Trigger Warning

noun: A brief statement alerting a reader, listener, or viewer to troubling or traumatic content ahead.
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Letter from Guest Editor Meggie Royer

When I started writing the call for submissions for this issue, I used a quote about how there are certain things that you can't say at a cocktail party. And it's unfortunately true—most of us might be mildly concerned, or worse, highly uncomfortable, if we witnessed a friend or acquaintance relaying the story of their miscarriage or suicide attempts to other guests over margaritas. Not, perhaps, because we don't want to help, but because such conversations seem out of place. That's why Trigger Warning was created, to form a safe space for such unsayable things. As Krista Cox writes in our opening piece “Snowstorms and Trigger Warnings,” sometimes heading into uncomfortable or highly emotional spaces is “the only way to address this dangerous climate and connect with others stuck in the drifts.”

In the poems, prose, musical pieces, and artworks that follow, we hope you'll find yourself being pulled out of the snow inch by inch, too. You'll find dazzling, powerful glimpses of red hair, morning afters, open coffins, cancer cells, bodies learning how to be bodies again—that is to say, in these pages you'll find pieces of yourselves, and all the words you buried at a cocktail party.

“I want songs and/poems and/parades for this/kind of/silent victory,” Emma Bleker writes in “Like Crying Over the Beauty of the Stars No One Else Can See.”

And that's exactly what all our authors, artists, creators, and believers have given you in this issue. For every victory, no matter how practiced or perfected—the victory of rising in the morning, the victory of navigating sex after rape, the victory of holding your father's hand in one last hospital room.

Enjoy the party. Drinks are on us. And so are the tissues.

Maggie Royer
Snowstorms and Trigger Warnings
Krista Cox

I'd met Chris on Tinder a few weeks before. We were planning to have our first date on Wednesday. Also set to go out on that Wednesday, unbeknownst to me, was every snowplow driver in the county; Winter Storm Emilio Estevez (name changed to protect the innocent) was forecasted to be the first (but certainly not the last) Snowpocalypse of the year. I grew up in Wisconsin, where snow isn't news unless entire herds of cows have gone missing, so I had no fear of Emilio Estevez’s slow descent upon northern Indiana. Chris, however, was worried. On Tuesday, he unilaterally canceled our date and suggested we reschedule. “It’s supposed to snow and I don't want you out on unsafe roads.”

Me. On unsafe roads. He didn’t want. Because snow.

I know that there are some people who would consider this thoughtful, or perhaps even a gallant display of the maybe-dead art of chivalry. You’ve perhaps guessed by my abundant use of italics above that my reaction was not in that neighborhood. It was in another kingdom, entirely. I did want to extend him the benefit of the doubt, though, so I restrained the sparks aching to shower forth from my fingertips, and just said, tentatively, “That’s a bit overprotective.” “Well, yeah…but not overprotective in the bad way.” Ohhh, see? Nothing to worry about. Chris from Tinder is overprotective in the good way, like when a mother lovingly forbids her child from ever using the slide at the park because she could fall off and die, or when a husband lovingly tells his wife she isn’t allowed to be friends with that guy Kenneth because he’s definitely positive that Kenneth is only her friend because he wants to get into her pants and he just doesn’t want to see her get hurt. That kind of overprotective. The good kind.

I never talked to Chris again.

Later, a friend suggested I had overreacted. I had to at least consider the idea. I’ve been single for a long time, but not for lack of trying. At some point, it became apparent that I was incredibly sensitive to even casual misogyny and objectification. Many things that others considered benign felt like gigantic, frantically-waving red flags to me. I was having trouble meeting men who didn’t make me
uncomfortable. I was afraid I was passing over well-meaning people with whom I could have perfectly
decent relationships, if only I weren't so...so 
sensitive.

So, I took a look back over my love life. I expected to skip and dance through a 500 Days of
Summer-like montage: the jubilant week in England with the stand-up comedian I met on Twitter, the
reckless romance with the smoldering philosopher who was leaving for Switzerland in a few months,
the slow fall into first love with the drummer who made lemonade popsicles and wrote love letters on
pink construction paper. I've had a fair share of magical movie moments.

That wasn't the movie that played, though. What I saw looked a lot more like The Day After
Tomorrow—the movie with the poster of the Statue of Liberty up to her nose hairs in snow and ice. For
every summer I've had, there's been a lot of winter. These are the blizzards that buried me: I lost my
virginity to date rape. Mentally destroyed and completely hopeless, I married my rapist to keep the
promise I'd made myself as a devoutly religious young woman: I'll only be with one man, ever. The first
man I slept with after my second divorce fucked me so violently I cried out in pain and asked him to
stop. Instead, he kept going until my cervix bled. Then, he moved us to the shower, because damn,
Krista, those are expensive sheets. Another man: No anal, I said, and he laughed, held both my arms in
one thick hand behind me, and put it in my ass, anyway.

It took me years to shovel out from under the weight of those experiences, for the wind to settle
just so I could see a way forward again. But I got out! Yay, perseverance and fortitude and whatnot!

But even when I'm not standing naked in the middle of a Winter Storm Emilio Estevez, it's
blaming. #notallmen. Rape jokes and rape threats. Victimized friends and acquaintances. Men's Rights
Verbal abuse and threats in response to rejection. It doesn't matter much if it happens to me or happens
around me; it's a reminder that this is the weather, and weather is impersonal and indiscriminate. And
this snow is some Willy Wonka shit—it doesn't melt. It just accumulates. I'm always a bit on edge,
worried any one of these snowflakes could trigger an avalanche, like last fall when I found out one of
my rapists (one of my rapists—that is a phrase that exists in my world, and the worlds of many women I
love) was dating a friend of a friend and I had to leave social media for several months just to unbury myself. Again.

So, yes. It’s definitely possible I overreacted to Chris from Tinder. But it was only because I couldn’t risk another blizzard, and what he said sounded an awful lot like a forecast.

***

There’s been a lot of criticism of trigger warnings recently. The Atlantic published a story by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt called “The Coddling of the American Mind” which featured a photo of a blank-eyed toddler sitting at a computer in a sweatshirt with COLLEGE emblazoned across the front. The implications there are obvious, and the article chides “fragile” students for supposedly seeking “to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.” Jill Filipovic argued in The Guardian (an ironic venue to make the argument against guarding people’s safety) that trigger warnings “quickly become a way to short-circuit uncomfortable, unpopular or offensive arguments.” In other words, the anti-trigger-warning narrative suggests that trigger warnings are Chris from Tinder: out of a genuine concern for your safety, they tell you that you’re required to sit this one out.

The problem with Chris from Tinder, of course, wasn’t his concern for my safety. That part was actually appreciated. The problem was that he assumed I couldn’t decide for myself when to stay home. If he had said, “It’s going to snow, and the roads may be bad; should we reschedule?” I would have responded entirely differently. Critics of trigger warnings make this same flawed assumption: that if there’s going to be bad weather, I must stay home. The roads are slick; we’ll all just cuddle on the couch with our fluffy teddy bears and write poetry about flowers, instead.

But trigger warnings are no more a mandate than weather forecasts are. They don’t force me to stop reading, and they don’t erase the potentially triggering content that follows. Trigger warnings are forecasts. They let us know the weather, make us aware of its potential, and then let us decide: do I want to take my chances out there on the roads right now? They give agency to those who have had it
taken from them, to those who often have it *repeatedly* taken from them—like by all the well-meaning Chrisses from Tinder.

Why risk being triggered if we don’t have to? Well, someone needs to drive the snowplows. Almost every woman I know willingly heads into these stormy conversations, when she has the emotional and mental energy to do so, because it’s the only way to address this dangerous climate and connect with others stuck in the drifts. I recently had a painful, triggering conversation with a male friend who wanted to better understand the dynamics of rape culture, for example. I had to take brief shoveling breaks at intervals, but it was important to me to keep going, because he was listening and I sensed the chance to have an impact.

And that’s why we *need* safe places. Filipovic writes, “Universities and blogs do students no favors by pretending that every piece of offensive content comes with a warning sign.” Well, no shit, it doesn’t. Trigger warnings are necessary precisely because so few of the storms we encounter come with warnings. So few places are safe for women. The advent of the internet means even my own home and workplace are always cloudy with a 60% chance of flurries. But it’s still so important that we continue to have the hard conversations, continue to read and write the things that hurt to read and write. It’s the only way to change the weather, and we’re long overdue for spring.

________________________


ii [http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/05/trigger-warnings-can-be-counterproductive](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/05/trigger-warnings-can-be-counterproductive)
Self-Portrait in Nightgown
Sophia Jakab
Unborn
Lilian-Leader Williams

_The Sound of Silence_ plays softly from the record player in the corner of the living room. My mother sits at the kitchen table shearing off her luxurious umber locks. She turned thirty today. My father isn’t home much.

"I’m pregnant. You’re going to have a little brother or sister," she tells me as another clump of hair falls to the floor. I bend to pick it up. The reds hidden in all that deep brown glow like embers in the dying sun.

"Mama, can I keep some?"

"Why would you want to?"

"It’s pretty."

"No. Give it here."

She rips the hair from my pudgy fingers and piles all of it in a large glass ashtray my father doesn’t know she still uses inside the house. She rises from the table. Her long earrings sway just above her shoulders like the pendulum in our grandfather clock. While she rummages in the kitchen cupboards, I steal a few strands from the pile and put them in my pocket.

She returns with a yellow bottle that she turns upside down and squeezes over the hair. A clear liquid that smells like the gas station comes out in a steady stream. When the hair is sufficiently doused, she lets the cigarette she’s been nursing fall into the ashtray. The blaze is slow to grow and carries a stench like the oatmeal I scorched this morning.

My mother blows on it gently and the smoke curls around the unfamiliar shape of her shorn head. She sits back down, watches as the baby flame gasps for life. It produces spikes of brilliant blue light before dying altogether.

My mother lays her head on the table and weeps.
I Am the Mother of Two Live Children and Three Dead
Heather Bell

So you live in a tiny house, entirely dependent on wood heat in the winter.
Let’s say you run out of logs to burn. Maybe you were too lazy to cut
the appropriate amount, maybe you just miscalculated. But now, what do you
start with? What do you burn first? First chairs, useless wooden bowls from
your grandmother. Then it’s January and you’re sitting on the floor so what
next? The legs of your sofa, maybe the headboard of your bed. There’s only

so much burnable inside a house. Before long you look at your dog. Panic.
Look at your husband. Cry. Your first born, just the right size. Your
left arm, who needs it? There’s only so much. You try going out there,

waist deep snow, weeping through it. All you have is an old maul.
You’re exhausted, aren’t you? What more can you give up, throw into the fire?

You know it’s only you or the house left, the old lathe would spark like nothing,
like it was meant to. But you can only sit outside a burning house

for so long before it’s just a hill of black and you’re cold again and pawing
through the ash like a hungry animal oh no, this does not smell like something
that could sustain you through February. Because there’s a limit to what you

you can burn. This mistake is always what you choose to start with.
On December 8th, 2015, I walked out of a brand new practitioner's office holding 13 prescriptions. Among them were anti-psychotics, anti-seizures, anti-convulsants, neurotrophic meds, sleep meds, anti-depressants and mood stabilizers.

This might seem odd, considering that the half dozen doctors I'd visited in the previous two months had insisted, in what felt like a single orchestrated act of dismissal, that I was, in fact, "a very healthy girl".

So I kept switching general practitioners, making the assistant fill out the paperwork she wasn’t happy to be filling out, transferring my files to someone new, someone who might listen to me as I sat
on the examination table, trying to steady my voice as I read through the growing list of symptoms that I keep recorded on my phone.

At these appointments, in an effort to appear like someone who should be paid attention to, I always dressed as if I might be attending a job interview afterwards. I learned to keep my words even, free of emotion, as if I were a lawyer presenting the case on behalf of myself. I would try to get through my list of symptoms as quickly as possible, but there was never enough time. I’d choose my top five, the ones I found most disturbing, the most difficult to ignore.

But it kept not working. One by one the doctors appeared in front of me, white coated and dully impressed with themselves. They’d glance at their clipboards and assure me there was nothing much to worry about. One of them handed me a thick white binder filled with the names of local therapists. Another fixed me with a sympathetic look and said, "I'm so sorry you're depressed."

I never said I was depressed.

On one particularly confusing afternoon, a younger MD I’d been seeing on and off since I moved to Asheville, seemed to be absorbing what I said. She listened, leaning forward with her hands clasped around her knee, nodding at the appropriate times. But the time I’d gotten through my allotted time, she smiled and sighed, with a dramatic shrug. Then she asked brightly, "So are you planning on having a baby any time soon?"

By the time thanksgiving came around, I was, if not depressed, then at least completely baffled by the fact that nobody would help me. It was the first thought to hit me every morning when I woke up and felt the symptoms descend. On some mornings, my mind would awaken up but I’d find myself unable to move or even open my eyes- a type of nocturnal seizure. I’d lie there for a minute or two, conscious but paralyzed, rolling the question around in my head.

Nobody will help me.

Why will nobody help me.

It was over thanksgiving that I dragged myself and my husband to a privately run urgent clinic, having been hit with an intense and mysterious symptom known as *mal de dembarquement*. If I was unable to catch the attention of any doctor, then maybe husband could.
We were spending the holiday in south central Vermont, where I spent over half my life. At the clinic, I asked for a blood draw to test for lyme. I figured I could take advantage of being in New England, where Lyme is endemic and the doctors, I believed at the time, were savvy ("lyme literate."). The two times I had requested a lyme test in Asheville, I was immediately shut down. ("We don't have lyme in North Carolina.") On both occasions I backed down, thrown off by the way the doctors' faces instantly stiffened with annoyance.

This time, I demanded the test. I refused to leave until they agreed, until I watched somebody leave the room holding a vial of blood. And the doctor fought me. At first, she gave me the familiar chorus: "Look at you, you're healthy."

"I'm not healthy. I can barely walk right now."

"You say you can barely walk. Come back to me when you can't walk. Then we'll discuss what could be wrong." (This is not an exaggeration, although it's such outrageously bad medicine that if my husband had not been there to witness it, I probably would not believe my own memory.)

"I'm covered in this rash. It feels like I've been burned. I never get a rash."

She waved her hand - "That'll go away. You need to see a therapist."

"I already see a therapist."

"Listen, I could give you a lyme test, but the tests are largely inaccurate. They give false negatives the majority of the time."

"Maybe mine will be positive."

"It won't be positive. But what if it is? What if you discovered you had Lyme disease, why would you even want to know? Listen to me. You live in the South. Nobody down there will help you."

This is when David spoke up from his chair in the corner, completely even-keeled. "If she has lyme, she wants to know because it's her right to know."

The doctor turned to face him, incredulous. "And you approve of this?"

We both just stared at her, barely comprehending the audacity of a doctor to ask approval from a patient's husband like this. She threw her hands up. She was over us. "Fine." The door clicked shut behind her.
She was correct about the lyme test: they are complicated, and notoriously inaccurate. Many people who suffer terribly from lyme disease are presented with false negatives. (The CDC criteria misses between 1/3 and 2/3 of all true positives, especially in later stages.) In many cases, lyme is so covertly hidden within the body that the blood shows up as clear, the blood lies, although mine didn’t.
And though it's dark these dead
still remember how every stone
smells from dirt that never leaves
becomes a sky without an evening
they can hold in one hand
and not the other –they call out
with valleys :cries that have forgotten
to rise far off as sunlight
and trembling –these dead want snow
side by side, already flowers
and lowered, opened at the throat
and no longer breathing.
* 
You show up late as usual
need more darkness
though you wait

delays each star
smells from dirt
and her eyelids

—the mouth you return to
is already weeds
worn down by the silence

that's lost its balance
can't escape
and won't let go

—some nights
further than others
smaller and smaller.
* You still feel for skid marks
though your shadow is flat on its back
holds fast between the ground and evening

as if there's room for your hands
and the darkness that's not a wall
once it's left to itself

–not a scratch! and underneath
you skim off sideways
end over end the way rain

protects itself, escapes
in the dripping sound its edges
can't stop in time without falling off.
He3
To listen to this piece, [click here](#) to be redirected to YouTube.
Part I – The Gossip

The click of an office door.
Low sounds, murmuring.

Heads turn,
away.
We walk with mouths
to cupped ears.

“Did you know?”
we say.

“Have you seen him?”
we say.
“Whispering in her ear?”

Someone
should tell her

about Jesus.

Someone
should tell

her husband.

Afterward,
her red face walks to the line,
watches the green bottles
 tumble past.

“Can I give you a hand?”
she says.

Heads turn
away.
Mouths to cupped ears.
Someone
calls her a tramp.
Part II – The Boss

He told me a story
and by mistake,
    I laughed.

“Come to my office,”
he said.
“I have another
    story.”

I leave the bottles behind,
smooth and cold on the line.

He closes the door.

There is only one chair.

“I think you’ll like
this story,”
he says.

His mouth
    too close to my ear.
His breath
    too close to my skin.

His hand
on my shoulder,
begins to slide.

“Please don’t,”
I say,
    not loud enough.
I Made it Through the Wilderness
Melissa Eleftherion
Pacific Salt
Eunice Andrada

To listen to this piece, click here to be redirected to YouTube.
An Interview with Eunice Andrada

Tiegan Dakin

**Tiegan Dakin:** How did you begin your career in writing and journalism?

**Eunice Andrada:** My "career" began when I found a love for writing poetry and chose to stick with it no matter what anyone thought. When I first discovered that poetry can be performed, I googled the soonest poetry slam near me, and it just so happened to be The Rumble Youth Slam, organised by Word Travels. With a sheet of poetry in my shaking death grip, I read my poem out to more than a hundred people. My poetry heroes Anis Mojgani and Kate Tempest were staring right at me. It was like there was no denying that I was present right then, allowing myself to be vulnerable in front of strangers.

After the slam, a journalist approached me and wanted to do an interview for the local paper. She asked me what I was studying. At the time, I had been in a Communications and Media course, so she recommended I do an internship at Fairfax Community Papers. I interned with them for a week and fell even more in love with telling stories.

I’ve been doing internships in a variety of media outlets since I was 16, and now I’m working for SBS Radio. As for poetry, I’ve been performing across Sydney and am aiming to publish a poetry collection soon. I’m so thankful that my poetry and journalism opportunities came at the same time.

**TD:** It sounds like you had a lot of fun interning, but have you ever encountered any challenges related to your work because of your age? If so, what were they?

**EA:** There were some challenges, but surprisingly enough, the subject of my age rarely surfaced unless I was asked about it. The topic had been an insecurity of mine for a while. I worried my colleagues wouldn’t take me and my work seriously because I was young enough to be their child. I felt like I had to work a lot harder to gain respect. But my colleagues had a lot of faith in me; they presented me with a multitude of opportunities and genuinely wanted me to be successful.

It was and is great to be part of environments with so many inspiring people around you. More than anything, the challenges mainly came from myself, because I wanted to use that inspiration as a drive to be better.

**TD:** It’s good that you’ve built up confidence. What else inspires you? Any favourite poets or family members?
EA: My mother will never stop being an inspiration to me. She was a writer and painter growing up, but lost touch with that kind of art as she reached adulthood. Now she specializes in the art of tolerating my bad jokes and being a hero. The strength of the women in my family will always be an inspiration to me.

Among other amazing poets and storytellers, I admire Tonya Ingram, Junot Diaz, Warsan Shire, Hieu Minh Nguyen, and Candy Royalle, an amazing poet who inspired me to keep writing and performing. In journalism, the incredible work of Maria Ressa and Lydia Cacho have been real motivators for me.

TD: Did you ever struggle to get motivated because you compared yourself to people you admired? If so, how did you get through it?

EA: I’m guilty of comparing my work to that of other artists, but it doesn’t become a barrier from creating. If anything, it’s a reminder my words and ideas have yet to reach the caliber I want, and there’s a lot more for me to improve on. So I use this as a motivation to keep working and finding my own voice.

TD: What would be your second choice if you couldn’t write? What would you be doing instead?

EA: I’m not sure, to be honest. Writing is such a huge part of who I am and how I deal with things. It’s how I find answers and become more sure of myself. But if I couldn’t write, I’d find other ways to create with my body. I’ve always loved dance as a form of release and been fascinated by the graces and strains of movement. Yeah, if I couldn’t write, I’d try to dance myself, and the world, better.

TD: How did winning the John Marsden/Hatchette Australia Prize in 2014 change your life?

EA: It made me realise the ideas, the poems, the gibberish I write alone in my room are part of a bigger picture. Receiving the prize has encouraged me to put more of my work out there. Since then, I’ve been fortunate enough to do a spoken word residency in Canada and learn from incredible artists, and perform in more places across Australia and the Philippines. It’s also inspired me to create the guerilla art initiative Free Poetry Project and, in collaboration with Writing Through Fences, Free Voices. Both projects were created in the aim of providing a platform for unheard voices, with the latter initiative focusing on freeing the poems of detained asylum seekers, in public spaces.

