stiff hairs Claudette told you not to touch, plucking the area smooth and bright. It was all you did on weekends, searching out every persistent invader. Work was so crazy then—all the long hours spent dressing up, the highlights and manicures and constant moisturizing because pantyhose were no longer a thing; you had to have silky gams to work in TV, to host that fluffy tabloid show that made you recoil. You tried not to cave, but eventually you succumbed back into your tried-and-true middle-school habit—*Are you going to do that your entire life?* your mom had yelled, your father already gone, living three states away—and you pulled out your eyelashes one by one, and then your eyebrows, until you looked like Tilda Swinton.

* * *

Bonny was pawing through fallen leaves when a new alert popped up on your phone. Kobe's daughter was also confirmed dead. Helicopter crash in Calabasas. You shot a segment there once at a pricey boutique owned by Khloe, Kourtney and Kim. You remembered thirsty rolling hills. The wicked 101. Soon after, you moved to the Bay, took an off-camera job.

Now, Bonny sniffed the grass, prepared to release, and you bent over and retched. It was hard to scoop up Bonny's mess while talking to the PG&E guy and you were worried more would erupt from your throat. Kobe's daughter died too? Only thirteen? That was too much. You would have to walk more, retrace your steps and start over. Walk instead of pluck. If only you'd done that with Brad.

Gulping back the bile, you told the PG&E dude you'd call him back. He provided his name, James Turner, and recited his direct line, but you couldn't jot it down because Notes wouldn't open on your phone and the gloves weren't helping. I don't have a pen, you told him, or paper, I'm walking my dog. Normally, you could memorize a number but your head was cloudy. He said he'd wait until you were successful, just keep trying, he was there to help. The cherries from the cheesecake you'd had for breakfast were burning in your stomach, along with the beans, and something wasn't adding up—you didn't remember seeing a cancellation notice or overdue statement—but you weren't in the mood to argue with James, not in the face of such sorrowful news.

Gingerly, you set the phone on the sidewalk and retrieved Bonny's waste. The speaker volume was turned all the way up. Though you were usually adept with the inside-out baggie technique, a bit of Bonny's stink ended up on your glove. Goddamnit, you shouted, and James asked, Is everything all right?

No, James, everything is not all right, you felt like saying. We can only fool ourselves for so long, which is what you'd done earlier by thinking you could relax. That was when you had leftover cheesecake. You actually laughed while watching a comedy special you'd already seen, and for a brief glittering moment the world seemed livable.

Five minutes later, while snapping on Bonny's leash, the news about Kobe came through. Brad was your first thought. Brad with his hot wife and new baby. When you were together, he hadn't wanted children or marriage, and so you pushed aside your deepest desires for seven fleeting years. Now you were forty-three, with nothing.

James adopted a pushy tone, said he was unable to postpone the disconnection. You must pay immediately. It would be terrible to be without power, he said.

Accidentally, you ran your poop-smeared finger through your bangs then stifled a scream. You wanted James gone. You wanted to process the helicopter horror all on your own. You tried googling PG&E scams but your internet request wouldn't go through. This happened a lot on that winding street. *No connection available*. Story of your life, you thought, then immediately scolded yourself for being so negative.

James said, I can clear everything up right now. Give me your number and I'll stop the truck. You weren't carrying a wallet, but you knew your credit card number by heart. In a second you could be rid of him. Instead, you knelt to the ground and flattened your bangs against the grass then mopped your head upward and sideways. Bonny thought you wanted to play. She ran in circles on her short Welsh corgi legs, tangling the leash. You unwound it and got back up.

Ma'am, you need to pay now.

James—? Hey, have you heard about Kobe?

Who?

You hung up.

* * *

Back home, men were crying on TV. News anchors, sports stars, coaches. Doc Rivers was really broken up. Tiger Woods would be interviewed after Torrey Pines, a newscaster said, LeBron James when he landed at LAX. Men were also crying on sports talk-radio shows, some so hard the host suggested they ring back later.

You kept TVs and radios on at all times so you never felt alone. You half-expected James to call again—and a small part of you wanted him to.

On TV, the Spurs and Raptors tipped off. Each team traded a 24-second violation honoring Kobe's number. You never wore a number. But you knew twenty-four was a composite and semiperfect number with exactly eight factors—1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, 24—and wasn't that interesting because Kobe first wore number eight with the Lakers before switching to twenty-four. You wished you had someone to share this information with.

The crowd at the arena rose to a standing ovation.

You stood too, right there in your bedroom, cupping your heart. Reach out to your loved ones, one of the announcers said. You knew you should call your mom but you opted to text Brad: You must be devastated. What a huge loss.

He replied within seconds. Five crying-face emojis, followed by a selfie in the jacket you gave him.

Looking good, you almost replied. Instead you wrote, Sad day.

Meet this guy! Middle name's Kobe. It was a picture of Brad's baby. Cabernet lips and long dark eyelashes.

Congratulations! you typed after swallowing hard. He's perfect.

Thanks! Hope you are doing OK. Life is short! Make the days count!

Absolutely! I'm doing great! you wrote back. Well, aside from the tragedy. You waited a few seconds before sending another text. We had some good times together watching #24, didn't we? You remembered the warmth of his thigh against yours in those tiny Staples Center seats and when Kiss Cam projected you on jumbotron and everyone cheered.

In the mirror above your dresser you spotted an outlier—a spiky eyebrow hair that didn't belong. You wanted to pull it and rub it between your fingers. It gave you a sense of calm and order, purging the ugly that way. But then you thought of Kobe. How maybe you could stop, once and for all, in tribute to him. Every time you felt the urge to pluck, you could dribble a ball instead, a small one, something that fit in your hand, something you could leave lying around in every room in the house—on counters and tables, next to the sink. First, though, you'd remove that last stubbly hair that was bugging the shit out of you.

But you stopped in midair, thinking about Vanessa. Where were the calls for her? How in God's name would she cope? You moved to the bed and invited Bonny up, then snuggled against her and opened a book, where you found three eyelashes. That was one of your tricks. Leaving a trail of memories to come across. Proof you'd been somewhere.

You looked at your phone. No response from Brad. Delete him, you thought. It'd help you move on. You'd do it this time; finally you'd go through with it. Kobe would approve. Kobe would say, Be the best, be strong, be the best.



NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones



NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones



NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones



NO DREAM SHOULD BE DEFERRED / Kevin B. Jones

What I enjoy most about photography is traveling with my camera and meeting new people, along with seeing and experiencing places in the world firsthand that one may only have read about. My personal belief is that, at our core, we are all very much the same, no matter where we come from or where we live. I attempt to represent this in my photography.

THE ROCK

ABHA CHANDRA

The woman walked back slowly to her village, leaving behind the dry, dusty hills. Her look was distant and tired, her mind preoccupied and blank. The landscape changed. The energy of the trees and wind nudged her forward. The calm of the running stream seemed to wake her from distractions, and her gaze floated to the rocks and pebbles that lay on the shallow riverbed. Her vision transfixed on the sheet of water—still and moving, steady and playful—the rocks and pebbles settling and unsettling. Her hands reached into the playful coolness of the waters, and as her being smiled, her long fingers curled around a rock. It was different from the others. Not smooth and rounded, not particularly earthy cool, but with stubborn edges, wanting to be left alone, and yet daring to be picked. She picked it up and slipped it into the deep pocket of the loose shirt that flapped in swirls. As she walked, she rolled the rock in her hand mindfully and teasingly, and she felt it grow warm. Frowning, she paused and tossed it back into the river and smiled as it cooled and hummed. She immediately fished it out again and held it up to the rays of the sun. The rock had streaks of minerals that caught the sun's light and scattered the rays randomly, haphazardly, forcefully and gently. The woman closed her smiling eyes, seeing through half-closed lashes the magic of diffuse, luminous, colored orbs floating on the rays randomly, haphazardly, forcefully and gently. The rock must be magic she hummed, magic she hummed ... and hummed. The rock belonged to the mountains that stood south of the village. The mountains sometimes rumbled, and all the people knew stories of when the angry mountain hissed and puffed and spewed clouds of steam and earth and occasionally spat fire. Today, the sunshine hummed in the rock, the streams, the blades of grass caught between rocks and pebbles, and the wet toes and fingertips. Before long, noon came and went, and the sun moved west. With newfound haste, and the rock safely resting in the pocket of the swirling shirt, the woman resumed her journey home. The evening was nearing fast and the clouds had been gathering moisture. Incredulous, her face caught some raindrops as her feet picked up pace. The crimson of the evening sky had given way to a smoky dark blue pastel sky with gray and gray-red stormy hues, rolling over the horizon, seemingly painted with broad brushstrokes. Suddenly, in a moment, or

many moments that froze into the sudden, the clouds split open, and the lightning and thunder came crashing down to earth, and the mountain exploded with a fury ... and the earth undulated ... and the rock, being of the mountains, glowed and burned through the shirt, hurtling towards the dark earth with the energy of something unknown, possessed. The woman fell to the ground. On waking, she reached into her pocket, and as her fingers found each other, and as her fingers found only each other, she cried. It was a long journey home. The next day was calm. The sunshine hummed in the rocks and pebbles, the streams, and the blades of grass caught between rocks and pebbles, and it choked in the hole of the burned pocket. And the weeks passed. The woman darned the burn hole, and filled the shirt pocket with mud, smooth round rocks, plants, snails and bugs. When she reached into her pocket she felt the mud, the smooth round rocks, plants, snails and bugs, and sighed that the rock with stubborn edges that was made to be left alone, yet had dared to be picked, was still gone. And the months passed. One day, the woman took a lit match to the darned pocket and burned another hole—a hole big enough that the rock with stubborn edges could escape—and imperfectly filled the pocket with mud, smooth round rocks, plants, snails, and bugs. And then smiled at what stayed. The sunshine hummed in the rocks and pebbles, the streams, and the blades of grass caught between rocks and pebbles, and in the hole of the burned pocket.

COMMENTS OVERHEARD BEFORE A COLLAGE AT AN ART EXHIBIT

SHELDON SY LEE

Mommy, look at this.

Mommy, look at this.

...

Mommy, look at this.

Come away from there, sweetie.

78% of mothers of young children found these comments to be helpful.

And this ... borders on pornography, in my opinion.

96% of members of the Decency League found this comment to be helpful.

The paper doesn't match up. Did he run out of paper? Look here. You can't just glue pieces of paper next to each other. The volume control isn't even glued on straight. And the edges are curling. It's so unprofessional.

98% of technicians found these comments to be helpful.

What is that dung beetle in the middle of the collage?

95% of entomologists found this comment to be interesting. 0% of cardiologists found this comment to be suggestive.

Ah, Iemon da.

Nani sore?

Za Iero Monki dayo.

Warui hitotachi?

Chigauyo. Rokku bando.

Kiita koto nai.

Saikin Tokyo de fukkatsu shitandayo.

Nanka chotto henna kanji.

Daisuki.

Hontou?

Un.

17% of first-year Japanese language students who only studied textbook Japanese found these comments to be helpful.

It says it's based on a Japanese rock song about going to paradise.

Fan art. Let's go see the landscape paintings.

94% of art lovers who prefer real art found these comments to be helpful.

It's too self-contained. He could have let it run over the borders in places. Especially since it's about going to someplace ... else.

100% of the artist found these comments to be helpful.

1. Some of this stuff would go well at a garage sale. (Laughter.) And in that other gallery, Milton looks like he's ... going out of his mind.

2. Milton went blind.

1. Oh, is that why ... I don't care.

3. Let's go watch the game.

2. It starts at 2:00.

78% of people who like baseball found these comments to be helpful.

1. Look, it turns.

2. Don't touch the art. What is that thing supposed to be, anyway?

3. Oh, tumbleweed!

1. Oh, tumbleweed!

86% of people who like tumbleweed found these comments to be helpful.

1. Who did this? Stu, look at this. This is one of my students.

2. Oh yeah, I remember.

1. Was my student.

2. The guy who drew the horse and banana leaves?

1. Oh, he always has something up his sleeve.

3. What's in this corner?

...

1. That's where we don't want to go. (Laughs.)

3. It's too dark. There's too much black.

2. Two people riding in a bathtub.

3. Is that a dung beetle?

1. I should show this to Raum.

2. It looks like a joke.

17% of art students who want to get an "A" in her class found these comments to be helpful.

What does it say?

"Let's bring the cat, too."

"Bring" or "take"?

Sou, ne.

"Let's take the cat, too."

Up the river.

"Yukou" wa?

77% of people who care about "bring" and "take" found these comments to be helpful.

Ma'am, don't touch the art, please.

...

Ma'am ...

I heard you.

11% of people who like to touch art found these comments to be encouraging.

What is this? I'm not artistic. Put me in a museum and I'm lost ... What does this mean? I don't understand it ... Can you tell me if this is good or not?

28% of men who were thinking of taking their girlfriends to an art exhibit found these comments to be reassuring.

I saw something like this in San Francisco. I did something like this. I have a painting at Cedar Street Gallery. I saw David Hockney, once. I do this thing where I put sunglasses on tree trunks and make them look like faces. I whittled a man out of driftwood ...

6% of art lovers who are tired of egotism found these comments to be enjoyable.

What time does the exhibit close?

I think it's 5:00 on Sundays.

I'm hungry. Remember that little French place on the corner?

It closed.

On Sundays?

No, I mean it isn't there, anymore.

What is it now?

Riga-Toni's.

Italian?

Yeah, like the opera.

75% of symphony ticket holders who like to have French cuisine before going to concerts across the street on Sundays found these comments to be helpful.



Rakuen

FOXES IN NUUANU VALLEY

AN ORAL HISTORY

SHELDON SY LEE

Yun Li (1947-2015) was a night auditor at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. He told his story to Mark Nishiyama, an assistant at the Daijingu Shrine in Nuuanu Valley.

When I stepped out of my front door, through the jalousies in the hallway, I could see the Pali Gap and Oahu Cemetery.



To the left, out of my view, was the grave of my uncle, who drowned off of Waikiki Beach at the age of twenty-one. He was studying to become a math teacher. Do you see the connection? I was born on January 21, I was named after him, I liked to swim and I became a night auditor.

Countless eons ago, a white balrog came through the Gap. The top of its head was almost as high as the mountains. You could say, it was a lofty balrog. It drifted down the valley and out to sea.

In 1795, as Kamehameha I was uniting the Hawaiian Islands, his forces drove hundreds of opposing warriors over the cliffs of the Pali. Of course, “pali” means “cliffs.” They all died horrible deaths.

The Nuuanu Stream comes down from the mountains, cuts into the valley and flows by the Japanese Consulate into Liliuokalani Garden, where it cascades over a

wide waterfall, a couple of meters high. At the bottom of the Garden, it joins Waolani Stream. From that point, we call it “the River.” It goes by the Foster Botanical Garden and the Kuan Yin Temple and on between Izumo Taisha Shrine on the right and Chinatown on the left. Homeless people and Chinese immigrants have coexisted in that area for a long time. Soldiers, like the ones in *From Here to Eternity*, used to hang out in the clubs on River and Hotel Streets. Finally, the River empties into the harbor.

Nuuanu is a straight, narrow valley and over the years, it became filled with houses, schools, temples and churches. It is a valley filled with spirits, history and death.

While I was a young man, several highrises were built around Oahu Cemetery and Nuuanu Memorial Park, across the street. There was a dark brown building on the ocean side of the cemetery and I rented an apartment on the eleventh floor. The floor and cupboards were made out of hardwood and because my unit faced the city, it was shut off from the tradewinds that came down the valley.

After the Daijingu Shrine was moved to Nuuanu, foxes were seen in the area. Of course, foxes are not indigenous to Hawaii. One of them was bluish, another was greenish and the third was white. They liked to dance in the cemetery on nights when there was a full moon. While the foxes danced on their hind legs, centipedes with crimson shells played flutes made from flower stems and turtles tapped on each other’s backs for rhythm.

A retired man who lived nearby was annoyed by the noise and he planted some pine trees inside the wall of his backyard to keep the foxes out. The trees were shaped more like bushes than trees and the needles were prickly. At night, the man woke up holding a pillow of *panini* (prickly pear cactus) to his bosom or with a pillow of *panini* under his head. Pine trees are powerful, but foxes are mischievous.



Being a single man, I sometimes stopped at my uncle's grave and asked him for advice about the direction of my life. I suppose if my uncle had had a spirit, it would have left for bigger and better places long before. Often, when I looked out through the jalousies, I would talk to him, as well.

There was a vacant unit on our floor, but when I came home, early in the morning, I began to see a woman going in and out of there. She always wore blue—usually, the same, deep blue dress. She was friendly and if I just said “hello,” she would come over and chat. Before long, I started to visit her place or she would come over to mine. She was good-looking and her skin was soft, like animal fur. Her unit overlooked the cemetery, but it was cool and the floor was cushioned with white carpet.

In the valley, there were people who kept chickens in their yards and when the hurricanes hit, many of the chickens escaped from their coops. Soon there were feral chickens all over the valley, on the side of Punchbowl Crater and even down in Makiki. Many of them were black with gold and red collars. Some of them grew to be large and strong.

On top of that, there were pure white mongooses living in the neighborhood. I only spotted them a few times. If I saw one alone, it would scamper away in a hurry. In groups of about three or five, they were more confident. They must have been drawn to the cemetery by the chickens that lived in the hedge and their eggs.

One night—it happened to be the night of a full moon—I came home from work and the woman was crying and shaking. While she and her two sisters had been walking outside, they were attacked by several men. She had run back to our building, but she did not know what had become of her sisters.

I suggested that we should call the police, but she refused. When I asked her to describe the men, she said that they were tall and wore white clothing. Their eyes were like smooth, black stones. They were proud and quick and said that the women should leave the neighborhood.

After a while, I went out to have a look around, but I didn't see anything unusual, except for a few specks of white fluff, like animal fur, on the grass in the cemetery.

Not long afterwards, the owner of the unit where the woman was living found out that she was staying there, without his permission. I was very fond of her. In fact, she had talked about getting married, so I thought about paying the man if he would refrain from taking any legal action. However, as soon as I heard about the trouble, she disappeared.

For years, I tried to find out anything I could about her and her sisters, and where she had gone. She had healed my life, but honestly, I didn't know much about her or her background. As time went by, I had to accept that I would never see her again.

There are few craftsmen in Hawaii who carry on the tradition of sculpting with igneous rock. I sought out one of them and asked him to carve two small foxes, a few

inches high. One of them was standing alertly on its hind legs. The other was sitting comfortably. I left them on a hillside, near some pine trees and a *panini* plant.

I have not gone back to that place in years and I doubt that anyone goes there. I chose a spot that was in the brush and far from any trail. At first, however, I used to hike there and stay until after dark. The fox that was sitting had a smile that made it seem contented. The one that was standing looked bluish in the moonlight.

The Daijingu Shrine is busy on special occasions, but most of the time, it's quiet. It's a tiny shrine and for a while, a fox with a greenish coat used to rest or sleep there, by the steps in front of the altar or under the *shisa*, nearby. The former priestess was a bit lonesome and she let it stay there. Nowadays, I never hear anyone speak of foxes in Nuuanu Valley.

THE ROAD

ROOPA RAMAMOORTHY

She's on a dark, pebble strewn path, stranded. Glad she has her fairly steady boots. She's left the car headlights on so someone will stop. She quarreled with her boyfriend and thought to drive away, clear her mind, think things through.

She'd left her cell phone behind on purpose; did not want to see if he texted her or tried to call. How could she have known her car's steering would give her trouble? Should she just get back in the car, lock the doors, and hunker down? What if a truck drives by fast and rams into her? Now she wishes she owned a flashy red sports car as she moves toward menopause, rather than the sedate black sedan.



GIRL AND HER PET / Carrie Salazar

For my art and writing, I am inspired by my childhood in the rural American South. I'm driven to tell my own story, or other people's stories, through illustrations.

YOU CAN'T FIX IT UNTIL IT'S WRITTEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH WRITER RACHAEL HERRON BY

SOPHIA HUNEYCUTT

RACHAEL HERRON (R.H. HERRON) is the internationally bestselling author of more than two dozen books in multiple genres, including thriller, mainstream fiction, feminist romance, memoir, and nonfiction about writing. She received her MFA in writing from Mills College in Oakland, CA, and now teaches writing extension workshops at both UC Berkeley and Stanford. She is a proud member of the NaNoWriMo Writer's Board. She's a citizen of both New Zealand and the United States.

SOPHIA HUNEYCUTT lives in Berkeley, CA, with her partner, two cats, and nine potted plants. She holds a degree in English from Davidson College, NC, and a post-baccalaureate certificate in writing from UC Berkeley Extension. She is also a two-time alumna of the Iowa Writers' Workshop summer graduate intensive. Sophia reads for *Flash Fiction Magazine* and is a fiction editor for *Ursa Minor*. Her fiction has been published in *Jabberwock Review* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

* * *

Q: What was the path to publishing your first book in 2010?

I wanted to be a writer since I was five, when I realized that there were people behind the books I loved. I thought writing would be an amazing miracle job, but I was discouraged by the world that says you can't be a writer and support yourself. So, I went to school for business and spent about seventy-three years trying to get a bachelor's until I switched my major to English, graduated, and got my MFA in creative writing from Mills College. I still didn't believe I could be a writer, so I spent seven years writing terrible stuff. Finally, I tried NaNoWriMo and realized that unless I wrote a crappy first draft and revised it, I was never going to finish it.

Q: Do you remember any of your first attempts at writing?

I wrote a little book about brownies—the fairy kind. I illustrated the book and sewed

it up. My mom helped me add a front and back cover. I also tried to write a romance novel when I was twelve. I named one of the main characters Ian, but I had only read the name, so didn't know how to pronounce it. In my head, I called him Ion. I got halfway into the first chapter and never picked it up again. But I remember the feeling of wanting to write a book, like the ones I loved reading.

Q: You've written twenty-five books. You also teach writing classes at UC Berkeley and Stanford, host two podcasts, lead writing getaways, speak on panels, and give interviews. How do you ensure you write?

Honestly, the hardest part of my life is getting the writing in, and it is the most important thing to me. I could not support myself as a writer if I were not producing books. And it is what I love to do the most, too. Routine is my biggest help. On good days, I get up and meditate or do yoga. Then I go to Mills College, which is around the corner from me, and use their library for free because I'm an alum and I can sneak in my tea. I sit in one of the carrels and write my word quota for that day. I turn my internet off, and it's a good day if I don't look at my email until my writing is done. I feel like the internet and social media can derail me. Just like every writer, I often beat myself up for not writing what I needed to that day.

Q: Sometimes, it feels like thrillers avoid political issues. Your newest novel, *Stolen Things*, doesn't shy away from topics like police brutality and racial bias. Was it a tough decision to address those topics, or were they always part of the plot?

It was going to be like that from the beginning because I already had the story in my head. I had never written a thriller before, so my agent had me write it in full rather than sell it on proposal. The book was complete, edited, and polished before she sold it to the publishers. It was the publisher's decision whether to gamble on a political book. I got to write it exactly the way I wanted to, and then they got to say yes or no. There were a few publishers who turned it down because they didn't want to dive into politics.

Q: You hired a sensitivity reader for *Stolen Things*, since one of the characters (Jojo) is Iranian-American, and another (Kevin) is Black. Did you do that because you see a lot of insensitive language in fiction or did you want to set an example to other authors? A little bit of both. I was shocked because my editors and publisher didn't mention sensitivity readers. It wasn't until the last moment that I realized they weren't going to. I shelled out my own money and hired these people. I was terrified because as low as

I think my biases are, I know that they still exist. In my dream life, both readers would have come back and told me I was perfect. They didn't. They marked things that I needed to change. I am so grateful to them. It was a good learning experience.

Q: In an interview with Eeva Klingberg, you said that you have always "liked to read things that were true." As a writer, do you feel like fiction or nonfiction is more "true"?

I feel like fiction can be more true. I love memoir, but there's always ego tied up in it. Even if we try to present ourselves as honestly as we can, the ego is always fighting a battle to the death to make us look a bit better than we are. And we're always struggling with that in memoir. In fiction, you can get out of the way and tell the truth because you're technically making it up. If somebody asks whether that is how you really feel, you get to say "I made it up." You get to put your truths on the page.

Q: In a prior interview with Deborah Kalb, you said that you write thrillers quickly and revise them a lot, but you write memoir more slowly and methodically. What's your revision process with literary fiction?

With fiction, I draft at a breakneck speed to get out of my own way. I have to take my inner editor out. My inner editor is happy to play on the page when I'm writing memoir or any kind of creative nonfiction. But in fiction, this editor's voice continually tells me that I'm not writing a good story, that no one cares about it, and that I'm telling it wrong. If I write as fast as possible and tell myself I'm writing the crappiest draft of anything that's ever been written, then I can finish and get to revision, which is the stage I love the most.

Q: Do you tell yourself the story as you write fiction or do you outline first?

I outline lightly with major turning points, the inciting incident, the context shifting, mid-point, and the dark moment. Then, I drive the story toward that. In revision, I go and make it all work.

Q: What's your advice for new writers stuck in the middle of their first novel?

You cannot fix it until it's written. No one can fix a book until it's at least as close to done as you can make it. Then you can make it better.

Q: Rejection is part of the writing life. What should beginner writers know about rejection? Do you have any personal stories to share?

You can't prepare for it, and it will hurt more than you think it will. From the beginning, I've given myself twenty-four hours to feel whatever I want to feel. For those twenty-four hours, I can cry, I can wallow, I can get in bed and pull the covers over my head. After that, I get out of bed and go back to work. The other thing I like to do is go to a favorite book and click on one-star reviews. There are always going to be bad reviews. There's always going to be rejection from agents and editors. I was thin-skinned when I began, and I think most writers are because we're sensitive. The more blows you get, the thicker your skin gets. Now my friends and I love to share rejections from editors.

Q: Do you remember your first rejection?

I'm sure that my first rejection was from an agent because I queried my dream agents first. I do remember one agent wrote back and said, "I do not believe you'll ever publish this story." To his credit, I didn't publish that exact book. I published the book after my agent and my editor helped me revise it.

Q: What's one thing you wish someone had told you when you were a beginner writer?

I wish someone had told me that the quality of your writing matters much less than getting it done. As we revise what we've written, we become better writers. Our previous writing teaches us how to be better writers. I didn't write for a long time because I was waiting to become better. But the only way you get better is by writing crap. I wish somebody had just explained to me that I would not be the one person who writes a beautiful first draft of prose. I wrote crap at first and learned how to revise. Then I loved it and did it more.

LIGHTNING ROUND

Q: Do you have any special writing rituals?

I use a white noise app, but I set it on the pink noise frequency because that is the frequency at which the human voice speaks.

Q: What are your must-haves before you start writing for the day?

Peppermint tea. And the internet off

Q: What's the best way to beat writers' block?

It helps to take a step back and ask whether this is the right wall you should be banging your head against. Or leave it and work on something else to build up your confidence again.

Q: People often say that the motivation for writing should be the pure joy of language, but some writers, like Elizabeth McCracken, famously say that spite or revenge is even better. What do you think?

Sometimes it's just pure hatred. Also, there's no feeling like the high and the smugness after a good writing session.

Q: What's on your desk right now?

Nine tarot decks; three books about reading taro (I use taro to access my subconscious when I write); three journals; two candles; my planner; my phone; four glasses of water; so many Post-its; and a metal rack that holds my paperwork. This is a roll-top desk, so there are drawers for Sharpies, for my favorite kind of pencil, hair ties, receipts, and then a couple of drawers that I purposefully keep empty because that makes me feel really rich.

Q: What book has the number-one spot on your to-read list?

The Girl with the Louding Voice by Abi Daré.

Q: What books are on your nightstand?

I have a tower of books, including a new thriller called *The Flight Attendant*, and a bunch of nonfiction self-help books.

Q: What books are your all-time favorites?

George MacDonald's *The Light Princess*, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*.

Q: You can write a book either without dialog or with dialog only. Which do you choose?

Dialog only.

Q: Would you prefer reading in an armchair by a fire, or on a porch by the beach?

A porch by the beach. And now I really want to be on a porch by the beach looking at the ocean.



I STRIVE TO REVEAL THE INNER BEAUTY of the visual world in my art. Light, color, shape, movement: Our visual world shapes and guides our thoughts, feelings and behavior. Through my paintings. I strive to communicate to the viewers the inner meaning and beauty of objects, places and people, as well as intrigue them with the composition. I paint semi-abstract landscapes and portraits in atmospheric and vibrant hues, using oil, acrylic and watercolor mediums. With oil, I particularly enjoy pushing paint around the canvas with a palette knife, thereby combining tactile and visual pleasure. My watercolor works pay tribute to the translucency, fluidity, delicate coloration, and unpredictability of this medium. I want to produce art that is beautiful and stimulating, an art to live with and experience every day.

Another of my passions is to explore shadows. Darkness is an indispensable element of the light. Without it, there would be no beauty. My shadow series, “People,” explores the sensuous variations of the absence of illumination and communicates a subtle message of tenderness and human fragility. Using the process of black-and-white photographic transfer, I peel off support layers to uncover various depths of darkness in an attempt to create an intimate connection with shadows. The complex world of darkness, so unearthed, is mesmerizing and carries poignant reality.



ELISABETH KOSS / Fireworks

SEA MONSTERS

ABIGAIL DEMBO

We had always loved the sea and were drawn
into the place where the sand sucks and slips and the waters tug.
But you must never turn your back on the ocean.

We had been there so long, we built our homes on the shore.
We looked for shells in the sand.

One day, a dorsal in the slew
crested in the cold waters.
And the roaring began.

We accounted for ourselves speedily,
we hurled our shells into the sea.
We sang and danced furiously
all of our old songs and dances.

And then with no words, nothing, he sank away into
dark waters and left only shifting sands and a dull aching.

CILANTRO'S SUMMER

ANGEL JOHNSON

She stopped making big,
beautiful, deeply green leaves
when the ragged ones started—
pouring all her life into one
parasitic stalk not quite situated
in the middle.

Seeds would come of it. Coriander.
Curries. A need for grinders and recipes,
roots and pantry items, just when the other flora
were offering their fresh summer wares.
She grew so fast, was in the change
before anyone realized it. A blink in the summer's
eye and the herb garden laid bare.

A LETTER TO FRANK O'HARA ON THE RETURN OF SUMMER DRESSES

RALPH J. LONG JR.

Frank

Today on my walk, an old holiday returned, igniting dreams of long-ago Manhattan. A fantasy, undeclared, without civil sanction, unlinked to sun or moon, birthday or anniversary. A time capsule of Central Park in bloom and East Side bars filled with single women letting us buy their drinks despite slim odds of ever seeing them again. In this city of automobiles, my holiday is unexpected for beauty flees the streets quickly into air-conditioned cars. It is hard to imagine today started like days in New York with wardrobes ransacked, woolens crumpled, boots and umbrellas tossed aside as linens, cottons, miniskirts, clinging wraps and spaghetti straps are scrutinized before bedroom mirrors. Winter's pale skin ignored for a day of aimless ambulation, flaneur walks, not the frenzied rush to buy a desk eaten lunch. Flirting, teasing walks perfumed with intimacy for those who can catch the scent. Hope again for romance and sex until Labor Day forces the city indoors. Now, a continent away, settled for years in a land of pedestrian absences, where seasons are marked by the covering and uncovering of tattoos, I feel the wonder of those perfect imperfect days when love was measured in subway stops.

I'll look for you on Fifth Avenue,

A LETTER TO ARTHUR SZE WHILE CONSIDERING QUIPU¹ AT THE MUSEO CHILENO DE ARTE PRECOLOMBINO

RALPH J. LONG JR.

Arthur,

What stories are woven into these
dangling braids? Transgressions,
taxes, testaments? Inquisitors and
Conquistadors left no Rosetta Stone.
What would the weavers of these
humble frames make of this age?
Could they accept our faith in
keyboard strokes? What of the
Cloud with its security of prime
numbers and childhood pets' names?
Are silicon chips more trustworthy
than the knotted certainty of handspun
wool? Unravel a quipu, start a cloak.
Wipe a hard drive, add to a landfill.
How many gigabytes of truth are lost
when moths feast?

Ratukama,

¹ Quipu – an Incan device constructed of hanging woven camelid fiber using color, position and knots to record information prior to the Spanish Conquest.

LUNAR INTERROGATORIES AT 8° 31' NORTH, 120° 53' EAST

DON PURDY

What mystical tune
accompanied your tryst with the sixteenth rune
a cruel cabal so glaring and locally
apparent this noon?

And what brilliant stars
what famous flames with mysterious names
Adara, Haedi, Izar, do you keep in books
like fireflies in jars?

Can we not conspire
in the evening hour to replay our refrain
in the chandelier light of a thousand stars
inflamed by desire?

Or are you lost within
angles and arcs, tables and charts
and mysterious lines that mark
the position you're in?

As the hour is aligned
for the measure of the mystical curve
of my lower limb, can we share time
with enchantment in mind?

And what will we see
in mirrored illusion, when you pull me down
with a gentle arm to kiss the salty lip
of the Sulu Sea?

After a moment entwined
on the horizon's line, will you turn away
as I embrace the predetermined arc
of my own decline?

Will my luminous face
now but a glowing trace of our embrace
be on your mind as you plot your lines
and close your sextant case?

Or must I take a final bow
as watch bells chime conveying the time
to follow twilight down and lift my crown
from the mountains of Mindanao?

HE'S A MATRYOSHKA DOLL

DON PURDY

He's a matryoshka doll
of reinvented selves,
struggling to hide
memories shelved,
emotions inside

He's the solid one within,
unbreakable marine
betrayed by his eyes;
disfigured figurine
deep within the lies

*He was underneath
the bodies stacked on top
The one they found later
when the shelling stopped
Down in the crater,
in the smoldering ground,
Under the other five
The last one they found
The only one alive*

He's a matryoshka doll,
deep inside himself;
unbreakable marine
can't unfeel what he's felt
can't unsee what he's seen



I love making sketches based on photos because photographs not only capture physical things, but also convey the things they are not. Sometimes, a photograph of a simple person or art object can portray a unique and memorable story at a specific moment in time. Other times, it may depict an abstract idea or even an emotional feeling. Focusing on these intricate details in a photo allows me to capture the story behind each photo and accurately express them on my canvas. I want my drawings to depict what cannot be captured on film.

BOBBY PIN

ROOPA RAMAMOORTHY

Apple pin, I wore in my short black hair at ten. The one my cousin plucked from my hair and tossed into the well of drinking water from my grandparents' bedroom in Chennai. He four, me pouting. Neither of us thought of the lead paint contaminating the well.

MUSE

WALT TRASK

Blessed and cursed
by you, my delicious muse, a tattoo on the wind,
appearing, disappearing, reappearing.

Flock of birds,
swarm of bees, taking form close in flight,
lilting, dispersing, coalescing again.

A deep yearning,
sole evidence you exist – oxygenates my veins,
open to rhythmically breathe you in.

ARRIVED AT SHORE

WALT TRASK

We burrow feet in cool damp sand,
a small reward for long travel.
Here, you and I, so present like a chisel to marble.

No soldiers fall from Trojan horses to impede our being.
No shadows cast to obscure this journey predestined.
A light wind gifts your masculine scent to me.

Sea, twilight, stars – all across a wide Canadian sky.
Together we want for nothing in this infinite moment.

FIFTY WINTERS

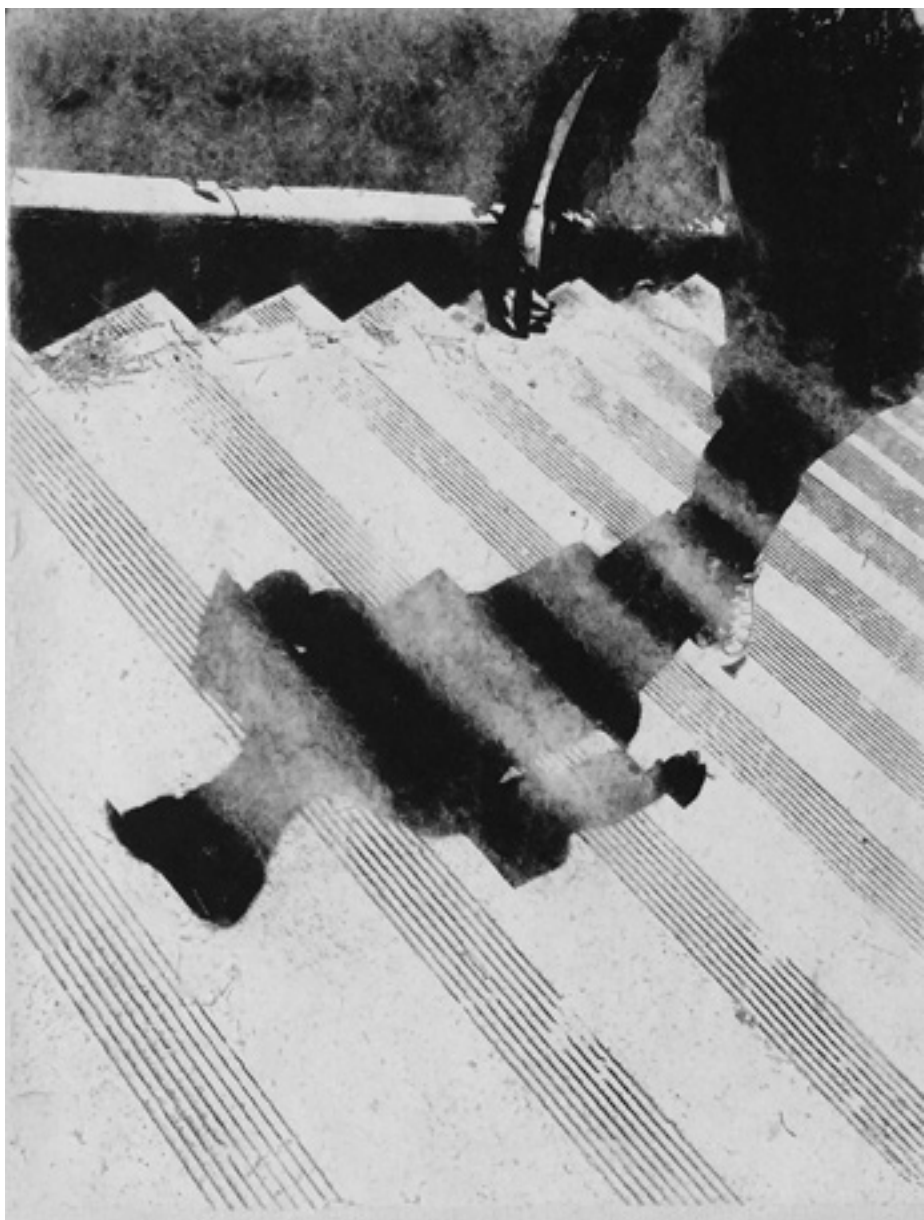
TAYLOR S. WINCHELL

Seventy-seven is a reasonable age to die,
which means I'd get fifty more winters.
Fifty more winters to catch snowflakes
on my tongue; to drink whiskey by the fire
as the world outside turns soft and white;
to stay inside all day and night
without a reason; to fail to understand why birds
fly thousands of miles north then turn around;
to complain about going to the grocery store.
Fifty more winters to find the right blend
of courage and sentimentality to say
I love you and *I'm sorry* and *I forgive you*;
fifty more winters to curl under the covers
after too many months of cold, eagerly awaiting
fifty more springs.

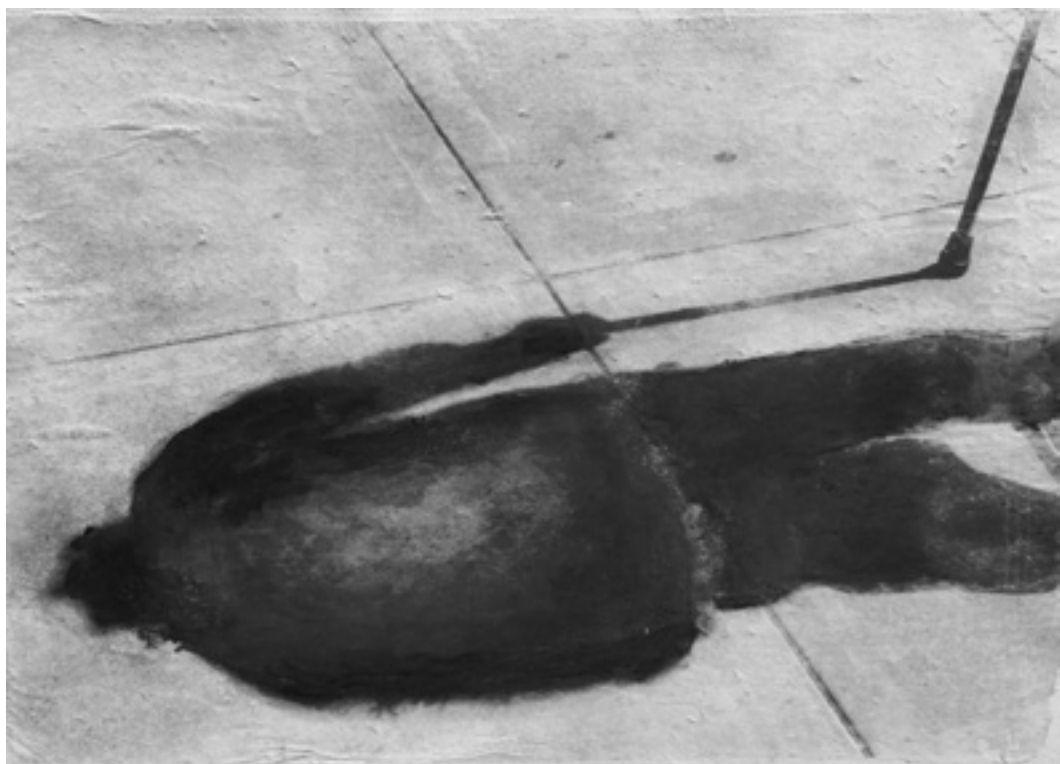
TAKING A BREAK

TAYLOR S. WINCHELL

I'm just gonna sit here for a minute.
Just sit here on this rock and catch my breath a bit.
Have a sip or two of water, a bite of trail mix.
The pine trees smell nice today, they've always smelled nice.
But you go on—wait for me up at the next fork,
I'll catch up.



SHADOW CLIMBING THE STAIR / Elisabeth Koss



OLD SHADOW GOING FOR A WALK / Elisabeth Koss

INTERVIEW: JEREMY MORGAN

THE BACK LIGHT OF SPACE

STEPHANIE BAKER

JEREMY MORGAN is Associate Professor and Painting Department Chair at the San Francisco Art Institute.¹ A highly esteemed instructor, he is a sought-after lecturer and influential international artist. His painting practice is inspired by physical surfaces of the earth and our solar system. The unrelenting power of weather, geological structures, and interstellar systems are interpreted in Jeremy's work as a dynamic language of form and energy infused with improvisational processes to achieve innovative visual experiences. His monumental paintings invite the viewer to share in a creative world of psychic landscape. In an *SF Weekly* interview, the artist says of his work: "I desire to create a moment as sensation rather than record."²

Jeremy creates abstract paintings in his studio located in an abandoned candle factory in Marin County, California. During my visit on February 17, 2020, I stood in the natural bright light of the large loft gazing at his stacks of large-scale artworks leaning against the walls. Viewing the multiple paintings at once, I felt immersed in a canyon of form, space, and color. When I looked at the many stretched canvases, a stunning ambient light glowed from a mysterious inner dimension in the backgrounds. From a distance, the paintings appeared to be thick impasto surfaces of abstract expressionism. I discovered, up close, that this is an illusion. The massive forms and deep inner spaces of the paintings are constructions of delicate layers of thin paint.

As his former student and teaching assistant, I wondered what perspective Jeremy might convey in relation to artistic creativity and offer on the theme of the fourth volume of *Ursa Minor*, entitled "Punctuated Equilibrium." My underlying focus was

¹ Founded in 1871, the San Francisco Art Institute is a private college dedicated to the creative study of contemporary art and is one of the oldest art schools in the United States. SFAI degree programs were interrupted in May 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic. Jeremy Morgan has been a professor of painting at SFAI for the last thirty years.

² <https://www.sfweekly.com/culture/jeremy-morgan-of-the-s-f-art-institute-mixes-eastern-sensibility-with-western> "Jeremy Morgan of the SF Art Institute Mixes Eastern Sensibility with Western Tradition," by Kate Sommers-Dawes, *SF Weekly*, 03/21/2011.



the contemplation of a theory that evolution is characterized by long periods of geological stasis interrupted by short bursts of rapid change, and likewise, I proposed the practice of painting could be a cultural system of evolution. Indeed, in my following interview with Jeremy Morgan, I discovered a deep connection between geology and art.

Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

* * *

Stephanie Baker: I see an aspect of deep geological time in your work. When I look at your paintings, I always see organic forms, which seem to be in a state of flux. Why is that?

Jeremy Morgan: My father was a geographer. I experienced early in life the idea of geological deep time. So, I learned a lot, primary things about the landscape from him. Like, we would be walking in the

Welsh landscape, at our place in Wales, and I'd ask him why certain valleys were the shapes they were. He'd explain physical concepts of geomorphology, such as glaciation and hanging valleys—fundamentals of rudimentary aspects of geological forms.³

So, I realized I was not only recording space in my paintings but also timescape. My personal revelation is that landscape is a timescape. I became privy to an idea of a residue of things as overlapping timelines that are both present and long gone, as if a glacier set down ancient moraine⁴ to create the shape of a “new” valley form, which continues alteration through multiple processes of time. [The] culmination is

³ Geomorphology: the study of the physical features of the earth and their relation to its geological structures. Glaciation: a mass of ice on a land surface that moves under its own weight. Hanging valleys: a tributary valley that is higher than the valley of the main river.

⁴ Moraine: a mass of rocks and sediment deposited by a glacier to form a valley.

that a renewal of the landscape maintains a time relationship to present and long-gone organic forms as a single composition of an organic unity.

When we are in any given moment in time, we're actually in multiple times—once you start to understand it. Like walking into a forest, you are witness to a timescape from the moment of origin, when seeds or leaves grew to become massive trees or foliage. So, my sense of the landscape is an evolving location in time as a readable place.

I feel a connection to J.M.W. Turner [1775-1851] the English romantic painter of landscapes. His vision of the world makes sense to me. The space in his later paintings is a geological record of elapsing and overlapping time—a timescape of disintegrating form. Turner most definitely was involved in that. The making of a painting, by definition for me, is a form of archiving through the artistic process—a relationship with a certain space and time. And because we live in a world obsessed with urgency, obsessed with what's new and contemporary, the effect eclipses a viewpoint of a slow rhythm of change unrecognized in the urgent necessity of the contemporary moment. I have become interested in the idea of the artist engaging a slower moment as the archivist, which I consider equally important. The artist-as-archivist navigates a sense of evolving continuity in the timescape of the contemporary moment.

[It is] a concept I try to instill in my students, because they get very preoccupied by the idea invested in the urgency of the contemporary moment necessitating their painting style as a proscriptive of relevant contemporary work. I often say the goal of an artist is to really understand your relationship to the contemporary moment—don't run after it. An artist is permitted to draw on studies of different time periods, any subject of interest, to develop their creative expression. It is not required that, to be a contemporary artist, you must achieve a certain look associated with painting in a contemporary style. It was my study of Turner that allowed me to explore my own form of abstraction that became my contemporary expression of landscape as timescape.