Suffice to say it’s been a hectic year of poetry so far! Receiving the prize has opened up so many doors out in the world and within myself, to keep creating and sharing.
She1
Marta Djekic
The Only Trans Girl at the Party
Alison Rumfitt

Saturday night’s a black hole
you’re the probe, lost in nothing, falling, negativity
crushed out of existence in your
knee-length skirt, white shirt and tights
and your make-up which other girls say
looks better than they could ever do
and you laugh and say, “I watched hours of youtube tutorials
to get to this!” and they laugh (what you said was true)
it’s like make-up is their country
you’re something strange, like an Hollywood horror
you’re a reanimated corpse, something from the black lagoon
and you’re a fun-vampire all in one
but you’re a girl, wearing the dress better
kissing slicker and sicker because you’ve got to
how dare you
intruder, monster, weirdo
The only trans girl at the party
the only starry anomaly
standing outside photographs just in case your parents see
got shouted at by strangers walking here
even though you hid your adam’s apple with a collar
You want to be part of the fun but
however hard you try it’s like
You’re a circus act or something at the end of the pier--

Ladies and Gentlemen, roll up, we have the
Wondrous Transgender
Ask it questions, find out
why it’s like this, it doesn’t look it, it doesn’t like it
what kind of trauma made you live like this?

The crowd looks on, laughs
this is wholesome entertainment
You wonder if, at some other party someone here
will tell your story
such an inspiration!
Yes I met this trans girl once
probed her for questions, she looked lost in space, lost
in the space between the kitchen and the bathroom floor

This is where it gets ugly, it’s the event horizon
although you don't know that yet:
someone thinks they've got you
you don't see their face but they feel
between your legs
You see a person in a mask, a rabbit’s head
tells you that you’d be better off drowned and dead
blink and they’re gone into the crowd
blink again and the crowd change
sometime's they all look like animals
it’s hard to see them as people when
they all see you as an object
as simply a trans girl at their party when really
you have a girlfriend, like films
go to coffee shops every weekend
No, they move in, pitchforks, Guy Fawkes faces
grins and burning torches after Frankenstein's monster
(that's you, a person made of pieces)
All they want to know is where you come from
they all need to know your story
they need to know what your body looks like
and the blood, your blood, does it
taste the same as theirs does?
There are so many hands
and they grab at your stitches
The Black hole finally rears its head
sucking you in from the other side of the room
it's mouth is rows of yellow teeth
You slip, you fall
the angry mob watch as Saturday night
eats you whole
spits you out
Sunday morning takes you home
Rape
Marian Kaplun Shapiro

That day in pink shorts
(subway singing, sun smiling)
No one knew I'd died.
Fishy
Sally Deskins
Body Back
Vanessa Crofskey

i.
She fucked him on his garage floor.
He kissed her forehead after,
tried to nestle in.
(These parts I remember. I was there.)

It was not my body that night,
but it was my hangover,
my morning after pill.

She never said *yes*
but her mouth spouted *fuck it*,
leaving everything else aside
but my underwear.

This parasite grows in spaces that don't belong for her.
Hates the world for how I am rendered physical.
To call it *self harm* would be to strip this exercise of the visceral.

Call this disciplined intent:
a practice captured in archives,
apologies, libraries of scratched skin.

We are symbiotic.

By she I mean myself.
I mean how girls know to lead lives casually,
know how to damage in order to protect,
could teach you a thing or two about how to lend.

How to cleave a mind from its counterpart.

How to let them graffiti all over your pages
and act as if you don't feel a thing.
ii.

Girl of disease
watches me pass by a Bible preacher.
Fists high, he cries: *Freedom from sin!*

If I could, I’d tell him
of something more like exorcism.
Her opening up to marks like flinches.

Being body, unbearable body,
body against stained sheet scripture.

I am never going to free from this.

Mr P preacher has a coat hanger wife.
Her mouth betrays myself: a mimic.
If I could, I’d ask her if copywriter
is the only role she yet knows to play.

Whether she was taught to hold burn
under her tongue and keep it there.
Whether there was another self to blame,
for why she had nothing to say?
iii.

If I could unlock this jaw,
I'd tell my shadow how strange
it feels to be held by someone
who does not take advantage of me.

I'd tell that wife how normal it feels
to stage my own break in.

Tell the preacher that I am pure body,
impure spirit, and wrapped in sin.

I understand being accommodation
to little girls and leeches. But,
dear stranger haunting foreign skeleton,
it is time for us to separate.

I don't want you as myself.

To be someone's drunken boast,
not a whisper nor a footnote nor a ghost.
I am sick of having these words
for loss and addiction,
bereft of conviction.
Have had enough of women
belonging as city to stray hands;
shelter to something that is never love.
I will sit on a street corner and preach.

This is my body.
This is my voice, cracking
and I am that which will not be
shelved away this time.

I will name her vessel, my landmine.
I will call your body, a home.
I will claim this body, my own.
Please Do Not Abandon Me.
Look, Empire
Ryder Collins

look, that house is burning

empire tells us that houses are on fire
we stand in the street & there are snowflakes
empire says, ash ash everywhere

empire says it’s my fault & everyone agrees

we agree

empire goes fox hunting
& people cry for the fox
& people cry for the dogs
no one cries for empire
no one here cares cos we’re not
traditionalists who cut off
tails & bloody our faces
we’re traditionalists who fear
woods & wolves who fear
little girls in riding hoods

& the teenage girls

teenage girls will strip a fox
of its fur in less than ten seconds
teenage girls will set your street
on fire with a zippo they stole
from your uncle teenage girls
will dance in the ashes, will eat the ashes
will eat everything & everyone they come
across except for foods, thus
spake empire

empire’s always right cos

&
where are the teenage girls when the uncle
says he never touched them & the girls don’t eat won’t eat

it's their only way to control
it's their way to say fuck you, empire

except empire love the skinnyass girls

& that house be really burning & the flames
In the Woods
Lisa Chavez

When I was almost 30, I spent an hour a week with a therapist who was interested in Jungian psychology. I went for marriage counseling, but my husband wouldn’t go with me, so in the end, the counseling was a way for me to talk through leaving my marriage. I wanted to start right in with my marital problems, but the therapist started much earlier, with my childhood, my adolescence. “Was there ever any sexual abuse?” she asked.

I felt myself go still. “Not much,” I said, wondering, even as I said it, what “not much” meant.

“How much,” she asked, in her professionally neutral voice.

I told her.

When I left her office that day I was shaky. I went out, startlingly, not into the nighttime landscape of Alaska I’d just relived, but into the alien brightness of a searing summer day in Phoenix. Got on my bicycle for my ride home. While waiting for a traffic light at a busy intersection, a young man whistled at me from a car, and though he was probably ten years younger than me and not threatening, I felt my legs begin to shake. It wasn’t him; it was the things I had recounted, how I’d been transported back. I rode my bike home in storm of tears and resurrected fear.

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As a girl, I wove myself a web of daydream, stories. They all involved safety. Always I was alone. I lived in a cabin in the wilderness, with my wolf dog and a gun. I was a crack shot. Or I was a rich girl who lived alone on the California coast, an actress, maybe, famous for her solitary ways and her fiercely protective dog. If there were men in my daydreams, they were distant and threatening, something I needed to protect myself against. How old was I when I told myself these stories? Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. The dog, the gun—these were talismans of safety. I walked the streets of our Alaskan neighborhood, ducked into the woods where I felt safe, hidden, dog at my side, and told myself stories.
In those years, and beyond, I disliked men with certain looks. Handsome white men with dark hair and mustaches, green eyes. Tall, thin black men with dark skin and close-cropped hair. Older men. I was afraid of older men.

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Some girls are more womanly at 14, not emotionally, but physically. I was not. In pictures of me from that time, I have a child’s gaze—distracted and slightly unfocused, as if the world I am seeing is very different from the world before me. I was thin and narrow, no hips, only a hint of breasts. Like many children of my age—the 1970s—I was a curious mixture of innocence and knowing. I knew about sex intellectually—I’d had sex education courses—but did not understand it in any real way. It was mysterious and meaningless. Yet I knew I was supposed to want it, supposed to want to be “sexy.” I was not entirely innocent—I’d learned to smoke marijuana the year before, tried to choke down beer when it was offered. I’d looked at the magazines left around by one of my mother’s boyfriends—Playboy and Hustler—and so I had an idea about what sex entailed, even if the idea was skewed. But I couldn’t imagine that those things had anything to do with me. I was a child, and I looked and acted like a child.

My mother and I had met Will the summer before, when we had first moved to Alaska. In the mid-seventies, Fairbanks was bloated with pipeline workers, real estate was at a premium, and places to rent went exceptionally high. We didn’t have much money. We camped mostly, moving from campground to campground to beat the seven-day limits. But occasionally, my mother took us to the cheapest hotel she could find—the Cripple Creek Hotel in Ester, a gold-rush era hotel at $30 a night. As an added bonus, there was the Malamute Saloon.

I loved the Malamute Saloon. It was everything a child in love with Alaska could want. The old false-front building contained tables made of cable spools and sawdust on the floor. The waiters—all young men—wore old-time clothes, white shirts and black vests and pants, red garters festooning arms. And best of all, there was a show, twice nightly. The show included a tired vaudeville performance with silly puns and songs—the young waiters doubled as performers. After this show, the house lights
dimmed and the owner of the place would seat himself on the stage in the lantern light and recite a poem by Robert Service.

I always looked forward to nights when we stayed at Cripple Creek, because going to the Malamute Saloon was such a treat. For my mother too. That first summer, we were as much tourists as those off the buses that sat in the saloon with us, eating peanuts and throwing the shells on the floor. My mother ordered me Shirley Temples, and I sipped them while she flirted with the young waiters. They enjoyed my mother too, I think, for she really stood out in that dusty bar full of mostly elderly tourists, my young mother in her short skirts and low-cut blouses, white high heels inappropriate for the rough wood floors. She liked to be up at the bar best, because that is where Will worked, behind the bar, and of all the waiters, he was the best looking. He looked like Mark Spitz, the Olympic swimming champ who was the idol of girls in those days. My mother liked to flirt with him.

One night, I begged my mother to take us to the Malamute Saloon and she agreed, but when we got there, the hotel was full. We knew by then that our campsite would long be gone, and so we had no place to go for the night. My mother told our troubles to Will. He offered us his bed in the staff quarters. The waiters—most of whom were from out of state—stayed in a big dorm room in one of the buildings adjoining the hotel. I remember by mother was worried about sleeping in a room full of young men, but in the end, only I slept there, as she spent most of the night partying with Will and the other waiters at another bar up the road. I didn't sleep much myself—I was afraid and it was noisy—but no one bothered me, and we left by six a.m. I don't think my mother slept at all.

I think she was disappointed that there was nothing more between her and Will, because my mother talked about him some, how good looking he was. But life continued, and Will was forgotten.

Until the following summer.

My mother and I met him one Saturday as we walked through the Pay-n-Save parking lot. A small blue pickup swerved up next to us, and he leaned through the window and waved.

“Sandy,” he called to my mother. “Remember me? Will from the Malamute?”
We both did, of course. Who could forget those good looks, dark hair and a mustache, and vivid green eyes? My mother looked pleased to see him. They talked a bit, and my mother gave him our address. As he drove away, she smiled to herself, and I knew she hoped he’d visit.

And he did. I don’t know if he planned it, or if it was just an accident he decided to take advantage of, but when he stopped by that first time, I was alone. I think now he must have known my mother wasn’t there, because her distinctive Camaro was not in the driveway. I don’t know if he knew I was there or not. I just remember that he was there and my mother wasn’t, and instead of leaving when he found that out, he seemed inclined to stay. He sprawled long-legged on the couch, and after my initial fear of talking to an adult subsided, I found myself pleased by his attention—he asked me about school, about what I liked to do. He asked me if I had a boyfriend. I could feel my face flush at this question, and I shook my head, too shy to answer aloud.

“Why not?” he asked, leaning forward towards me, as if the answer really shocked him. “A beautiful girl like you? I know a boy who’d love you.”

I was flattered, of course. No one had ever called me beautiful. No one except my mother, and I didn’t believe her. I understand now how typical his behavior was, how men like him prey on girls like that, the shy uncertain ones, hungry for any attention.

Several things made his seduction easy. Seduction is not the right term for what he did, and when I use it, I don’t mean what he did physically. I mean what he did to me mentally, how he seduced me into believing that I somehow caused what happened between us. One thing was this notion of beauty and desirability. No one had ever called me beautiful before—for the most part no one noticed me at all. I knew that to be beautiful was the thing every woman wanted most—or so my mother told me. My mother was beautiful—she always had men flirting with her, desiring her. And I wanted that too. And if the man was one so obviously desirable himself—so much so that even my own mother wanted him—than that was something I could not easily turn away from.

I remember another incident that occurred that summer that will shed some light on my feelings about beauty. My mother had a second job, part-time, at a rental car agency at the airport. One day she took me with her while she went to pick up her paycheck. She stood at the counter joking with
the other employees, two other attractive young women. They drew the attention of a middle-aged man, who stopped and asked what three lovely ladies were laughing at. I stood there, looking at the floor, a sad fourth, neither lovely nor a lady. I guess he noticed me then, and stopped and looked at me directly. “And you may be lovely some day too,” he said, and I could feel myself begin to cry, so I turned away quickly and fled to the bathroom.

I don't think he meant to be cruel, though his words hurt me. But they also seemed just to me, because I knew, from looking in the mirror, that I fit into no known notions of beauty—especially, I did not look my lively blonde mother. So I liked the fact that he had not lied, had not patronized me. And I liked the idea that I might grow to be lovely someday. But I also heard the “may” as in “may not” and when I compared my darker skin and Native American features with typical beauty, I worried I might never measure up. None of these are uncommon adolescent worries, I know, but mine were exacerbated by the fact that my mother never acknowledged my race—my difference from her, and from the majority. And so when Will called me beautiful, I did not believe him, but I was grateful he had said it nonetheless.

The second thing that bound me to him was marijuana. I had begun smoking it the winter before in junior high, and I knew that my mother could never find out about it. And so when he offered to get high with me that first afternoon, it was, though I didn't know it, a way to swear me to secrecy, so everything else could be hinged on silence sealed with drugs.

Perhaps what he did would have scared me less if I had been less innocent. He came over again. We smoked dope, listened to records, and he flattered me. Told me how lovely I was, praised my choice in music. Promised again to introduce me to a boy my age who would like me. When I told my mother he'd stopped by, she looked disturbed, and told me I couldn't have him in the house if she wasn't there. So the next time he called, I told him that, and he had said no problem, he'd meet me at the park down the street instead.

So I went. Walked down the gravel street in my scuffed tennis shoes, 14-years-old, hiding behind my long, loose hair. Excited, because I was going to meet a guy, because what I was doing was secret. Scared for the same reasons, and scared because he was so much older than me.
He was parked near the baseball field. I got in the truck. We talked. I asked him about the boy, surprised at my own boldness, but wondering when I'd meet him. He admitted there wasn't one. I wasn't surprised. He asked me if I'd ever been kissed before, and I said no. Then he turned my face to his and kissed me, my first real kiss, but what I remember most was surprise turning to fear—it was all too much, the tickle of his mustache, his tongue in my mouth. I pulled away.

“Do you mind?” he asked. “Do you mind if it's me who likes you? Because you're so beautiful.” He kissed me again. I could feel my legs beginning to tremble, and I pressed my back up against the door.

What did I say? Anything? I don't remember. I remember, then, what he did next, which was to put my hand on his crotch so I could feel the hardness there. “Feel what you do to me,” he said.

And I pulled my hand away quickly. Too much, too much. I began to cry, my hand fumbling for the door handle.

He was careful. He didn't scare me more. He touched my arm gently, wiped at my tears. “I'm sorry,” he said, “it was too much. I won't hurt you. But did you like your first kiss?”

I suppose I nodded through my tears, afraid to risk his displeasure, but I didn't like it at all. It's hard for me even to recall or imagine my feelings now—I'm so far from being that child. The things I think are erotic now, the pleasure of feeling the roughness of a man's face against my own, the teasing of his tongue in my mouth, the thrill of feeling his hardness, his desire, all of those are things I've grown to love with the right man. But I am a woman now, and then I was a child, and those things were simply alien, frightening. At that point in my life, I don't know that I'd felt much of what I could truly call sexual desire. I'd had crushes, of course, known emotional attachments, but I don't remember knowing or having felt anything much sexually yet. I was truly a virgin—innocent of desire. And so my reaction to this man was simply fear.

That's all he did. Kissed me again, and sent me on my way home. But the reason he lingers in my mind, in addition to the fear I felt, is because now I'm chilled by his predatory planning. He intended more, he just didn't get the chance. He planned. Bound me to him by secrets and drugs. Comforted me...
when I was fearful, because he didn't want to scare me off completely; he wanted to keep seeing me so he could lead me into what he wanted to do.

That day I went home, scared and shaky. I was pleased I'd had my first kiss, but scared by it too, scared especially by what he'd done, putting my hand on his crotch. I wondered if sex was like this for everyone, then wondered why, if so, anyone ever did it. It never occurred to me that he shouldn't do what he was doing.

A few days later and he was back at the house. Sprawling again on the couch. Did I like the kiss? Did I want to do it again? He promised he'd go slow; he knew I was inexperienced. I huddled at the other end of the couch, staying out of the range of his hands.

Then the phone rang, a clarion of relief. My mother, calling from her job cocktailling to check on me.

“What are you doing,” she asked, but I was too afraid and too stoned to answer clearly. Her voice turned sharp with worry. “Is anyone there?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, but I didn't volunteer more.

“Is it Will?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I'll be right there,” she said, and hung up before I could reply.

Years later we talked about this, and I asked my mom how she knew he was there, how she knew to call.

“I don't know,” she said. “I just had a feeling, that's all. Thought I should call. And when you sounded funny on the phone, I just knew. Mother's intuition, I guess. I told the bartender I had to go and I ran out the door, leaving all my tables to take care of themselves.”

We laughed about it then, not the incident itself, but the way she knew. We laughed about how she must have looked, flying in the door in a rage, blonde hair streaming behind her like a gorgon's snakes. When she got in the house, she didn't give him a moment to speak.
“What are you doing here?” she screamed. “Do you know how old she is? She’s 14! Fourteen years old. Young enough to send you to jail. Do you know that? If you come here again I’ll call the police.”

On the couch, the man who’d seemed so tall and threatening shrunk into himself, as if trying to ward off a blow. He opened his mouth to speak. Maybe he even did—I can’t remember now. But nothing registered, nothing could withstand the artillery attack of my mother’s shouts.

She came across the room, put her arms out to me and I went to her, comforted by her embrace. Will saw his chance and headed for the door. Before he got out my mother turned toward him, her voice now quieter but sharp as flint. “On second thought, if you come near her again I won’t call the police. I’ll make sure you never get near another little girl again. I’ll shoot you myself.” Those words followed him out the hall and out the door.

And then it was only my mother and me. Her arm around me, my face buried against her. I cried.

She lifted my wet face up by the chin, looked at me. “Did he hurt you? Because if that bastard hurt you...”

I shook my head, couldn’t look at her.

“Did he touch you?” she asked, and I knew she meant in a bad way.

I shook my head again; I was too ashamed to tell her everything. “He kissed me,” I said, and that started off a fresh round of tears. “He just kissed me.”

I saw a slight smile before my mother, sighing in relief, kissed the top of my head herself. “My poor baby,” she said. “I won’t let him near you again.”

I’ve thought of her smile since then, thought of how it must have been relief, relief that nothing had happened, but also, perhaps a smile of adult knowledge, a smile at my innocence, because really what I’d told her had happened was so little, and my reaction marked me as the child I still was. My mother, my fierce protective angel, descending in lightning bolt of wrath. Saving me. He never came back.

My first kiss.
There was Jerry, the boyfriend of Ana, the first young woman my mother had stay with me while she worked up north on the pipeline. Ana would take me over to her boyfriend’s apartment so she could have sex with him—they’d leave me in the living room with his reel-to-reel tape player and a coke, and they’d be gone for hours. I was bored, mostly, and I didn’t like the music he played—soul, rhythm and blues—so the music was no comfort. Ana emerged from the bedroom puffy-lipped and sleepy-eyed, her neck mottled with bruise. Love bites, she called them, but I had no idea what that meant, even though I’d seen kids with them at school.

Sometimes he stayed at my house with her, in my mother’s bedroom. He ignored me absolutely—I can’t remember a single word he ever said to me. But I remember what he did. It was spring. I was staying up to watch a movie following the Tonight Show. On the couch, wrapped in a blanket, I read and half-listened to Johnny Carson’s monologue. Ana and Jerry had long ago gone to bed. I heard the bedroom door open, someone go into the bathroom. Then come out. Heard footsteps enter the room. It was Jerry, wearing only silky yellow pajama bottoms that stood out startlingly against his dark skin. He was carrying a towel too, and he walked slowly into the kitchen. “Whoops,” he said, and I looked up from my book. He’d let the towel drop, half-hard penis falling out of his pajamas. He was looking directly at me. “Sorry,” he said, and smiled.

I felt my face flare. “It’s ok,” I whispered, and probably I even smiled, but it was not okay, and my smile was the equivalent of a subordinate dog’s tail wag, a frantic, please-don’t-hurt-me reaction. I stared at the TV fiercely, willing him to go away.