SB: So, any contemporary moment of painting is built on previous explorations of creativity that continue to change or evolve as time moves constantly forward?

JM: Historically, perspectival structures were a pictorial system based on separations of space—the space we're in, as opposed to the space we look into.⁵ Twentieth-century cubism fractured that separation of space between the viewer and the image. The perspectival dimension of pictorial depth is eliminated in modern art. A viewer's eye entered a cubist artwork differently, as an immersive visual experience within a foregrounded shallow space. Ironically, we go back to Turner, who predated later

cubist concepts of twentieth-century modern art, when he discarded the repoussoir in painting⁶—those elements of “wings” that dominated seventeenth-century painting, which direct the viewer’s eye into the deep space of a painting’s composition. Repoussoir the technique of bracketing a painting composition integral to the artworks of Claude Lorrain [1600–1682] and Nicolas Poussin [1594–1665]—artists Turner studied. Repoussoir is an element of perspectival structure used in theatrical stage design, which Lorrain and Poussin employed as visual strategies of reality in their paintings. So, initially painting, theater, and opera had a visual connection.

SB: When you say “wings,” are you referring to an actual frame on a painting, or the contrivance of trees, or something else, framing the compositional edge of a painting’s scene?

JM: Perspectival technique defines relationships of space as well as a perception of time. So, when we view the composition of a Lorrain or Poussin painting with a framed edge of woods as the repoussoir element, the viewer’s eye is directed to a distant point towards the middle of the painting. This is an infinity point, usually manifested in mountains and sky—a direct spatial relationship of time related to the edge of woods framing the composition. Customarily, there is a pathway or river that leads the viewer’s eye from the timeframe of the here and now at the edge of the woods (which is the foreground dimension of the painting) to the infinitive observed behind the mountains and sky, as if peering directly into the deep space of the world in the painting. This brings me back to the fundamentals of the initial creation of space within the Renaissance: the moment of “ousia.”⁷

A sense of ultimate reality, ousia (for want of a better term) is a philosophical realm of phenomenon exemplifying all that is possible, simply put. The perspectival structure of stage-set design of “wings,” used in painting compositions by Lorrain and Poussin, present phenomena that are viewed as if through an apparition of time, or veil, to become appearance. Turner was an artist interested in de-concretizing the time structure of foreground, middle ground, and background in painting as part of his studies of nature. Turner was interested in the forces of nature as an energy more important than form, and the effects of energy as a dematerialization of form. The process of change or transformation of a moment we can see through the veiled appearances of the world to make a painting that comprehends timescape.

6 Repoussoir: a contrived object placed along the right or left foreground of a painting to direct a viewer’s eye into the deep space of the composition, in effect bracketing the edge of the painting like a framed stage set.

7 Ousia: a term used by ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, to refer to concepts of essence or substance in the world.

In my own work, I conduct an ongoing study of materials as a source of innovation in my painting. Very rarely do I use gesso while painting. I use materials which I then stain with inks and thinned-down acrylics so that my painting is actually formed as integrated with the surface. Traditionally, the canvas is a substrate, or panel, then you have the gesso on top, which is the surface to use. I want to take away that gesso surface so there's no separation between the paint and the surface. So, I'm fusing my painting materials with the canvas on most of my paintings.

SB: Sounds very much like a geologic structure.

JM: Yes. And I refer to it as what I call "psychic geology" because the time element, to me, is very important. The way I see it, my paintings are chronological as much as they are spatial. Landscape has a subliminal effect on me, as the theater of the divine sacred spirit, a magical effect—whatever the hell you want to call it—the only place where our sense of time meets the endlessness of the reality of the physical world and the infinitive. Painting, for me, is the re-engagement of, you know, the internal discussion of our relationship to the world throughout time. So many of my paintings, even if they're varnished, have textures that appear to be near the surface, yet are actually the first images I painted on the surface. It's like that idea when you see a form in the garden and it's snowing. It can be a flowerpot shape, which will continue to grow with the fullness of snow. The form is amplified, even though it's hidden under snow, because the form of the flowerpot shape is still visible by virtue of the layers of snow on top—elements that integrate the organic processes of nature with form as a disintegration of the concrete world.

SB: Is the act of painting an important process beneficial to human experience?

JM: Yes. Art is a constant form of inquiry, and painting is the meeting place for the viewer and the artist. And I think that's the key: painting is a continuous exchange of ideas. The public is often locked into a singular concept of literal appearances as a visual goal in creating art, but my point is appearances are merely a touchstone for interpretation by the creative process. Painting, to me, is a means of negotiating our world as a basis of ideas. The benefit to culture is to record human experience as our unique relationship to space and time.

SB: Is the creative process of art reflecting on a geological system of habitable earth—of a world that is eternally suitable for humans, even if they are not represented in the artwork? I am thinking about the concept of geologic time as a deep time of space and form that is always archived in the present moment. A philosophical idea developed

in the eighteenth century by Scottish geologist, James Hutton [1726-1797], proposed a system of habitable earth as a deistic mechanism sufficient to maintain the world as eternally suitable for humans.⁸

JM: That's basically the Gaia Principle.⁹ You know, [humans] are actually a virus: a living entity corrupting the very thing that is hosting us. Our eternal dilemma is how to achieve the correct balance between systems of natural organisms and our inorganic structures of civilization. My paintings have an aspect that hopefully reflects in their non-narrative abstractness of timescapes—the possibilities of human danger if we don't start thinking quickly about the environment. Paradoxically, the beauty of nature is increasingly contemplated the more we damage it, the more we ravage it. I am not trying to paint paradise; I am trying to speak to that which is beyond us, which we rely on totally for our existence, and I'm spiritualizing that dimension of the inner glow of my paintings as the Back Light of Space.

⁸ Deism: a supreme being exists based on evidence of reason and nature, rejecting the belief in a God who created the world and has since remained indifferent to its existence.

⁹ The Gaia Principle, also known as a theory or hypothesis, proposes all organisms and their inorganic surroundings are integrated on Earth to form a self-regulating system that maintains conditions for life on this world.



MINDFULNESS / Yu Yan Vanessa Wee



REFLECTION / Yu Yan Vanessa Wee



POLYESTER / Yu Yan Vanessa Wee

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: PIEDMONT AVENUE

ABIGAIL DEMBO

IT WAS A COLD AND RAINY DAY in California. The sky was a pale dove-gray and the forecast foreboding. The weather service said that it was going to rain, and rain forever. I was going on a journey—for I always did love exploring—to a place I had never truly been before. No more had I been to this street than I had been to Phoenix by visiting the pastel-colored and cow-skull bedecked airport, or to Germany when my mother was pregnant with me. Today, I layered scarf over sweater, and hood over a hat, and boarded the bus asking the driver to tell me when we were at Piedmont Ave.

The very name “Piedmont” seemed to indicate that it was affluent. In truth this probably played some part in my avoidance in the past. Although, I did feel Piedmont had some share in the blame. It was enough out of the way as to make it difficult to get to on foot from a subway, or by the bus that ran only sporadically I had a feeling that Piedmont did not want the likes of me, but of course, it’s not quite fair to blame a street for the transit authority’s frivolity.

When I stepped off my bus, I gazed up and down the street. I had landed at Piedmont Avenue as though I had walked through a wardrobe. The clouds had parted, and the sun peeked through. The air seemed to be shining with glitter. The streets were lined with wooden Victorians. Every small alley was festooned with falling vines and ribbon.

I passed a patisserie and creperie. Ducking into the bustling bakery, all around me was warm, and the room was filled with the sweet smell of coffee. Glistening behind the glass-fronted counter were cakes with pale pink icing, lady fingers, small custards, and delicate chocolate-laced wafers. People were guided by a velvet cordon as they waited to order the gilded pastries. There was the hum and buzz of carefree chatter and the clinking of forks sliding through glazed tartlets. Patrons wore slim cashmere scarves, brown soft-leather shoes, and they nibbled on mouse-sized pumpkin pie. I had fallen into a dreamscape. I must have slept through the tornado.

Enamored enough with this patisserie, I sped off to see what else this street had to show me. Whatever had been cold within was melting in sheets and falling into a warm ocean.

A church bell carried the souls of the street aloft with its ringing. As I passed storefronts, a woman walked by me, her warm hat snuggling her head, its soft fur fluttering in the wind.

The windows twinkled with crystalline trees, red, blue, and green. Golden stars shone among silver reindeer. An enamel camel, tall and thin, balanced a golden crown in which a crystal orb was nested. His partner, a regal elephant, wore a bejeweled mantle of red and green fabric. Upon the back of the creature, a palanquin held a satin man, his face majestic. I'd never seen anything like them; they shined like glass or ceramic.

My gaze had become lost in this display of the miniature skate rink and the snow-kissed housing, when I was passed by a child in a pink puffy coat and heart-dappled leggings. As she ran past me, I wondered where her father might be, and I saw her turn into a wall, disappearing into a hidden doorway. Hearing her giggling, I followed and stepped in, and was met by the aroma of spices, and shelves that stretched to the ceiling.

Each shelf was piled high with cellophane-wrapped boxes, and paper packages. Every item was a mystery, ciphers of backwards r's and curly-q accents. Some had a legend, indicating that it was a cookie or jam, but most only denoted by the Rosetta Stone of an insect of calligraphic inclination.

Each label carried a small painting more romantic than the last. Cartoon cows in ribboned hats, cheerful hedgehogs in chef's caps, tall Russian forests, golden palaces, ballerina silhouettes.

Rows of exotic beers, smoked sprats, cornelian cherry, and walnut jelly; I vowed to return. I placed a mental breadcrumb at my feet.

I walked down the street, peering in jewelry stores and wineries, comic-book shops, toy stores, stores that sold only beads.

I passed children, couples, and families. I heard snippets of conversations.

A woman chided her child softly.

A man asked where that expensive Thai place was again.

A woman with sugar in her voice told a vendor of yarn she just loved coming to this place when she was in town.

Then, I heard the delicate strumming of Moroccan music and sashayed and shimmied. I swayed into a Saharan bedroom. The light was golden and red, the colors dark and deep. There were lapis mosaics, stars inlaid with precious-stone pieces. Vases, ceramics, beaded bedding, and rich fabrics abounded. As I stepped in and stepped lightly, my feet sank into the carpets. I looked above and saw that I stood beneath wrought-iron and red diamond-shaped lanterns. I began to imagine myself as a genie with his gauze veil and bracelets jingling. I would sit on silk cushions in my slippers, and grant wishes when beckoned.

The next store was a secret garden, with warm ferns and orchids hanging. The air was thick with moisture and the smell of fragrant moss. I heard the gentle sound of fountains flowing and found myself surrounded by thick greenery. I was in the rain-forest, under the canopy. Small stones, worn smooth by time, peppered the spaces. Driftwood was delicately wound and bent as though by skilled elfin craftsman. Delicate moss fronds cascaded. The nymphs must be dancing somewhere in a clearing.

I passed into another store, or rather it came to me. At this one, its artwork spilled onto the street. Tall paintings overlapped one another against the brick walls, streetlamp, and doorway. Through the windows, I saw brass statues, wood and stone figures of all varieties. Stepping in, the air was filled with the musty smell of old books and attic.

I was met by a gray cat, who slinked amidst the narrow passageways, and I ducked beneath a wooden elephant, narrowly missing a ceramic. I was drawn into tight spaces, my feet light, as though stepping into the sacred. I gazed into faces of masks and mirrored Indonesian dancers with arms lifted and hands tilted. There was case after case of sparkling jewelry. I was inside a grandmother's trunk, if she'd married a duke and traveled to Asia.

Fearful I would soon break something, I stepped back out onto the street, and after surveying several spaces, entered a small, dimly lit bar. I relaxed into the smell of beer and dust, and smiled as "Weird Science" played on the jukebox. I walked up to the bar, ordered my drink, and gazed into the face of a small dog who sat beside me.

The bartender greeted arrivals with shorthand gestures and brief queries. "Hot or cold?" he inquired. He was answered with a nod and began his alchemy. Grabbing hot water and sweet syrup, he laced his glasses and made magic.

The music played, and billiard balls struck suddenly. A taller player, paunchy, moved quickly around the table. His cue struck the ball hard and fast. He made jaunty jibes at the other. The shorter player, with gray hair and rumpled Oxford, shrugged this off, and slowly stepped up to the velvet green. I gazed off amid the chatter and the ricocheting, and everything dissolved like a watercolor. I was soon lost in the click-clacking.

I sipped my wine as a man stepped into the back alleyway and swayed as the smell of marijuana mingled with the sounds of Prince in the breeze.

"Ain't got no money. Ain't like those other guys you hang around."

Why had I never been here before, really?

Was it just that Piedmont was difficult to get to from a subway?

"It's kinda funny. But they always seem to let you down."

Or was it that shiver a poor person gets from being in a place where they have no standing?

I had seen so many things that day. But I might as well have been a ghost for all my wandering.

I remembered that patisserie.

But I had walked out.

A four-dollar coffee.

That was fine. That was nothing.

But I had walked past lots of stores.

Their bright, clean lines and trim lettering.

But I had hunched my shoulders and hurried. Past the winery. Past the jewelry.

I had passed so many bars before finding the one that was dark and musty.

I visited the sights, as I would in Saks Fifth Avenue or Tiffany's.

But this was just a museum. Where I lived there was a tent city.

My stomach felt heavy. I felt tired and antsy.

Suddenly, this street felt like an old Western movie. This town was flat-fronted, made out of wood. Only scenery.

I walked out of the bar, just as the skies began to darken. I hugged my hoodie close to my body. The sky was foreboding, but I felt like walking.

I walked up a hill, past the cemetery, and the rain began to fall.

Brigadoon was disappearing—if it had ever been there at all.

CRACK ... FIZZ

MELISSA J. ELBAUM

IT'S A HOT AND DRY COLORADO SUMMER in 1984. Dad and Valerie have planned a family vacation to the Grand Canyon. By vacation I mean *road trip*, where we will camp out along the way, go fishing, and do some hiking and exploring. Family vacations for us are constrained by the budget of a rank-and-file employee at Bell Telephone Co. in downtown Denver, and a mechanic who specializes in auto alignment. Our road trip will not involve fancy motels or expensive diners where you can buy burgers and fries or steak and eggs. Like all our family vacations with Dad, this will include things like sleeping bags, tents, flashlights, coolers, fishing gear, and a whole lotta canned goods.

Mom drops me and Miles off at Dad's house on Friday. If she feels any trepidation about our going, it is nearly invisible but for a tinge of worry in her eyes. Mom is optimistic and forgiving. Mom also needs a break. Perhaps she feels as many single mothers do: a guilty sense of relief to be rid of kids who don't listen.

"Have a good time! I'll see you in a week!" Mom says, waving from the driver's seat of her Ford sedan, giving us her wide and perfect-toothed smile.

"Bye, Mom!" We wave back, carrying bulky school backpacks filled with several days' supply of clothing, as well as hair- and toothbrushes and a few toys. I watch her roll out of the driveway and disappear down the street before we clamor through the side door of Dad's old house. We walk into the familiar sights and smells of the mudroom and kitchen. The kitchen has old linoleum flooring with brownish ornate designs, now faded by traffic and time. Over the kitchen table is a framed painting of an old man with white hair and beard, praying over a plain bowl of soup and slice of bread.

The kitchen is never clean, with rare exception. There is a backlog of dirty dishes caked in days-old food that pile up in and around the sink, a trail of stench on the counter. Dad and Valerie smoke red Marlboro cigarettes, and the pungent smell of cheap tobacco permeates the house. The smoke is sometimes mixed with a skunky odor, hidden (badly) in the upstairs bedroom. Scattered ashtrays lie about tables and countertops and are stubbornly full. Empty pop cans are used as makeshift ashtrays

when the others are full, and we are careful to search for cigarette butts and ash before we take a sip of our A&A Root Beer. The clutter in the kitchen includes medications, mugs filled with cold, abandoned coffee, and the ever-present Budweiser cans. The quantity of cans is a gauge for us to determine how much we can get away with, and when we need to make ourselves scarce. The refrigerator housing their stash of beer is covered in photos and magnets, one of which is a frog with its head down a pelican's beak, the frog unrelenting as it chokes the bird's neck with its free hands. It reads: *NEVER give up*. Another magnet reads: *If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten*.

Valerie, our stepmom, and Dad recently bought the house in an area of Arvada called Olde Town. The house was built in 1901, situated on a dead-end road that runs parallel to a berm with railroad tracks. Miles and I are convinced that the house is haunted and contains secret passages connecting the large closet to the storage space over the door in the spare bedroom. This is a great premise for many of our games.

"Are you guys excited for vacation?" Dad asks, standing tall in the kitchen.

"Yes!" Miles says. I smile shyly, nod a little as I grip the straps of my backpack.

"Well, we are going to leave early in the morning, so don't stay up too late tonight." He adds a firm, "Okay?"

"Okay!" We answer, shuffling out of the kitchen.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour."

There is an air of anxious excitement in the house, as preparations are still to be made for our vacation and evening has long since passed. Out-of-state trips with Dad never happen; typically, we spend summers camping just two or three hours west, deep in the Rockies. This will be our first vacation outside of the state with Dad, and he's spent many hours mapping our route, figuring out where we will camp and catch fish and making lists of supplies and fuel estimations.

The next morning, we rise early with anticipation and Valerie sleeps late. Even Valerie's son, James, is up early. Our stepbrother always sleeps late. We don't complain. We know better not to.

"Why not?" she says, when she wakes up with drooping eyes and a groggy voice. "It's vacation!" Her eyes look dim, vacant.

"Don't you want any coffee?" Dad asks, holding up a freshly brewed pot.

"Nuh-uh." Valerie yawns, stretches, and is left alone at the kitchen table as Dad attempts to organize and load up supplies.

It's a similar scene that we witness most weekend mornings at Dad's: Valerie shaking off a nasty hangover by cracking open a can of Budweiser for breakfast. *Crack ... fizz*. The sound of the can opening is just like in the commercials. The aluminum ripping, a staccato of pops that quickly crescendos towards a final *sshhplit*, followed by the hiss of escaping gas from its air-tight confinement. It's the sound of an *Ahh!*: a

mini burst of relief. It's a familiar sound, one that pricks up our ears from other rooms in the cranky, old house. Although Dad doesn't start drinking as early in the morning as Valerie, we are sure he will make up for lost time later on. We can sense it by the way he eyes the can with eagerness. But Dad sips his coffee, drawing out the little patience that he has, gently remarking on the hour. He does a few dishes without making much of a dent in the pile, and finally begins to stack the car with supplies on his own.

Dad has grown a full beard for this summer, and he wears a cowboy-style straw hat to fend off the high plains sun. His chestnut hair is full and wavy, he has long skinny legs under his cut-off denim shorts, and he wears John Lennon glasses. He's a good-looking man at a little over six-feet tall with hazel, almost yellow eyes, lean muscles, and broad shoulders. His disposition is infectious and fun. Except when it isn't.

Originally from rural Northern California, Dad's family goes back multiple generations in America we've been told.

"Okies," he explains, "*from Skokie*." He carries a box of cans to the trunk and we follow.

"What's an Okie?" Miles and I ask, laughing.

"An Okie is a person from Oklahoma, from back in the olden days when people drove horses in covered wagons. The Okies left the dust storms; real bad storms big as tornadoes. They got away from the storms because they couldn't grow anything in the dust, and moved to California to work on fruit farms. That's how my family ended up in Ukiah."

Dad is a proud descendent of pilgrims, the likes of which are depicted in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: a book I've not read but that Dad talks about. As he packs up the car, sweat runs down his temples, and he tells us rumors of more prosperous relatives. These rumors are about a great-great uncle, one Admiral Cockburn of the British Navy, who gave the order to set light to the White House in the war of 1812. Although Dad is an American patriot, he relishes this story and its sense of rebellion, its spirit of anti-institutionalism. He's proud as he tells it to us, even though we've all heard it before. We follow him back and forth from the old yellow house to the car, sometimes getting in the way of his long stride.

Although we know Dad never went to college like Mom, and never made it past the eleventh grade, he is intelligent. Not what Mom would call *intellectual*. I never see him read Steinbeck, or any other book for that matter. Most weekends at Dad's are filled with Sunday football, occasional ACDC and Tom Petty soundtracks, and various house and mechanical projects that are temperamental. However impatient, Dad is terrifically gifted with his hands and occasionally works on craftsman projects, like building models of old battleships. Perhaps his lack of education aids in the creation of his darker sides, his rougher and tougher moods. Well, that and his own father, whom we only met once when we were babies. Dad says that when he received draft papers

for Vietnam, he made necessary preparations to dodge Uncle Sam's call to duty. This meant he had to drop out of high school. Lucky for him, the war ended before he had to officially enlist.

With the noon sun blazing behind us in the cloudless blue sky, we brim with anxiousness to begin our journey. Our annoyance at Valerie makes us brave, and we all beg her to help Dad so that we can leave. Well after 1:00 pm, Valerie succumbs to our collective urgency. We plead for lunch before getting into the car. But Dad is cranky and mightily impatient in the unrelenting heat of the Colorado afternoon. He barks at us to wait, and we quickly fall silent, even if our stomachs don't. The process of fitting a week's worth of camping gear into the trunk of his 1974 Chevy Nova hasn't helped Dad's mood. His patience has officially run out, and he is short with Valerie; she, in turn, is short with him. This is how their dances always begin. With each new offense comes a stubborn defense, which is, of course, a brand-new can of Budweiser. *Crack ... fizz.*

"Don't forget the cooler of beers for the car!" Valerie shouts to Dad. The weight of the large cooler is beyond our puny arms. We dance around the car, waiting and excited to go.

"Go play!" Dad snaps.

"We are playing!"

"Not here! Over there!"

At last, finally, in the wicked heat of the afternoon, our road trip begins. With empty stomachs and underlying irritation all around, the Chevy makes its way down the street and we feel the enthusiasm for adventure. I'm six-years-old, with the promise of another birthday coming soon in August. Miles is eight-and-a-half, the oldest. James is seven months younger than me. Unlike Miles and I, who are blond and blue-eyed, James has bright-red hair, a face specked with freckles, and two front teeth missing. His eyes are kind, if not sad, and he giggles when he laughs. James is painfully shy and cute. We don't know much about his real father, who lives somewhere out of state, maybe in California. They don't visit each other. At some point after Dad and Valerie got married, Dad adopted James and gave him our last name: *Johnson*.

It makes sense for James to sit between Miles and me. We have our pillows to lie down on or put behind our backs or hold and cuddle. It's a tight fit, but we begin the drive feeling cozy and excited and forgetting about lunch. Here we are, lined up in the backseat, two blonds and a redhead in the middle singing a *hundred bottles of beer on the wall, a hundred bottles of beer! Take one down pass it around, ninety-nine bottles of beer ...* James sings with the most enthusiasm followed by myself and then Miles. Dad and Valerie find this cute for five or so seconds. Miles, as the oldest, drops off the song first, and I get bored of it when we reach seventy bottles of beer on the wall. But James sees it through to the end, even as we all cringe, and with just as much enthusiasm and gusto as when he started, he begins again right from the top!

"Ok, James. Now that's enough," Dad says. We are heading south on a major highway now, Interstate 25.

"Eight-nine bottles of beer on the wall, eight-nine bottles of beer!" James sings, giggling.

"James, it's too loud," Dad says.

"Take one down, pass it around!"

"That's enough, James."

"Eighty-eight bottles of beer—"

"Enough, damn it! Enough!" The car slides a bit into the next lane, effectively shutting up the loud redhead. Miles and I are weary of the repetition as well, still hungry. We are secretly relieved Dad has made it end.

"Oh, so James isn't allowed to have fun?" Valerie asks. "Let him finish."
Crack ... fizz.

Dad clenches his jaw and I watch as his mastication muscles flex again and again. I know this body language well. He's biting down on his molars.