I heard footsteps. Coming closer. Saw his bare feet near the couch, strangely elegant, long and dark, contrasting with the butter yellow of the pajamas. I kept looking at his feet, afraid to look anywhere else. But he lifted my chin, turned my head towards him, and I saw then he was still exposed, his cock at the level of my face, and I was so terrified, I could feel myself shaking, tears scalding my face.

“We don’t want to Ana to hear.”
He dropped my chin as my voice raised, pleading.

Then Ana’s voice from the bedroom. “Jerry? Are you coming back to bed? What are you doing?”

He turned away, put himself back in his pajamas. “I’m just getting some water,” he called out to her. Then softer, to me, “you better not tell her.” He padded off down the hall.

And I sat on the couch, frozen, tears raging, nose running. I didn’t bother to wipe my face. I watched the whole movie, though I have absolutely no memory of it. My ears tuned, not to the film, but to the bedroom, praying I wouldn’t hear the door open again. The movie: Klute, Jane Fonda as a prostitute who is brutally raped. I’ve never been able to watch it again.

Nothing more happened. When my mother called from up north, I told her Jerry was living at our house, and my mother made both Ana and him move out, so he never touched me again. Ana moved into his apartment. He hit her, a lot, before she left him. I never told her what he’d done to me, but she hated me for getting her kicked out of my mother’s house.

Years later, I saw him again. I was in my early twenties, and innocent no longer. Far worse things had happened to me since, and I had survived them. I was working in the photo lab at the university one dark winter afternoon. I was alone, and the door opened and someone came in. A tall, thin black man, not even vaguely familiar. But he stood in the doorway and watched me in a way that made me uncomfortable. Then he said my name, “Lisa?”

“Yes?” I still didn’t know who he was, but my body tensed, as if it sensed danger before memory engaged.

“I’m Jerry, remember? Ana’s old boyfriend?” He walked into the room.

I began to tremble. “I remember,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

Then the door opened again, and my sense of relief was so strong I could barely remain standing. It was my friend Ron. He looked quickly between Jerry and I, and somehow understood all was not right.
“Hey, Lise, sorry I’m late.” He walked to me quickly, protectively, slipped his arm around me in a quick hug. He turned toward Jerry, his glance sharp. Then back to me. “Are you okay? Is this guy bothering you?” For a moment they stood there facing each other. Ron was short but muscular from summers spent roofing. The confrontation was over in a moment.

Jerry turned toward the door. “I know her from a long time ago,” he said.

“Do you want to see him?” Ron asked me.

I shook my head.

“So get going,” Ron said. “Or I’ll call campus security.”

When Jerry left, I collapsed against the sink I’d been standing at, film forgotten. It had been so many years. So many years, and yet just the sight of him, the sound of his voice had spiraled me back to my childhood, had made me a frightened girl on a couch. I didn’t want to cry in front of Ron, but I did, and he put his arms around me and rubbed my back. Handsome Ron, who’d got me on with the roofing crew too, who I’d had a crush on for over a year, loving his green eyes, his warm brown skin, his short dreadlocks.

“Thank you,” I said, speaking into his shoulder. “He hurt me a long time ago when I was a kid. I can’t believe I was so afraid.”

He patted my back. “It’s ok.” He let me go, and I wiped away my tears. “I knew something was wrong as soon as I walked in,” he said. “I could see it your face. That’s why I acted like I was meeting you here. So he’d know to leave you alone.”

Who knows what Jerry meant to do. But just seeing him had propelled me backward, propelled us both backward into old dynamics. That was what Ron had seen when he walked in the room, an old scene being replayed, though both actors were older, were different people. The fear remained the same.

***

There were all the usual things too, when I was an older teenager. The guys who kissed me when I didn’t want them to. The guys who I had sex with though I didn’t want to, because they convinced me I had to, or because I was so drunk or drugged it was easier to give in then to protest. I didn’t think of
those things as rape, or as sexual assault. That was just life. Every girl I knew had, at sometime, given in
to a degree of unwanted sexual contact—it was just the way things were. One of my friends had been
raped in a bedroom by a friend of a friend. He'd tried to hold his hand over her mouth, but though she
yelled out “no” again and again, the friends in the living room never came to her aid. These things
happened. These were the stories young women told one another, because who else could we tell?

My best friend Sherry was with me when I met the man who raped me. He scared me enough
that even very soon after, my memory failed me: I could remember neither his name nor his face, as if
the act of forgetting could save me. And I didn't call it rape then. I didn't call it anything at all—it was
just something we talked about once, then never mentioned again, as if the sheer mention of it were
enough to bring disaster back to us.

I was 17, not a virgin, but only newly sexually experienced. My introduction to consensual sex
had been a few encounters with Sherry’s older brother in his basement bedroom. He was a few years
out of high school, a former football player, sought after by pretty white girls, a situation that caused
some consternation in his conservative black family. I think their parents knew about me, but they
didn’t seem to mind—I was, at least, not white, and not likely to cause him the sort of problems a little
white girl with a racist daddy might. So we got high and kissed in the basement, and finally ended up in
his bed, an experience I found interesting if not quite as earth-shattering as songs and stories made me
expect.

That was the extent of my sexual experience. But like many young people who aren't actually
having sex, I had an enormous amount of bravado. I’d say anything, said I’d do anything, and I suppose
I half meant it. So one day when I was walking downtown, back from the Dairy Queen with Sherry and
another friend, I yelled at a guy I saw in a car. It was a fancy muscle car, blue, a Camaro or a Firebird,
and the guy behind the wheel was classically good-looking in a 70s way: shaggy hair and a mustache.
He might have been blonde. I don't remember what I yelled. It got his attention. He circled the car back,
stopped to talk. Up close he was older than I’d thought, late twenties or early thirties. Insistent. Asked
for my phone number. I didn't want to give it, suddenly had doubts, remembered Will. But there were
my two friends, giggling and nudging me, and I had to act brave. I give him my number. And accepted
their congratulations as he drove away.

I saw him twice after that. The first time he took me on a date, as he called it. He picked me up
at my house. Was nice. No alarms. But he drove me up to an isolated part of Farmer's Loop road where
we smoked a joint, and before I could even react, he'd started touching me, taking off my clothes. I
didn't want him, didn't know how to say that. I told him no, and pushed his hands away, but he
persisted, and finally I was too scared to resist any further. He fucked me there in his car, and I let him
do it, but felt as disconnected from my body as a kite tethered by the most fragile of strings. It wasn't
like Joe, who had been tender with me, kissing me, holding me, flirting before he'd proceeded further,
all the things I thought I was supposed to get before sex. I didn't know this man, didn't want him, and
though I let my body move and be moved, I wasn't really present.

I didn't think of that as rape then. It was unwanted, but I didn't protest much him. I was silent as
he drove me home, huddled against the car door, but he didn't notice. He dropped me off in front of my
house, and just an hour or so after our date began, it was over.

He called the next week for another date. I didn't want to go. So I invented, told him that I'd
gotten back together with my boyfriend. There was a silence on the phone. Then his voice, hissing in
anger, “Is anyone else home?”

Why did I answer? I don't know. Because I was too young to know better. So I said no, and I
hung up the phone, and I crouched there in the hall, waiting. And when the banging on the door began
a bit later, I opened the door. I suppose I didn't think he'd really hurt me, but when he came in, his face
red with anger, a vein in his forehead pumping, pumping, I knew I'd made a mistake. I grabbed the
phone to call someone—my mother, the police—and he knocked the phone from my hand. “Little girl,”
he said, “I'm no one's one-night stand.”

I fled before his wrath, but I fled the wrong way, to my bedroom. Like an animal retreating to its
lair, I went to the place I'd always gone to feel safe. I had the presence of mind to try to shut and lock the
door, but he threw it open. Knocked to me the bed. Ripped down my shorts. And then I lay there half
on the bed and half off, while he did it, lay there crushed against the stuffed animals on the bed, staring
at the floral wall paper as if I could escape somehow into a field of orange flowers, a field of poppies that would bring a sweet sleep. He held me down with the weight of his body, my arms pinned above my head, wrists twisted in his grasp. He called me baby when he came, and kissed me on the mouth, and I wanted to spit on him or to bite him, wanted row upon row of shark's teeth that could rip and savage him.

But I did nothing. I was afraid. I was hurt. I was 17. I turned my head to the wall while he pulled up his jeans. “Now,” he said, “It's not a one-night stand.” I didn't cry. I lay there, breathless and numb, staring at the flowers on the wall. Listened to him leave. Finally, I got up. Cleaned myself up. Threw away the white shorts I'd been wearing, the panties too. Picked up the stuffed animals that I'd always slept with, put them away in the closet, as if they'd borne witness to something I couldn't face.

Then I walked to Island Homes to meet my friend Sherry, who was visiting at someone's house. I took a paring knife out of the kitchen drawer and carried it with me, cupped in my hand. Walking over there, I remember trembling every time I heard the rumble of a muscle car. I was so afraid I wanted to hide, wanted to dart into the bushes at every car that passed. When I arrived, I called Sherry outside, so I didn't have to tell her in front of the friend she was visiting, and as we stood in the front yard, a blue car passed, and I ran around the back of the house and crouched near a tree, hiding, though the car wasn't a bit like his.

When I told Sherry, she hugged me, then cursed him, her large brown eyes narrowing to slits. “That fucking asshole,” she said. “What should we do?”

Should we tell her brother Joe? Maybe he and his friends could find this guy and beat him up. I shook my head fiercely—I didn't want Joe to know. Should I tell my mom? I couldn't; she'd be mad because I'd smoked dope with the guy. In fact, one of my greatest fears—illogical as it was—was that he'd come back to my house and tell my mother what he'd done. Should we tell Sherry's father, the police detective? She shook her head before I could speak. No, we both knew we couldn't tell him. I'd be in so much trouble—smoking dope, going out with older men I didn't know. We never once considered that I would not be blamed, that what happened to me was not my fault. So we told no one, and I carried a knife with me after that. And shook when I saw a car that looked like his.
Our logic amazes me now. Why was I so sure that I would be condemned? Hadn’t my mother already proved that her desire to protect me? She had. Didn’t I understand that Sherry’s father’s job was to put men like this rapist in jail? I guess I didn’t. And I was worried about something else. I was afraid if I told about the rape, I’d have to admit to the fact that I wasn’t a virgin anymore, that I’d already gone to Planned Parenthood to get birth control pills, and was taking them. That I’d then have to tell my mother about Joe, and I knew she’d be angry, not only that I’d had sex with him, but because he was black. We’d already had conversations about that. My mother said that while it was fine to have a black girl as a friend, I could never date a black boy, because then I’d “get a reputation for that sort of thing” and no one else (presumably no one white) would want me. I’d been furious about that, had tried to point out to my mother that white boys didn’t want to date me for fear they’d get a reputation of going with Native girls, but she brushed that aside. And her advice had contrasted hilariously with that of Sherry’s parents, who told Sherry and I to stay away from white boys, who “only wanted one thing” from girls like us. All these thoughts tumbled through my mind, spools of thread unwinding into countless confusing complications, and what I came away with was my own guilt. I’d brought this on myself because I wasn’t a virgin, because I did drugs, because I’d crossed racial lines, because I’d yelled at a man on the street and then had sex with him. I was everything I knew I shouldn’t be, and I deserved what I got.

I never told. But I lived, for years, in fear of mustached white men in flashy cars. Like girl after girl after girl, I heaped guilt on myself and fell silent, while the man who raped me went free.

***

For years, I thought I’d escaped the worst of it, that I’d managed to survive, relatively free of scars. Of course, it wasn’t true: I was afraid. I carried a knife throughout high school and after. I’ve already talked about how men with certain looks scared me, but even in that I was selective: I wasn’t afraid of all white men—just certain green-eyed men with mustaches, or a certain type of blonde. I wasn’t afraid of all black men either—just tall thin ones with lean faces and dark skin. I did, however,
develop an extreme distaste for older men, and so all my boyfriends were for years my exact age or slightly younger. I went on. I met boys, had sex, fell in love. I got over it.

Or so I thought. But when I think back to my teen-age years, I wonder. I did things I shouldn't have, things a person who was healthy and unharmed might not have done. I was reckless—I hitchhiked; I walked alone at night. I had sex with any boys who asked, whether I wanted them or not. Always I was surprised by their desire, especially if they were white. I didn't think I was pretty, and I knew in Alaska my Indian looks branded me, made me less than desirable, the kind of girl a boy could fuck but wouldn't date. In fact, that was the history, for both me and Sherry, of our teen-age relations with white boys: they slept with us, but were unlikely to acknowledge our relationship publicly. We pretended we didn't care, saw ourselves as sexual free agents, who did it because we liked it, and didn't want to be owned. But now I see also how we protected ourselves, how we pretended not to notice that the boys were ashamed of us.

And there were the younger boys, the acting out that I see now might have been a reaction to sexual abuse, a way for me to try out desire on someone I thought was safe, someone who wouldn't push me. For a couple of years, when I was 17 and 18, I had crushes on younger boys, boys who were 14, 15 and 16. I flirted with them outrageously, indulged in risqué talk and jokes. For some of them, their own lack of sexual experience made them shy with me, unaggressive, and one of them was a victim of sexual assault himself, something we finally shared with one another. I particularly liked that boy, and we kissed once in almost chaste way, and cuddled on the couch, but there was never more than that, with him or with the others. And so our relationships were a safe dance: plenty of flirting and suggestive talk, but nothing more happened, and I wonder now if that wasn't part of the appeal.

***

There is another story that is illustrative of this time of my life. I made the acquaintance of a biker called Hobie. Hobie was an old man to me, meaning he might have been 40. He had long graying hair and a beard, and he was popular among my teen-aged friends not only because he occasionally had great pot to sell us, but because he'd once rode with the Hell's Angels in LA and had actually met Hunter
S. Thompson as he was writing his book on the Angels, a book we’d all read. Hobie was quiet, and though he tolerated the teen-agers that occasionally descended on his apartment, he rarely spoke, just sipped his beer and rolled another joint. I thought he was an amazing man because he’d ridden with the Angels, but he was old enough and honest enough to have no illusions: he’d pointed out most of them had been pigs, and many of them were dead now and good riddance. I think I talked to him more than the other kids, because he liked to read and so did I, and we talked about books.

I remember one afternoon I went over to his apartment by myself for the first time, to see if he had a joint to smoke. He let me in, offered me a beer and some hash, and we smoked silently and companionably. Then began to talk. Somehow it came around to sex, and I remember I began the conversation, talking about someone who’d hit on me who I didn’t like. Hobie was silent for a while, stroking his beard. Then he said in his quiet voice, “I’ve thought of it. I’ve thought of asking you to come by and have sex, but I thought I’d just scare you off and I didn’t want to do that.”

I froze for a moment, all thoughts of safety vanished. One of the reasons I’d liked him, one of the reasons I’d felt secure enough to visit alone was because he’d never once hit on me. He seemed safe, and I was simply too naive to wonder what a 40-year-old man was doing hanging out with teenagers. I sat there in the chair, in that neat but shabby basement apartment, holding on to the cheap beer going warm in my hand. Looked at this man who I was entirely incapable of seeing in a sexual manner. Wondered, briefly what I was doing there, alone, with this ex Hell’s Angel.

Then he smiled, gently, and repeated his last words. “But I didn’t want to scare you. So I decided not to.”

I don’t remember what happened after that. We talked more, perhaps even smoked more dope. And I left. And I saw him again occasionally after that, and we never mentioned our conversation. I was absurdly grateful to him. Of course, what he was doing was saying here I am, and if you want to I’d like to fuck you. Of course he was, but in a way that both did not risk too much if I rejected him, and in a way that even for me, the girl skittish as a deer, was not threatening. And I thought he was wonderful, because he never pressed me.
I'm suppose I'm still grateful. But not so much. Because I see now how skewed my perceptions were. Instead of seeing what was happening—here was a man who had entirely too much contact with teenagers, who was selling drugs to us, who was making an understated sexual proposal, I saw him as a knight, a good guy, one of the few in my life. All because he didn't try anything. Because he didn't force me.

And indicative of how easily things can get turned around, how young people can be convinced that they deserve abuse. How easily they can be preyed upon. I wonder sometimes if I was simply unlucky to encounter so many bad men. But really I see I was what they sought—the predators, the men who prey on youth. In fact, I was lucky not to have been hurt worse. Lucky to have survived. For I was just what they wanted. A girl mostly alone, left unattended by her hardworking single mother. A shy girl with little confidence in herself. I was easy prey. But now I know that I was not unusual, for young girls and boys are so fragile, so easily preyed upon. Years later, as an academic, I have served on college judicial board cases where there are sexual assaults that girls don't want to take to the police. Each case brings back old pain: the way young women are so vulnerable with their new sexuality, and all the ways in which they can be hurt. And so often the girls are like I was, shy, unsure of themselves, the easiest girls in the world to hurt. I was not unique, and I rage that these things happen again and again, children walking wounded in the world, while the men who hurt them go free. I try to do my part, by listening to the girls, trying to comfort them, advocating for them. And I marvel at their bravery, for some of these girls do tell, refuse to let the men who raped them walk away, unpunished. Some confront their abusers at an enormous cost. And whether they speak or remain silent, they survive, bearing scars, and searching, as I did, for safety, that elusive place we all hope to find.

***

Those days and after, I walked in the woods. I dreamed of living alone, far off the road system, in a place where the predators were animals: grizzly and wolf. I felt safe in the woods, the trees companions that shielded me, hid me, the silence a type of safety. I lived in a small city on the edge of the wilderness, and it was not the wilderness I feared.
The Human Skit

W. Jack Savage
A whiney student was once a powerful form of birth control.

“Mrs. Stevennnss,” Kara said, somehow stretching my surname into three high-pitched syllables.

“Give it back, please. You don’t understand.”

Kara was secretly one of my favorites—a dramatic girl with blue-black hair and facial piercings. While her 29 classmates were obediently reading The Grapes of Wrath, she was reading Twilight. Favorite or not, I had to confiscate the book.

“Sorry, Kara,” I said. “You can have it back at the end of class.”

“But…Edward,” Kara said, pressing a hand to her heart.

“Who?”

“Edward,” Kara said again. “He’s in the book. He’s just so---”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. The entire class was now watching our exchange. “We’re reading Steinbeck. Twilight is kid stuff.”

Walking back to my desk, I noticed the pages of Kara’s novel were dog-eared and worn. The cover was tattered, a few rips clumsily repaired with clear tape. Some of the pages even had brown splotches. Tear stains?

I scoffed, and locked the book in my desk drawer. It sat among lighters, laser pointers, playing cards, and other useless distractions.

***

As my husband helped me to our bedroom, his hand on my elbow, I realized I wanted to die. My face was stiff and ached from crying. The underside of my arm was bruised and sticky with the remnants of medical tape. My stomach clenched and unclenched, pain radiating to the tips of my toes. Everything hurt and I was uncomfortable and the world was bad, bad, bad.
Justin helped me lower myself onto the mattress, then covered my legs with a blanket. "Do you need anything?" he asked, adopting the same stoic expression he had worn last time.

"My Kindle," I said, voice barely audible. I was sniveling and pathetic.

Justin handed me my e-reader, the screen smudged with fingerprints. A red icon in the corner said that only 25% battery remained. That was okay; it wouldn't take long.

I swiped my fingers across the screen, past Jane Austen novels with flowery covers, past the Great Gatsby saluting me with a champagne glass, past George and Lennie sitting on a tree stump, their shadows exaggerated on the ground. I opened *The Hunger Games* instead.

Katniss Everdeen, pursued by a pack of murderous teenagers, scaled a tree. Her burnt leg smarted on the branches. Her pursuers yelled taunts from the ground. The boy from her district, Peeta, seemingly betrayed her. But for the moment, she was safe.

***

When my mother called, I told her the truth: It had been over twenty four hours since I left my bed.

"Do you need anything?" she asked. *Why did everyone keep asking me that?* "I could do your laundry."

I looked at my pile of dirty clothes in the corner, my torn hospital ID bracelet the cherry on top. "I’m good," I said.

"I made a list of books you might like to read," she said. She read the titles aloud: *The Miscarriage Recovery Guide, Empty Arms, Grieving the Child I Never Knew.*

"I read some of those last time," I said.

"There aren’t many books about second miscarriages," she said. "Maybe you can write one."

I glanced down at the screen of my newly charged Kindle. Katniss kissed Peeta in the cave, and though their situation was dire, my heart fluttered. It was a scene I’d re-read a number of times—especially after the gynecologist’s office called to warn that my progesterone levels kept falling, falling, falling...
“There’s always the Bible,” my mother said.

“True,” I replied, and wondered where I stored my Harry Potter books.

***

We were something of a motley crew: a gaggle of English teachers out way past our bedtimes, occupying the back row of the movie theater. My co-workers nibbled popcorn and sent last minute texts as the lights dimmed. I could only sit on the edge of my seat, rigid, heart slamming against my ribs.

“I think Carissa is more excited about this movie than the kids,” I heard someone say.

I didn’t know what group of “kids” they were referring to—the speaker’s own children (they all had them), our students, or the crowd of teens and tweens who sat in the rows before us. It didn’t matter. I was more excited than any of them.

“You don’t understand,” I whispered. I wasn’t sure if anyone heard me.

Onscreen, the opening credits of The Hunger Games began to roll. I gripped my Milk Duds so hard that I crushed the container and smooshed all of the candy.

***

“First hysterectomy?” the anesthesiologist asked.

“Second,” I said. Earlier, a kind nurse had given me a shot to calm my nerves. I could feel it kicking in as I spoke—my head felt too heavy for my neck, my tongue felt too big for my mouth.

“Any questions?” The anesthesiologist was looking at his clipboard, not at me.

“Will I wake up?” I tried to make it sound like a joke, but in my drugged state there was an edge of urgency to my tone.

The anesthesiologist nodded. “We shouldn’t have any problems. Looking at all your information here, you’re healthy as a horse. Good heart rate, good blood pressure, no major health problems. Except those health problems that brought you in, of course. Your uterus is a mess. But your doctor is going to see if she can fix that, okay?”
I could feel the hospital bed beneath me lurch forward on squeaky wheels, and I fixed my eyes on the ceiling. I thought about Katniss Everdeen, a lone teenage girl taking on an oppressive government. I thought about Harry Potter making the decision to walk into the Forbidden Forest, alone, to die for his friends. If they could do that, I could act brave in the face of my messy uterus, couldn’t I?

In a sterile, silver operating room, my gynecologist bent over me. “Hello,” she said.

“I’m brave,” I said.

“Good,” she said, strapping a mask to my nose and mouth. “Count down from three for me.”

***

I felt like an imposter.

Sweat pooled at my back as I stood at the head of the classroom. I wasn’t lecturing to teenagers this time; instead, my audience was composed of teachers. Teachers from another district who supposedly needed my help with writing instruction. I didn’t feel qualified to give advice—in fact, I felt as though I were drowning in a pool of grief, merely surviving until summer break.

“You have to get your students interested in reading,” I said. It was a direct quote from my Power Point. Such stupid, useless advice.

A teacher near the front raised one hand, stroked his beard with the other. “My students hate to read,” he said.

*That’s not a question,* I thought.

“Do you talk to them about the things they’re reading?” I asked. “You might want to read a few young adult novels so you’re familiar with—”

“I’ve tried. It’s mind numbing—love triangles and such. I’m an adult, after all.” He chuckled.

I blushed, the tips of my ears growing warm like Ron Weasley’s.

***
Kelly gasped, her hand on her heart, mere inches from her swollen belly.

“Carissa!” she said. “This is the cuuuutest.”

She held up the gift so the other baby shower guests could see it: a children’s book version of *Romeo & Juliet*. Guests predictably ooohed and ahhed through mouthfuls of cake and punch.

“There’s no double suicide in this one,” I said. Everyone laughed.

“I hope you bought two copies,” Kelly said, and an icy hot fear began to creep up my spine.

“Because I know this is going to be *you* very soon.” She pointed to her distended stomach.

The guests nodded as though their heads were on springs. One even reached for me and squeezed my shoulders.

Returning home after the shower, I stayed up long into the night watching all eight Harry Potter movies. Shakespeare was overrated, I decided.

***

We rounded the corner and there it was: cobblestone streets, kitschy shops, wagons loaded with butter beer and pumpkin juice. A dragon, balanced precariously on top of Gringott’s Bank, breathed fire into the air.

“I can’t believe you’re so excited,” my mother said. “You’re a grown woman.” She sounded half amused, half embarrassed.

An employee approached us. She was wearing a Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes uniform and a Gryffindor lanyard around her neck.

“Welcome to Diagon Alley,” she said. Her smile was wide and friendly.

Something bubbled in my throat, stung my sinuses. Something made of magic, of dystopias, of avoiding the baby aisle at department stores.

I burst into tears. The employee stopped smiling.

***
We'd reached a pivotal moment in literature: Atticus Finch's final plea for Tom Robinson's acquittal.

I knew, as all teachers knew, that a little drama was sometimes needed. I walked slowly between the rows of student desks, gripping Harper Lee's masterpiece as though it were a jeweled crown.

“Read this passage to yourself,” I said. “Let the language sink in. Look for those rhetorical strategies we discussed.”

The students all turned to their books, many of the copies so ancient that the covers hung on with the assistance of duct tape. That's how I knew Preston's book was different: fluorescent lights bounced off a shiny, intact cover and the pages were crisp and free from annotations.

I stopped near his desk. He was gazing at the book with round, unblinking eyes.

“Whatcha reading, Preston?” I whispered.

Preston shook his head, rousing himself from a reading trance. It was a feeling I knew too well.

“Sorry,” he said. He shut the book, and I caught a glimpse of the cover: The Maze Runner.

I knew that To Kill a Mockingbird was a timeless piece of literature that was still applicable in today's society. I knew that Atticus Finch was the embodiment of bravery and moral goodness. I knew the state of Kentucky mandated that I teach the novel, harp on the literary elements, ensure that every ninth grader that passed through my classroom door knew Scout and Jem and Dill and Calpurnia.

I also knew that Preston's father recently passed away. I knew sometimes he arrived to class with a hollow, blank expression. I knew that sometimes I could feel his grief, and it reminded me of my own, a sort of morbid kinship.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“What?”

“In The Maze Runner. Where are you?”

Preston looked away, as though deciding whether or not he should answer the question. Finally, he said, “There's a girl. In the box.”

“That’s a good part,” I said, squeezing his shoulder. “Everything will change now.
“I hope you mean that it gets better,” he said. “I mean, the book is good. Really good. I just want them to get out of the Glade. Go through the Maze.”

“There will be difficult times ahead for Thomas,” I said. “But it all works out. I can promise you that.”

And, walking back to my desk, I allowed myself to believe that it would all work out for Preston and I—just like in our favorite books.
The Two
Shawn LaSota

He tried not to think of all the nights he spent caressing her belly, cooing to the thing inside. They did not know the sex yet and so it was their “jelly-bean” until a more suitable name could be given. He sang lullabies to his unborn babe, not knowing that it was already dead.

He was at work when she called, her voice ravaged by tears, nose stuffed with grief, and he already knew the words before she said them.

“What’s wrong?” he said first.

“Are you okay to talk?”

He had a class, but he had forgotten about them and was already in the hallway walking towards, well, nowhere. He just had to move, had to walk, as if distancing himself from where he was supposed to be would distance himself from the news she was about to share.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said suddenly speaking in doubles. “Go-go.”

“It’s gone.”

He knew it, expected it, and had waited for it like closing your eyes and waiting for the sound of a gunshot in an execution. He thought the wait was the worst part, the anticipation for the bad news, the anxiety of not-knowing. But of course he was wrong. All the harshness of the world being withheld in those few breathless moments was just the final breath before the tidal wave of tragedy.

“Are you sure?”

He didn’t realize immediately how stupid and insulting the question was. She was alone at the hospital, staring at the sonogram machine, seeing nothing, no heartbeat, just an off-white blob of what used to be there, what used to be alive, and of course there was nothing. Nothing at all. Not exactly true. There was something, it was just dead. So yes, she was sure. She had to be sure. The doctor had told her. The doctor was on the phone. The doctor was telling her how sorry she was, how it wasn't her fault, how there was nothing that could have been done, how it said nothing about the health of her or her
husband, how it was common, one in four, 30%, or was it 25%, something like that, and how it didn’t mean she couldn’t get pregnant again, how first time pregnancies often resulted in miscarriage.

They were sure.

She didn’t answer. She didn’t need to answer for him to know they were sure, she was sure, and it was only his denial of the moment causing him to doubt, to question.

“Go home,” he said. “I’m taking off the rest of the day. I’ll meet you there.” He was still walking down the hallway, he’d made it across the school, talking on his cell phone, setting a bad example, breaking the rules, but God help the person who told him to get off the phone. “Are you okay to drive?” he added as an afterthought.

“Yes,” she said and of course he doubted it. He didn’t think he’d be able to drive. But he rode a bike to school. Not as a tree hugger. Not as a way to save money. But just because he liked riding his bike.

“I’ll meet you there.”

Realizing he was on the other side of the school, he hung up the phone. The halls were empty, strange he thought, between bells they were so packed with people getting to and from classes. He was able to think, contemplate, make a list of things to do before leaving. His footsteps echoed throughout the cavernous hallways, tiled with ugly colors meant to match ugly lockers that weren’t supposed to be permanent in the first place.

He avoided eye contact in his class. They fell silent once he entered and reached for the phone by the door. He set up a substitute. He scribbled out pathetic plans involving a movie with Robin Williams, grabbed his bicycle from the back of the room and left.

***

On the brief ride home, he tried not to think of the plans they’d made, his wife and him. Playing catch in the back yard with his son. Taking his daughter to father/daughter dances and letting her stand on top of his shoes, letting her hold onto his pinky fingers, while he stepped back and forth in an awkward penguin walk. Reading stories at night not only to get them to go to sleep and develop their
reading comprehension but hopefully get them to like books as much as he did. The stories he would tell them about his life, meeting their mother, antics with their uncle. The songs he would sing to them. The things he would build them in his wood shop. The kid-movies he would watch with them, the first time for them, the thousandth for him. The great and classic movies he would watch with them to expose them to great cinema at a young age so they could be as cultured as he considered himself to be. The music he and his wife would raise their children on. None of this Wiggles bullshit, but Kiss and Reo Speedwagon. Instead of falling asleep to lullabies, they would play and sing Elton John. He or She would be the only child in elementary school who knew Billy Joel and could sing “For the Longest Time” in the highest octave to perfectly round out a family formed singing group. Nights of sitting around the table and discussing the day as a family, Sunday mornings of going to church and playing with other kids in the nursery room downstairs, watching them walk for the first time, say his name for the first time, say her name for the first time, laugh for the first time, cry for the first time, see colors and a rainbow and swim and love for the first time. To be held for the first time. To have a tiny infant hand wrapped around his finger for the first time.

All those moments and plans were gone. Evaporated in the void of what might have been.

His wife arrived home the same time he did. He rode his bike through the yard and into the garage while she left the car in the driveway.

He didn't say anything. He put the bike away and went to her, arms already outstretched. She wasn't a touchy-feely person, but she accepted his embrace, even though she didn't act on it herself. Her eyes were red-rimmed, evidence of crying she had done alone. He felt a pang of guilt imagining it, probably surrounded by nurses who didn't know what to say, didn't know if it was okay to hug her, touch her. Probably thinking the husband was some sort of bastard for not being here, who preferred to be at work rather than at the hospital with his wife looking at their child.

He hugged her tightly, pulling her cellophane feeling windbreaker hard against him, breathing in her hair, and tried not to think about the amalgamation of both of them that had been lost.

“I love you,” he said.
“Love you too,” she said without feeling, without conviction. He heard the numbness in her voice and tried to think of a way to take care of her. But it seemed impossible when he was just as numb.

***

They took their small dog to the park, bought ice cream and sat in the chill October wind eating it. They watched the small dog jump onto picnic tables and sniff out places to piss, never telling him “No,” or keeping him from anything. He was their only baby now. He got to be the baby for a while longer.

They had timed the pregnancy perfectly. They had been obsessed with their charts and schedules. They had put on a calendar when they needed to have sex and where. Their child was probably conceived sometime while they were traveling to Virginia, probably in Kentucky or West Virginia at one of the hotels, maybe even at their Virginia Beach motel or in the parking garage after a particularly long walk on the boardwalk. And why not? They were married and they were trying to start a family. They were in love, on vacation, so it was a mixture of 1 part passion and 1 part procreation.

When they got back home, a few days before her August period, they took a pregnancy test because they couldn’t wait. The results were positive. She was pregnant. But these things happen and unhappen. There was no need to get their hopes up yet. They were still three days away from her period and the test was from Wal-Mart. They had a second test just to be certain.

The second test was a few days after when her period would normally be. Of course it was positive as well. A little blue plus in the tiny window on the stick covered with pee. A little plus as if to say, “They’re s a plus one coming.” But it wasn’t a plus one, not really. It had been an expected thing, like a member of the family who hadn’t shown up yet. The room at the front of the house was empty, the name was picked out, boxes of diapers had even begun to pile up in the closet waiting for use. All that was missing was the kid. The baby. The one to make their duo into a trio and their family complete.

And the moment was delayed yet again. He tried not to think about the hours he spent touching her stomach, wondering if the baby could feel it. Tried not to think about the money they’d already spent on doctor’s visits. The hours spent discussing how the child would be raised. The hours spent
reading articles on raising children, Googling how to be a good dad, reading how to bond with your boy or girl, reading books about genetic mutations or recessive genes and panicking about what if the boy or girl was actually a hermaphrodite or a transsexual or something else entirely? How would he handle it? What would he say? Love was the answer, said every website he considered. Love them and nothing could go wrong. But bullshit, he thought. He was a normal fucking kid and his parents loved the shit out of him but he still ended up in therapy with depression and suicidal thoughts because of some goddamn imbalance in his brain. What did love have to do with anything? Love didn't matter in the long and short of it. It was all in the genes, all in the DNA, all in the chromosomes determining just how fucked up your life was going to be. He was destined to be in a chair talking to someone about his feelings after wrapping a plastic rope around his neck in the closet. All the hours he spent telling himself he was going to be a good dad and he was going to work for the kid, sacrifice for the kid, give it everything he had ever wanted and more. He was going to give the kid a good life. The kid was going to be fucking blessed for having a father as great as him. The kid would thank its lucky fucking stars that it came into the world with such a great dad to watch over him and keep him safe and protect him from all the bad things that were out there to get him. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you for my father! Thank you for my mother! Thank you for the luck of being born to these two sad saps who wanted nothing more than a child between them! A child to call their own! A child to raise in the way they think children should be raised which probably wasn't exactly right, but what the fuck is? Thank you! Thank you!

And now…

They went back home and inside the house there was nothing to do but stare at the walls. He asked if she wanted a drink. He asked if she wanted a back rub, a foot rub, anything at all. He was desperate to please her, desperate to do something, desperate to make up for the slight the world had given them. But she said, “No.”

He sat with her in the living room and tried not to think about the students he has in class. He has students that have children already. Some have more than one. He tried not to think about these students who spend their weekends with drug addicts, smoking weed, drinking until they are blind,
listening to thumping music that vibrates their organs, driving dangerously over the speed limit, abandoning their responsibilities for a few hours of fun, fucking, and fighting in corn fields with their significant others that they'll replace in another week's time. They have children. They have little copies of themselves. It was an accident, an accident that they claim they’re grateful for but if pressed hard enough they would admit the burden, would admit that if they could do it over again… they’d do it differently. When they found out they were pregnant, it wasn’t joy they felt but despair. “Oh God,” they thought, “my life is over.” Compare that to him and his wife, “Oh God,” they thought and said, “our lives have begun.”

He tried not to ask the questions, “Why them and not us? What did we do wrong? Why do they get a baby when they didn't want one and not us? Why? Why?” But it was hard not to.

He knew that she would be pregnant again. He knew they were both healthy and it was not a big deal, but God damn it, it was. Miscarriages do happen all the time and it's a bitch and he's never understood how much of a fucking travesty it was until then.

“I keep thinking,” his wife said pulling him out of his thoughts he tried not to have, “that it was too easy. We got pregnant on the first time, the first month we tried. It was just too easy.”

“I know,” he said and that’s all he said. There was nothing else to say because he had thought the same thing multiple times before. He had thought, we must be good. My sperm must be virile titans pillaging up her fallopian tubes and wreaking havoc up in that uterus. They must be athletic Olympians even if the man their ball sack is attached to is not, could hardly run a 5k without his nipples bleeding and gasping for death.

He tried not to think about all the people he knows and doesn't know who can't have children because of some genetic disorder or because they are barren for another reason. He wondered if they feel justified when someone has a miscarriage. He doubted it, but he wondered if he would. He wondered if that makes him a bad person and decided that it probably does. Perhaps it was justice that this happened to him and his wife. Perhaps it was karma rearing its ugly head and giving them what is theirs.
He turned on Twin Peaks and they watched the last episode of the first season, for a moment forgetting about their troubles. When it is over he said, “I’ll call everyone.”

By everyone he meant their parents. How he wished they had waited telling them. He tried not to think how excited they were. They both had grandchildren already from their siblings, but now both their youngest children were having a child. Her mother excited because her only daughter, having a child, would be able to share things her son couldn’t have. His mother because her youngest son, the one who had stayed with them, who had been good to them throughout his life, even the awkward years of adolescence, was having his own. They’d been thrilled. Cried at the reveal party held a week ago when they were presented with specially made playing cards that had the baby’s first picture, a sonogram of a white blob, on every card.

He tried not to think about his mother-in-law’s teary face as he dialed her number, alone in his office, sitting at his desk where he had practiced his writing, where their child might have practiced writing single letters in print or in cursive. He put the phone to his ear, listening to the monotonous tones.

“Hello?”

Oh fuck, he thought, why the fuck did I think I could do this? There’s going to be crying, on her end mostly, maybe mine, and all I’m going to be able to do is sit on the phone quietly like a goddamned retard and wait for a proper time to say, “Goodbye” and hang up so I can go and make the same fucking call to another relative who will respond the same fucking way. What the hell was I thinking?

“Meredith?” he said.

“Hi,” she said, talking to him now. Before she was expecting the sound of her daughter’s voice and an explanation about how she had to call from his phone because hers had died.

“I’m calling with some bad news,” he said.

“Oh God, no,” she said, “What’s wrong?” Already a sense of urgency. She knew it already too. He knew this, could feel it, wanted to save her from it, wanted to say, “Just kidding!” and have a good laugh about it.
“It’s gone,” he said echoing the sound of his wife’s voice, the subtle crack, the minor betrayal of emotion that something had broken inside of him.

And there were tears. Of course there was. And when they were done, he called his mother and then his father, teared up while talking to his father, thinking about how he wasn’t a father yet. Reading all those damn articles about bonding with your child, how to be a good dad, he had already begun to feel like a father, like a dad, like a man who was doing his damnedest to raise a son or daughter the best he could, but he wasn’t. He wasn’t anything yet. A minor purpose he had assigned himself was gone and now what the fuck was he?

He went back into the living room where she waited for some semblance of a report. What’d her mother say? What’d his mother say? What did he say? And of course he couldn’t repeat any of it, never could remember a conversation directly after it happened. He only remembered the emotion. It was fucking sad, dear. That’s all.

They sat in silence in the living room. He read a book called *Ordinary People*, also about the loss of a child, how fitting. And she crocheted, unraveling the baby blanket she had been making and creating a scarf for herself. The booties she had already completed still existed in a drawer in that empty front bedroom, unused for a while longer. The plans he had of building a changing table, done and gone. Things had changed, altered so fast. They had been buoyant with excitement, and now they were numbly drowning. Neither one of them cried. Numb people don’t cry. They just wallowed in their silence, moving their eyes and hands, hibernating their brains and thoughts. They sat together, just the two of them, in silence. Just the two of them.
Forgotten Places
Cameron Conner
In the cellar was buried the dismembered body
of the cherry-cheeked child butchered by the super of 598.
And even though I thought it a myth to keep girls like me
tethered, I still hugged
the curb as I skipped by. And hugged
it even more closely on that day in June
when Daddy and our neighbor, the undertaker,
bolted up the slate stairs to the roof bellowing,
*Get the bastard, get the bastard.* Pressing my flesh
against ochre stucco, I, wall-eyed,
and slack-jawed, saw your trembling five-year-old body
brindled by the ruby and magenta rays of the stairwell’s
stained glass, your flaxen hair buried
in Mama’s corn-flowered house coat,
the X of her arms like crossed swords guarding you.
Like Crying Over the Beauty of the Stars No One Else Can See

Emma Bleker

In my stomach is a knot like hair,
or like saying goodbye before you are ready,
or like the pulse of a dying animal.

It is easier to tell the words
their name without trying to make
them comfortable.

It is harder to watch their
faces contort in reaction: human
beings like to be told the thing
that is hurting ends up okay.

To say it out loud,
at first, is like raking
inside the throat.
Clawing to
stay down,
begging
to be left alone,
to keep drowning.

When I heard her name
said aloud
for the first time
since I learned how to
swallow it
to make the
story easier for
everyone else,

the quake could not be stopped.

A mountain the size
of a thimble grew like a
child, reached like a child,
screamed like a child.

I should say, screamed for a child.

For a long time
I did not know whether
to say I lost it
at 9 or 19,
but fingers cannot take,

there is not a name
for when fingers take like
that,

and at 19, I felt that
I was being given something back.

In places like this where no one knows anything about one another at all
I want to ask if they are loved.

I want to tell them I felt shut
and caved in
once those fingers got done doing
that thing that can’t be called anything;

I want to tell them, it takes a long time,
but the body finds a way to unstitch the parts of itself that have been closed up.

I want to tell them,
I am not empty anymore.
I want songs and
poems and
parades for this
kind of
silent victory.
For all the silent victories.

For the ones we cannot
say out loud
because it will not
be understood
that this
is a healing thing.

For the people who are
not okay yet.

I cannot tell them, without
their eyes sinking and
their hands going stiff,

of all we have
survived.