Time passes with a few more verses. Eventually, thanks to the suppressive heat and the ticking clock, James relents and grows tired. We all fall into the quiet hum of our south-westbound drive in the blue Chevy Nova.

As we drive, I look at Valerie. She has a good face for looking at. She's a few years Dad's junior and talks with a Colorado mountain accent: a heavy drawl with a hint of twang. To top that off, she speaks with a lisp that makes most of her words sound like they end in a "pthh." Valerie's build is long and bony, and she wears daisy dukes. Her brown hair is permed. She has knock knees and walks with flip-flops in the summer that peel and slap against the ground, and she never wears a bra. I find Valerie captivating: she has gold-rimmed, '80s aviator glasses, behind which are wide brown eyes. She's a twin of Shelly Duvall. Valerie buys things at the grocery store like Orange Crush, Lucky Charms, and greasy potato chips, which earn her some points with me and Miles. Valerie often eats only once a day—usually late at night. And she goes into excruciating detail when she has an audience. She is the opposite of Mom in form and character. Like Dad, Valerie never received a college education. She tells us that she joined the army and completed four years of honorable service.

Two hours pass, and I'm squished. I'm sweating from every pore. The breeze from the rolled-down window is just more hot air. The hunger pains that had subsided return.

"I'm hungry."

"Me too," James says.

"What do you think?" Valerie asks, turning to Dad.

"I want to keep going," he says.

"How much further do you think it is?"

"Oh, not too, too far. They'll be fine. They'll eat better later if they're hungry."

"Yeah. Well, you wanna stop at a gas station?"

"No, not yet. I still have 'bout a quarter tank. Can you hand me one of those?" Dad nods in the direction of the cooler.

"Okay you guys, just sit tight. We'll be there soon." Valerie says. *Crack ... fizz.* She hands an open beer to Dad, who puts it between his legs, his hands occupied with the steering wheel.

The empty beer cans smashed hither and thither inside the car. There is such a great quantity of empty cans on the floor that they form a metallic sea at our feet, steadily rolling and clanking with the rhythm of the tire rotations. The Chevy Nova has begun to smell of stale, watered-down beer and secondhand Marlboro-cigarette smoke. The combination results in a unique type of headache that is well-known to me and my brothers. The empty beer cans make their way into whatever crevice in the cramped car is available: in-between and underneath seats, beside the cooler and our backpacks, and become footrests under Valerie's flip-flops. Dad expertly holds his beer between his legs as he drives. His eyes dart from side to side with every sip. We've seen this enough times to know he's scanning for cops. Valerie finishes her beer, belches, and mindlessly tosses the empty can at her feet. *He, he, he*, she laughs. She's trying to raise our spirits, but I put on my red plastic sunglasses and stare at the passing landscape of rising boulders that stretch towards the blue sky, and the tall, green pines and the roadside streams.

The Chevy Nova follows the setting sun along Colorado 160 towards the southwestern border. Before darkness sets in, we set up camp at a site close to the sand dunes in the southern Colorado Rockies. James and I run up a small hill in search of dead wood for the fire, and the sky above the low sun looks gray, in contrast with the white aspens reaching towards it. The aspen leaves sway in the wind, looking high and lonely. We get a few whiffs of food cooking over a campfire, making our tummies growl. A few hours earlier, the sand dunes were a blur of a visit. We ran up vast mountains of fine-grained sand, plopped into the cushy terrain, and rolled all the way down. We pretended to be in quicksand. We begged for Dad and Valerie to bury the three of us with our heads sticking out. Before it got very late, we made haste to leave; James, at one point, refusing to go.

"Don't go too far!" Valerie yells from the campsite behind us. But we feel more relief the higher we go, the fresh air replenishes our lungs and pumps blood into our feet that have been captive in the car. She warns us against animals often found in this region of the low Rockies. We get instructions on how to handle such an encounter. *If it's a mama bear... If you hear a rattle ... If it looks like a cat ...*

More relief comes when we finally eat—a simple task of filling up the empty within. Campfire smoke wafts through my nose, and I'm very tired. My sleeping bag is a welcome sight. We sleep five bodies to one tent.

The morning is crisply cold, and I smell coffee brewing over wooden coals. Mornings are often just me and Dad, as we are the first to rise. He's sober and the day is fresh, and I have him all to myself. There is something peaceful in this moment; he speaks to me with an even, well-intentioned tone.

"Hey there, whatcha doin' up so early?" He pours himself some coffee from a boiling percolator.

"I don't know." I feel shy. Intimidated. Lucky.

"Can't sleep no more?"

"No."

"Well, here. Come sit."

I watch him sip his steaming coffee and listen to him commenting on the state of the sky and weather. I'm a happy listener of one as he describes our journey on a map, offering me a plastic cup of water at the picnic table where we sit.

"We are going to take a shortcut," Dad explains, pointing to colorful lines on the map. "Here we are now, and we need to go further west. We'll pass by Pagosa Springs, here, and then take a left on Colorado 151, here. Tomorrow we'll camp at the Navajo Res and go fishin'. We can catch dinner."

"I thought we were going to the Grand Canyon?" I ask.

"We are, but we have to go through New Mexico to get there. See?"

I nod. I contribute little to the conversation and the study of maps. I'm content to watch him mull over our journey, account for our supplies, and begin to get camp in order.

"Go fetch me those bags over there. Help me tidy up this table so people can eat when they wake up."

I hop into motion, enjoying the role of being Dad's helper. But our time together doesn't last long, a brief moment is all, before everyone else awakes one by one, and the private moment dissipates like the cooling campfire's smoke. Without too many arguments, and after several trips to the bushes to pee, we manage to pack our gear and move out.

The drive to Pagosa Springs is endless, and we fall in and out of naps in the backseat of the Chevy Nova. As hours pass in the small car, the smells of stale beer and day-old campfire smoke mixed with cigarettes begin to stick to our clothes. Dad tries to encourage us by counting down the miles on the highway signs, but even James is quiet. We have to pee but are told to hold it. My bladder strains, and this makes me hyper-alert. Details of every rock, every tree, every cloud seem to have a secret. When Dad stops, at last, we pee on the side of the road behind a cluster of trees (a much easier task for my brothers). James and I play together in the backseat with our toys, annoying Miles who can only find peace in sleep. Eventually our game lapses into silence and my eyes fall shut, lulled by the vehicle's droning motion. We stop for gas

and stretch our legs and are allowed a small bit of candy. A few stops are made at tourist lookouts at Valerie's request, but we all await the promise of the Grand Canyon.

Dad told me when we were looking at the map earlier that Colorado 151 was an unpaved, gravel road, which turns out to be correct. Along Colorado 151 are similarly unpaved and unnamed side roads blending into the desert landscape of the southern foothills. The benefit of an unpaved road is clear in my six-years-old mind: speed and the ability to drink without getting caught. We're sick of being in the hot, stuffy car that offers no air conditioning, let alone seatbelts. Hot air from the semi-rolled down window blows onto my face, drying the sweat that drips from my forehead and temples. But I'm grateful for air that isn't stale.

The desert close to the southern Colorado border with New Mexico is vast and unchanging. In the near distance, the Rockies rise jarringly from the ground and into the depths of sky. The landscape near the state highway is arid, undulating, and infertile. The Chevy Nova hums towards the New Mexico border carrying with it the sea of empty beer cans at our feet. *Crack ... fizz*. Dad's eyes dart back and forth, then he takes a sip, finds his left turn onto Colorado 151, and accelerates. We reach a speed of about thirty-five or forty miles per hour when, out of nowhere, we hear screeching breaks and then a sudden, very loud slamming of metal against metal—*BAM!*

Dad's Nova is clipped in the rear by a pickup truck. *Shit!* Valerie grabs the handle above her window. Dad grips the wheel, struggling for control as we violently fishtail. The car spins around like a *Dukes of Hazard* stunt, gravel flying into our open windows and showering over the beer cans like pellets. Dad's foot strikes down on the brake with the force of his entire body weight to control the spiraling motion of the car. Our heads in the backseat become pendulum balls: my head smacks against the window and then bangs against James's head, sending it towards Miles. Miles's head goes into his window. Blood drizzles from his blond crewcut, then the pendulum reverses back to me. James screams, or opens his mouth as if trying to. Dust flies into his toothless face. A second or two later, Dad's Nova stops with a screech and a final thud into a ditch, and then silence.

"Is ... is everyone okay?" Dad asks.

James begins to cry. Miles looks shocked, fingering the blood he's wiped from his head. My heart races, but a smile creeps onto my face that I can't suppress. I'm giggling, then laughing, then hysterical, almost choking. It's funny! It's hilarious!

I laugh uncontrollably. How silly! Our heads banging together like a dinner bell on a farm! The car spinning out of control, as if in slow motion! Valerie cursing! Chuckles escape so quickly from my mouth that I have to gasp for air. It soon turns into a wild and uncontrollable sounding cackle. It's a nervous laugh, and it's the kind that's catchy. Miles meets my eyes. He smiles and begins to join in. Soon, we are both bowled over in the back. *Wow! What fun! What a ride! We hadn't had this*

much excitement the whole trip! Let's do it again! Again! Miles forgets the wound on his head.

Dad gets out of the car to confront the driver of the pickup, but not without first whispering orders to Valerie to *very quickly* clear out the beer cans. *Police may be coming*, he says, his eyes darting left to right. More delicately than I've ever seen Valerie do anything, even crocheting baby blankets and stitching embroidery, she begins collecting the beer cans in garbage bags without making so much as a sound.

"I'll look at it in a bit," she offers to Miles, who is still laughing. "You'll be fine, it's just a little blood. Help me clean up, guys. Quick. If the cops see the beer cans, they'll think it's our fault."

We did. And we filled each garbage bag all the way to the top.

ON CANARIES AND OXYGEN TANKS

PAULA ARELLANO GEOFFROY

IT WAS VERY CLEAR TO ME, when we left the hospital carrying my grandmother that night, that she was going to need assistance to breathe. The doctor on duty summoned my mother, my sister and me to a dark, smelly room next to the emergency hall, leaned back on a shabby couch, and crossed his legs before saying: “The lady can stay here of course, but what’s the point when she’ll die so soon?” He suddenly looked haggard in his green clothes, disheveled, even dirty. We knew the situation was serious, only you don’t expect someone to spit the facts in your face like that. It was obvious the doc needed the bed Grandma was using, that he probably wanted it right away for any of the other patients who had arrived after her that night. Nevertheless, I felt I didn’t want to make his life any easier.

“Is there really no way to help her out anymore?” I asked.

“I can show you how to inject morphine to relieve the breathing,” he said.

And so, after a one-minute arm-injection course, forms filled, payments done, we left the building the same way we had entered two hours before: dragging our skinny, suffocating grandmother in her lovely beige pajamas.

Companies that rent oxygen tanks for home-use are seemingly accustomed to acting quickly, for we received the tank at my mother’s apartment within an hour of having made the call. Grandma was resting in my sister’s bed, alert and clever as always, silently looking at the huge cylinder being installed next to her. The man who brought it advised us to wait ten minutes before using it to allow the pressure levels to set; then he tried the mask, modeling like an airplane steward to one side, then to the other. I tried the mask myself, felt the strangeness of the cold air pushing inside my nostrils. Later that night, Grandma said it helped, but I doubted it.

Grandma smoked two boxes of cigarettes daily for most of her life. Her deep, rough voice was her distinctive feature, besides the small smoky cloud that surrounded her wherever she went. During the last years of her life, however, in addition to reducing her rate to four or five cigarettes per day, she had taken the habit of announcing every March that she had stopped smoking. We applauded enthusiastically, but of course we knew she was still smoking. Her hair, blouses, furniture, and

curtains smelled of it, and a thin ashy layer obstinately remained everywhere at her place. But we still loved the part of truth that there was: her anxious desire to deflect our unspoken reprobation.

I vividly recall the summer afternoons in her backyard. I see her sitting on a wooden chair in the shadow of an avocado tree, slowly savoring her cigarette as she listens attentively to the birds. She loved canaries. When she was diagnosed with cancer, four months before this story, she had twelve birds in a big cage in her garden, next to a blue hydrangea that she watered religiously every night following her cigarette. The canaries were cheerful, nervous white and yellow creatures that sang beautifully, surely grateful for the bits of lettuce and eggs Grandma treated them to.

After Grandma departed, my sister and I went to clean and collect her stuff before the house was sold. The canaries were so silent, so quiet even as we approached, that they seemed to be mourning, or simply waiting for their time to come, too. I regretfully parted them and took each to a neighbor and two of Grandma's friends. The neighbor and friends thanked us profusely, but I am not sure whether they accepted the birds as a gift or as a burden, considering the unexpected visitors would eventually need care, seeds, water, and cleansing every day. I didn't say a word about how to handle them to any of these people; I felt I didn't have the right to intrude, only thank them for their acceptance. Nevertheless, every time I handed over a warm, delicate bird, I remembered Grandma's bony hands, and I silently prayed they would tenderly care for the canaries as lovingly as she did. "Birds get stressed when moving to a new home," she would say, "so you have to protect them from draft and cold. If they are indoors, they need daylight. Make sure the cage has firm perches, seed, water dishes, newspaper to cover the floor, and a device to build their nest. You've seen that they lay about five blue-green eggs. They are good parents, the canaries. Both take care of the chicks." If my mother's apartment had been bigger, and the birds hadn't slightly smelled like smoke too, I would have probably suggested that she keep one.

The oxygen tank was about my size, that of a small woman, with an inscription under one valve that read: "Pressure release valve prevents tank explosion." It purred softly and constantly, like a cat being caressed, only this cat was tall, hard and red, and stood stiffly like a member of the Queen's Guard by her side. Before leaving, the steward explained how to use the three main gadgets adorning the guard's hat: a flow control valve, an oxygen gauge, and a flow-rate indicator. He recommended we set the flow on medium or low, and we did. But later on, as the mask clouded with Grandma's desperate breath, it was clear to us that the miserable breeze was completely useless. We switched the flow to high. Grandma struggled to take the mask off. We suddenly realized that one or ten liters per minute meant the same nothingness for her, and so we threw the mask away and started injecting morphine into her arm. The first shot had an almost immediate effect, she opened her small

eyes and stared at us. The relief on her face passed swiftly onto ours, allowing us to finally breathe as well.

Although most people think morphine is just a pain killer, it also helps to relieve shortness of breath due to heart failure, lung disease, or emphysema. It relaxes the muscles in the bronchial-breathing tubes, making the work of breathing easier and helping control the anxiety associated with the suffocating feeling. I blamed Marlboro, Lucky Strike, and Hilton, but also myself for shutting up when I watched her light a new cigarette with the stub of the last one. Her nails, always neatly painted in bright colours, were now transparent, her fingertips yellow-tinted from nicotine. But incredible as it may sound—and according to the last oncologist we talked to—her lungs were pretty good, for metastasis involved only her stomach and liver. Her difficulty breathing was caused by a blood clot (embolus) that originated in a deep vein from her lower leg that traveled in her bloodstream to the lungs, and blocked the blood flow there (pulmonary embolism). The doctor pointed to the status of her right leg as proof: swollen, red, warm, painful. He also mentioned that the risk of forming blood clots was increased by cancer, prolonged bed rest, smoking, etc. No need to say more.

Grandma stayed in bed most of the time during her last months at my mother's apartment. Once a day, though, she would wear a white robe and pantoffles and walk slowly to the balcony, where she would sit near the geraniums, light up a cigarette, and gently let the smoke escape into the blue sky. I used to watch her secretly from the living room while pretending to read a book. What was she thinking? Was she afraid of the approaching end? Was she preparing herself to leave this world by looking with such alertness, with such concentration at some point in the distance? I never dared to ask. We spoke about the family, her canaries, the fruit she fancied before I went to the supermarket for it, the possible reasons the ivy was drying out, the annoying noises of the construction next door, the beauty of the purple mountain range surrounding Santiago. Passionate about life, she was a strong, loving, intelligent woman who cooked delicious roast chicken for all of us every Sunday. Always a good eater, she urged us to eat as much as we could, in that common matriarchal gesture of expressing love through food. Ironically, though, her last days were a nightmare of pills she had to swallow to keep up the internal balance of her body. Too much or too little of one thing or another, and the general difficulty eating, drinking or going to the toilet, made her cry.

The last time I went to Grandma's place, I reached out to the neighbor to check on the canary I had given to her. She said the little bird didn't want to sing for a while, that he kept staring from his branch, moving only to peck birdseeds every hour. But one morning, he had woken her up with his singing: "I thought immediately of your grandma, that she had entered heaven." I now smile at the idea of the canary as a bell

announcing the entrances happening at the other side; the honorable footman reading the litany before royalty entered the golden doors. Whatever the case was, this little canary outlived Grandma, we outlived her, and here we were, trying to sing like any other day. I found out that birds have inspired humans throughout history with their ability to rise above earthly matters and vain concerns, reminding us to focus on the greater spiritual realm. I don't know if Grandma knew that canaries have always been interpreted as meaning happiness and joy. They symbolize the patience to enlighten ourselves, as well as others, providing the power to express our voices, feelings, and emotions. They are a guide to healing, to breathe fresh air and make a new start. Was this bird really announcing Grandma's new start?

She passed away at dawn the morning that followed our trip to the hospital, with my sister holding her hand throughout that night, for she sensed Grandma's farewell. After a quick deliberation, we decided the funeral was going to be a short, simple one followed by cremation. I went to a mortuary early that morning and sat with a talkative, kind woman who showed me dozens of catalogues of what I now know were coffins (six sided) and caskets (rectangular shape). The options for materials were infinite. Fiberboard or fiberglass; hardwoods, such as mahogany, cherry, oak, or the cheaper pine; copper and steel (only suitable for burial); personalized ones with my own choice of images and pictures; cardboard (the economical choice and also better for the environment) in all kinds of colors, covered with gardens, flowers and sunrises; eco-friendly biodegradable, made from recycled kraft paper, bamboo, willow or banana leaf. Coffins and caskets could be left blank so that friends and family could inscribe final wishes and thoughts to the deceased. The lady stared at me when I mumbled, "Cigarette-box shape with a bird on it." I must have looked pale, startled, crazy, or all of it altogether, because she stood up and offered me a glass of water. The truth is, the sleepless night and the absurdity of it all struck me like a mallet in the head. I needed fresh air—a direct oxygen flow into my brain to ease the dizziness.

Two men came to pick up Grandma midmorning. They had to dodge the oxygen tank, which was not easy given the small size of the bedroom and the enormous size of the cylinder. They pulled her body, wrapped in a bed sheet to the hall, and then maneuvered to make her fit inside the black wooden coffin. We stared in circumspection, halfway between tears and nervous laughter, until the men asked if we wanted to add something to the coffin before they sealed it. I looked at my sister and mother in hesitation. After a few seconds, each one went about the house collecting stuff. Much to my perplexity, two Marlboro cigarette boxes were left on top of Grandma's covered legs, next to a burgundy sweater, a tiny figure of the Virgin del Carmen, and a picture of Saint Pancras. Later in the day, I asked my sister where she had found the cigarettes. "Grandma's bag," she said. "There was a whole carton, just took two boxes."

Back at my mother's apartment after the funeral, the room where Grandma had rested was lit with a warm, creamy summer light. If it had not been for the faulty, incongruous cylinder still there in the middle of everything, there could have been some peace in it. Why was this lifeless apparatus standing there instead of Grandma? I felt a strange pull to check out the pressure gauge needle. It was functioning normally. Life seemed to be functioning normally. Were deaths also a normal function of life? Pressure gauges between lives? I grabbed the phone to call the oxygen company. It seems oxygen tank companies are used to delivering quickly but delay the retrieval of their equipment. "You have already paid for the twenty-four-hour service, Miss, I am afraid I cannot give you the money back," said the woman at the phone. "It's not about the money, I just do not want it here, can you understand?" We had to endure the thing's presence until late that night. I was glad when they finally came for it, to watch it disappear through the door with all its tension and futility. The cylinder had outlived Grandma and would certainly outlive us too, for who knows how many years. Physical objects endure, entangled in their ever-lasting mechanisms; the material world goes on and on and on, while we disappear in silence, forever, apparently leaving no trace.

If I could, I would ask Grandma if this disappearance is real, if she is aware of what I am writing right now, and if she is enjoying her afterlife. Something shakes when you try to grasp this other reality. My sister can sense a subtle rumor of air passing, the fluttering of a bird rising to the ceiling, when someone dies. Some people call it energy, vibration, life forces in movement. I look through my window at a couple of magpies building their nest on a birch. They work with such undisturbed intention. They have no time to waste. I think of Grandma's canaries. Did they adjust? Somehow, I am sure they did; birds do not lose time in trivialities as we do. They just go on and sing. I find out that magpies symbolize an open mind and a gateway to a higher spiritual vision. They urge us to re-evaluate priorities, be more creative, and listen with more attention. In their message, we are beckoned out of hiding to reveal our brilliance, our grace and beauty, our spirit, in each life, to the world.

DR. MARC LASHER PLACES LIVES ABOVE NORMS

CHRISTINE WELDON

FRESNO, Calif. —Each Saturday they arrive by car, motorcycle, moped, bicycle, wheelchair, crutches, and on foot.

Some come alone. Some are dropped off. Some are aided by a friend or accompanied by their canine companion. Some leave their kids waiting in the car.

Often, the line they form extends down the dusty sidewalk while they each wait patiently for a turn to exchange their collections of used hypodermic needles for a fresh supply of new ones and an opportunity to see Dr. Marc Lasher.

This is the site of the Fresno Needle Exchange and the Fresno Free Medical Clinic—a makeshift medical facility set up along the sidewalk of a small, isolated cul-de-sac, one block north of Roeding Park.

Lasher, a doctor of osteopathic medicine with a master's degree in social work, said he has been providing addiction-related medical services to patients at the clinic, free of charge, for nearly 24 years.

“Build a stadium, and they’ll come,” Lasher said, in a misquoted reference to the movie “Field of Dreams.” “Open up an awning, and we’ll put out a biohazard container, and they’ll come.”

Every Saturday, rain or shine, Lasher drives a 1964 green and yellow school bus from his home in downtown Fresno to this location.

The old school bus has been converted into a mobile medical clinic, where Lasher said patients can come to receive treatment for any ailment they have.

The bus is stocked with everything he needs to clean their infections, lance their abscesses, and generally treat



This 1964 reconditioned school bus is parked each weekend at 1175 W. Hedges Ave in Fresno, one block north of Roeding Park. The bus serves as the site for the Fresno Free Medical Clinic and the Fresno Needle Exchange.

Photo by Christine Weldon

whatever afflicts them. Most of these conditions are the result of their intravenous heroin addictions.

Although the bus looks run down and dirty, Lasher said many of those he treats feel more comfortable going into an old bus than a clean new van.

While the inside of the bus is also not as clean as one would expect of a medical clinic, Lasher said the instruments, supplies and techniques they use are sterile.

As Lasher travels to the site, volunteers await his arrival so they can set up tents and stations outside the bus in preparation for the next few hours. The clinic and needle exchange operate from 1–3 p.m.

“This is like what it’s like in Third World countries,” Lasher said.

Relying on a 55-year-old bus means that when it breaks down or needs repairs, Lasher said they have to improvise. “Broken water pump!” Lasher said on a recent Saturday, as he explained why he hadn’t been driving the bus for a couple weeks. “It’s in for service; this’ll have to do,” he added, as he backed up a U-Haul truck to the curb.

The interior of the back of the truck served as his new, temporary exam room.

As Lasher stood inside the truck, a man walking through the line approached him.

“Hey, I need you to look at my ass, all right?” the man said.

“Okay. Put your stuff away; I’ll do it,” Lasher said, in his New York accent, as he instructed the man to set his bike and backpack aside.