Of the love
I have for
having survived.
Emily’s Keeper
Rajendra Shepherd

To listen to this piece, click here to be redirected to YouTube.
Elegy for a Child Bride

Lakshmi Mitra

i.

three pre-dawn bathers see her first on the *ghat*
arms stretched out towards the river, eyes closed, a single
gold bangle sheened red on her left arm.

she could be sleeping; but she
is not.

ii.

in the days to come, she wanders in many forms many shapes
into my night dreams. but always, her eyes are wide, crimson-clinging-lashes
there is nothing in them – no tenderness, no abhorrence
and no pain.

my mother tells me horror stories of girls younger than I
who bathe in gasoline then swallow fire. they burn their histories from their bodies
and carry their unshed nightmares into the afterlife.

iii.

ten houses down the road, a young man will leave
come tomorrow morning, just to be sure.

the cops think she took a knife to herself, and no one
disagrees. i think tomorrow a girl whose name i cannot know
will give herself to the sea. maybe the same evening
another will bleed out over her mother-in-law's floor
and give bitter thanks for it.
iv.

in the evening the temple doors part and someone
kills a goat on the steps; blood on water on stone, it feels
much the same.

deadly carry her ashes to the ganga, the river, fractious,
already brimming with ghosts of girls who
died fast and young like flies. their mothers lament
by the river, not just for their daughters, but for
all the ghosts to come.
Open Doors
Samantha Fortenberry
I’m like a clumsy 80’s robot learning human mannerisms, I thought. This was the first large celebration I had been to since finishing the chemotherapy that zapped the four clustered tumors into nothing. Sparkly party people whizzed by me quicker than I could catch them, the world a moving carousel I was constantly trying to get on.

When I had to explain what I was doing between 2009 and 2010, the truth is, I was doing Stage 2B breast cancer. The words always landed like a nuclear missile. I tried to wiggle out of it a few times: “Illness.” I’ve tried to skip over the sick years altogether and generalize: “Stay-at-home mom.” People usually wanted the easy answer, barely listening through the high buzz of their lives.

But I was tired of the easy answer. It felt like a lie. Like it was my fault--I had planted malignant tumors in my right breast. Maybe it was the cigarettes I had smoked in my twenties or as my surgeon had suggested, the Marlboro Reds that my father chainsmoked when my breasts were developing. Maybe the grief over my father’s Stage 4 lung cancer diagnosis had made me grow my own mass six months later.

“What color is it?” I asked the nurse over-seeing the breast biopsy.

“Pink,” she said.

***

Three years after my father’s death and my recovery, I went to a good friend’s 40th birthday party in La Jolla, California. In the amber light of her pink Mediterranean-style house, I stood mingling with well-dressed guests on her salmon-colored tiled patio. I circled slowly and unfocused around the white-draped cocktail tables. I caught snippets about jobs and kids in between requests for more champagne.
After a few attempts at conversation, I headed straight for the bar that was set up in the far corner. I reached for a glass of champagne at the same time as another guest. “Oops,” we said at the same time. He let me have the glass with a sheepish smile.

“So where are you from?” he asked. His blue checked shirt, black blazer, and khakis looked straight out of a Brooks Brothers catalog.

I was happy to have someone to talk to, but my stomach began to clench. The questions I couldn’t answer without talking cancer, I thought.

*Where are you from?*

* I am from Cancer.

Cancer defined everything I had done and was about to do with my life. I didn’t walk around like I was going to be alive forever anymore. I would either have to keep quiet or tell him. I tried to figure it out while he talked about his kids and the problem of finding a good sitter.

We exchanged niceties this way for a few more minutes. I was from Berkeley, I was married with a 6-year old, I said. He was from the San Diego area and he and his wife had met the guest-of-honor on an airplane, he said. This didn’t surprise me, my friend was ubersocial and knew how to make friends easily. This was why we were such best friends in middle school. Yin and Yang. She crank-called the boys we had crushes on and I listened in on the party-line. She was never afraid of the consequences.

When Brooks Brother asked me what I did for a living, I felt the answer stuck in my throat. The question was loaded to begin with. If I said I stayed at home, the answer would be, “Good for you! What do you think you’ll do afterward?” If I said, “I stayed-at-home until I got cancer and that changed my-fucking-life-and-now-who-knows-what-I’ll-do,” then the possibilities were less predictable. I’d get a pregnant pause for sure, but then? I wasn’t sure. Maybe he’d be different.

I didn’t know if it was the balmy weather of Southern California, the ocean air or the second glass of champagne I was nursing that made my decision for me, but I told this man the truth. He paused, as predicted. He looked at me while I explained, over-explained that my father had lung cancer and I was diagnosed with breast cancer a short six months later. Waiters brushed past with fishy hor d’oeuvres as I balanced on one suede blue heel to the next making my case.
When I was finally done, I looked down at the ground for a brief moment. I knew it was a lot to take in and wanted to give him a moment to answer. When I finally gazed up he said, “Let’s not talk about things like this at a party.” Then, because he couldn’t just turn around and leave me without looking rude, “So, after the thing that we’re not going to talk about, what have you been doing?”

I told him that I was writing now. My plans were to write about it. Maybe I would send him something through my friend. Before I left him, I tried to remember I was like him once. He didn’t want mortality crank-calling him. He didn’t realize it was right in front of him, at a cocktail party, disguised in a little black dress.
By mid-September the apples grew sweet enough to pick, so off they went—a festival, a Sunday event, their looks across the barns, across the tops of trees.

My father had his coffee in a Thermos, a camera, a day on earth. My mother must recall a heaviness that was not the heaviness of death, not yet: a basket, a pint of cider, all those voices across the orchard in love with the soil. They spoke simply to each other and wondered how it was they weren’t here every fall, for it was so easy—the reaching forth, the gathering—and as carefree as sex for the newly in-love.

Among the screams, the weeping, and the telephone calls, a bowl of apples stood on the counter, beautifully oblivious to living and dying, our minutes of weakness and joy.
Someday soon,  
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.  
You tell him no.  
—Richard Hugo

Tuesday night and I'm driving over the river bridge  
that connects the old highway to the village.  
The bridge is long, and low, and lighted.  
Rain water drips from the rounded steel side railings.  
No other traffic is on the bridge, and I think  
how easy it would be to pull to the side,  
slip from the car, and slide into the darkness below.  
It's been raining for days: the water is fast and cold.  
It would only be a moment.  
Tonight firefighters and volunteers search  
for a seventy-something woman who disappeared  
in another village ten miles downriver. In two days  
they'll find her washed up a bit farther down,  
jammed against a log on the north end of Packer's Island.  
Had she missed the island, gone another mile or so,  
she'd have spilled over the dam at the south end of Sunbury,
churned and churned in the water until morning
when some passing trucker on the nearby bridge
phoned it in to the county dispatch.
The woman's husband knows she always gets sad
come the short days, the long nights, that he needs
to be on guard when she says she's going for a walk.
He knows, despite the saying, there are some things time
does not erase. Cold rain can seep deep into the hollow.
I'm no expert, but I remember from my Navy days:
a few minutes in the water this time of year and the limbs
go numb, breathing is labored, the heart is taxed then
shuts down. That's why it's rare. Damn near no one
walks back out of the river once they go in.
Tonight I finish my trek across the bridge,
turn right on a side street, pull into the lot
of a neighborhood grocery. Inside I say hello
To the store clerk, then search the bright
ordered aisles for the things I need.
Your Children Aren’t Safe

Allison Austad
When Tara sees that her mother’s relationship status says “Engaged,” she knows for sure now that this is happening. She looks at mom’s new profile picture and there he is, standing between her and the husband-to-be, beaming at Tara through the laptop screen. She thinks about bringing antifreeze when she flies home for the wedding, slipping it into her new stepbrother’s coffee when he’s eating eggs at the kitchen table that her father made, but Tara knows she won’t ever really do this. She slams her finger down on the red “X” in the corner of her screen, reaches for her headphones.

Anyway, her mother should be the one slipping something into his food or rigging a light fixture to fall on his head, but that’s not a possibility. Her Facebook page is covered with pictures of him and his father, and mom labels them with things like “#newfamily” and “#stepsonlove.” Besides, ever the new fiancé entered the picture, her mother sounds echoey on the phone, like she’s surrounded by space. Tara imagines her mother standing in her childhood bedroom, shouldering the phone while she boxes up Tara’s American Girl dolls and Miley Cyrus posters, making room for her new son and whatever shit he’s bringing with him. Every call ends with mom’s conviction that they can be a family again, that Tara’ll love her new brother once she meets him.

Except that she already has, and he’s a rapist, but these are things that mom either hasn’t put together or refuses to acknowledge. And, it’s not like the situation was exactly easy to ignore. He was in that fraternity, which hosted the party Tara’s entire college was at, the party where things went all wrong. Christ, the whole town knew about it. There was a headline and all, not front page or anything, but, you know, in the news. Tara’s father showed it to her back when the oak kitchen table lay half-born in the workshop and his hands were still enough to hold the paper. A tiny headline about sexual misconduct allegations cramped itself into a small box under his blunt and steady thumb. After he read it aloud, mom had prattled on about girls just wanting attention, and Tara felt something in her core harden and die.
She knew at the party that those guys were so guilty, especially the rapist, but it was more okay to do shit like that back then when Rolling Stone hadn’t been interested in the poor choices young girls were making at parties, and the boundaries they blurred with the length of their skirts. So now, the rapist gets to pretend he’s forgotten about what happened between them and run his fingers over the darkened whorl on the kitchen table where her father had bled into the wood before realizing the saw had bitten into his newly tremoring hand.

Tara fidgets with the tiny, knotted scar on her earlobe as she eases on her headphones, knowing that this will be the summer that her mother married the rapist’s father, when it used to be the summer of hiking the Adirondacks, the summer that had nothing to do with the western part of the country. Tara left all that behind, hadn’t been back since they enclosed her father in earth, pine needles sticking to her shoes and tears clumping her lashes like resin. It’s probably why he’d barely been dead eight months before the new fiancé was in his seat, eating breakfast off his table, scuffing its legs with his shoes. Mom always sucked when she was alone.

The point is that Tara lives here now, out east, years and miles away from that party when, deep into kissing, things shifted and the rapist slid a finger into her, and then another, even though she had clamped down on his wrist with her thighs, pushed his arm away after the first one. When she cried out, he’d bitten down on her earlobe, drawn blood. For a second, he’d thrust in harder, digging for her middle, before withdrawing those long, reaching fingers. He held them up to the dim shard of closet light. They glistened slightly, and he smiled, told Tara he’d see her again.

Tara amps up the volume on the classical and lets the tympanies rattle her eye sockets, begins a small circle around her studio apartment, sliding her socks over the threshold where the wood of the kitchen meets the carpet of her bedroom, runs her fingers over the smooth lilac paint of the walls. She swallows hard against the splintered truth of those words, not that words mean much. After her father showed her the headline, he’d never asked why she spent more time just watching him hew those rift-sawn table planks down, ease out delicate fluting from the rich heartwood. The clean, rhythmic scrape of his sander stood in for conversation, and the warm scent of his sweat slowed Tara’s blood. He’d arched an eyebrow at her scabby earlobe, but let it drop when she swept her hair over it in response.
Besides, she'd already told Jillian about the fingers, after she'd lost the ability to swallow breakfast with ease. Jillian, however, didn't seem to know the definition of rape. I mean, it was just fingers. It's not like she's saddled with some rape baby now. So, he's a dumb prick, but she should drop it. His pants weren't even down, so it's not that big of a deal. Just avoid the asshole. I mean, she'd look so uncool if she kept talking, like such a whiny bitch, and no one wants to tap that. Not that Tara wanted to be tapped, but back then, she listened to her friends, and when the reporters came around, she'd kept her mouth shut. Tara certainly wasn't looking for attention, and mom had already complimented her on how thin she'd started to look and how well her hair framed her face now that she was wearing it down again.

She completes the circuit around the apartment, tracing her hand over the dried roses, the bag full of half-graded essays about Chopin, last night's single wine glass almost empty. Tara contemplates telling her mother about what happened with the fingers and all, just in case she might want to know who's really sleeping down the hall. It's not like her mother is 25 or anything, but at 50, she still wears skirts that show a little leg. Tara could even share what she learned in her self-defense class: gouge the eyes, bend back fingers, stomp the instep, or scream really loud, just in case the golden boy tries something, you know, in case all those hours of university mandated, tree-planting community service didn't sufficiently teach him how not to be a rapist.

She wonders what mom would say if she knew the real reason that Tara will never be #bradybunchingit on her Facebook page. Tara knows she won't ever really do this, tell her mother about the party or the fingers. She just can't bring herself to saw into that deadened space, mill the pulpy truth at her center. Besides, all of that happened six years ago, when Rolling Stone still talked about music, and that sturdy oak table emerged unblemished and whole beneath her father's careful hands.
The Taste of Man
Michael Russell

Sex site etiquette: create a man,
a sheet of fiction, from the faceless.

Blue eyes, bubble gum lips,
hair the colour of fresh cedar wood.

Do not concern yourself with personality.
In your mind, you are two bodies kindling in cyberspace.

Remember metaphor: the body is hard candy,
sugar plum, vanilla scented candle.

This is fantasy, the way your pixels make the lion
purr like a kitten, the way he kisses your palm with cactus-tongue.

Remove the veil from your face,
bring him in—sweet pheromone

honeysuckle, rose garden, mouth of ghost lily.
Swallow him whole.

Tell him he is beautiful,
tell him you want to meet,

tell him discretion is assured
and expected.

*

Imagine this: the bus a horse drawn carriage,
you alone in the backseat—the stars

like streetlamps pouring through the window,
the snow sucking on the lemon wedge of the moon

while he waits for you in his apartment
tea lights flickering in a bed of rose petals.

You are going to meet a man you have never met
in a place you have never been in a city brightened
by fluorescents. It's okay to rock, to clench, to shake,
to wish for your mother's hand.

Imagine this: you knock on his door and he answers
in nothing but black briefs, his body like chiseled marble.

He greets you with a kiss, his tongue fresh as mint leaf
the candles are just as you pictured, locked in fields of rose petals.

He offers you wine, you tell him you do not drink.
He offers you water, you tell him you thirst for something else.

*  

He looks so much older than his picture.
His face like dry leather, his gut spilling

over his jeans, a small waterfall.
You tell him you have to go

he insists you stay—*it's late
*and there are bad men out there,*

*men who would stick a gun in your mouth
and make you lick the inside of the barrel,*

*men who would take you into the dark
of an alley just to salt your sugar,*

*just to bitter your sweet spot.*
He slides his hand up your shirt

and your skin goes cold.
What have you gotten yourself into?
The taste of man is sour as salted lime,
tart as an unsweetened blackberry.

The taste of man is snot
coating the back of the throat,

the taste of man is flavourless
long strands of cobweb
dangling from the unhinged lip.
The slug of his tongue enters

the red rose of your mouth.
The taste of man is rotten.

It lingers
like a strong perfume.

The taste of man is the taste
of blood on your palate,
gasoline-laced liquor, turpentine,
unchanged bathwater.

The no that jumps from your lips
falls onto closed ears. He has made his decision:

your body is his body. No.
It does not matter, he pins you down

like a thumbtack—you do not fight it,
your body slides into the corkboard of his bed.

No. He opens you like a stubborn gate. God, no.
Shoves your face into a pillow, no,
and knifes his way into your body. 
In one moment, he has killed everything inside you.

you watch the lights firefly in the apartment 
across the street. each one burning out

as the night grows tired. the whole milk 
of the moon curdles beneath the clouds.

he’s still at it. shredding your insides, 
biting your shoulder like an animal,

marking his territory with your own blood. 
you watch the skyline bruise into dawn,

the sun tear through the backdrop of the city. 
he howls—coyote-song,

tells you to get your things 
and leave.

* 

the water from the showerhead falls 
like pine needles on your skin.

you look at your flesh, that bulk of rot, 
and see patches of dusk scattered across the horizon

of your body. the water stings. it eats away 
at the teeth marks like vinegar.

you know you shouldn’t wash— 
your body is a crime scene

but you are dirty, the sperm fluid seeps out of you 
like a bad memory. you scrub

until the soap foams red, the scent of lavender 
and blood expanding in the air.
you don’t care. a man has taken you like a porcelain doll and shattered you.

he was nice enough to put you back together with cheap tape and chewing gum

before he took you to his bed
and crushed you beneath his dumbbell heaviness.

*

[4 months later]

your heart is a furnace that cannot heat the abandoned warehouse of your body.

it is winter, but there is no famine.
snow blows through a broken window.

your mouth is a conveyor belt assembling calorie after calorie after calorie.

rats avalanche across the factory floor, a rush of slush. this is your living.

you dine with vermin, expand with the colony—your stomach, rippling.
Growing Against the Wall

Barbara Ruth
appropriate:

adjective
1. dieticians coaxing you into accepting normalcy, one bite at a time
   *It would be appropriate to take salad dressing.*

2. mocking treatment when you're too tired of therapy
   *Are you sure talking about family relationships is appropriate?*

Origin < Modern English < dieticians' plastic smiles < not being allowed to use swear words < sheer exhaustion. See normal

bigger bites:

noun
1. a plea from therapists to improve your pace by enlarging the size of the bites you consume
   *Brenda, please take bigger bites so you can finish on time.*

2. one warning closer to a supplement
   *If you don't have bigger bites, you may have to supplement this meal.*

Origin: Modern English < dieticians who use singing as a threat < tired therapists < trying to be helpful. See Boost

Boost:

noun
1. a carton of nutrients
   *There are different flavors of Boost.*

2. a supplement that tastes like chemicals and letting your eating disorder win
   *When you refuse to drink Boost, after a while you get sent to the hospital.*

Origin < Modern English < factories < underpaid workers < hell. See fear food

Ed:
noun
1. a middle-aged
   man, most likely white and upperclass,
   who is susceptible to male pattern
   baldness
   *Ed cut his lawn yesterday after playing golf.*

2. a nickname for eating disorder.
   *Don't let Ed win.*

Origin < Modern English < tired therapists < Life Without Ed < white woman with restrictive
eating disorder who realizes She Knows about recovery

fear food:
noun
1. crying, please don't make me, staring at plate, haunted, I'm going to gain weight I'm going to get
   fat I'm going to die I'm going to die
   *Cupcakes are one of my fear foods.*

Origin < Modern English < treatment centers that smell like bleach < a mind full of purgatory

flair:
noun
1. a condiment or accompaniment to a dish that people are trying to make exciting
   *The mustard is there for extra flair.*

2. something you sure as hell don't want to eat
   *Look, there's some flair on your plate.*

Origin: Modern English < a dietician who overuses the word "fun" < "to reek." See superfun
extra

normal:
 adjective
1. having a happy and healthy life, not obsessing over calories, weight, body image
   *Normal people do not engage in diet culture.*
2. not existing at the whims of your eating disorder

*Teenage girls in treatment centers do not have normal outlooks regarding food.*

Origin: Modern English < chipper dieticians < derivative of normalcy, meaning commonplace. See appropriate

**processed:**

noun

1. "anything that goes through a process"

*A bag of apples that you buy at the store is processed.*

2. a stealthy way of referring to foods you dislike that are packaged and full of preservatives

*I want to be healthy and cut down on eating processed foods.*

Origin < Modern English < diet culture < the worst thing you can be is fat < don't be a woman
Some Days Are Tougher Than Others

W. Jack Savage
Privilege
Sam Herschel Wein

Boystown, I scuttle, bump, shake my butt when I walk. I eyes out, searchlights, helicopter fins. An old roommate invites some boys I used to play frisbee with to celebrate, boys I knew when I would put up with being the only queer person in a room, when I wouldn’t suffocate. One of them, red, sashaying hair, Ariel the Mermaid in a checkered shirt. We’ve walked down the rainbow streets less than two blocks & he’s disgusted, keeps saying loudly “WOW I don’t think I realized how uncomfortable I’d feel being here & being NOT GAY I wish I had a warning sign like maybe pink triangle on my sleeve it’s like people just look at me without even asking I mean THEIR DEMON EYES” my friend Katie, watching the blood drain from my face like an open gas nozzle on the highway, leaving behind a trail of rainbow tears, interjects “Um, how about being a woman ANYWHERE” & I clasp her hand because she’s right, but the front row boys laugh & say “I guess so” & now it’s all of them on a team against me & it’s my friends turned to sharks with a single sentence & I’m a small, strewn up to the shore minnow & they can’t even look for me to resuscitate me & I’m worried if they do they won’t even leave me breathless, they’ll graze bruises up & down my sides & let the blood roll over white seashells, a ruin.
Typical Weathers

Eleanor Leonne Bennett
Red Hair
Norman Klein

Each morning she would step shy from her shower and ask me to braid her hair, “I won’t stop working,” she said, her face as red as her hair, her hands shaking.

Days later she returned early saying it was over. Her students couldn’t take the heartbreak. Now every night she pulls the drapes tighter, arranges the darkness,

hoping I will only hear her step out of her shoes, toss her clothes onto her chair, then let down her hair, hair long enough to cover her breasts, hair enough to cover my eyes and her healing lies as she says she’s sorry, sorry for the scar she came home with, my seeing for the first time her long red hair coming out in handfuls.
There Were Clowns at My Funeral

Allison Austad

perhaps
i don't deserve
nice things
cause i am paying
for sins i don't
remember.
- rupi kaur

Saturday, 2.6.16. 7:25 pm.
Interview with Clementine von Radics
Rachel Nix

1) First of all, congrats on your recent WOWPS Video Slam win with your poem “Mermaid”! I drove down to Baton Rouge, Louisiana from north Alabama last year to catch you and Alexander Dang on your Love & Whiskey Tour and can vouch that your performances are engaging and come across very honest.

You seem like you’re in your element when performing; do you get nervous?

Thank you! And I’m so glad you came out to that Baton Rouge show. I think I was more comfortable than usual on that tour because I was with Alex, and he’s so at ease onstage that it makes me relax, too.

I’m certainly more comfortable writing than performing, but I do like featuring at slams and readings. I like meeting readers and signing their books, and I like trying to figure out how to perform my work and make it exist somewhere besides the page.

2) While on the topic of slam, what’s your favorite piece to perform? Personally, I’m partial to “My Hometown” and I think those of us from similar towns needed an anthem like that.

I love “My Hometown” and I love performing it, but I think my favorites are the less anthemic, more quiet and introspective pieces, like “The 4th Step”.

3) There’s a famous quote – and I’m not sure who said it – but it goes something like, “Be who you needed when you were younger.”

To revert back to the anthem statement above, I think the lot of your readers have fallen for your work because it feels like you’re reaching out in a very individual way. It’s not easy to be so approachable, but you seem to take that role on with enthusiasm. Even when signing books, you’re notorious for thoughtful messages of encouragement. Is it your aim to be that person, the one young people may need?

Now that I’m an adult and a working artist, it’s always in the back of my mind.

4) I had a tumultuous adolescence, and during those years I felt very, very alone. To me, back then, art was proof there was a better life out there than the one I knew. I remember meeting a writer I loved as a teenager and just bursting into tears, because her work had become emblematic of so
much of my own hope and aspiration.

Knowing first hand what someone's work can mean to a young person, I don’t ever want to take that for granted. It's something I want to be worthy of and treat with the kindness and reverence it deserves.

5) **Your new book *Dream Girl* is a stellar read. These poems are incredibly raw and open – it's brave to share this sort of work. In reference to our Trigger Warning theme for this issue, is it difficult to share such personal work with people or do you find it cathartic?**

I’m kind of used to it by now, and it doesn't feel overly vulnerable to me. Generally, if I’m writing about something that seems dark and personal, it's something I’m just trying to understand and explain to others. Because of the nature of my work, and the things people assume they know about me because they read my books, I’m very private in a lot of respects. There are stories, experiences, and aspects of my personality I like to keep all to myself, both dark and light things. I consciously choose not to share all of myself publicly. I find power and catharsis in withholding as much as I do in sharing.

6) **Where can we see more of your poetry? Any recent publications you’d like to link us to? Previous books you’d like to mention? We would love for our readers to know how to collect your work.**

Check out *For Teenage Girls With Wild Ambitions and Trembling Hearts*, available for pre-order now!

7) **Speaking of publishing, you founded Where Are You Press in 2013, and it's been responsible for some incredible releases – important and necessary work. The focus is on young women, people of color, and other marginalized voices. What made you feel the need to give such voices an outlet?**

To put it simply, those are the people historically kept out of the literary world, and those are the people I’m most interested in hearing from.

8) **How do you decide which poets find a home at your press? What pulls your attention and makes you want to get someone's work into the spotlight?**

We look for authors who have built their careers on social media and who vibe with our mission statement. Beyond that, we’re excited about anyone who has a fresh voice and perspective and isn't trotting out too many tired themes.
9) Switching focus — who are some of your favorite writers? Who’s work can you not get enough of lately? (Please feel free to send us links to their work online or personal websites.)

Blythe Baird, Michelle K, Brenna Twohy and Jamie Oliviera all have or are slated to have books out through Where Are You Press, and I was so humbled and excited to edit and publish those women.

I’m also really excited about the new collections by Ocean Vuong and Hanif Willis Abdurraqib that are coming out in the next few months through Yes Yes and Button Poetry, respectively.

10) Which magazines, online or print, do you admire and follow regularly? We’re always on the hunt for publications to love on and are curious where other poets’ attention goes.

I’m actually so terrible at keeping track of literary magazines. The one thing I do is follow bostonpoetryslam.tumblr.com, because whoever curates that blog has flawless taste, and they post regularly from a wide net of journals.

11) We ask this in every interview because it seems like each editor has one book that’s defined them in some way. Any genre, and subject; what’s your favorite book? What book matters to you?

Angels in America by Tony Kushner is my favorite piece of writing of all time. I practically have it memorized. I own 3 copies so I can lend them out to two people at a time and still have a copy for myself. The language, the themes of queerness, God, sickness and America, the message of resiliency, it’s just phenomenal.

12) Got a question for us? About the publication, the staff, who should win whatever sportsy thing is going on at this time of year?

I’m good, thanks though! I really appreciate y’all letting me be involved.
Depression

Samantha Fortenberry
Mothers Cannot
Sally Deskins
Being a Girl: A Brief Personal History of Violence
Anne Thériault

1.
I am six. My babysitter's son, who is five but a whole head taller than me, likes to show me his penis. He does it when his mother isn't looking. One time when I tell him not to, he holds me down and puts penis on my arm. I bite his shoulder, hard. He starts crying, pulls up his pants and runs upstairs to tell his mother that I bit him. I'm too embarrassed to tell anyone about the penis part, so they all just think I bit him for no reason.

I get in trouble first at the babysitter's house, then later at home.

The next time the babysitter's son tries to show me his penis, I don't fight back because I don't want to get in trouble.

One day I tell the babysitter what her son does, she tells me that he's just a little boy, he doesn't know any better. I can tell that she's angry at me, and I don't know why. Later that day, when my mother comes to pick me up, the babysitter hugs me too hard and says how jealous she is because she only has sons and she wishes she had a daughter as sweet as me.

One day when we're playing in the backyard he tells me very seriously that he might kill me one day and I believe him.

2.
I am in the second grade and our classroom has a weird open-concept thing going on, and the fourth wall is actually the hallway to the gym. All day long, we surreptitiously watch the other grades file past on the way to and from the gym. We are supposed to ignore most of them. The only class we are not supposed to ignore is Monsieur Pierre's grade six class.

Every time Monsieur Pierre walks by, we are supposed to chorus “Bonjour, Monsieur Sexiste.” We are instructed to do this by our impossibly beautiful teacher, Madame Lemieux. She tells us that Monsieur Pierre, a dapper man with grey hair and a moustache, is sexist because he won't let the girls in his class play hockey. She is the first person I have ever heard use the word sexist.
The word sounds very serious when she says it. She looks around the class to make sure everyone is paying attention and her voice gets intense and sort of tight.

“Girls can play hockey. Girls can do anything that boys do,” she tells us.

We don't really believe her. For one thing, girls don't play hockey. Everyone in the NHL – including our hero Mario Lemieux, who we sometimes whisper might be our teacher's brother or cousin or even husband – is a boy. But we accept that maybe sixth grade girls can play hockey in gym class, so we do what she asks.

Mostly what I remember is the smile that spreads across Monsieur Pierre's face whenever we call him a sexist. It is not the smile of someone who is ashamed; it is the smile of someone who finds us adorable in our outrage.

3.

Later that same year a man walks into Montreal's École Polytechnique and kills fourteen women. He kills them because he hates feminists. He kills them because they are going to be engineers, because they go to school, because they take up space. He kills them because he thinks they have stolen something that is rightfully his. He kills them because they were women.

Everything about the day is grey: the sky, the rain, the street, the concrete side of the École Polytechnique, the pictures of the fourteen girls that they print in the newspaper. My mother's face is grey. It's winter, and the air tastes like water drunk from a tin cup.

Madame Lemieux doesn't tell us to call Monsieur Pierre a sexist anymore. Maybe he lets the girls play hockey now. Or maybe she is afraid.

Girls can do anything that boys do but it turns out that sometimes they get killed for it.

4.

I am fourteen and my classmate's mother is killed by her boyfriend. He stabs her to death. In the newspaper they call it a crime of passion. When she comes back to school, she doesn't talk about it. When she does mention her mother it's always in the present tense – “my mom says” or “my
mom thinks” – as if she is still alive. She transfers schools the next year because her father lives across
town in a different school district.

Passion. As if murder is the same thing as spreading rose petals on your bed or eating dinner by
candlelight or kissing through the credits of a movie.

5.

Men start to say things to me on the street, sometimes loudly enough that everyone around us
can hear, but not always. Sometimes they mutter quietly, so that I’m the only one who knows. So that if
I react, I’ll seem like I’m blowing things out of proportion or flat-out making them up. These whispers
make me feel complicit in something, although I don’t quite know what.

I feel like I deserve it. I feel like I am asking for it. I feel dirty and ashamed.

I want to stand up for myself and tell these men off, but I am afraid. I am angry that I’m such a
baby about it. I feel like if I were braver, they wouldn’t be able to get away with it. Eventually I screw up
enough courage and tell a man to leave me alone; I deliberately keep my voice steady and unemotional,
trying to make it sound more like a command than a request. He grabs my wrist and calls me a fucking
bitch.

After that I don’t talk back anymore. Instead I just smile weakly; sometimes I duck my head and
whisper thank you. I quicken my steps and hurry away until one time a man yells don’t you fucking run
away and starts to follow me.

After that I always try to keep my pace even, my breath slow. Like how they tell you that if you
ever see a bear you shouldn’t run, you should just slowly back away until he can’t see you.

I think that these men, like dogs, can smell my fear.

6.

On my eighteenth birthday my cousin takes me out clubbing. While we’re dancing, a man comes
up behind me and starts fiddling with the straps on my flouncy black dress. But he’s sort of dancing
with me and this is my first time ever at a club and I want to play it cool, so I don’t say anything. Then
he pulls the straps all the way down and everyone laughs as I scramble to cover my chest.
At a concert a man comes up behind me and slides his hand around me and starts playing with my nipple while he kisses my neck. By the time I've got enough wiggle room to turn around, he's gone.

At my friend's birthday party a gay man grabs my breasts and tells everyone that he's allowed to do it because he's not into girls. I laugh because everyone else laughs because what else are you supposed to do?

Men press up against me on the subway, on the bus, once even in a crowd at a protest. Their hands dangle casually, sometimes brushing up against my crotch or my ass. One time it's so bad that I complain to the bus driver and he makes the man get off the bus but then he tells me that if I don't like the attention maybe I shouldn't wear such short skirts.

7.

I get a job as a patient-sitter, someone who sits with hospital patients who are in danger of pulling out their IVs or hurting themselves or even running away. The shifts are twelve hours and there is no real training, but the pay is good.

Lots of male patients masturbate in front of me. Some of them are obvious, which is actually kind of better because then I can call a nurse. Some of them are less obvious, and then the nurses don't really care. When that happens, I just bury my head in a book and pretend I don't know what they're doing.

One time an elderly man asks me to fix his pillow and when I bend over him to do that he grabs my hand and puts it on his dick.

When I call my supervisor to complain she says that I shouldn't be upset because he didn't know what he was doing.

8.

A man walks into an Amish school, tells all the little girls to line up against the chalkboard, and starts shooting.

A man walks into a sorority house and starts shooting.

A man walks into a theatre because the movie was written by a feminist and starts shooting.
A man walks into Planned Parenthood and starts shooting.
A man walks into.

9.
I start writing about feminism on the internet, and within a few months I start getting angry comments from men. Not death threats, exactly, but still scary. Scary because of how huge and real their rage is. Scary because they swear they don’t hate women, they just think women like me need to be put in their place.

I get to a point where the comments – and even the occasional violent threat – become routine. I joke about them. I think of them as a strange badge of honour, like I’m in some kind of club. The club for women who get threats from men.

It’s not really funny.

10.
Someone makes a death threat against my son.

I don't tell anyone right away because I feel like it is my fault – my fault for being too loud, too outspoken, too obviously a parent.

When I do finally start telling people, most of them are sympathetic. But a few women say stuff like “this is why I don’t share anything about my children online,” or “this is why I don't post any pictures of my child.”

Even when a man makes a choice to threaten a small child it is still, somehow, a woman’s fault.

11.
I try not to be afraid.

I am still afraid.
Dissociative Identity

Samantha Fortenberry
Advice
Dustin Pearson

Tell them what it would look like and how it feels so they won’t have to guess. Tell them anyone would do it. Tell them to scream, and that they won't get in trouble. I remember there were two toilets inside two doors at my preschool. An open space inside, they serviced two people at once. I was five with my pants all the way down. It was routine before a nap. It was important we avoid accidents. I wasn't the only one in the room. Bent over one seat I was asked to wait. “Relax,” he said. It happened more than once. Nobody knew, not even after jokes in the dining room about the man on the news. In that room, I didn’t see us that way. These days, I see us most often when I’m sleeping.
Medusa, Her Word Against His

MANDEM
Extraction
Kate Garrett

The last time I bled it was winter. Now it’s spring and the bleeding won’t stop. He says it’s fine, that I’m just late. She says, *take her to the hospital*. He says, *it’s nothing*.

They’re on the other side of the door. I’m curled on the floor next to the bath. It started when I puked up three packets of cheese and onion crisps. We were curled in the bed, but the pain came and I staggered out of the room. Clinging to the sink in the bathroom, shaking. *What’s wrong with you?* He said, *you’re disgusting*. Do I do these things to spite him? The pain responded in kind, like his voice kicked me between my legs and found its way inside. His voice was a rat, burrowing up.

Then blood, blood like I’ve never seen. But he says every month it’s the same and this time it’s simply two months after it ought to have been. These things happen. Stop being a drama queen. I’m crumpled on the floor no more use than the balled up crisp packets in the bedroom bin.

I’m half awake. We’re in a room. There’s a party, a masquerade. A masked stranger with a gun shoots him in the face. The bullet scrapes his cheek and lands in my side. I’m bleeding, but I stand, and go to him. He says *I’ve been shot in the face. Look at my face! I’d rather die*. Yes, his perfect face is grazed. *You’ll have a scar*, I say, reeling, the bullet between my ribs, warm blood leaking through my lips. He’s touching his cheek, staring at nothing. I say, look I’m bleeding too, and point to my left side. He says *you’ll live! Look at my face!* I say I might not make it. He says *Stop making your problems worse than mine. My face*. He starts to cry.

One life saved, another ruined.

I crawl to the toilet and pull myself up. Now the blood pours out in clotted streams. My flesh and blood. He doesn’t want me to think about that. It’s nothing. No need for any fuss.

*Take her to the hospital.*

*No, she’s fine.*

And I *am* fine, I try to say. Only blood, and something more. But only a bit of something. I’m only two months late.
*Have some whiskey.* Like I’ve had a tooth pulled. Think of it like having a tooth pulled. A tooth, a tiny dead weight, a redundant part of me. *It’ll numb the pain.*

He puts his arms around me. It’s for the best, he says. *Look now, look at my face.*

The blood, and the ache between my legs. I look up.
Rising Agate
Melissa Eleftherion
Morning Song
Marina Carreira

Driving home from the Stop & Shop, you glance over
at the Clorox and pretzels and get the urge
to wrap yourself around a pole

like a snake
like a stripper
like an SUV yearning for the hot crush of metal

Holding her as she coos
like a bird seeing the ocean
for the first time, a part of you

wants to tear yourself to pieces,
pull: intestine by intestine,
smolder the liver you no longer

destroy but fuck if you don’t
every now and again
sitting at your desk

looking out the window
you think how close the planes get to the top of buildings
in this city, you remember the last time you flew,

the last time you faked an orgasm
the last time you rode him like a ghost
in the wind, you rode like the wind

and only looked back to make sure
every part of you was still there
in that moment

When there is a shooting
in an elementary school
you drop to your knees, thank God it wasn’t her
in her classroom you run

to the bathroom and throw up,

you throw your hands up in the air

Google “statistics of school shootings in New Jersey”
Google “where can I buy a gun fast”
Google “post partum depression”
Jennifer Rents a Trailer
Mary Stone

1.

She purchases the lot from a local fisherman using 500 bucks from her tax return and the Oldsmobile she’d never had a chance to scrap for cash. He takes the keys and crisp bills from her, shows her the nub where a bobcat had bit off his finger, says she might find the rotting flesh if she looks real hard out by the creek.

2.

On a Tuesday, she wakes up wanting to get high. Her friend Donkey shows up dressed in camo, a buck strapped to the hood of his car, They tie it up in the tree and she helps him skin it, using her own knife to remove the bladder and intestines. He removes the hooves and tosses them into the road, and they take a break to smoke a bowl next to the carcass, their fingers bloody. Donkey smells like catfish when he kisses her and the flies begin to arrive, decorating her dirt yard, and the sound reminds her of home.

3.

Because she no longer sleeps on her grandad’s couch or works the pumpkin patch, she hosts a party every night for the other ghosts of Holt County.
They come down from the bluffs
and park sideways on her lawn.
She greets them with cold cans of beer
in a short skirt and tube top
and invites them in to the sounds
of the Great Malenko playing on repeat
They take shots of Jim Beam
sitting on a carpet stained with beer and piss
and Donkey shows them how to clean a gun
with a cigarette in his mouth
and Jennifer falls in love with every one of them
each night, and sleeps in the residue of their shadows.

4.

It’s the most populated street
in the town of nearly 300,
where most houses have boarded windows
and vines crawling in foundation cracks.
She finds dishes and other supplies
in the dumpster behind the local diner
and mostly eats fried bologna sandwiches
smothered in Miracle Whip
as she counts how many trains pass each day.
She wants to make her trailer beautiful
so she paints a sun on the front door
with a smile like her mother’s.
Each day, the children get off the bus
and search for four-leaf clovers
and their laughter never rattles her windows.

5.

When she runs out of pot
she walks to the bar down the street
and Donkey takes her to the backroom,
pulls down her skirt, breathes into her
his wet and bloody breath.
When he’s not looking, she takes
a bottle of Old Crow from the bar
and runs to the swings by the railroad tracks,
takes pictures of rocks and railroad spikes.
Each drink tastes like hazel eyes,
tastes like Donkey’s fingers.
Tastes like needles.
She finds a nest of baby mice
next to the gazebo and carries them
to the gravel, their pink hairless skin
nearly transparent in the sun.
They wake when she touches them,
they wriggle and chirp and their infancy
is suddenly so ugly she can't stand it,
so she steps on each one like she’d been taught,
giddy at the small pop beneath her foot,
at the splatter of blood on her white Keds.
A Thousand Ways to Fall
Eleanor Leonne Bennett
Body Bound, Ablaze
Elliott batTzedek

Another day, another woman’s body found
bound, it’s reported, and strangled and set ablaze.

Bound, it’s reported, lengthening the litany of details
with every repetition, adding next the rope around the neck

and after the rope around the neck the report that
the body was still smoldering when the dog walker found it.

The body, the it, that the dog walker found while looking for
the woman, the woman who’d had a life,

the woman who’d had a life and a dog, and a dog walker
whose own life will never be the same

for whose life could be the same after going to meet a woman
and finding a body strangled and bound and burned?

Strangled, bound, burned—how the pornography of violence
substitutes the description of the body for the depth of the life,

for whose life could be the same after going to fix a furnace
and leaving behind a body? He reported

how he didn't mean to, how he strangled her
then bound her body and set it ablaze how he just snapped

a life left undescribed behind

How the details of the body’s death become more glamorous than the life.
How the news team knows the ratings will spike with certain lead-ins.

How certainly the lead-in body bound ablaze stay tuned will spike
desire to see what pictures might follow.

Admit it, aren’t you curious?
Can you pretend you don’t want to see?
I’m Ready to Die If You Call This Plumbing a Life
(On the Aftermath of Overdose)

Tyler Earls

There’s talk of real
talk but not real
*listen:* I never walk; I lean
with stunning persuasion;
I haven’t stepped beyond
the neon gutters in my arm
in six years of profane
confession: anything is a mirror
if you look long enough.
An honest opinion and/or
the truth: but truthfully,
if the truth can’t speak,
neither then can true advice.
Medusa, in Her Sunday Best

MANDEEM
I used to tell people I was born in the back of a station wagon, on a February road snaking out of the Rocky Mountains. I also told them I was born in a log cabin, in Estes Park where my father was a park ranger—the kind with the green Smokey Bear hat. There is a fork in the road in the station wagon story. My mother is in the back of the station wagon. Another ranger from the park is driving and his young wife holds my mother's hand while the car careens down the mountain valley toward Loveland. My father follows behind in his sports car, the spare seat stuffed with luggage. Sometimes in that story my father takes the other fork and drives to the wrong town. My mother arrives in Loveland with the park ranger and his wife. Then all three of them wait at the hospital for my father to appear.

In the log cabin story, my father delivers me while the other ranger builds a roaring fire to hold out the cold. His pregnant wife squeezes my mother’s hand and tells her to breathe. In the station wagon story I’m born at noon; in the log cabin story it’s the dead of night.

I had been told variations of those stories growing up, and believed them all to be true, in some fashion, especially the part they shared about my parents not having enough money for a crib so they used a dresser drawer filled with socks and old shirts. "And when I cried too much, they just closed the drawer," I’d say. "That’s why I’m claustrophobic."