Lasher then helped the man climb up into the truck. Despite the poor lighting, providing medical treatment in the back of a U-Haul truck offered the man little privacy.

Anyone walking by could watch as Lasher performed a procedure on the man’s hip, illuminated by a cell phone flashlight held up by a student volunteer standing inside the cramped workspace.

“This is what it’s like in Third World countries,” Lasher said.

Lasher said he and Dallas Blanchard, who manages the needle exchange, have



This 1964 reconditioned school bus is parked each weekend at 1175 W. Hedges Ave in Fresno, one block north of Roeding Park. The bus serves as the site for the Fresno Free Medical Clinic and the Fresno Needle Exchange.

Photo by Christine Weldon

worked together in Fresno, as well as in Modesto, for all these years.

Lasher also gets help from Dr. John Zweifler, who works by day as the medical director of clinical integration and graduate medical education for Adventist Health Hanford.

Zweifler has known Lasher since Zweifler was the program director at the University of California, San Francisco-Fresno Valley Medical Program, back when Lasher was a resident.

Zweifler said he believes the program is a good cause and comes out as often as he can to help the patients and support Lasher's efforts.

"He's incredibly dedicated and compassionate," Zweifler said. "He stays late. If the folks coming through arrive late, he just stays as long as there's folks."

Zweifler said that Lasher is responsible for getting the bus together.

"I can't imagine the number of hours he puts in each week to make this happen, completely on his own volition," Zweifler said. "He's probably personally been responsible for saving hundreds of lives, providing them with Narcan and his service. He's just a good man."

Talking about what he was most proud of with the program, Lasher quickly redirected attention away from himself and onto the volunteers, most of whom he said are pre-med students, nurses-in-training or students of social work.

Lasher said it is gratifying to offer those in training access to provide hands-on care in a real-world environment and an avenue to gain invaluable experience they can actually put on their resumes and take anywhere in the state to help people.

Each week, Lasher said the volunteers dole out items commonly used by drug addicts to facilitate their habit.

Lasher explained that these items include sterile hypodermic syringes, condoms, lubricants, antiseptic wipes, elastic arm bands, caps and purified water for mixing their drugs, cotton balls for filters and Narcan, a drug used to treat narcotic overdose in emergency situations.



Dr. Marc Lasher completes paperwork before treating a patient, whose illness is related to drug use, inside a U-Haul truck on a quiet cul-de-sac north of Roeding Park in Fresno, Calif.

Photo by Christine Weldon

While Lasher expresses his respect for the efforts of the volunteers, many share the same respect for him.

“He’s amazing. He’s very nice and cares,” said volunteer Karina Perez, who can be seen every weekend at the exchange handing out syringes ranging from “starter packs” to boxes of 500.

Lasher said the volunteers also bring food. For example, he pointed out Monica, a Fresno State student studying social work, and said she raised funds on her own to purchase 160 sandwiches and water to share with the patients.

“Who would take care of them?” Lasher said. “We see the problem, and we’re going to help them.”

On a recent Saturday, visitors watched as county health officials stood under an awning and offered free flu shots to those in line.

“No thanks,” one man said as he walked past the station. “I don’t like injections.”

The needle exchange, clinic and drug problem in Fresno are frequently the subject of news articles and a recent film. Most of the stories, however, highlight the struggles they have faced with the County of Fresno around providing these services in the community because of the belief that they are enabling the habits of drug addicts.

But Lasher said this concern doesn’t take into account how their services are really impacting the individuals and the community, and why the project’s efforts matter.

“Who would take care of them?” Lasher asks. “We see the problem, and we’re going to help them.”

“It’s harm reduction,” Lasher continues. “We [in medicine] do a very effective job managing all kinds of chronic conditions—diabetes, smoking, alcoholism—but we are ignoring drug addiction. It’s getting better, but it’s still a condition that, although illegal, can be managed.

“By employing harm reduction strategies, we are minimizing the damage that the drug addiction is causing,” Lasher said. “What we do with sanitation saves more lives than medicine.”

Both Lasher and Blanchard acknowledged the services they provide enable addicts to continue their drug habits. They also said what they are doing at the clinic and exchange is making the risky behavior less lethal and helping to prevent the transmission of life-threatening communicable diseases spread by intravenous substance abuse addiction.

“The addicts are still going to shoot up,” Blanchard said. “But instead of picking up a dirty needle on the street or sharing a used needle with another person, they are getting a clean needle,” he said. “This means they will be less likely to transmit HIV or Hep-C to others.”

Lasher then added that when these individuals are ready to seek treatment for their addictions, they are not having to contend with the life-threatening problems associated with Hepatitis C or HIV.

During the week, Lasher works as an addiction specialist for Aegis Clinic, treating addicts and helping them move towards recovery.

“Some people get it right away,” Lasher said. “Some need a few more years to get it.”

For those patients at the free clinic who express an interest, Lasher said he refers them to his weekday clinic for treatment and recovery.

But Lasher has an even greater worry.

“What if something happens to me? I get disabled?” Lasher said. “The program right now is not sustainable.”

Lasher said his efforts to get County support for the program haven’t been easy. He’s seen times when they’ve supported the program, only to later pull the rug out from under him. Even today, with the program now legal in California, he says some leaders still have reservations.

Yet, when they come to observe the program and see who seeks treatment, Lasher said they see it isn’t always people who are homeless or down on their luck. Some drive up in new vehicles, are well-dressed and maintain respectable jobs in their communities.

“Drug addiction touches everyone and every family,” Lasher said. “This is why we need to institutionalize ways of managing this problem like we do other chronic illnesses and other substances.”

Lasher is open and eager to share his life experiences, stories and long history of community volunteerism. He said that when he was in high school in New York, he began volunteering at the Boys’ Club and in the emergency room.

Lasher describes his hometown as “the Holy Land of Brooklyn.” The son of a father who sold industrial staple machines and a mother who worked in a men’s store, he is acutely aware of his heritage.

Lasher said his parents were born in the United States, but his grandparents emigrated here from Poland, entering this country



Sept. 17, 2019. Dr. Marc Lasher talks with current and prospective students of medicine and health sciences about the services he provides at the Fresno Free Medical Clinic at the Eighth Annual UCSF Fresno Mini Med School.

Photo by Christine Weldon

through Ellis Island in 1915. They grew up in a disputed area between Poland and Russia, roughly 300 miles from what would later become the Auschwitz concentration camp.

“Had they lived there during World War II, they most certainly would have been assassinated,” Lasher said.

On a recent Saturday, Lasher introduced himself to a woman observing the activities at the clinic and needle exchange. She told him she was from Denmark.

“I want to thank your people for saving my people,” Lasher said, referring to the efforts of the Danes who, at great personal costs, hid the Jews from the Nazis during World War II. They both smiled.

Lasher said perhaps this is why he can identify with those who visit the clinic and needle exchange. “We were always told that we were slaves in Egypt,” Lasher said. “So, when we see others who are enslaved, we had that same history. We were strangers in a strange land. The undocumented workers or the homeless, or whatever, just flows from that orientation.”

He now says he views the homeless as refugees from an economic system that has failed them.

He doesn’t feel it is their fault and believes there is more that can be done to help them. He feels the same about those dealing with addictions.

Listening to his stories, one can see that Lasher is no stranger to opposition. Growing up in the 1960s, he said he’s learned that some things he believes in are worth standing up for. For instance, he recounts the time in 1968 when he helped shut down his high school during the mobilizations against the Vietnam War. In ’69 and ’70, the protests continued, and he was part of the strike committee at Brooklyn College.

With a sparkle in his eyes, Lasher appears to take satisfaction in sharing that he got kicked out of New York City because he didn’t want to go to Vietnam. In those days, he explained, if someone claimed conscientious objector status, which he did, the federal government would require that person to move 50 miles from home to work in national health, safety and welfare, or end up in jail.

So, Lasher said he chose Buffalo as his new home, where he worked on a suicide prevention hotline. Then he fell in love, his girlfriend got accepted to Fresno State, and off to Fresno they went. While his love for Fresno grew stronger, his relationship with the girlfriend waned, and they parted ways. However, Lasher remained in Fresno and subsequently married Chanah.

He and Chanah now live in a 1930s, two-story California bungalow home in downtown Fresno, which he said is a few minutes’ drive from the clinic and needle exchange.

Located in a neighborhood that is home to transients and drug users, their baby-blue home with white trim is surrounded by wrought iron and wood fencing and secured by metal screen doors and bars on the first-floor windows.

“It had previously been the location of a prisoners’ rights organization when I bought it,” he said.

Lasher explained how he used to see needles and syringes lying around his home when he went outside. Then when he’d go outside again, he noticed the needles were gone. But he said it wasn’t from clean-up efforts. More than likely, they were gone, Lasher said, “because someone had picked them up and was probably reusing them.”

That is when Lasher started to realize that something needed to be done. His hope is that this illness will finally be recognized as a public health issue.

“We need people to step up to the plate,” Lasher said. “I hope that what we do out here is brought into the lobby of the Health Department on Saturday mornings when the building is not being used at all. “All we want is the lobby and one exam room right next to it, maybe some bathrooms and a custodian to lock up at the end,” Lasher said. “But the County is preventing us from doing that.”

Despite the challenges of getting this harm reduction strategy fully embraced by local leaders, Blanchard shared Lasher’s enthusiasm for a bill already passed by the state legislature that would allow needle exchange programs to hire one full-time, paid staff member to man each program.

Blanchard said such a law would go far in helping Lasher and his team continue their work and lobby for increased resources.

While spending Saturdays in a bus on a semi-secluded street in Fresno is Lasher’s passion, he said it has taken a toll on his family. He said his wife is a little burned out.

“You know, I’m not getting paid,” Lasher said. “She knows not to plan anything. My children know not to make my grandchildren’s birthday parties on Saturdays because I’m not going to be there.”

Still, Lasher is modest about his role in this project.

“It isn’t about me,” Lasher said. “It’s about a response. I’m sort of symptomatic of the response we should have as a society, as a community. But I guess I stepped up to the plate,” he said with his characteristic grin.

ARRIVAL: CHICAGO 1990

JUDITH GOFF

AS THE PLANE FLEW OVER CLEVELAND, en route from my old home in Philadelphia to my new job and new home in Chicago, I looked at the landscape below and smiled to myself. I was thinking about what happened when I was on this same flight eight weeks before. At just this spot, I was amazed to realize that I had completely forgotten to take a Valium, and that, after years of paralyzing anxiety about flying, I didn't even need one.

The earlier trip was for the job interview. I had been out of the workforce for several months, having left a good but demanding job writing executive speeches and stockholder reports for a big petrochemical company. At the time, leaving the job seemed like the right thing to do. My husband's career in technology transfer was going very well, but it too was quite demanding, and he traveled a lot, especially to what was then the Soviet Union. At the same time, my teenage stepson, Tom, who was living with us, began to get into a bit of trouble—nothing serious, but a little close to the edge. I worried that my preoccupations with work were contributing to Tom's problems, as well as to some tensions in the marriage. So, after discussing it, my husband and I agreed that it made sense for me to leave my job and tend the home fires.

Then, one night after dinner, when Tom was at his mother's house, my husband metaphorically pulled out a can of gasoline, sprayed it all over the home fires, and blew them into an inferno. "We need to talk," he said, grinding his jaws and looking hard at the salt shaker.

As the flames set my head on fire, a thousand thoughts surged through it, thoughts that ranged from "NO!!" to "We'll be able to work this out" to "Did he just say, 'we need to talk'? How fucking trite is that, for God's sake?"

Here's the story I got from him that night. There was another woman—a woman in Moscow. She was a hairdresser—maybe also a manicurist. Oh, and she was an editor, too. She had a daughter—out of wedlock—who was about twelve years old. He was madly in love and wanted to marry the hairdresser. They had known each other for ten days.

Even though I was in a state of shock and desperately hoping to make sense of what was happening, I realized that he was handing me some bizarre mix of lies and craziness. He wanted to marry her after knowing her for only ten days? She was a hairdresser, maybe a manicurist, *and* an editor?

Things only got crazier from there. Trying to follow all the changes in his stories, his plans, his behavior, and his moods was like trying to track the flightpath of an irritated gnat. One day he'd be loving, another day swaggering, another day furious, another day seductive, another day teary, and all too frequently whiny. Sometimes he said he still loved me. Sometimes he said he never loved me. Sometimes he said he planned to "set me up" in Italy, where I had lived years before and had always tried, but failed, to get him to visit. Sometimes he said I had to get out of the house so he could move the hairdresser and her daughter in. Sometimes he said I could have the house because he was moving to Russia and buying a dacha. Sometimes he said he was going to Moscow or Alma Ata or some other place in the USSR for a long weekend, and sometimes he would actually go, and sometimes he wouldn't. One story, however, never changed. He said that he couldn't pay me alimony because the hairdresser's teeth were an awful mess and the dental bills to fix them were going to be staggering. I guess I smirked the first time he told me that, and his response was to look accusingly at me and say, "Can't you at least be a little sympathetic?"

I was very lucky to have wonderful friends who listened to my stories and shook their heads in wonder, and I would ask, "What is he thinking? How can he possibly manage? I just don't understand him at all, do you?" After several weeks of hearing this, my dear friend Bob brought me up short. "Look," he said, "you're never going to understand him. There's nothing there *worth* understanding. It's time to get out. Get out. Just get out."

I did not take Bob's advice immediately because it's not so easy to fall out of love with someone after eleven years together. Fortunately, at about that time, the therapist I had started seeing gave me a wonderful homework assignment that helped me achieve just that.

"Make two lists," he said. "In the first list, put everything you love about your husband. In the second list, put everything you don't love about him."

I started with the first list, because it was easier to think of what was lovable. As I wrote down things like, "the touch of his hand," "the warmth of his arms," my tears fell on the page and blurred the ink. After a while, I wiped the tears away and reluctantly started on the second list. It was hard to think of things I didn't love about him at first. But as I peered into that part of my brain, the rose-colored glasses slipped further and further down my nose. I began to make more entries to the list. "He's always so *afraid* of things." Then more. "He never wants to go anywhere." Then more. "He invited Tom out to talk about the situation and offered him cigarettes and a beer!" Before long, I

had run out of room and had to start another page. “I discovered that he rents porno movies when I’m away on a business trip.” I will spare the reader some of the more repellent entries. By the time I was halfway down page two, the rose-colored glasses had completely fallen off my nose and smashed to the floor. I slammed the pen down on the table and said to myself, “Why have I been putting *up* with this clod?”

Though that homework assignment did a lot to help me fall out of love, it was a fortune cookie that pushed me over the edge. My husband and I had gone out for Chinese food, just the two of us. He was in one of his amorous moods, and he asked me to wear something revealing, which I did to please him, though it made me feel disgusted with myself. I hardly ate a bite, while he chowed down and ogled me and talked about how I looked. Then came the fortune cookies. I cracked mine open and pulled out the little paper strip. I was expecting the usual nonsense, something like “The grass smiles to you—please do not trample.” Instead—I swear to God—this is what was written on it:

“Do not believe the vain words of a vain man.”

After I read it over a couple of times, I didn’t look up and I didn’t say a word. I just carefully folded the little paper slip, put it in my pocket, and thought, *Okay, Bob was right. He is a jerk, and it’s time to get out.*

Getting out meant, first and foremost, finding a job. During that recession, the best option turned out to be the Chicago branch of an organization I had worked for before. They wanted me to have face-to-face meetings with about six of the company officers I would be working with, so that’s when I flew out the first time. When I was flying over Cleveland and discovered I was Valium-free, I laughed out loud. I realized that the fear and anxiety about flying that had plagued me for years wasn’t really about flying at all—it was about my husband and all the havoc and unhappiness he had created in my life. It was about what was in those two single-spaced pages of “everything I don’t love about my husband.” Free! I was free of all that! That freedom was the very best gift he ever gave me.

With my lovely, old, brick Edwardian house on the market in Philadelphia, and with eight huge suitcases full of clothes and other things I didn’t want to leave behind bouncing around in the baggage hold, here I was on my second flight to Chicago, my new home.

I knew that I’d be met by a limo when I arrived. I pictured the kind of “limo” that was typical in the Philadelphia suburbs—a beat up minivan with rotten suspension, smelling of stale cigar smoke. The limo was to take me to the little studio apartment that the organization provided for a few months as part of my relocation package. I

was trying to picture how it would all work out, how I would manage to get all those suitcases loaded onto the minivan, how dumpy the studio apartment would be, how far from the office I'd be living.

After we landed, I walked down the corridor of the airport toward the baggage claim area and saw a phalanx of drivers holding up small placards with the names of the people they were picking up. I sighed, wishing my name were among them and wondering how I was going to find my guy and his minivan. Suddenly, I noticed a placard that *did* have my name on it! And the guy holding it was in *livery*, with a cap, no less. He noticed my look of recognition and stepped smartly up to me.

"Ms. Goff?" he asked.

"Yes, that's me," I answered.

"How many bags do you have?"

"Oh, sorry, I have so many—eight—and they're big. Do you have room?"

"No problem. Please come with me to the baggage claim area to identify them."

Once we got to baggage claim, he found a huge wheeled carrier that would hold all the suitcases. As the pieces came tumbling down the ramp, he deftly grabbed them, stacking them skillfully on the carrier, never breaking a sweat.

Then he escorted me outside. The air on that September night was warm and clear, and the moon and the airport lights blotted out the stars. We walked a short way to a special parking area, and he directed me toward an ebony-black stretch Lincoln limousine—a real, honest-to-God limousine. My limousine. He opened the rear door for me, and I stepped in. As he loaded the bags in some other part of the limo, I settled myself against the comfortable leather cushions and looked around. The cabin was lit by a few soft, soothing white lights. There were buttons galore, none of which I understood at first, most of them marked by a pale green light. In front of where I sat was a bar with ten or so airline-size bottles of whiskey, rum, vodka, and so on, along with a bottle of champagne sitting in a container of ice. Above all of that was a small rack holding glasses for wine and champagne. By the time I had taken most of this in, the chauffeur had slid into his seat and lowered the glass partition. He turned to me and said, "We're going to 111 East Chestnut Street, right?" I checked my notes and said, "Right. Yes. Is that a nice part of town?" He smiled a very big smile. "It's pretty much the best part of town, Ma'am. Right next to the Water Tower."

I soaked this information in, and then he said, "So, you're new to Chicago?"

"Yes," I said. "I used to live in Philadelphia, and now I'm here to start work at a new job tomorrow."

"Would you like a little tour of the financial district and the Magnificent Mile? It's not that much of a detour to get to East Chestnut Street."

"I'd love it," I said, and leaned back against the cushions. "And if you'd like to give me your commentary as you drive, please do, please do, please do."

One of my favorite scenes in Shakespeare is when Enobarbus rapturously describes seeing Cleopatra sailing in majesty down the Cydnus. I admit, my limo wasn't like a burnished throne, there was no poop deck of beaten gold, nor purple sails, nor silver oars, nor flutes, nor perfumed air. No pretty, dimpled boys fanned me, nor did I lie in a pavilion of cloth of gold. But in my own way, as the limo sailed down Michigan Avenue, with the rack of wine glasses tinkling and the little green lights flickering and the big buildings on the streets all lit up, I did feel just a bit like Cleopatra on her barge. I thought to myself, *It's going to be all right.*

GLASS

MARIAM KHAN

IN THE SIXTH GRADE, I decided knitting and crocheting were my passions. Someday I'd knit scarves, like cranky Mrs. Karasco, my anglo-Pakistani, middle-aged teacher. She taught math, which I was completely hopeless at, and crafts, which I was mostly hopeless at. She made up her mind that I was a waste of her time and regarded me mostly with disdain. When she introduced needlework to the classroom, I decided to prove that I was good for something.

Convincing myself needlework and yarncraft were activities every eleven-year-old loved, I spent hours following cross-stitch patterns and knitting random rectangles that no one knew what to do with. I dreamed of presenting her, and her forever-curved lip, with a scarf for Christmas.

When I'd stuck with it for a few months and produced more than a dozen strange patterns, Mama decided I needed some organization. She knew of some craftsmen in Punjab Colony who wove beautiful things out of strips of wicker and proposed that we purchase a sewing basket.

Would it be just for me? I asked in wonder. *Yes, she said, just for your sewing things. Just wait a few weeks so I can save up for it. You can pick out your own design too.*

A special basket that I could design? This was now serious—beyond just any hobby!

For weeks I waited on edge, careful to be on my best behavior, afraid that if I were found guilty of the slightest infringement my disciplinarian mother would retract her offer. I needed this basket to legitimize my passion. Finally, after I spent days agonizing and watching her mood, Mama announced it was time and made plans for us to visit the wicker shop one weekend.

Basket-buying weekend arrived, and I was excited. For the occasion, I picked my coolest, most grown-up outfit: blue jeans and a plain, black t-shirt I'd inherited from my brother, Aly. I tucked the shirt into my high-waisted jeans and undid my usual tight pigtails. Examining my appearance in the full-length bathroom mirror, I tossed my head coolly to the side, flipping my hair dramatically, and determined I was ready.

Just as the afternoon sun was starting to sink, I climbed into Nana's (grandfather's) beat-up brown sedan with Mama and my three cousins: Sana, Sabrina, and Zahra. Close in age, we all lived in my grandfather's four-bedroom home and spent all our time together. Sana, like me, was in Mrs. Karasco's classroom. Unlike me, she wasn't math- or crafts-challenged and was not met daily with a curled lip. Mama started up the old car and reversed down the short driveway. As she turned the old car into the choked Karachi streets, I decided not to indulge in the usual backseat games with my cousins. No, I thought, such childish nonsense would be unbecoming a future knitter.

The sky was starting to turn pink as Mama double parked outside the shop. I stepped out with my hands stuffed deep in my pockets. Tossing my hair over my shoulder, just as I'd practiced, I strolled in with a nonchalant swagger behind my mother and skipping cousins.

It was hard to keep up the coolness as Mama and the weaver presented me with patterns and styles. I was careful to maintain a steady, smooth air, despite the excitement I was feeling. The occasion required at least some level of sophistication, I reasoned. When a design was finally chosen, Mama motioned to stay behind her as she haggled about the price with the craftsman. My cousins ran around while I smoothed my shirt examining (rather, pretending to) the rows of vases, vessels, and furniture that lay scattered around the dimly lit, cramped shop.

Hey. He's calling us, says he has more at back. One of my cousins tapped me on the shoulder. We glanced toward my mother, who was standing in front of the shop still arguing with the weaver. We turned back to the second shopkeeper, who stood smiling and pointing to a table by him. My cousins and I looked at each other, none of us daring to interrupt my mother, and wondered if he had an even better design than the one I'd chosen.

I looked toward my mother and looked back at the man again. He was dressed in a stiff, white shalwar kameez (loose pants and shirt) that strained to hold his gut. His teeth flashed through his cropped, white beard as he grinned, waving me over. He was pointing to something that I couldn't quite see. Curious, I started to make my way toward him. My cousins followed behind in single file, maneuvering through the narrow alley bursting with wares.

Idhar beti ("here daughter"), he said as I came closer. I stepped up to him, and just as I turned to see what lay on the table beside him, he grabbed my face with both hands. *Mmm-muah*, he murmured, kissing me roughly on the cheek. Still holding my face in his hands, pulling me closer toward him, he turned my head and kissed the other cheek. *Mmm-muah*, he groaned, almost theatrically. His beard felt coarse and prickly against my skin.

Heh heh, bass yeh dekhana tha (“that’s all I had to show you”), he said and he let go. I turned slowly toward my cousins. My cheeks were on fire. Their eyes were wide. We stood frozen in place, unsure what to do. Their games forgotten and my cool guard shattered, we stood amongst the piles of musty smelling wicker. Composing herself first, Sana tugged at my hand, and the four of us made our way to the front of the store. Mama’s voice reached us before we saw her; it sounded like she had settled on an acceptable price. Silently, we followed her to the car, and somehow I knew—we knew—that something had happened, though we were not sure what.