There would always be a pause. "No," they’d say. "That can’t be true." I’d wait a few more seconds for effect then admit that of course it wasn’t true. I was a quiet baby, I’d tell them, and my parents put the drawer in the corner by the fireplace to keep me warm.

Most of the guys I had been with were not interested in the birth story, maybe because I was never with them long enough to be that intimate. Only one guy ever asked right away. He was a few years younger than me, was new to everything, and wanted to cuddle first. That’s when he asked me, with his head on my chest, arms around my waist, "Where were you born?" And I told him the log cabin story because it was during the last days of the Reagan administration. I thought it was humorous to talk about my manly Abe Lincoln beginnings with my new boyfriend who I would later zip into a
purple sequin dress as Sextra Lipsinka for her midnight drag show at the Blue Diamond on Central Avenue. I tried to sound like Ronnie when I told the story, but it was completely lost on my young man who bought the whole thing hook, line, and sinker. He thought I was doing a cowboy voice just to turn him on. I kept telling the log cabin story afterward using Reagan’s voice, with the halting delivery and even the, "Well, you know... there you go again," line to amuse myself, but no one ever got it during Bush One or Clinton. It only became funny again during Bush Too, for completely different reasons. "Oh my God, that sounds like Cheney," they’d say, even though I sound nothing like him. "It’s hot, in a sick way, don’t stop. Can you do it with the snarl?"

It was the women I’d been with who asked for the birth story, usually within the first few weeks, and it was always women who asked too many questions that I couldn’t answer honestly so I fabricated to fill in the blanks, to provide specificity and an appearance of accuracy. The women all loved the mountain tale, and told it to their friends, much to my horror as I heard it coming back to me:

"She said you were born in a log cabin?"

"She said you were born in a station wagon in the mountains?"

"Is that true?"

"Was he actually a park ranger, with the big hat and the whole outfit?"

"Did that really happen?"

They needled me with questions about the birth story in private, continually asking if it was real, hoping I would confess that it was all a lie and that I was truly only interested in guys and was dragging their girlfriend down the garden path, using her for cover. They could see it clear as day, why couldn’t she? Why couldn’t I just be straight with everyone? But instead of confessing, I simply said, yes, it’s true, I was born in a log cabin. Yes, it’s true, I was born in the back of a station wagon on the way to the hospital. Yes, it’s true, my father delivered me with his own two hands. As for the rest, I am genuinely attracted to women when I’m with them, a few much more than others, it’s not an act. I do admit to occasionally using them for cover. All men do that. I’ve never known what was true or false, gay or straight. Sex is sex—tits, clit, cock, balls, banging and getting close. Most of the time I’m alone anyway, especially now that I’m so much older, fatter, and grayer, which means sex with anyone, anytime, is a
good thing. Being content to live with the in-between, happy to screw either camp never satisfied anyone from Reagan to Bush Too, everyone always had to choose sides. I didn't want to choose and so I kept telling both birth stories, but I mostly told the log cabin one because it was easier. Being born in the station wagon was much harder to keep straight with the divergent roads, the two hospitals, the different towns, and the larger cast of players. Too much plot to keep in line. The station wagon story especially didn't go over with older women who knew first-hand about birth. There was the line dancing mom with the three boys who didn't buy either story, and instantly knew the station wagon birth was a lie. That relationship only lasted three weeks. She was using me to piss off her husband anyway, and when she started talking about the guns in his safe and the pistol in his glove compartment, I called it quits.

I finally discovered that none of the birth stories were true a few days before Christmas when my father called, asking me to help him shoot a tractor display in Story City. He had just taken an assignment for Investor's Weekly to photograph the annual John Deere display for an article they were running in the new year about agricultural futures. Every year the Story City dealership outlined all their new monster tractors and most of their smaller, older ones with Christmas lights. The display was apparently well known in the area, although I'd never seen it. The wheels looked like they were turning when the lights began to cycle, and the exhaust pipes blinked out dotted lines of white smoke. The editor in the New York office needed the photo pronto, my father claimed. It had to be taken by the next afternoon.

My father called me because it was fifteen below, the roads were icy and still not fully cleared. He wasn't calling just to pull me away from my mother, he said. He didn't want to interrupt my visit with her. But he had misplaced his driving glasses, and he told me with unusual candor that he would welcome my company.

The real reason he called was obvious and more pressing—he had a cast on each broken hand, with only his thumbs and index fingers free which he could barely press together like bloated, fleshy pincher. He was helpless, but would not admit it. There was no way he could use his tripod or change a lens. No way he could complete the assignment, but I knew he had taken it because he needed the
money and wanted the photo credit. The next day, while he stood in the garage, giving me directions about what to bring and what to leave behind, I re-packed his camera bags, loaded two bulky, safety-green snow suits, an emergency kit, and four huge bags of kitty litter for extra weight into the back of his 4X4. Then an hour before sunset we took off in search of the dealership.

My mother told me about the broken hands when I called from Phoenix to see what my parents had finally done to one another, and to determine if I needed to be there.

"He broke both hands, the idiot," she told me.

"How?"

"You'll have to ask him. It's not my place to tell you."

"What does that mean?"

"It's just not my place. He, you... he broke his right hand here, at my condo, which he had no business coming to. I don't know how he found me."

"Okay, how did he do that?"

"The hand, you mean?"

"Yes."

"John. He hit John. I don't know how he broke the other one."

They had separated and she moved to Mitchellville, a suburb just outside Des Moines, to be closer to work. My sister and I suspected something was going on because when either one of us called, we only got him—normally, my father never answered the phone. All through fall, the only time we talked with her was when she called one of us. When he answered, and we asked for her, he always claimed, unconvincingly, that she was out shopping. They finally told us about the separation around Thanksgiving, both insisting they were fine, and that we should stay put for the holiday.

"Oh my God, I'm so glad I'm not there," my sister laughed, from London.

"It's not funny." Even though we knew it was, in a way—trying to hide it from the children when we were already in our thirties.

"I know. It's not funny. I can't go there for Christmas, you know. It's crazy here around then."

"Yeah, I know that. I didn't expect you to. It's too far."
"He broke his hands? Really? That's so... and who is John?"

"I don't know. Some guy from her car pool, I think."

"Okay, that kinda makes sense."

"It does?"

"I'm so glad I'm here. You know, I can't go. It's too far."

"And you wouldn't want to anyway, even so."

"You're right, I wouldn't want to anyway. But maybe you should check on them. Go. Have fun. See snow again."

We had been talking about it for years, about why they were still together. About how our father would drive anyone crazy with his moods, the mad slamming of cabinet drawers every time he was looking for something, the way he vanished for hours for no reason—going out in the morning for toilet paper or milk, not returning until long after dark. Where do you go in a town like Boone? Two minutes with three green lights all the way and you've driven right through. The rest is just cornfields and pigs. We never knew why she stayed.

"I'm glad you're coming for Christmas, but you don't have to," my mother said when I called to tell her I had purchased a ticket. "You might not want to stay with me, though. You might be uncomfortable."

"Is John there?"

"Yes. And the door's still not fixed."

"The door?"

"Your father. When he was here."

"Is that how he broke the other hand?"

"No. No. I told you before, I don't know what he did to the other hand. It was a fight and he hit John and they tore the screen door off the hinge. That's when the cop next door came over. Your father broke his hand when he hit John."

"There was a cop? Next door?"
"Yes, he's very nice. He and his wife helped me move in. That first week she brought over a plate of blondie bars."

"Okay."

"He's the one who arrested your father."

"He was arrested? I didn't know that."

"We didn't want to tell you."

"Oh, well... thank you?"

"I don't know how he found me. I told people at work to not say anything if he called. And I made sure I used all the money from my own account. I just don't know how he found me."

"You were hiding? I didn't know that. Why were you hiding? What did he do?"

"It's not for me to say. You need to talk with him."

"But you just told me, so... never mind. So, he was arrested?"

"Yes. He'll need your help in court when you get here."

"Oh great, with what, exactly?"

"You'll have to—"

"Talk with him. Okay."

I split the difference. Five days with her. Five with him. I told everyone at the firm a relative had died back home and it was messy; even though it was the holidays, I'd still need the full week plus a little more. I never did see her condo and stayed in a sad hotel by the highway, halfway between Mitchellville and Des Moines. We went for a few dinners, and to a bad Star Trek movie. Those first few nights with her were like a series of creepy, extremely uncomfortable dates—the whole time talking about my job in Phoenix, or my sister's travels, politics, the weather, anything but what had happened. Then finally there was a long afternoon at a cafe near my hotel. My father called my room to ask for help, just as I was leaving to meet with her. I told her about his assignment with Investor's Weekly when I arrived. "He'll need you," she said immediately. "You should go up there. Don't worry about me." We took a seat by the big window looking out at Wonder World. "Investor's Weekly..." she said mostly to herself, "That's good for him. It might lead to more."
The amusement park was shut for the winter. The rides were covered tight with tarps, but the roller coaster still rose above the rest, speckled with wind-blown patches of snow. A few long icicles hung from the blue and red clown hat signs in the parking lot. I never met John, thank goodness. She told me everything had begun during their daily drive to Des Moines, when they started talking about John’s divorce. Then she told him about her life and how hard it was to live with my father. All that made sense.

"And when I told your father what was going on with John, he yelled and did that thing with the drawers, but worse. So I left. I thought he might hit me. I stayed with Brenda for a while. You know Brenda? From the office?" I didn’t know any of my mother’s friends, and had never met Brenda, but I nodded anyway to keep the story going. "She helped me collect most of my things when he was out one day. Then I moved to Mitchellville. I was already living here for two months before we told you both what was happening."

"Before Thanksgiving."

"Yes. And I thought he was going to be reasonable. And it would work out. Then two weeks ago... Wednesday, right in the middle of the week, he showed up at six in the morning. He was out there, pounding on the door, shouting for me to come out. He went to his car and came back with handfuls of my clothes, and jewelry, and a few other things I left behind. And he started throwing them on the lawn. Into the snow."

"That’s... wow, that’s amazing. Really?"

"Yes, really. Your father is an angry man. It scared me. It’s not funny. You think it’s funny."

"No I don’t." I did. The idea of my sixty-seven-year-old father out there in the snow, tossing dresses. "I’m sorry. Yes, it’s a bit funny. It’s so... dramatic."

"It was scary."

"I can see that. I know."

"And then John came down to the door to stop him, and your father ran up and started hitting him. Punching him. Hard. The screen door came loose, and they fell off the step. Your father was intent on hurting him. I’ve never seen him like that. Everyone was coming out, you know, getting ready for
work. That's when the cop came over. Uniform and everything. As soon as he got to the front walk,
your father saw the uniform and stopped. He was embarrassed. He seriously hurt John. He almost
broke his jaw and damaged his eye. He's still wearing bandages. It was awful. I've never seen your father
like that."

"Did the cop use handcuffs and the rest?"

"No. He didn't have to. Your father was embarrassed. He slid into the police car quietly. His hand
was bleeding. I picked my things out of the snow and brought them inside. I'll have to wait for spring to
find the jewelry. It was horrible. Everyone was watching."

We sat in silence for a while, studying the closed amusement park. I realized all the blue clown
hat signs were the even number parking areas, all the red ones were odd. Two ways to help customers
remember their cars, by color and number. Good idea.

"You know, when you were born, your father just took off."

"I know, you've told me. He drove off with all your suitcases, and went to the wrong hospital
because he was so flustered."

"Well, no, he drove off with his suitcase and camera kit. He didn't get lost. He just drove away."

"What?"

"He just drove away. That's it."

"Where?"

"I don't know. He never told me."

"What do you mean? For how long?"

"Two weeks."

Neither one of us was looking at each other directly. We were facing Wonder World. But I saw
her in the reflection, looking into the empty parking lot with all the colored hats. She seemed younger,
like in those black and white wedding photos where she's wearing the cat eye glasses.

"Two weeks? He drove away for two weeks? What did you do?"

"Well, I waited. There wasn't much else I could do. The ranger and his wife next door helped.
They were very kind."
Apparently the ranger and the wife next door were real. I found that strangely comforting.

"They took me to the hospital in Loveland, and stayed with me the whole time. We thought he might be there when we got back to the cabins, but he wasn't. So I waited."

"With me?"

"With you. After the second week I finally called Mother and Daddy and they were going to come out and get me. Then he showed up."

"What did he... he just showed up? What did he say?"

"Nothing. Not a thing. He just pretended it was all fine and didn't say a thing."

"And you didn't do anything?"

"Well, of course I did. I told him he could never do that again. And the ranger next door didn't think much of him afterward. That's why they eventually let your father go, you know. There wasn't much I could do. I had no money, no job. And I couldn't go home to Mother and Daddy, not for long anyway. And I had you. I had to take care of you."

"In the cabin, in the park."

"Yes. And your father was actually very good with you. You know, he really was. He's stayed, all this time. He's been good for you kids."

We didn't talk for a while. The bill came. I paid it and walked her to her new truck.

"So, you're going to help your father tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'll drive up in the afternoon."

"That's good. He could use you. You know, you'll be surprised by all the changes. Boone is much bigger than it used to be. You should drive around for a while and see it."

"Okay."

We hugged, she climbed into the truck, and drove away. I went back to the hotel, bought a few cans of pop and a candy bar from the machines in the hall, then watched infomercials until I fell asleep in my underwear and dress shirt, on top of the covers. The next morning I realized there was a lot more I should have asked. There was a very good chance I would never hear my birth story again, at least not
the real one. But I couldn’t have asked anything more, even if I had thought to. She said all that she knew how to say.

Boone was bigger. Not much, but some. Our house had always been at the abrupt end of a street where they stopped building the subdivision. We were surrounded by two different cornfields, with a rail line running alongside the garden behind our long backyard. Now our house was in the middle of a stretch of newer houses that followed the rail line for a few blocks then turned away in a slow circle as the road returned to the entrance. The streets were named after presidents and flowers: Nixon, Goldenrod, Kennedy, Lily, Jefferson, Prairie Rose. Eisenhower was ours. When we first moved there in the 70s, after he lost his full-time job with the paper in Portland, the neighbors came over to invite us to the neighborhood ice-cream churn they organized for the weekend with twenty-five hand cranked machines. They wanted to know which shift we wanted and what my mother was going to bake. My father shot the whole thing with a wry smile on his face, as if he was at a costume event. When the photos ran in the local paper as a feel-good piece, they both joked about stepping back into the 50s, especially when the first party at my junior high was a lunch box social, followed by a sock hop in the gym. To help us prepare, the school offered afternoon dance classes for the kids taught by a Presbyterian minister and his wife. My mother signed me up with my sister to help us socialize. The first dance they taught us was set to Crocodile Rock—it involved taking two steps forward, a handclap, then two steps back. Just like on TV, the minister’s wife told us. The second dance was YMCA. Both those songs were in Sextra’s act. Crocodile Rock was her most requested. The Blue Diamond was in an old movie theater with a big wooden stage and thick red curtains that made everyone attached to the show feel like celebrities. The floor was filled with expended poppers by the end of the night. We took special joy smashing them underfoot like flash bulbs as we made our way to the exit and the after party. On the way to one of those parties, I told Sextra about my first dance class with my sister and the Presbyterians. She squeezed my hand and said, "Oh Christ, that’s so adorable. You really are my Iowa boy."

The safest way to Story City in the weather would have been the main road into Ames, then up I-35. But that would take longer. We followed the back roads instead, which my father knew well. This
meant dodging a number of cross-road drifts, and once driving carefully onto the edge of a ditch to avoid a drift the size of the 4X4. He spent most of the trip trying to unzip his car phone from its leather bag. I offered to pull over and help him but he kept insisting he had it covered. After more fumbling, cursing, and grunting, he eventually plugged it into the lighter then dialed the dealership on speakerphone to let them know we were now about twenty minutes away. I know he did all this to make it clear he was calling from his car, just like a national reporter on an expense account. The owner told us the lights would be coming on in a few minutes. They were on a timer. When it's dark, he told us, we couldn’t miss it. We needed to get there before full dark. There had to be just enough light in the sky to show both the tractors and the light display. I drove a little faster.

The dealership was on the far end of Story City, with nothing in every direction except empty cornfields with miles of stalk stubble poking from the snow. The main display lot was filled with huge tractors and row after row of harvesting and planting equipment. There was a square side lot just for flatbed trailers, and a long line of wooden sheds along the back designed to look like Swiss chalets. Using the shovel on his truck, the dealer had recently cleared a path from the highway, down his drive, then over to a set of parking slots directly before the office. He was inside with two farmers. All three men stood close to the potbelly stove, sipping from their coffee cups.

"So, you found the place?" the dealer asked, after we came in and my father introduced himself as the photographer from Investor's Weekly. "Cold enough for ya?"

"Bracing, but we like it. A lot colder than New Y ork," my father said, in the hail-fellow-well-met tone he acquired every time he was on assignment. "This one," he turned to me, "just flew in from Phoenix. I've been here a bit longer so I've had time to adjust."

I nodded, rubbing my hands for emphasis, and tried my best to look like a photographer’s assistant. As usual, my father wanted to leave the impression he was a well-supported outsider who had come from far away at great effort.

"Thank you so much for letting us do this today," he said, turning to look at the tractors. "That's quite a display you got there."

"So we've been told," the owner said. "Been in the Tribune every year, you know."
"Yep," one of the farmers said, "each Christmas."

"Oh yes, we know. That's how we heard about it. It's impressive."

"Well, thank you," the owner said, and took another sip from his coffee.

We all stood for a moment, looking at the tractor display with nothing else to say.

"Well, now, if you don't mind, we'll get right to work. Before it's too dark."

"No, no, that's fine. You fellas do what you need to do."

The owner and his friends could not take their eyes off my father's casts, except for when they glanced at each other to acknowledge that they were all wondering the same thing: What the hell did this man from New York do to his hands?

My father and I went back outside. I stood in the lot while he walked around to pick the best spot for the photograph. The wind came up and the temperature dropped even further. As he walked, he kept holding up his two movable fingers on his right hand to peer through them and imagine the shot. We were both wearing winter coats, but they were not enough. I opened the back of the 4X4 to let the moisture escape and so the cameras could adapt to the cold. The wind was cutting right through the seams in my coat. I gave up, unzipped one of the green snow suits with a big reflective X on the back and climbed into it. I tied the hood tight around my face. Within minutes I was considerably warmer, but also felt like a giant Gumby with a target on my back.

My father wasn't even wearing a hat, and his jacket looked thinner than mine. He had nothing on his hands except for his casts. "Aren't you freezing?"

"Well, it's cold. But no, I'm fine. Let's get this over with. Can you set up the big tripod right about here?"

I unfolded the sturdiest tripod, loaded the cameras, attached the fisheye to the first camera body then the 50mm to the other. After I put the tripod in place he bent with some effort to peer through the viewfinder. I moved and adjusted the tripod following his directions. I took some readings with the handheld meter, set the exposure on the camera, then he clicked off a few frames with his right index finger. I changed cameras, moved everything again, took more readings, adjusted the settings, and he snapped a few more. We continued this for a while as the sun dropped and the sky darkened. We shot
three rolls. I packed everything away as he went back into the office to say goodbye and let them know the magazine would send some copies in February. He took more time than seemed necessary in the office. I wondered if he was trying to explain the casts, and if so, what he was telling them.

All the way back to Boone we talked about politics, the family obsession. The primaries were still one year away, but already the unknowns and the desperate were giving speeches at community halls, visiting cafes, and talking about Iowa weather. My father had been covering most of it as a stringer for three different outlets. At the Hy-Vee we picked up some steaks and a few potatoes that I would cook for dinner with whatever else I found in his fridge. At the house, I pulled my travel case into my old bedroom on the second floor. Years ago my mother had taken over with her projects. The shelves were filled with craft boxes. Two small folding tables were covered with neatly stacked piles of brightly colored cloth, felt pads, and a varied collection of foam balls. My bed was still by the window and my glass display case with my history dioramas stood in the corner. On the way back down the stairs I saw the hole in the wall, about shoulder height at the landing, next to the front door. I don’t know how I missed it on the way up. He was sitting in the living room and saw me looking at what he had done.

"I know," he said, shaking his head.

"You punched the wall? That’s how you broke..."

He stood up and walked toward me, holding up his left hand. "Like a goddamned idiot. I know. I hit part of the stud."

"When?"

"After I returned from the police station. I spent all day there. Richards came over and bailed me out. You know Richards, from the Tribune?" I nodded, even though I had no idea who he was. "Good guy. Kept it quiet. That was embarrassing. He dropped me at home. I got to thinking about what I’d done, how it would look, what people would say, and then I..."

We looked at the hole again. It was almost perfectly round with a rough inside where the drywall paper was torn and the gypsum smashed in.

"I’m such a goddamned idiot," he said again, "I knew better. I just sat here afterward. Maybe two hours before I finally drove to emergency in Ames to get patched up. That’s what made it worse, they
told me. The waiting, and the swelling. I didn’t even put it on ice. I’ll now have these damned things on for the next two months." He turned away and headed for the kitchen. I realized he was starting to choke up. "How about we eat now? What do you think?"