We rode home in silence through the heavy traffic. *I shouldn’t have gone to the back*, I thought. I shouldn’t have tossed my head around like that. I shouldn’t have tucked in my shirt. My face still itched from the coarseness of his beard.

A few days later, my basket was ready. I kept it for years. Sometimes I sew a loose button, but I never did knit that scarf.

THE TRAUMA WE INHERIT

SHAUNA KONNERTH

Heredity is only the sum of all past environment.

(Luther Burbank, quoted in Zimmer, para. 65)

WHEN GRANDMA WAS A CHILD, her sister Mabel fell into the family water well and nearly drowned. Nearly seventy years later, my grandmother still vividly recalled her mother's ragged screams for help as Mabel disappeared again and again under the murky surface. Reflecting on the traumatic experience in her memoir, my grandmother wrote, "After that near tragedy at the well, my mother was deathly afraid of water and passed that fear onto [...] us" (Johnston, p. 4). Not surprisingly, Grandma's fear of water was lifelong. In turn, she articulated her fear to her seven daughters, six of whom came to share it. My mother was among them.

What is less clear is why I was also extremely afraid of water as a child. While climbing into the bath was merely uncomfortable, entering any larger body of water—a pool, lake, or especially river—was terrifying. Mom had craftily concealed her fear; she didn't want to turn her children into bags of nerves. I didn't even know about Great-Aunt Mabel's trauma or its legacy of fear back then. But although no one had overtly fostered or reinforced my anxiety, there I was, a bag of nerves.

It begs the question: Just how long is the reach of trauma? Certainly our ancestors' traumatic experiences may have been transmitted to us through nurture—the way our parents raised us, the way their parents raised them, and so on back. Undoubtedly, we learn to be fearful by the things we are told and by the adult patterns of behavior we pick up on as children. But there's more to it than just how we are brought up. The consequences of ancestral trauma go even deeper than nurture, influencing the expression of our genes.

Until recently, most studies on trauma's intergenerational reach have focused on parenting practices. PTSD, depression, anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse,

disruptions to relationships: all are possible life-altering effects of trauma that can negatively impact how traumatized parents raise their children. For example, according to the American for Children's Services (New York University) Children's Trauma Institute, "Mothers with untreated PTSD may be less able to parent effectively, may be at greater risk of abusing their children and/or may have less ability to protect them from the effects of abuse by others" (para. 3). All this through no fault of their own. Other traumatized parents fight to take back their power, often with equally devastating consequences. Dr. Sasha Stok, a clinical psychologist and Senior Research Scientist/Clinical Coordinator for NYU's Safe Mothers and Safe Children Project, suggests that parents who have experienced trauma may develop a hyper-aroused sense of danger and threat, resulting in a parenting style characterized by high stress, anxiety, irritability, or overprotectiveness (Stok, slide 8). If, in addition, the children of such parents suffer new trauma as a result of their parents' ineffectiveness, negligence, or abuse, the cycle of trauma continues unchecked.

Making parents aware of the heightened risks might be the first step toward avoiding them, but it's not likely to be enough. Michelle Hurtt, a certified trauma practitioner, notes that most survivors of childhood abuse are "Unable to make the connection between what is happening to them in the here-and-now and what happened to them so many years ago" (Hurtt, para. 5). In other words, knowing about the potential consequences of trauma does not amount to finding healing from trauma or overcoming the odds of it repeating.

The odds are considerable and are complicated by the fact that nurture cannot fully explain the risks. Child welfare statistics tell us that parental trauma has as much impact on a child's welfare as when the child experiences trauma first-hand (ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute). That is, a child doesn't even need to suffer trauma to be at risk. Besides that, although it was once widely accepted that any inheritance of trauma was passed to children solely through a parent's trauma-affected behavior, we are no longer so sure. Instead, researchers are exploring the question: Can the inheritance of trauma be passed down regardless of what parents do or say?

The short answer is, *maybe*. Considering the trauma of her sister's near-drowning, it makes sense that Grandma was afraid of water, and since she fostered this same anxiety in her own children, it stands to reason that they were also afraid. But when it came to the next generation, Mom was bound and bent that her children would learn to swim well and fearlessly.

Her plan was two-pronged: concealment and action. She hid her own fear, her mother's fear, her grandmother's fear and the initial trauma. Meanwhile, she faithfully enrolled us in swim classes, but when I failed the most basic get-your-face-wet level three times in a row, she grew desperate. So, she took me to the pool herself one day and refused to leave until I could swim. It was hardly the sort of phobia therapy

supported by research, but it was effective. I pleaded. I wept. Finally, I swam. That frightening day conquered, I went on to successfully pursue swimming classes right up to lifeguarding, when we learned how to search lake beds with our hands for victims of drowning. That was too much for me, so I quit.

Ironically, when Mom was cajoling me to float, she herself could barely swim. I didn't know this; I was too wrapped up in my own fear to notice. What's more, I didn't know about my family's hidden legacy of fear. So, where did my fear originate? What is the role of nurture in intergenerational trauma? And can an inheritance of trauma also be transmitted by other means? One clue comes to us from the animal kingdom.

In 2013, Emory University researcher Brian Dias and his colleagues set out to investigate whether mammals' memories can be transmitted through DNA. They piped a harmless and pleasing cherry-blossom scent into the cages of adult male mice. Simultaneously, they administered a mild electric shock to the innocent creatures' feet. After just three days of induced trauma, the mice began to associate the scent with pain, showing distress at the first whiff, even without the accompanying shock (Zimmer, para. 24-30).

Next, the research team artificially bred the traumatized mice with females. The resulting pups were given to unrelated mice to be raised. These adoptive parents had not been exposed to the scent *or* the zap. Science writer Martha Henriques describes the outcome: "When [the] pups smelled the scent of cherry blossom, they became more jumpy and nervous than pups whose fathers hadn't been conditioned to fear it" (Henriques, para. 25). Remarkably, "the grand-pups of the traumatized males also showed heightened sensitivity to the scent" (Henriques, para. 26).

We can't say that the pups *learned* to respond to the cherry blossom scent, because neither the pups nor the grand-pups were nurtured by the traumatized mice. The only link between them all was the traumatized sires' sperm. Carl Zimmer, *New York Times* science writer and heredity enthusiast, explains: "Somehow the animals passed down information not carried in their genes but gained through experience" (Zimmer, para. 30). How is that even possible?

In my early thirties, I became fascinated with researching my ancestry. One day, I noticed that my father's grandmother had died early, too young for the cause to be old age, yet I could find no record of her death. I asked my dad what she died of. "Drowning," he tersely replied. "Drowning?" I spluttered, incredulous. "How?"

He drew a long breath through his teeth, then sighed it out. "She drowned herself in the farmyard pond." And I felt the old childhood horror seeping upward, compressing my chest and constricting my throat. No one had ever mentioned her to me before. I don't know how much silence flowed between us before I finally found my voice. "Who ... who found her, Dad?" He answered, simply, "Her sons." My grandfather. Water. Trauma.

Yet, Grandpa was not afraid of water, perhaps because he was already a 6'4", 200-pound giant of a man when his mother drowned. Once, when I was five or six, he coaxed me out onto the dock at his lakeside cabin, reassuring me it wouldn't break. He punctuated his shouted claims of safety by jumping up and down on the seismically bouncing boards while I clung fearfully to a pile. The whole thing collapsed, plunging us both into the frigid lake. But I'd already been afraid of water before that. So, perhaps what we receive is not so much an inheritance of fear as it is a memory of trauma.

Dias and others are following the thread of a possible link between nature and nurture, which is called "epigenetics." In describing epigenetics, Zimmer explains that while our actual DNA is not changed by trauma, its readability can be altered (Zimmer, para. 13). Molecules can latch onto the genetic code, silencing the genes they cover and creating a new epigenetic mark that changes how the genetic code acts out. The epigenome is "sensitive to the outside world," which means that it can translate the experience of trauma into changes to the epigenetic signature on our DNA (Zimmer, para. 13).

In Dias' experiment with the mice, for example, the traumatized males' sensitivity to the scent was linked to epigenetic changes to their DNA. Furthermore, these changes were remarkably specific, confined to one single scent. We know this because when the researchers plied the pups and grand-pups with smells other than cherry blossom, they didn't respond at all (Henriques, para. 26).

Interesting though it may be, a single study of mice does not establish the power of epigenetic changes to produce intergenerational effects. Fortunately, this process of molecules climbing aboard the genetic code and mixing things up across generations has been observed elsewhere—in the field of botany. Zimmer recounts the following story. In the year 1742, long before the genetic code was discovered, a Swedish university student named Magnus Zioberg found a strange looking flower while out hiking. He brought it back to show his professor, who passed it along to famed naturalist Carl Linneaus. The plant looked exactly like the common, if unfortunately named, toadflax plant, except for one thing: the specimen's flowers had a completely different shape. Confounding the issue further, the seeds from the mutant plant grew into plants with these same altered flowers. Once Linneaus was convinced his leg wasn't being pulled, he concluded that a regular toadflax plant had been fertilized by another type of plant, resulting in a completely new species. He named it *Peloria*, "monster" (Zimmer, para. 4-8).

But Linneaus was incorrect in thinking the specimen was a new species. In reality, it was and still is the common toadflax plant. However, it wasn't until the 1990s that a group of researchers at the John Innes Centre in England, led by biologist Professor Enrico Coen, applied our modern knowledge of genes to the mysterious toadflax enigma. What they discovered is that epigenetic markers had been added

around the DNA of a standard toadflax plant, resulting in the new shape of the flower's blooms (Zimmer, para. 12-13).

There's no way of knowing if the toadflax plant suffered some kind of trauma prior to 1742 or, for that matter, what would constitute trauma of a plant, causing the first epigenetic markers to lock in place. However, the longevity of the epigenetic changes—more than 250 years—is troubling to consider. Is it possible that epigenetic changes in humans could also cast such a long shadow on future generations?

In 2018, UCLA economist Dora Costa and her colleagues compared thousands of health records of children of Civil War veterans. They found that the sons of veterans who had been POWs (an extraordinarily traumatic experience) had an 11% higher mortality rate than the sons of the veterans who had not been POWs. Having ruled out other possible causes for this high death rate, such as nurture or genes, Costa deduced, *a la* Sherlock Holmes, that the only explanation was an epigenetic effect (Henriques, para. 3-19). Provocative, but hardly definitive.

However, in a 2015 study, Director of the Traumatic Stress Studies Division Dr. Rachel Yehuda and her colleagues at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine honed in on human DNA, attempting to prove that epigenetics is at work in intergenerational transmission of human trauma. She and her team studied epigenetic markers on the DNA of children of Holocaust survivors. For the first time, researchers demonstrated that both the children and their traumatized parents displayed specific epigenetic changes related to stress response (Yehuda et al., para. 3). But it was small study of only thirty-two descendants of Holocaust survivors. Is that really enough?

Studies of human trauma are problematic. Besides the obvious problems of scale and interpretation of results, people simply live longer than the usual lab test mammals. How many years would a study need to be in order to truly assess the impact of human epigenetic changes on future generations? Besides, the thought of administering electric shocks to people's feet or, in the interest of controlled conditions, artificially inseminating women with "traumatized" semen and then removing the resulting children from their mothers to be raised by others is obviously horrifying. (It's bad enough with rodents.) It is therefore difficult to study human trauma in a meaningful way. In the meantime, we may have to settle for what mammals can tell us.

In the 1990s, in what may be the most provocative epigenetic study of mammals, stress and epigenetics expert Michael Meaney and his colleagues at McGill University subjected lab rats to stress by enclosing them in a small plastic box. Researchers noticed that some of the rats were far more sensitive to the stress and coped worse than others. Along with geneticist Moshe Szyf, Meaney set out to discover why. What he discovered is chilling. The rats worst impacted by the stress of confinement were the same rats that had been licked less by their mothers as pups. What's more, the

epigenetic markers in these stressed-out, less-licked rats were different from those in the rats who coped better with stress (Zimmer, para. 36-37).

As a final step, the McGill research group compared the specific epigenetic markers seen in the neglected, maladaptive rats to the brain tissue of humans. Incredibly, they did find similar epigenetic markers, but only among one narrow group of human subjects—individuals who had experienced child abuse and who had ultimately ended their own lives (Zimmer, para. 40).

If this mammalian research has parallel applications for human epigenetics, the implications for children who suffer neglect are troubling. Perhaps these children's lifetime prognosis for stress management is impacted by their early neglect, during which enduring epigenetic markers are laid down on their DNA. Such changes may predict their ability to cope with stress throughout their lives and may also be passed on to the generations that follow.

Because research on human trauma is still nascent, we don't yet understand exactly how epigenetic changes are passed on from one generation to the next, or how often it happens. However, given the stakes, we should consider the possibility that some effects of trauma may be inheritable. If that's true, then the study of our ancestors could be the key to understanding—and healing—ourselves and our descendants. If healing is possible.

When I was pregnant with my daughter, a family friend was dying of brain cancer. Near the end, my husband insisted I stay away from the very stressful process because it wasn't good for the baby. It is an oft-repeated axiom that an expectant mother's stress can harm her child. Whether it is true or not, the idea adds guilt to the already considerable stress of gestation. I always thought that a mother-to-be's stress level made her womb inhospitable, potentially causing harm to the child she carries. This may be true. What never occurred to me was that my stress could potentially affect my daughter's lifelong experience of the world, her ability to cope, thrive and be happy.

Still, the same gloom-and-doom research that suggests our children may inherit our trauma and the trauma of our ancestors may also hold out hope in the form of the toadflax flower. Tantalizingly, more than two and a half centuries after the unusual plant's first discovery, some of the affected plants continue to display the mutation, producing the same strange flowers ... but others have healed (Zimmer, para. 15). It's true. Some of the once-mutated toadflax plants have shed their epigenetic markers and are growing normal flowers once again. Does this mean that healing from our intergenerational inheritance is possible? And if so, does such healing require the passage of time, or can we help it along?

Dias' traumatized mice experiment suggests that healing of intergenerational trauma transmitted via epigenetic changes may be possible. Some of the males that

had initially been conditioned to fear the cherry-blossom scent were reconditioned to reduce their sensitivity to it. Over time, the scent was administered without the accompanying shock. The mice's sensitivity to the smell waned. When their DNA was explored, the distinct epigenetic signature of their fear of the scent had disappeared. Furthermore, their subsequent pups were not sensitive to the scent at all (Henriques, para. 57-58).

So, although we can't escape the far-reaching tentacles of trauma, perhaps its grasping epigenetic markers *can* be pried off of our DNA. And perhaps working to heal our own trauma and the trauma of those we love could lessen its negative impact on future generations.

Just as the traumatized mice were reconditioned, people can learn to cope with their anxiety and fear responses through carefully controlled and repeated exposure to the source of their distress. The research-based psychotherapy involved is called "exposure therapy." Such exposure is not merely pushing an aquaphobic individual into a pool and then saying, "See? You're fine!" Rather, exposure is carefully graduated and involves talking through the process.

A second effective therapy for treating individuals for traumas and phobias is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), in which individuals learn a new way of thinking about their fears—developing a new belief system, if you will. According to Dr. Aaron Brinen, a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in CBT, "Both [exposure therapy and cognitive therapy] deal with beliefs [...] and coping strategies [...] that maintain the symptoms of PTSD" (Brinen, para. 15). Once these beliefs are changed and coping mechanisms are put in place, the effects of the initial trauma wane. Presumably, so do the epigenetic markers.

I'm reminded of my own painful path to swimming. It was forced and fearful, but moment by moment, as my mother coaxed me down the steps into the pool and through the checklist of skills, I grew used to the idea. Nothing dreadful happened. I learned to submerge first my ears and then my face. Finally, I discovered that I could float without holding on to the side of the pool. With that, the primal, shrieking fear began to tamp down until it became an uneasy truce between me and water.

Whenever I was afraid as a child, my mother used to say, "It's all in your head." In a way, she was right. The key to my own healing *was* in my head, in my choice to experience water differently and to cope by thinking more rationally and deliberately about the danger it poses. But if trauma can be passed along through epigenetics, our unresolved fears may be more than mind over matter: they may also be unwelcome hitchhikers on our DNA.

You'd probably like to know if my daughter is also fearful.

Yes, but not of water—just the dark.

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LIFE EXPECTANCY

LISA RELTH

ON DECEMBER 20, two weeks from now, I'll drive to Fresno straight from work on a Friday evening. It's a pit stop along my drive home to Oceanside for the holidays. I'll stop to pick up a twelve-week-old Scottish terrier puppy. I've named her Wallace.

We've met only once, briefly. I picked her from a litter of four, which included a sister and two brothers, because

- A. Wallace (who had no name at the time) is a girl;
- B. Wallace was the chubbiest of the litter;
- C. Wallace's ears were already sticking up, giving her an assertive and inquisitive aspect;
- D. Her siblings fell asleep after the initial surge of new human frenzy, but Wallace remained awake and fixated on my shoelaces for the duration of our visit.

I haven't thought much about the dramatic change my life is about to undergo. My life with Pony was a slow evolution, a lesson in synchronicity, a masterclass in energetic connection. We slept and woke at the same time with equal levels of satisfaction. We ate together (she, faster) and walked together (me, faster) but with matching appetites on both counts. We enjoyed the same hobbies, held the same opinions, liked the same types of animals, and humans, and shared a sense of humor. We affirmed in each other, the absence of self-limiting beliefs. This perfect partnership was arrived at over time, with many long-forgotten bumps along the way.

I haven't dwelt much upon the details of Pony's puppyhood. The Seattle-winter nights at 3:00 am, potty training in a sideways downpour; she inspecting every drenched and freezing blade of grass, taking her time. The needle-like teeth. The times (every time) she would run away from me, after we'd agreed to leave the leash in the car. The many indoor pee incidents. The anxiety I felt leaving her alone, which was not often, given my former life as a yoga-teacher dog-mom.

This new puppy will be the same, but different. She'll look like Pony and have some Scottie manners. I don't know whether she'll have the same prancing gait, or whether she'll want to sleep on my pillow. Whether she'll like the ocean and operate

with the unflinching belief that she's an excellent swimmer, despite certain anatomical disadvantages to flotation and aquatic propulsion. Whether she'll greedily devour broccoli stalks and the filmy remnants of an empty peanut butter jar. Whether she'll stoically stand her ground in the face of hyper and unpredictable dog personalities, and whether she'll like to sleep on her back, four short legs splayed upward. Whether she'll obsess over the cleanliness of her own paws.

I find myself submerged in an undercurrent of solemn and fragmented memory regarding these traits. Like a drowning person who, at the very moment of surrender to a watery fate, begins to fantasize about the sensory mechanics of deep breathing. And begins, yes, to gain certainty that deep breaths can surely be recreated of a substance related to air, but not air. I inevitably reach the bottom of this sinking fantasy loop with the acknowledgment that this tiny furry puppy knows nothing of the history and precedent she is prancing into, and that I must keep the slate clean for her to be whoever she may be.

She will not be Pony.

When Pony turned thirteen last November 2018, I had a silent medium-size panic attack at the realization that I'd only have seven more years with her, that two-thirds of her life were roughly and realistically spent, having deluded myself into believing that she would live to be at least twenty. I would never have imagined that she would not make it to fourteen. This dark injustice approached me with stealth, dreamlike movements throughout the first half of 2019, and finally succeeded in cutting off my head, tearing out my heart, and leaving me adrift in the middle of a cold, dark and wild sea, tossed mercilessly by the surging swell.

When I finally did wash ashore—lost, nameless, and without a single desire—I kept my eyes closed to the deafening glare, seasick against the rough wet surface. I remained there, immobile, a long time; a waterlogged piece of refuse that the ocean finally succeeded in ridding herself of. I'm still there. But I open my eyes a little now. And I notice the salty smell. I run my hands aimlessly and repeatedly through the sand because it feels good. And I realize that it feels good. I hear the waves crashing and the sea birds screaming. There are kids and dogs, and humans holding hands. I train my attention on the horizon line. I notice the ships, the clouds, and the inexplicable sinking luminosity at the end of each day.

It's been six months. I decided on Wallace because I need to get off this beach. I'm sun-sick and cold, and I need to take care of something. I named her after William Wallace, the thirteenth-century Scottish freedom fighter and national hero who led his people to a bloody independence from English tyranny. I hope she feels pride rather than pressure, but also that she'll be mystically imbued with some quality of courage and integrity befitting her name and pedigree.

As this tattered year foists itself, breathless and cruel, into a new decade, I reflect on the shattered expectations of 2019, on the bets wagered and lost. I brace myself against the clambering expectations, projecting joy and meaning and familiarity onto the empty blue screen of my current existence. Given the volatility of the life-futures market, I try to adopt the pragmatic notion that expectations are worthless currency, not to be trusted with the full weight of a step.

And yet, a step has been taken. Mechanical and self-preservative as it may have been, I find myself infiltrated with a barely detectable beat of excitement, even hope. I feel guilt. A loss of a love like Pony should result in nothing brighter than gray. Gray, gray, gray. Forever, forever, forever.

And yet.



this is not a buffalo



no eye deer

JENNIFER RUPERT

ALTHOUGH FAMILY AND FRIENDS THOUGHT I'D FORGE AN ARTS CAREER, I never found professional success pursuing that path. Yet art remains central to my life. Museums are my churches. I collect art, study it, and sometimes try to make it in my own crude way. Drawing is not my strongest suit. But technical skills are not so important in this context since my goal is to make people laugh.

It is fun to imagine my drawing style as the lovewchild of Andy Warhol and Sol LeWitt, who was raised by Dora Maar and Agnes Martin, then kidnapped by Marcel Duchamp, only to be rescued by Marcel Dzama, who permitted the then teenager to go on tour with Beck. I know invoking such great artists is pure hubris on my part. And though I am not religious, I should probably make some cross-like gesture or throw salt over my shoulder for protection from evil spirits for committing blasphemy.

I just really love meta-narratives. The images here are visual Dad jokes: the age-old quip about a deer with no eyes; translating the Russian Matryoshka motif into a t-shirt in a t-shirt (that I then printed on a t-shirt); making fun of the fact that so many people erroneously think a bison is a buffalo. I find it hard to resist a pun, even if it's a bad one.

MAINACHT OR GIRLS FOR SALE

LISA SAHIN

IN THE EIFEL, THE NIGHT BEFORE the first of May is a special night. It's a night full of questionable tradition, celebration and trampled tulips.

To understand what this night means to us, the residents of the countless small villages, you first need a clue to who we are; otherwise this whole discourse will sound pretty hillbilly and crazy to you. It probably still will, but let me try to explain.

The Eifel is an area of barren, cold hills in the western part of Germany. Summer is one day in July, and the rest of the year there is rain.

More rain.

All the rain.

A land shapes its people, so we are barren and cold too. We are known for our mistrust in everything and everybody and for our good schnapps. We wear rain jackets and grumpy expressions most of the time, and the rare writers in our community only write crime novels about corpses on moors.

The image that I just created is really dark, and that's not the whole picture.

The other side of the Eifel there is a place of soft green hills with fragrant wild flowers, summer evenings at campfires, and good people who help you in every situation (provided you were born in the Eifel or spend years developing their trust). We appreciate people for their actions, and not for what they are. Nobody cares if you went to college; what counts is that you help to brush the community hall and show up to all the celebrations.

So, talking about celebrations, we have a lot of them. The reason for that is pretty simple: more celebrations mean more opportunities to drink.

The celebration I want to tell you about is called Mainacht (Maynight).

It is a very old tradition, and it follows a lot of complex rules, which tend to vary from village to village. Essentially, the young men in the village put a decorated birch in front of the house of each unmarried girl over the age of sixteen on the last night of April. This is probably raising more questions than it answers, so let me tell you about Mainacht in my village and all the side effects of it.

Where I live, Mainacht starts before the actual date.

It starts when the Junggesellen (the name of the club in the village that you must join if you are an unmarried male and don't want to be a loser) begins to build a kind of hut from planks, tarpaulin, and old sofas from everybody who wants to get rid of a sofa. Last year, someone brought along an organ. You never know what might fall

into their hands, but let me tell you that you can be certain the hut looks incredibly unsightly every year.

In front of the hut, they put a rusted fire barrel, and then everything is ready for the Mainacht. But everybody agrees that using the hut only for one night would be a great waste, so they spend every evening for one week inside this ugly thing.

And not just the single males.

Of course, we girls also want to be there, on our grandmas' sofas next to a smoking fire ton. Amusement is rare in my village, so you take anything you can get. Sometimes the boys complain because it's their hut, but in the end, they tolerate us. It is always better to have some girls with you: it makes the whole thing much more interesting.

And then it tends to happen that other people who come past the hut on a walk or on their way home from church, make a little stop so that, in the end, half the population is gathered there. Often on these evenings, a few of the sofas are sacrificed in the fire, as well as some beer bottles and somebody's jacket.

Each day, new sofas arrive, and the skeletons of the old remain; what results is that the place gets more nasty with every day. Old women sigh deeply when they pass the construction, which seems to belong more in a slum, but no one ever complains. It just belongs to the tradition, so you have to tolerate it.

Finally, one or two days before Mainacht, the Junggesellen pack some chainsaws, ropes, and themselves into someone's Ford transit van and head into the woods. They are going there to cut down birch trees.

It has to be a birch tree because these are the only trees that look at least a little pretty in May. All the other trees are still leafless and gray, but the birches already have tiny green leaves by then. It is the first sign of Spring.

When I was a child, I often saw the Junggesellen drive past my house when they returned from the woods, the van loaded with birch. I thought, *One day, one of those trees will be for me.* It made me pretty excited.

They bring the birches back to their hut, and the trees remain there till Mainacht (if they do not *accidentally* land in the fire, in which case, the Junggesellen have to go to the woods again).

Then it's finally here. The day everybody has waited for.

April 30 is a rainy, cold day most years. But nothing can dull our mood on that day. There is something in the air. Maybe the combination of frost and smoke and excitement makes the people leave their houses and walk around, chat and laugh, and sweep their front yards in expectation that someone is coming by with some schnapps.

The sign for the start of the spectacle is when our doorbell rings.

Even as a child I knew exactly who was coming, and I hid in the closet, mostly because I was a weird child and always a little afraid of everybody. My parents opened

the door, and from my hiding spot I could hear a bunch of already very drunk Jungesellen sing:

*Eier her, Eier her
oder ich fall um,
wenn ich keine Eier bekomme,
fall ich schon von selber um,
Eier her, Eier her
oder ich fall um!*

Summarized in English this song is a simply a request for eggs. Yes, eggs.

It is because men who drink as much beer as the Jungesellen have to eat something reasonable, and what's better than frying eggs on their sofa-fire?

So, they go from house to house and collect eggs and whatever they can get (money, schnapps, more schnapps ...).

My dad, good friends with everybody, always spends some time with them at our house, drinking and chatting. When I was younger, I would watch them from the distance, fearful but curious. They were the same men I saw all the time, but on that day, they turned into strangers. Like I said, it's something in the air.

Last year, I watched the Jungesellen from the window of my room because I was busy getting ready for the evening and wasn't wearing any pants when they came by, so I stayed upstairs.

Maybe I'm still a little fearful.

When they returned to their hut with their bags full of eggs, it was also time for me to start the evening.

It would be unfair if only boys can have fun during Mainacht, so us girls also meet. Last year, we spent the evening at my friend Nina's house.

Well, we started there.

Nina has been my best friend since childhood, so it was natural that we would get ready together. She is my lifelong partner in crime, and we always manage to get ourselves into crazy situations, which are funny when you look back at them; I was certain this Mainacht would also be memorable.

I was a little late, so I threw my stuff and two freshly baked cakes in my car and headed to Nina's house.

Of course, I had to drive past the hut.

I'm the only girl from far and wide who drives a Mercedes SLK 320, so the Jungesellen recognized me instantly and welcomed me with general jubilation. I felt nervous and happy and was looking forward to the night ahead.

So, so alive, if only for one second.

It was the first Mainacht I really celebrated; normally I would stay home and watch movies. I'm not the kind of person who likes to party a lot, but that year, I wanted to give it a chance.

They stopped my car, and one of them, Andreas (in his early twenties, already really hoarse from drinking and accompanied by a strong smell of smoke) leaned in through my window.

The car shook a little.

He leaned a little further, until he could reach the cake.

He didn't ask permission, and I didn't expect him to.

This rudeness has its origin in youthful indifference, as well as the level of his drunkenness. Mumbling through the cake in his mouth, he asked me where I was heading.

I told him I was on my way to Nina's.

Someone in the background shouted my name.

Andreas took the cake from the passenger seat. I silently bid farewell to my cake plate. I wouldn't try to get it back. From previous situations, I knew that it was senseless. The cake disappeared somewhere, and Andreas invited us to join them later. I promised to come, and he let go of my car.

While I was busy not to choke the engine when starting it, some younger kids appeared next to the hut. They hung around from a safe distance and watched the spectacle, walkie-talkies in their hands, communicating among themselves.

I did the same with my friends, with Nina, when I was their age.

It had always been very adventurous. Watching, creeping up, stealing a bag of chips or an empty beer bottle. Then running home to Mommy, reporting back on what scandal was happening in the hut, then running back to observe again. Discussing the events in the secret hiding spot under the linden tree next to the church and sharing the stolen chips. Running back to the hut because one of the Junggesellen had stolen someone's scooter, and we had to fight to get it back. And, in the end, falling into bed at 07:30 with smell of smoke in your hair, totally exhausted.

I can't decide what I like more, the child version or the adult version of Mainacht. Both have their own advantages.

I notice that the children these days are more rude and more brave than we were. They throw branches on the Junggesellen and jump around, laughing and screaming their names.

Kids these days.

I made it to Nina's, one cake less than before but without further interruptions. She was also excited, so we started eating and drinking and getting ready at once. It was just as chaotic as normal, and I was suddenly thankful that our relationship hadn't changed in all these years we spent together. We were still two kids in high spirits and

with a lot of awful ideas. It's rare that friendships are like this: lives tangled together since birth, more sisters than friends.

Nina was sitting on her dressing table, busy turning her lashes into black-inked spider legs. My face was already covered in tons of make-up, and it disturbed me as usual, but girls need war paint when they go out. I sat on the carpet and ate cake, careful to not ruin my lipstick, and we gossiped about who in our old high school had become pregnant and how we could improve the Instagram page we created for our village. And, most important, we made guesses about who of the Junggesellen would "set a Maytree" for us.

Before any further confusion, it's time now to explain what really happens on Mainacht. It's a little mysterious and offensive, like most traditions.

This is how it works.

The Junggesellen sit in their hut around their fire. They have a list with the names of all the unmarried girls over the age of sixteen. Every one of these girls will get a decorated birch branch. But of course, this list includes the popular girls (pretty, highly regarded in the village and from well-established local families) and the not-so popular girls (not of any interest to the community and newcomers). Naturally, every Junggeselle prefers to set a Maytree to a girl of the first kind.

And, like in any other economy, rare goods are expensive.

So, to decide which Jungeselle is allowed to set a tree for which girl, they auction the girls. Or at least their names.

This is a young man's chance to show a girl that he has a crush on her, so this whole auction gets pretty expensive for the Junggesellen. It's normal to pay between one and two hundred dollars for a girl. Not too far away, you could easily buy more than just a name and the right to set a tree for this sum.

Mainacht is a very thrilling time for the girls because it could be possible that you have a secret admirer. Nina was sure that a boy called Tobias (a nice guy in his early twenties, who I had known since kindergarten) had a crush on me, and she assumed that he would set me a tree that night.

That thought left me thrilled and unsettled. I like Tobias, he is nice, but we all know that nice means boring, and I definitely had no crush on him. But when you already know before the night starts that a boy will spend two hundred dollars just to get your attention, but you are not interested at all, it creates a lot of pressure. At least for me, who is a total fool when it comes to dealing with a boy's interest.

I felt bad because he would spend so much money for nothing and I would look like an arrogant bitch in the end, and only because I'm unable to talk to boys. I felt a little insecure and muted at that point. I thought about washing the make-up from my face and hide in the house to watch TV again. But that was no option at all, and I didn't speak it out loud, because I didn't want to sound like an insecure kid.

There was only one other acceptable solution for the problem: start drinking.

So, we did, and other friends joined us. We ended up in the front yard of Nina's house, making suggestions about Nina's Maytree. It turned out that she wasn't that excited about the night. She had a boyfriend from another village and already knew what would happen.

When you have a boyfriend, all the rules for setting a Maytree change again. A boy can buy his girlfriend's freedom from the auction (costs him a box of beer and a varying amount of money, which depends on who he is) to protect her from potential admirers and set her a Maytree himself. (About the effort it takes to transport a Maytree from one village to another I'll tell you later.)

Finally, when the sun had set and the air got chilly, and I was damn freezing in my crop top, we girls made our way to the hut.

It was a good evening: no rain and not too cold, the best that Spring could offer in the Eifel. The air smelled of growing things, smoke and home. I thought that I could not be happier than in that moment.

It's true that anticipation is the best kind of happiness.

Maybe the cheap wine was speaking for me, but I think the others felt the same. We were all hilarious and well prepared for the night. Tetra-pack wine in one hand, phone in the other.

Shiny hair, shiny eyes, shiny shoes.

Ready for everything that would come.

Halfway to the hut, I started to regret the decision to wear high-heel boots because my world began to shake. The wine was doing its work. I didn't feel so nervous anymore and was more ready to face a conversation with Tobias. I was even looking forward to it, because I liked the feeling of being idolized. It made me feel more powerful and attractive.

It also made me more of that arrogant bitch that I was terrified to become. I was sure I would hate myself for these feelings the next day, because that isn't really who I am.

But the drunk me didn't care about anything.

We arrived at the hut to find half of the Junggesellen doing whatever, but the others were sitting around the fire on their disgusting sofas. I sat on a rocking chair, which wasn't the best decision; the world was shaking enough already. But in this moment, like I said, I didn't care about anything.

Tobias was there too. He was *nice* as always, and we had a lively discussion about how important it is to keep traditions alive. We both agreed that they are one of the most basic things that holds our community together and connects us with our ancestors and the ones who will come after us.

The thought that I am not just a lonely being in the universe, but part of a solid construct and cohesion of traditions somehow soothes me.

In addition to these deep thoughts I also giggled a lot, like these stupid girls I despise.

Nina watched our interaction with curiosity.

I wanted to punch Nina.

I drank more wine.

Tobias prevented my hair from burning in the fire. It was funny.

I felt privileged because the Junggesellen allowed us to sit with them in their hut. In the past, this would have been a complete no-go. Mainacht has historically been a night for only men (and somehow still is).

They scared us away before the auction called our names at midnight. Which was a good thing, because I wasn't really able to stand straight anymore. But I was relieved that I survived the evening without any embarrassing conversation. I was pleased with everything and ready for my comfortable, warm bed.

Before I made it there, I somehow managed to break the screen of my phone, which put a bit of a damper on the event, but the evening was a success all in all.

While I went to sleep, the auction took place.

It's some kind of top-secret thing, because nobody should now how much the Junggesellen pay for the girls. Of course, it's public knowledge the next day. In a village of only five hundred people, everybody knows your secrets before you know them yourself.

For me the biggest mystery is what happens after the auction.

Every Jungeselle bought the name of a girl and the task then was to set a May-tree (between 13 and 22 feet high) in front of her house. I wonder every time how a bunch of drunken boys manage to set a dozen Maytrees without breaking their necks. I think the key is teamwork.

After the auction, everybody decorates a birch with colorful crepe paper garlands—the more of them, the more magnificent. When everybody is done, they fan out in groups of two or three to the houses of the girls with a birch, lashing straps and cable ties.

The whole village is still asleep, so everything is very silent and peaceful.

Till the Junggesellen come along with their stuff.

On their way to the houses, they leave behind a trail of destruction. Broken bottles and branches, torn crepe garlands, and lost cable ties.

When they finally arrive at their destination (you wouldn't believe how long it can take to walk a distance of a quarter mile when you're carrying a tree), the next challenge is to find a good spot to fix the Maytree. From years of experience, I can tell you that streetlights and other trees are good choices; gutters and rotten balcony railings are not.

Often the fathers of the girls have horrible images of fallen Maytrees on their cars, so they put a solid stake somewhere for the Junggesellen to attach the Maytree

to and prevent the worst. Sometimes this stake even gets concreted, just in case (and because fathers like to do things with concrete).

I plan every year to secretly watch the Junggesellen set my Maytree, but somehow I oversleep every time, so it is still a mystery to me how exactly they do it. What I know is that they manage to trample my mom's tulips flat every single year. Once I found the blossoms on our doormat. I think that was some kind of apology and I appreciated it. My mom blamed my dad for it anyway because he never puts in a stake (yet he loves concrete), so the Junggesellen always have to attach my tree to our poor acacia.

So, you can see that it is a lot of effort for the Junggesellen.

But that's nothing compared to the poor boys who have a girlfriend in another village. If they want to set her a Maytree, they have to buy her freedom, as I said, but they must also transport the tree from their village to the girl's village. To do so, you need a car with trailer, somebody who agrees to stay sober and drive, a few helpers and good nerves. If you have bad luck and a reckless driver, your Maytree loses all its leaves or lands on the road, and the only thing you can present your girl with is a pitiful frame. You can be sure you're in big trouble then, because your girl has nothing to post in her Instastory. Also, when you set your Maytree in another village, you must be aware that you are in the territory of the enemy.

Not your village, not your rules.

And if you skip the paying part, be sure the Junggesellen will demolish your Maytree. So, as I said, having a girlfriend in another village is terribly complicated.

For the Junggesellen, the night is still not over after the setting of the trees.

Once they have finished, the war begins.

It's tradition to put the biggest and prettiest Maytree (often up to 40 feet tall) in the middle of the village. It's not for someone in particular; it's just a way to show the pride of the village. And what a better way to humble other villages than with the biggest Maytree?

So, some of the Junggesellen hop in a car (preferably in one of a sober boy who just returned from setting the Maytree for his girlfriend in another village) and hit the road to find some trouble. The rest remain to protect their own Maytree.

The Junggesellen drive through the nearby villages, and when they find an unprotected Maytree, they cut it down mercilessly. This village then gets the mockery from the whole region for a while.

And finally, after that, after all the effort, when the sun begins to rise, it's time for the Junggesellen to go to sleep. They must be totally exhausted. I'm lucky I don't have to do all this stuff. But I'm jealous that I'm not allowed to do the stuff they do.

A few hours after the Junggesellen go to bed, everybody else gets up.

The first of May is a holiday in Germany, so we have the whole day to wander through the streets and compare the Maytrees and make suggestions of who set

whose tree There are no names on them, so it is a mystery. It's not really. Somebody always knows.

The first thing I do, of course, is run outside to see my own tree. It's a little like Christmas Day. Sometimes.

I remember the first year I got a tree. I was sixteen and pretty curious when I went outside. And there it was. A little dented but kind of pretty. I looked at it and felt really weird. I didn't expect to feel so. I somehow was hurt and tainted, because the people who I went to kindergarten with had sold me overnight like I was an item. I was no longer a child and the colorful tree in front of my house told everybody. I went back to bed and cried.

I know it was meant as a compliment, but I felt horrible. I felt horrible all day long and thought about demolishing it.

I didn't. It would have been pretty rude.

So, I put a big smile on my face instead and talked with everybody about my amazing tree (all the while dying inside).

My neighbor—my kindergarten friend, the boy I built treehouses with—set me this first Maytree, as I later found out. Somehow that made it better because he only set me the tree as it was the most practical for him. He set it when he was on his way home.

The insignificance of the tree somehow made it better for me. There was no real intention behind it. It was no bigger deal than to borrow some flour from a neighbor without giving it back.

But still.

Somehow, I felt like something was taken away from me in this first year; some of my innocence was gone.

The next two years I didn't care much about my Maytree. It was from the same person and with the same intention (none) behind it. I was tired of caring and had decided by this point that nothing really mattered. I opened the door in the morning to examine the tree, just like in the first year, but I felt only fatigue.

I think after my initial uncomfortable feelings, I had decided that it would be better to feel nothing in order to protect myself. It was easier to deal with the big emptiness than the aching of emotions deep down in me. The tree was only a tree, and the first of May only a holiday, and life only an irrelevant succession of gray days.

But last May, the year I got the Maytree from Tobias, I finally felt something like pride. I accepted that the tree was a sign of esteem and tradition.

Nothing that meant the world, but also not nothing.

Just a little thing that showed I am a respected member of the community and that other people actually know I exist. I finally felt part of the whole thing, maybe because I sat by the fire with the boys the evening before, or maybe I was still drunk.

Possibly a little of both.

But still there was this pressure on me. How I should thank Tobias for the tree?

I had no idea.

After all, Tobias's Mom came past our house in the afternoon on her examination tour and had to tell me how much money her son spent on me.

Yeah, this was so not helping.

I felt bad. And I still do, because I never really thanked him. In the end, I was a coward and only sent him a message. Shame on me. The weather took revenge on me. The tree didn't last long that time. In the middle of May, an angry snowstorm hit our patch of earth and threw every Maytree around.

The only thing that is left to tell about Mainacht is that the Junggesellen get at least one reward.

Maybe you are wondering what happens with all the money that get collected in Mainacht. Of course, it gets squandered. What else?

The Junggesellen go on an awful party vacation in Mallorca.

Germans believe Mallorca is a place that only exists for them to party, and accordingly they misbehave.

Accordingly, the Junggesellen misbehave.

No more words to say.

That's it, the story of the first of May and me dealing with it.

I think I'm not so good in dealing with it as I thought. I love it, on one side. And I hate it on the other.

That's the thing with traditions. They are remnants from a gray past. They don't ask what you think about them. You follow them because they make you who you are. Or you resist them, which is also some kind of tradition: a tradition of avoiding traditions, which also makes you who you are. Without them, we would all be the same and not so much diversity would exist, and that would be a pretty boring world, right?

DISASTER TYPE

SARAH SANTONI

WE SCRAMBLED TO OUR FEET as the whole building shook. Available doorframes: one, two, three. But four of us meant our bodies outnumbered the apartment's safe spaces. Earthquake? No, because the rattling already ended while we tried doing math amidst the panic. Four goes into three, with remainder –

“What’s going on?” asked Mom, waking up to the rumble, following us to the doorways in our silent duck-and-cover attempt. She asked like we could answer. We were just kids caught off guard.

Over the last twenty-one years, I do not remember thinking much about that day in 1999 when Mt. Baker erupted. Maybe because it didn’t. Many of the folks who lived on the San Juan Islands thought it did. They looked to the horizon and saw the plume of smoke billowing over the mainland, north of Anacortes, nearer to Bellingham. They thought it the volcano, Mt. Baker, making noise after a long, long silence.

Months before, our elementary school held an assembly at the Mt. Baker Theater downtown. The speaker from the Nooksack Tribe had a way of engaging us hyper students with his tone and energy. I think he spoke of Native history, but I don’t fully remember. For sure, he told us that the word “Whatcom” meant “noisy water.” Waves of giggles spilled out of us when he concluded that we all lived in Noisy Water County. Kid humor.

As we scrambled around that day in our apartment, our minds racing with thoughts of what could be happening outside, no one in my family concluded *pipeline explosion*. When the shaking stopped, too soon to keep thinking *earthquake*, we stepped outside to the smoke. Before the sirens, everything remained eerily calm, but not quiet. Clatter built upon commotion. Most sounds were from the neighbors exiting their apartments: the two Cambodian families speaking Khmer, the college kid getting his bike ready for a quick escape, the eldest sister of three trying to reach her mom at work. Her landline phone reception stretched all the way out to the complex’s courtyard as she looked for something tangible.

“Something’s happened,” she said into the receiver.

That something was a gas line owned by the Olympic Pipeline Company that exploded in Whatcom Falls Park, sending a ball of fire down the creek. A faulty valve, leaking gasoline, and three kids playing with firecrackers: a recipe for noise. The noise of grief, the noise of debate, the noise of outrage, still heard.

* * *

Last year, the band Death Cab for Cutie released a folk song about the explosion called “Kids in ’99,” with a lyric of “Been thinking ’bout those kids.” I heard the song, and I too thought about those kids who, at the time, were my peers.

Whatcom Falls is a big, lush park. It is isolated and crowded, loud and then quiet, and all kinds of juxtapositions waiting to be explored. It was the greatest place to just be a kid messin’ around. I imagine the band members in their off-campus college house, minutes down the way from my childhood apartment; I picture them stepping outside to the explosion and looking up at the smoke. The whole town stepped outside and looked up.

“Been thinking ’bout those kids” ... the song is simple enough. Just a comment on an event that is worth taking pause for. This jarring of a place, this blast, this cloud of smoke, this unknown thing now with a Wikipedia page. It took investigators three years to learn it was a preventable disaster.

It ended three young lives.

As we bounce around this life, with our shifting interests and fears, and daily standards, we’re struck with currents from the past that reach all the way to our present and flick us on the forehead. Sometimes, it’s worse than a flick and we crumble. Sometimes, we don’t permit ourselves the time to really stop and think, but still, it lives with us. Maybe if a song comes out that alludes to one specific experience of a creek catching fire, you must sit down and reflect on it for the first time in your adult life. And maybe the whole point of a folk song is to offer that much-needed space for rumination.

I went to school with those kids. Months before the explosion, they sat at that same assembly, three or four rows down from me, in the fancy theater seats, giggling at “noisy water.”

When I think of them now, it is fleeting, and my mind always returns to the relative silence brought by aging. But there is an overarching conclusion that my mind found on its own, even before the song. It’s the thought that, while the smoke of that pipeline blast dissipated in hours, already gone as those kids’ bodies continued to burn, the smoke of an actual volcano would have been more tolerable. If Mt. Baker did explode that day, it would have been so much easier to accept, even if it killed the whole town.

At least with the volcano, we knew danger was there.

A GROSS SAFETY TALK

JOHN SCHMIDTKE

I SPENT A WEEK AT WILLIAM & MARY'S WRESTLING CAMP every summer of high school. On campus, the other wrestlers and I slept in Monroe Hall, one of the men's dorms along Richmond Road. We worked out next door at Blow Gym, a T-shaped Georgian building with a pool in the basement and a banked indoor track on the third floor above the basketball court. Years later, I would float motionless in the cool embrace of the pool after grunting through sprints on the track while wearing plastic sweat suits to steam away extra water weight. The counselors at the summer camp, members of the wrestling team at W&M who were picking up some cash in the summer, locked us in our rooms at night because we lost control when the sun went down. We responded to being stuck in our rooms by having room-against-room contests to see who could pee the farthest out of our third-story dorm windows.

During breaks between wrestling sessions, we explored the campus. In the basement of Monroe Hall—a men's dorm—we found a tunnel that ran from building to building under the old campus. It roughly paralleled Richmond Road, then turned in a sharp “V” at the Wren Building, and ended at the laundry room of Jefferson Hall—the women's dorm. I didn't know it then, but W&M's English Department had its offices and classrooms in the Wren Building—the oldest educational building still in use in the United States. I also didn't know then that I'd become an English major at W&M, or that I would meet my wife in an English class on the Wren Building's third floor. All I knew then, as a high-school explorer, was that I'd entered an old building through an obscure service door in its basement as if I were an archeologist. Sweat-wet and aching from the semi-ducking necessary to avoid the scorching pipes overhead in the low tunnels, I felt giddy with the fear of discovery. I think I choose to go to William & Mary because I knew there would be fun just below its staid colonial surface.

* * *

In the summer of 1970, before one of those fated weeks at W&M, I asked my folks to let me drive one of our cars the 150 miles from Falls Church to Williamsburg. I told them three teammates would ride with me, as if adding more teenage testosterone to the trip made it a better idea. We planned to extend the week of wrestling camp with a week of camping in a tent at a state park in Virginia Beach. Thinking back, four

unsupervised sixteen-year-old boys cruising long-distance with a novice driver at the wheel sounds foolish. I had just earned my license. However, I don't remember having to argue in order to get permission to drive our family's pine-green Peugeot 404, with its reclining seats and sliding sunroof, on South I-95 to Richmond and then east on Route 60 to Williamsburg.

My buddies and I divided responsibilities for our trip's essentials. Gil and Hal Lunsford gathered the camping gear—a tent for four, sleeping bags, air mattresses, a Coleman kerosene lantern, and a camp stove. Their dad, the band and orchestra director at our high school, loved tramping outdoors as much as he loved a march by John Philip Sousa; he shot pheasants, stalked deer, and hooked small-mouthed bass when he wasn't waving a baton. Mr. Lunsford filled his basement with everything needed to live in the woods. So, even though Gil and Hal's job was absolutely necessary for our trip, it wasn't challenging.

We tasked Jackie Utz with bootlegging booze for us all. When we packed to leave, I think he wedged Schlitz beer and Boone's Farm Apple Wine in the crevices between every bag in the truck. Jackie's job may have been even easier than Gil and Hal's. Jackie's mom, Midge, always seemed more of an older sister, excited about helping us break rules, than a mom who was supposed to set solid boundaries. She might have bought our beer and wine. One time, Mrs. Utz threw a birthday party for Gil and brought out a thickly iced, two-layer, round cake with flaming candles. After blowing out the candles and making his wish, Gil reared his head back and then plunged his face into cake, just to be funny. He'd never have done it if his mom or mine had baked the cake, but it seemed the right thing to do at a party thrown by Midge Utz. When she realized what Gil planned to do, she screamed "No!" because she'd made her cake out of two, two-inch-thick, round cinderblocks that she'd stacked and covered with white frosting. Gil cracked his face full force into the mess, expecting a funny explosion of dessert over the table. Instead, he jerked up quickly with a bent nose, a split lip, sore teeth, and vanilla frosting everywhere from his chin to his eyebrows. Gil's blood ran from his mouth and out his nose like strawberry syrup all over the un-mashed stone cake. After a horrified silence, Midge Utz started laughing. She laughed without remorse and with no concern. Then she got towels and water to tenderly wipe Gil's face. She even hand-crushed ice cubes, put them in an ice compress and gently pressed on Gil's nose and lips to stop the swelling.

My assigned task for the trip, a task at the core of our adventure, one that could define the absolute success or abject failure of our fourteen summer days of adolescents on the loose, was to get condoms for everyone. We knew we'd need them when we slid the car's sunroof open to let stars watch us win coed wrestling matches on the reclining seats of the Peugeot. The excitement radiating from our planned road trip

turned me into the Dr. Reed Richards of our marauding foursome. I became Mr. Fantastic. I became our group's rubber man.

* * *

In the early 1970s, a time when most stores in Virginia were closed on Sundays because of blue laws, and grocery stores couldn't sell beer or wine, only drug stores sold prophylactics.

Safe sex meant going to the back of the store, waiting for the pharmacist on duty to finish mixing a pill or concocting a potion. The hopeful lover-to-be then had to ask the pharmacist—face-to-face—for the condom of his choice. He declared the intent of his dreams and ambition by the brand he chose, as well as by the number of prophylactics he asked to buy. Was he a Trojan latex-rubber guy, or a Forex lubricated-lambskin man? Did he need one? Three? Six? More?

I don't remember the regional name of the drug store at Loehmann's Plaza—it's a CVS now—but I remember walking down the aisle to the pharmacy counter with sweat soaking the underarms of my madras short-sleeved shirt. I'd used my dad's Brylcreem to style a pompadour in order to look older. I'll bet you had to be at least eighteen to buy condoms in Virginia, but I had a fake ID, so I wouldn't have been worried about that. I approached the counter like I approached every wrestling match: with a nervous optimism that turned my mouth dry, my hands cold, my breath hot, and filled my stomach with the fun of stepping irrevocably into uncertainty. I carried the money in my back pocket that we'd all anted up, folded in a cordovan leather wallet that matched my belt and my penny loafers. I smiled because no one stood at the counter; I was the only customer in the back. I had the kind of bravery that didn't like an audience. I couldn't see the pharmacist, so I rang the chrome bell twice, trying for confidence in the ringtone. No tentativeness and no urgency, I rang like I'd been there before and was glad to be there again.

The pharmacist, who had been bending for something on a low shelf right behind the counter, straightened up to help me. Startled, I stepped back. My back-bone jello-ed. My knees hiccupped. My heart stutter-stepped sideways. The pharmacist smiled at me, looked me kindly in the eye—very kindly—and asked what I needed that day. My mouth refused to open. I shrugged apologetically. I fluttered my hands to show I had made a mistake by ringing the bell. I turned dreamily without a word and left the store without breathing. The pharmacist ... she was beautiful.

When I put the car in gear and drove out of the parking lot without buying the rubbers, Jackie, Gil, and Hal commented without kindness about my courage. "Weenie" seems like the gentlest adjective any of them used. I said I had been fine. Seeing a pretty woman behind the counter, just old enough to be out of my wistful dreams but

young enough to frolic in my fantasies, with full hair pulled back in a teasing palomino pony tail, with a kind smile and with confident, mature eyes that invited play—surprised me. She looked like the lead from *Summer of '42*, Jennifer O'Neil. I told Gil, Hal, and Jackie I'd go back the next day. I said we had plenty of time.

I did go back the next day, but I again left rubberless. Before reaching the back of the store, I saw the beautiful woman working the counter. I bought a Slim Jim and an RC Cola before leaving. In the car, the Day Two insults topped those from Day One in callousness and vulgarity. The insults suggested there wasn't a reason for me to buy a rubber because I didn't have anything to wear one on. I'd go back the next day, I said. We had plenty of time, I said.

I backed out of buying anything on Day Three as soon as I walked in the front door of the pharmacy. She was there again. I spun out the door before it closed. Fortunately, I didn't go with Jackie, Gil, and Hal. I didn't need their help in feeling helpless. I knew I would never be able to buy condoms at that pharmacy. I was the novice high diver frozen on the edge of the ten-meter platform; the more I stood there without taking the plunge, the more I'd never perform.

* * *

"Bud," my dad had said several years before when he gave me The Talk during a weekend trout-fishing trip to Staunton Dam. "Don't ever be afraid to ask me for anything. Don't ever be afraid to ask me to help. Don't guess. Don't mess things up. Don't get a girl pregnant unless you mean to."

So, very early on the morning after my Day Three failure at the pharmacy, I went to my parents' room, knocked on his bathroom door, and said, "Dad, you got a minute?"

"What are you doing up so early?" Dad asked, looking at his watch on his bathroom counter. "It's not even 5:30."

He stood in front of his sink, shirtless, wearing checked pajama bottoms, his mirror fogging from the steam rising from the running water. His face was fully foamed with Rise shaving cream, and he held his stainless steel, double-edged safety razor in his right hand; a lit Pall Mall cigarette balanced on the rim of the clam-shell sink, its smoke braiding with the rising steam. "What's up?"

He motioned to the toilet. I closed the lid and sat down. He must have known it'd be easier for me to talk if he wasn't looking at me. He leaned towards the mirror and trimmed his high military sideburns. He didn't say anything.

"You know how you said I could ask you for anything?" I asked.

"Yes."

“Well, you know how I’m going to Virginia Beach with the Lunsfords and Jackie Utz?”

“Yes,” Dad said while pulling his upper lip down to tighten the skin under his nose for a closer shave. His razor started to scrape away the foam and to cut through his whiskers.

“Well, I’m supposed to buy rubbers for everyone,” I said.

Dad didn’t even nick himself. He put the razor on the rim of the sink, picked up his cigarette, took a slow drag, and exhaled downward through pursed lips. He never looked away from the mirror. He rebalanced the cigarette and picked up the razor to shave the other side of his upper lip. “And how can I help?”

I told him about the Loehmann’s Plaza pharmacist. He lifted his chin and started long, measured passes with the razor under his neck, against the grain, working from his Adam’s apple to his chin. Concentrating.

“Could happen to anyone,” he said, inflating one cheek and drawing the razor down. “Want me to pick some at up the PX?”

“Would you?”

“Absolutely. No sweat.” He paused and then said, “Preferences?”

I paused and then said, “Whatever you think best, Dad.”

“OK,” he said. “Done deal.”

Later that day, I told the guys I’d bought the condoms from the pharmacist the day before. I said I’d left them at home. I said I’d bring them the next day.

“Bullshit!” Gil said.

“Liar,” Jackie said.

“Do you smell something?” Hal said looking at the sole of his Converse sneaker to see whether he’d stepped in a pile of what I was saying.

“Just wait,” I said.

* * *

That night, still in his army uniform, my dad knocked on the door of the small den on the top floor of our house, opened it, and looked in. I liked to read while stretched out on the floor of the den. When Dad looked in, I lay with my head propped on pillows, reading and listening to LPs through my quadrophonic sound system, each speaker spaced around me for best effect, trying for the perfect merry-go-round of music to swirl in space just above me.

“Hi, Bud,” he said as he tossed a brown paper bag my way. I dropped my book and caught the bag. I sat up. I reached in and pulled out a sultry red box about the size of a James Michener hardback novel. Trojans. Latex. Non-lubricated. Basic, but

tailored to my experience. The silhouetted profiles of a man and a woman about to kiss decorated the bottom left corner of the box.

"Thanks, Dad!" I said.

"Is that enough?" Dad asked. "I can get more."

I looked at the box again. One hundred and forty-four. A gross of condoms.

"Yeah, Dad" I said. "I think so. Should be."

My dad just stood there like a comedian whose audience didn't get his last joke. His left eyebrow raised in an amused, expectant arch. His lips pulled tight, like they were repressing a smile. His left hand resting on the door jamb, and his right still holding the doorknob, like he was ready to make a quick exit.

"Thanks," I said.

"You bet," he said and closed the door.

* * *

"Holy shit!" Gil said the next day when I showed him the box.

"Nice job!" Jackie Utz said when I showed him. "I thought you were lying."

"Someone's shit don't stink," Hal said. "Give me some."

We didn't have one hundred and forty-four Trojans when we came home from our week at wrestling camp and our week at Virginia Beach. The non-lubricated condoms made wonderfully disgusting balloons when pee-filled and thrown at any counselor foolish enough to walk below our dorm windows at night. Condoms made trading for cool t-shirts and funky gear from other teams at the wrestling camp easy; everyone wanted what we had. Unused condoms made permanent circles in our wallets where we kept them while we strolled the vacation sidewalks of Virginia Beach, always hopeful, never lucky.

You need help to work completely through a gross of rubbers, especially when you are a virgin in high school. Lots. I handed out the last of that box of Trojans two years later, the night we graduated from high school, giving my friends pre-packaged gifts of hope and joy. Later in the summer of 1972, when Mom and Dad dropped me off at William & Mary to report for the wrestling team's preseason training, the last condom still waited in my cordovan wallet.

LIKE PETER PAN

RICHARD TURNER

MY DAUGHTER, ANJULI, SHOULD BE in her Algebra II class, but instead we're in my car headed home after lunch at Café La Mediterranee. It's Wednesday, two days into her achiness, sore throat and congestion. She wouldn't get out of bed till I mentioned Café Med, but now that she's eaten, she seems to be feeling a bit better. I turn onto College Avenue in Berkeley. The winter sun, unobstructed in the sky, has warmed the car during the time it took us to eat our chicken Cilicia and spinach filo. It's cozy inside.

"I don't want to start drinking alcohol," Anjuli blurts out from the passenger seat. We'd talked in the restaurant, but only chit chat, nothing revealing. She's reclined as far back as the passenger seat will go, hand behind her head. "Because that will mean it's the end of my childhood," she says.

I glance over at her.

"You think that's weird?" she adds.

I shake my head and poke out my lower lip. "Good enough for me," I say.

She laughs.

This is the kind of conversation we can get into, me and both of my girls, only while driving. It's as if some powerful potion from deep inside the engine block vaporizes when the car's running. The fumes drift into the passenger compartment and compel my girls to talk. It's a truth serum.

These discussions never take place at home, or in the numerous places we sit around waiting for things, new gadgets, prescriptions, the eyes to dilate. Doesn't happen on freeways either. This kind of discussion is reserved for times when we're cruising city streets or negotiating the winding roads overlooking canyons and reappearing expanses of the San Francisco Bay from way up in the East Bay hills. We'll get home, park, but they'll sit there unready to get out. "Fifteen more minutes?" they'll say. "Okay then, five?" Sometimes I give in. I admit it, I enjoy driving around with nowhere to go, talking to my girls.

"What made you think of that?" I say to Anjuli.

"I shouldn't tell you this," she says. "But Aubrey's been drinking." Aubrey's my older daughter.

"Drinking what?" I say.

"Beer."

"Uh hu."

“Not drunk,” Anjuli says. “She just takes sips. But it’s still drinking. I don’t even want to do that.”

I’m not exactly sure how to react to this news. I never ratted out my older sister when I was growing up. But I’m glad Anjuli’s told me, and I’m glad she’s decided not to drink, for whatever reason. But it is a little odd, this ending childhood thing. I grip the steering wheel with both hands. “Like Peter Pan,” I say.

“What?” she asks.

“He never wanted to grow up, you know?”

She’s silent. Looking out the window. We’ve entered Oakland now. That’s what the sign says. Not “Welcome to Oakland” or “Oakland, Home of the Warriors,” just “Entering Oakland,” like a warning.

“Yeah. Like Peter Pan,” she says.

Aubrey and Anjuli are very different. I know every parent says that about their children. But we have proof. Their mother took the photograph when they were toddlers, maybe three and four years old, they’re only thirteen months apart. In that picture, they’re flying a kite. You can’t see the kite in the picture; it’s way outside the frame. The photo shows them holding a string that leads up and away. Aubrey’s in front. They’re both looking up and holding the string.

Aubrey is gripping that string so tight in her two little fists. She holds the leading hand above her head, with the trailing hand pulled back as if she were an archer drawing a bow, a determined scowl on her face.

Anjuli barely cradles the plastic handle tethered to the end of the string. It settled loosely between her two little fingers. The handle is extended out in front of her chest. She looks aloft completely enchanted, seemingly oblivious to her sister’s struggle.

“It’s getting so much harder,” Anjuli says.

“What is?” I say.

“Everything,” she says.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Sheena is working toward an Online Writing Certificate from Stanford Continuing Studies. Her work has been published in *CWC Literary Review*, *166 Palms*, and *Fault Zone*. She has a Bachelor of Architecture degree (India), a Master's in Landscape Architecture (Texas A&M University), and a Postbaccalaureate Certificate in Writing (UC Berkeley Extension).

Stephanie Baker—Nonfiction/Interview

Artist and writer, Stephanie has deep roots in the state of California, finding inspiration in cultural histories of the West Coast. Stephanie has an MFA Studio Arts, MA in History & Theory of Contemporary Art, and is an alumni of UC Berkeley Extension.

Janet Bein—Fiction/Other

I have been writing stories on and off since I was a small child. I have also enjoyed drawing all of my life. I had little time for these hobbies while I was raising my three daughters and working full time. But I am now retired.

Laurie Blanton—Fiction

Laurie, a Kansas City native, is a yoga teacher, fitness instructor, and writer living in San Francisco. She writes short fiction and aspires to write a novel someday. Her short stories have been published by *Pilcrow & Dagger*, *The MacGuffin*, *Zoetic Press*, *Across the Margin*, and *So It Goes*.

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Abha was born in India and currently lives in New York city. She is a mother, scientist, teacher, medical writer, yoga practitioner and an enthusiastic photographer. As an aspiring creative writer, she is surprised when she finds the words to say what she means or when the words find her.

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Abigail lives and studies in Berkeley, California. She has been published in the *Berkeley Daily Planet* and was one of two winners of the 2002-2003 American Academy of Poets Prize at UC Berkeley. She loves sparrows, moss, and etymology.

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Paula is a Chilean writer residing in the Netherlands. She is a forest engineer, but creative writing is her true passion. Endlessly curious, an avid reader, and appreciative of life, she is currently writing for a business school and creating articles, essays, and a novel for pleasure.

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Judith had a long career as an editor and speechwriter, working mainly in the public sector. She grew up in central New York State, where she also attended college. She is now retired and living in the Bay Area and is exploring ways of telling stories from her life.

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Sophia holds a degree in English literature from Davidson College and is a two-time alumna of the Iowa Writers' Workshop summer graduate intensive. Her work has been published in *Jabberwock Review* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. She reads for *Flash Fiction Magazine* and is a fiction editor for *Ursa Minor*.

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Angel is a Bay Area poet whose writing combines philosophical musings with observations about art, literature, and living in California. She holds a degree in Linguistics and Psychology from UCLA and is finishing a Master's degree in Creative Writing at SF State.

Kevin B. Jones—Art

Kevin Bernard Jones was born and raised in the community of South Central Los Angeles. Primarily self-taught, he focuses his camera on the communities and places in the world that are less traveled. Kevin's travels and photographic interests are the communities that make up the African diaspora.

Mariam Khan—Nonfiction/Memoir

Mariam is a designer, bookworm, and agony aunt-for-hire who focuses her written word on real life. Her passion is to create a voice for experiences we might otherwise be tempted to bury for years. You'll sometimes find Mariam examining the stories around her life [@mariamkhan](#), or those of others [@mariam_khn](#).

Lydia Kim—Fiction

Lydia is a writer and strategist, a former English teacher, and almost a California native. Her favorite book is *Geek Love*, and she identifies most with Flannery O'Connor's character Hulga. She loves being stilled by a perfect sentence and, because every story has one, always reads closely.

Shauna Konnerth—Nonfiction/Personal Essay

Shauna is a Canadian expat living in SoCal. Her teaching career is gradually being overtaken by her writing and editing side hustle, fueling a life-long writing dream. On a whim, she leapt into UC Berkeley Extension's Professional Writing Program, from which this essay was born.

Elisabeth Koss—Art

Born in Belgium, Koss grew up fascinated with the interplay of light, water, and shadow. She emigrated to the United States to study neuropsychology. After retiring from a career as a behavioral neuroscientist, Koss is now devoted full time to painting. She lives and works in Oakland.

Sheldon SY Lee—Other

Sheldon has read a lot of old, Asian stories about nature spirits pretending to be people. Green parakeets have recently come to his neighborhood. He likes experimenting with forms of art and writing.

Ralph J. Long Jr.—Poetry

Ralph is the author of the chapbook, *A Democracy Divided* (Poetry Box, 2018). His work has appeared in *Humble Pie*, *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *The Avocet*, *The Poeming Pigeon*, *Zingara Poetry Review* and the anthology *Ambrosia: A Conversation About Food*. He graduated from Haverford College and lives in Oakland California.

Victoria McAllister—Fiction

Torrie is a writer living in Redwood City, CA, studying the craft of fiction in the Certificate Program in Writing at UC Berkeley Extension. After a career as a reporter, editor, and public affairs officer, she is addicted to storytelling, ancient civilizations, mythology, world travel, and fantasy fiction.

Cynthia Nooney—Fiction

Cynthia holds an MFA in creative writing and is currently working on a collection of linked stories. Prior to that, she was a marketing executive and journalist. Publishing credits include the *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *805 Living*, *Twins*, *Preemie*, *Today in PT*, *Sherman Oaks Sun*, and others. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Don Purdy—Poetry

Don is a retired US Navy and airline pilot living in Berkeley. In addition to working with veterans in the PTSD program at the Oakland Vet Center, Don spends time in pursuit of trout, faster bicycle riders, speed on the banjo, grandkids, and the completion of a book of poetry.

Roopa Ramamoorthi—Poetry/Other

Roopa Ramamoorthi is a biotech scientist and poet from India who now calls Berkeley home. Her work has been featured on NPR's Perspectives, in the anthologies *She is Such a Geek*, *Dismantle*, and *Red Skirt, Blue Jeans* as well as in *India Currents*, *The Berkeley Daily Planet*, *Khabar*, *Spectrum Anthology* (the best of 60 years of *Spectrum*), *Ursa Minor* and other publications.

Lisa Relth—Nonfiction/Personal Essay

Lisa is a designer in the Bay Area. She lives in San Francisco with her dog, Wallace.

Jennifer Ruppert—Art

Jen Ruppert is a Wisconsin transplant who dabbles in drawing and making objects outside of her full-time marketing job and mothering twin- daughters. Though not a professional artist, she knows a lot about material culture from earning two degrees in art history and staying plugged into art world news.

Maryam Safanasabi—Art

Maryam Safanasab is an Iranian visual artist who lives in the Bay Area, California. Her work is often inspired by early Modern painting of Iran and traditional imagery in Iranian pop culture. Her artistic vision is to explore identity and gender discrimination in a Islamacized society representing her cultural allegiances.

Lisa Sahin—Nonfiction/Personal Essay

Lisa grew up in a small village in Germany. She loves her home more than anything else; nevertheless, she decided to spend a year as an au pair in California. Next to writing, Lisa likes baking, and she dreams of owning a café one day.

Carrie Salazar—Art

Carrie, the daughter of immigrants, grew up in southeastern Louisiana and now lives in California. She is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and The American Association of Illustrators. Her work has been featured in books for young people, short stories, and educational materials.

Sarah Santoni—Nonfiction/Memoir

Sarah is a former production crew member who has worked on feature films and episodic television projects. Her writing has been featured in *The Pittsburgh City Paper* and *The Carlow University Press*. She lives in California with her dog and an undying love for Nicolas Cage and Turkish coffee.

John Schmidtke—Nonfiction/Memoir

By day, John writes fiction while sitting in his law office. By night, he writes nonfiction in his living room. In 2014, John completed Berkeley's Certificate Program in Writing. In 2017, he graduated with an MFA from Goddard College after writing a collage-style memoir as his thesis.

Walt Trask—Poetry

Walt is enrolled in the Certificate Program in Writing at UC Berkeley Extension and is a commercial lender in international trade finance. Walt holds a BA in Economics & Latin America Studies from SUNY Oswego and a Master of International Business from the University of San Diego.

Richard Turner—Narrative Nonfiction

Richard studied biology at Stanford and attended medical school at UCLA. He practices urgent-care medicine in the Bay Area, where he lives with daughters Aubrey and Anjuli. His son, Aksum, lives in Oxnard, where he performs comedy routines that often lampoon his dad's parenting practices.

Yu Yan Vanessa Wee—Art

Currently living in California, Yu Yan Vanessa Wee is a Malaysian artist who aims to inspire others to speak about current issues through art.

Christine Weldon—Narrative Nonfiction

Christine Weldon, M.A., is a California native who left a long-term career in public service to pursue her passion for writing. Now a freelance writer and blogger, she brings humor and poignancy to the feel-good stories she writes about ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Taylor S. Winchell—Poetry

Taylor's poems have appeared in *Nature Writing* and *Every Writer's Resource*. He lives in Denver, where he writes, performs music as The Rabbit's Atom, and helps plan for the future of Colorado's water supply.

Cindy Yi—Art

Cindy Yi was born in Shanghai and graduated from the University of Washington, where she received her B.S. in Computer Science. While developing drawing tools for Adobe Fresco as a Software Engineer, Cindy found her passion for drawing and enrolled in art courses at U.C. Berkeley Extension in San Francisco.



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INTERVIEW:

Rachael Herron
(with Sophia Huneycutt)
Jeremy Morgan
(with Stephanie Baker)



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