We didn’t talk about his hands, the fight, or my mother. I was certainly not going to bring up the birth story. I cut both our steaks and potatoes into bite sized chunks before I put our plates on the table, making it a little less obvious that he could barely feed himself. All through the meal he asked me a steady stream of carefully impersonal questions about my job, Arizona, my sister and her life, mostly covering things he already knew, or should have known. He was in journalist mode which was how he generated conversation with strangers. Every conversation I ever had with him eventually fell into journalist mode. I obliged him, as I always had, and shared so he wouldn’t have to. At the end of dinner, while I washed the dishes, he told me what else I could do to help.

He had to be in court the next afternoon, in Des Moines, to appear before a judge. My mother talked John out of pursuing the charges so it was mostly a formality but he wanted me beside him in case something came up. He also needed someone to drive. This was a deviation from my standard practice with labor law and contract negotiation. I hadn’t been in court in years, but of course I said I would go. We went to bed before ten.

The wind came up again and buffeted the house from all sides. On winter nights, with the wind blowing and the house closed tight, I always swore there was someone playing basketball on our drive. The basket was already attached to the garage when we moved in. We never took it down. I only used it a few times, by myself, during my halfhearted jock phase. Once the wind died down, when everyone was asleep, the basketball sounds were more distinct and I could hear dribbling out there, followed by a ball banging into the hoop. Every time I looked out, there was never anyone in the driveway, even though I liked to scare myself by imagining there might be. Some nights, when it was warmer, I would see a dim red glow where the cheerleader who lived across the street was sneaking a cigarette beside her garage. I am fairly certain she knew I was in on her secret.

That night I listened for the ghost basketball player. Nothing. The family across the street moved long ago. A young couple with a baby lived there now. All their lights were still on when I looked out at
our driveway. I kept thinking about my father’s broken hands and the hole in the wall. How do you do that? I could never punch a wall. I did understand why my mother was scared and wanted to hide. I felt bad for taking that so lightly. My sister and I grew up through all his moods, the slamming drawers, the lengthy disappearances, we thought it was normal. But we also looked forward to when he was away on those day-long trips for toilet paper. It was so quiet and calm in the house with just my mother, my sister and me. Once we left, she was there on her own. He was not a big or imposing man. People liked him, especially strangers. But we knew he was changeable. It was surprising she stayed as long as she did.

Within the year of the broken hands, he sold the house and moved to Cedar Rapids, then took up with a younger woman my sister and I intensely disliked. We never visited Iowa after that, and called less and less. The young girlfriend always answered, he never picked up. My mother bought a house even closer to work in downtown Des Moines. John drifted away soon after. She flies out to see us for holidays now, calling each trip her great escape. My father and mother both went through a period of buying a new car every six months, often within a few weeks of each other which was strange since, as far as we could tell, they never talked to or asked about each other. The new cars were the basis for most of our conversations with them, and about them. As we talked with them individually it was as if they had never been together.

I've been with Stephen for almost a year, longer than any man. My sister says Stephen is good for me, and my mother asks after him when she calls. Maybe this one will last. He's a librarian in the engineering center at the university and is lovely in every way that matters. He doesn't know anything about politics and doesn't care to learn, which is fine. He is devoted to science fiction movies about space and time travel, so am I. That's how we met, waiting in line with a chatty, nerdy crowd for a midnight opening. During our third date he asked me about where I was born and I said, "In a little town in Colorado. In the mountains. How about you? What do you want to tell me?"
These were some of the many rules at Marydale Mental Hospital:

1) Visitors could not bring you outside food, not even on visiting days. Someone had brought in a pizza, hidden pills under the cheese, and the recipient had almost succeeded in committing suicide.

2) No strings. No shoelaces, no drawstrings, etc.

3) No pens. For daily group sessions you were provided a golf pencil.

4) No shampoo, lotion, chapstick, or conditioner—people would use them to smuggle in alcohol and drugs. “Filled all the way up in the bottle, beer looks just like Johnson’s Baby Shampoo,” a supervisor announced. Sure, I thought. Depending on the beer.

5) No hoarding food, not even snacks.

6) No hairbrushes. No hair dryers—if you had long hair you just had to go with cold, wet hair in November.

7) No contact case or contact solution. If you had to use either, you had to go to the nurse desk and check it out every morning and night. If they lost either, you were shit out of luck.

Later, I learned the unspoken rules:

8) If you disagree with anything the staff says, even if it’s wrong and not in your best interest, they will say you are resisting and causing a problem. They will add more days to your stay and maybe more medication.

1 Name of hospital changed
9) If you complain about anything, even if it’s wrong and not in your best interest, they will say you are resisting and causing a problem. They will add more days to your stay and maybe more medication.

10) There is no difference between disagreeing and complaining. As a patient, you are always complaining.

11) If you agree with anyone that complains or disagrees, they will say you are resisting and causing a problem. They will add more days to your stay and maybe more medication.

12) If you don’t lie, you are screwed.

I followed the rules and I was there for only a week. Actually, even that is a lie: I broke two of the rules. I would sneak cookies into my room from the cafeteria. I hid them in what my sister called my “woodland creature” jacket because, she said, I looked like I belonged in the forest, lying down with sleeping deer, when I wore it. Dinner was served before anyone felt hungry, and the cafeteria shut down soon after. There was an approved, somewhat outdated list of places you could ask to deliver dinner to the hospital, so it was possible to have dinner and pizza later, a pizzeria being one of the few places on the list still in business. Despite this, however, I found myself stealing, eating cookies in the gaps between mealtimes. They weren’t anything special—a generic, somewhat dry chocolate chip likely brought to the hospital kitchen from outside. But to have food that is yours, and the freedom to choose when to eat it, is a great luxury.

My second transgression: I was in possession of pens. The golf pencils were unwieldy and blunt; I considered this a personal slight, as I did their enforced limitations on what we should write (‘Today I am feeling content/rested/anything positive’). The supervisor who pressed me to admit myself cooed to me to “think of it as a vacation, a break from yourself,” but my stay could not be a “vacation” if I was deprived of what I found relaxing. I considered stabbing myself with a golf pencil, to prove that it was no safer than a cheap plastic Bic, but ultimately decided that this was perhaps not the best place to exercise spite. I became feverish and irritable, and one of the other patients noticed.

She was deaf and communicated with an interpreter, but even so I barely interacted with her, as we were not in the same group. On her last day inside she walked by me at lunch and slid a few pens
across the table. When I looked up, she slurred “for you” and pointed at me. She put her finger to her lips, winked, and walked off before I could speak.

She was discharged soon after. I never got the opportunity to thank her, to ask how she got the pens in the first place, or what she recognized in me to care.

I wrote with them until a surprise room inspection during lunch one day. While I got a few looks from the nursing staff afterward, they otherwise ignored my infraction. Left to my own devices, I was an easy patient, and they had more serious issues to deal with.

***

My mom had made the doctor’s appointment for me because I hadn’t been able to get out of bed for a month and a half. I was doing an unpaid internship in New York City, staggering home after work, eating take-out in bed while marathoning Law and Order: SVU. I had a table in front of the TV, but only used it when a friend, worried, flew out to see me, asking me about anything I wanted to do, anything, he would pay for it. One night he tried to kiss me. When I stopped him, he grew horrified and apologized, repeating over and over that he was acting like the kind of man he hated. Afterward, I ignored his calls; I couldn’t be responsible for another failed relationship.

I tried taking dance to get my endorphins up, but only lasted two classes, when I used to dance three times a week. I bought a plant and named it Elliot Stabler, after the strongest, most capable man I could think of. I placed the plant on the windowsill over my bed and whispered to it to please help me. I dragged myself to a few plays, thinking that art could cure me. Finally I told my boss I had a severe medical condition and I had to fly home to treat it. He released me from my internship early.

Later, my mom called to remind me of my appointment.

I can’t do it, I said. I can’t get out of bed.

People who haven’t been depressed don’t understand how someone can’t get out of bed when they aren’t physically sick. The people who have been depressed know exactly what I mean.

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The ward next to ours was the geriatric ward. Even with the doors closed, at night we could hear one of the elderly women yelling “Will somebody help me?!” over and over. “I think she’s schizophrenic,” another patient speculated. “I wish they would give her something.”

***

All the doors in the hospital’s hallways were secured, one after another; you needed permission and a reason to go through.

When you first come in, they take you into a small room. They take all your personal belongings—purse, wallet, money—and record them for inventory. Everything gets sealed into a plastic bag. A nurse holds up a hospital gown before her, like a curtain, and you take off your clothes. The staff checks your clothes for weapons, for drawstrings: anything that might be used to hurt yourself.

(They said they would have to cut the drawstring out of my sweatpants because it was sewn in, not threaded through. I said my pants would fall down. They gave me two hospital gowns instead. Until my family could bring me new clothes, I wore one in the front and one in the back, flapping around as I walked the halls.)

You can place outgoing calls on a single shared phone next to the nurse desk, but if people want to call you they must have your patient number. You bunk two to a room and no one’s allowed to close their doors.

(My first night the hospital didn’t have permission to turn the heat on for winter yet; I received two thin blankets. It was the first week of November and my bed was near a large window. I spent the night shivering, wondering if the pillow would do more good over my body rather than under my head.)

At 4 A.M., they take your blood.

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On weekdays we had mandatory group therapy, where we were taught self-help by way of *The Secret*. Yes, the *New York Times* best-seller, the book about the law of attraction: that if you send out your vision, the universe will hear you and let it come true. What you put out is what you get.

One of us suffered from bipolar disorder. Another woman had trouble with cutting. Some people were in for stress. A young military member had grown depressed after an injury.

“It works,” said one of the women-people running the group. They were not doctors or nurses, so I was unsure of their credentials or what to call them. The women-people leading the group rotated on different days, and we had a few group sessions each day. “One day I had this visualization that I was in India, with a red scarf. A year later, as I was stepping off the plane in India, I looked down and realized that I was wearing a red scarf, the exact same one that I saw. It took a year for that to happen, but it did. You can’t put a timeline on your visualization, but if you do them regularly they will happen.”

No individual therapy beyond group, only a psychiatrist that saw you Monday through Friday for up to ten minutes at a time in order to prescribe you an array of pills. Sometimes the psychiatrists were late; sometimes they didn’t show up at all. Every morning and night we lined up outside the nurse desk for meds dispensed in a cup. My psychiatrist decided I should be on Seroquel, citalopram, and trazodone. This was supposed to make me, and I quote, “The best Elaine Wang in the galaxy.”

***

Before each group session, we all had to fill out a form to read and share with everyone. It said:

*Today I feel ______________________

*I am working on _________________

*My self-affirmation for today is ________________

*I would like to ask the group today for ________________

We each got fifteen to twenty minutes. There were eight to ten of us in the group, depending on the day. On the fifth or sixth day, tired of *The Secret*, I made the mistake of writing *Today I feel bored*. When it was my turn to read aloud, I passed it off as a mere observation. I thought, perhaps, we would talk about why I was bored, that the group might suggest new exercises for me to work on.
The facilitator’s reaction was swift and unexpected: I would get out of group what I put in.

“Boredom,” she insisted, “is a pre-determined mindset keeping you from learning.” She seemed to take my boredom as a personal affront, as if I were deliberately trying to embarrass her, and I could feel the anger leaking around the edges of her professionalism. The group grew silent. Even the TV on the wall seemed to be looking at me, its blank screen a reflective eye, waiting for an answer.

I backpedaled.

I didn’t mean that I was trying to not change or learn anything, I explained. I wasn’t bored to be bored. I mean, for the sake of being bored. I mean—it was just a feeling. I just wanted to say how I felt. I wasn’t—I wasn’t saying I was bored to be in a mindset. Maybe I wasn’t bored, just tired. Yes, I was wrong, I wasn’t bored, just tired. I couldn’t tell her that I found *The Secret* stupid, that it wasn’t helping me.

Another day in group, the leader passed around handouts of various song lyrics. We spent half an hour discussing how we could apply Miley Cyrus’s “The Climb” to our lives. “I had a teacher who told me that I wouldn’t amount to anything and the most I could get was my M.R.S. degree,” said the leader that day. She paused, pulling her lips into a tight smile. She watched us, waiting for us to spell it out in our heads, and nodded, hard. “I want to go in now, put all my degrees on her desk, and say ‘Only a M.R.S. degree, huh?’”

Your teacher was right, I thought. You do not amount to anything, and it has nothing to do with how many degrees you may or may not have. You look down on us. You don’t understand even the beginning of mental illness, and you think that earning degrees will make up for all the things that you do not understand—that they will give you worth.

***

Though she fed, clothed, and raised me, taking me to the doctor that day felt like the only important thing my mother had ever done for me. I want to say she did everything else out of duty: She refused to buy me bras when I first grew breasts but gave me her old bras from when she was a kid, which hurt and did not fit me. She slept all the time, unplugging all the phones during the day so they
wouldn’t bother her. As a kid, whenever I complained about wanting something, she would say the same refrain over and over: “I had to drive you around. You think it was easy, driving you around everywhere, holding up a big pregnant belly?” When I remember her back then, I cannot remember her looking at me with any love in her face; at best it was tolerance.

Now, I can see my mother had been depressed. As a child, I reveled in the peace that came while she slept, but now I see the danger in that; she closed herself off entirely. As an adult, I once asked her if she was happy. “Life isn’t about being happy,” she answered.

***

My pediatrician, whom I still saw at twenty-three—I hadn’t found another doctor yet—asked me why I was in that day.

I’m really sad, I said, and burst out crying.

He stared back at me. Both of his sons had gone to school with me. I had graduated college summa cum laude, won awards and scholarships. My family went to church.

I must have said more, but I don’t remember what. He left and returned with a pamphlet. *We Believe in People*, the logo said. His receptionist would call them and set up a consultation for me, today. He told me to go over now, and they would take care of everything.

“I don’t want to go to your funeral,” he said. I must have said something about killing myself. *Who said you’d be invited?* I thought.

***

My psychiatrist at the hospital was Dr. Q. The first time we talked he was doing my entry evaluation: he asked about my medical history, my mood, my background. I was depressed, enough to be doing what they called “suicidal ideation.”

“Did your boyfriend break up with you?” he said.
It’s the question psychiatrists ask to make themselves feel superior to you. Your depression can’t be real if a man left you, that’s garden-variety, women-are-crazy hysteria. Men, even psychiatrists, like to think we can’t live without them. But I had already lived through lots of men leaving me; it wasn’t that. The problem was something I couldn’t live without, but I didn’t yet know what that might be.

“Yes,” I said. He gave me a look.

“But that’s not what’s making me depressed,” I said. He was already writing.

It was true that my on/off boyfriend had broken up with me a month ago, but he had dumped me once before, so it seemed unlikely that the shock would be killing me. Besides, I had moved on: I was seeing a man who lived in San Antonio, and it felt serious enough that he had visited me in New York for my birthday.

I didn’t tell Dr. Q any of this. He didn’t deserve the truth, and he didn’t want it.

***

Before, I had thought all I needed was a therapist. In college I had felt like killing myself, and had gotten through it with 10mg of citalopram from a general doctor and weekly visits to a volunteer therapist at a low-cost health center. I thought the pediatrician would prescribe me some antidepressants, but maybe he couldn’t—maybe he had to refer me to the hospital and they would do it. My mother and I sat in the hospital lobby, waiting to fill out paperwork.

A nurse ran up to the receptionist. “Have you seen so-and-so?” she asked.

“No,” said the receptionist.

“If you see him,” said the nurse, “bolt the doors.”

After two hours, a woman called us into a separate room. Instinctively I didn’t like her, but everyone always said I judged too quickly, so I tried to be patient. I asked my mother and best friend to come in with me; for some reason I couldn’t discern, I also felt scared of the woman. She asked me the standard questions about my background, my mood, and my mental health history. How old was I? Did I drink? Did I use recreational drugs? How was my mood today? Had I ever experienced physical or emotional abuse? The air cottoned and thickened. After a few seconds, I said, “Yes.”
I snuck a glance at my mother. She stared forward. Maybe she hadn’t heard. Maybe she wasn’t even there.

Neither of my parents had found anything wrong with hitting their children. To them, doing so had been as natural and as normal as breathing. The rules of corporal punishment could always be blurred, and my mother often felt the need to slap or pinch or strike out with any objects at hand. My father was more restrained, but that didn’t stop him from hitting me on the head one night when I had embarrassed him in front of our piano teacher. My family refers to that night as the night I “ran away,” but I only got to the end of our neighborhood before turning back, barefoot and sobbing. I had nowhere to go, and my friends were no help; I probably deserved it, they said, as I was not an “easy child” like my siblings. I confided to my youth pastor, but he said that under God’s law, it was permissible for my parents to beat me—not ideal, but not wrong, either. When I was eighteen, I could leave and do whatever I wanted. I only had to make it until then.

In the interim my father and I would get into more fights. Once, he would kick me up the stairs. Another night at dinner, I would hurl a bowl at him, grabbing it from my mother’s hands as she ate.

Based on what I told her, the woman said, I should be hospitalized immediately.

“Psychiatrists aren’t taking new patients right now,” she said. “You would have to wait at least six months. And even if you did manage to see one of our psychiatrists outside of this facility, they would send you right back there.” This was how it was going to go, the woman told me: If I committed myself voluntarily, when the hospital released me I would be given a psychiatrist and a therapist, whom I could see immediately. But if I released myself—“gave up on the treatment” and left—I would be given neither. And neither felt worse than anything. I would have failed at even a mental hospital, and there was nothing left after that.

What if I do all this and I don’t get better, I asked the woman.

“You will,” the woman said. She took out a stack of forms for admitting me and started filling them out. Halfway through them she said, “See, I’ve even signed them because I already know you’re going to make the right decision.”
One of the hospital patients required a wheelchair and needed routine hip surgeries. In group he made the mistake of being honest about an upcoming operation, his loneliness and fear. His hurt was reasonable—no one in his family seemed to care about him, and he had no friends to visit him in the hospital. He felt scared, he said, and—

“Stop,” said the group leader, the woman who'd visualized visiting India. “You are looking for support where you can't get it and you need to stop.” He should learn to be there for himself. Make new friends: Google “hunting clubs” or other activities he once enjoyed. “You can always sit and watch,” she said.

The man didn't like these ideas. It seemed unrealistic for him, between surgeries, to find a close friend by googling meetups.

“All I'm hearing is ‘I can't,’” she said. She gave him a smug, pointed look.

The patient tried again. Yes, he acknowledged, by looking for support from his family he might be looking for support in the wrong place. “But they are my family,” he said. “I'm never going to stop wishing and hoping they would care.”

I grew close to a few others at the hospital.

In my last few days at Marydale I met a girl with a boy’s name. After we both got out we made plans to eat at the one good Indian restaurant in town, but stuff kept coming up for her.

I wrote her an email. If you don't mind, what were you in for?

Stress, she wrote back. I was involuntary [sic] sent there by a hospital doctor who I went to for stress, and he said that I was suicidal.

Another patient, depressed by a dangerous job situation, lent me comic books to read during my downtime. (In retrospect, perhaps I should have given him a pilfered cookie in return). We kept in touch once we were both discharged, but after a while I wasn’t able to keep up with the volume of his
phone calls and texts; at the time we were both in difficult situations, and I needed all my energy to focus on mine. The attention he paid to me—the texts, the compliments—had become too much. Once I wore my sister’s discarded cardigan with a large missing button, and he said it looked nice. In response, I said, “It’s missing a button.” I looked down and saw the front was slightly skewed, perhaps in a stylish way, as if I had done it on purpose. “And I misbuttoned it,” I said.

After a few months, he politely texted me to say it was all right if I no longer wanted to be friends. I didn’t know how to respond, and so I didn’t.

The young man in the army had a baby within the next year. He emailed me a photo of the newborn, and I sent him a blue stuffed hippo I had crocheted with my congratulations. It was one of our last interactions.

In the end, it wasn’t indifference that did us in, but time and environment. Now that we had returned to our lives outside, we had the old routines to go back to, the same daily dramas to deal with. How do you introduce someone you’ve met at a mental hospital? How do you integrate them into your community of friends and acquaintances, those who have no idea?

***

I think that one of my greatest weaknesses is my sensitivity to perceived kindness. If someone shows me an inkling of niceness, I can remember it for years. As a child, I hoarded these moments; if a classmate played with my hair, I would obsessively recall it for months, the tingle in my scalp from being touched, the dim glow of being chosen, the weight of the new braid against my neck (my mother did not brush my hair). I remembered every time a teacher smiled at me, when a parent of a friend joked with me. Later, alone, I would take these memories out and relive them, feeling the exquisite joy of making someone happy by seemingly nothing, by the fact of simply existing.

In Chinese, my name means I am a flower, known for its fragrance, that floats down rivers (or so my dad says, although he has never given me any proof). I have never seen this flower, but I imagine it to be white with waxy cream petals that are easily bruised, like a magnolia.
Perhaps this is how it happened—being predisposed from birth to easy bruising, I lived up to my name: floating down rivers, smashed upon rapids, crushed underfoot when I washed ashore on muddy banks. But in English, my name means “Shining Light.” It is an old French form of Helen, who survived both cruel gods and burning cities.
The Soft No
Meghan Sterling

Hard-pressed, you think the saying is enough, that there's a no inside of you that will make itself felt, that will rise. But that's not it. The knee in the back is felt, the hand on the mouth. What is felt is wet and sorry, a soreness, a dirty room. The moon out the window, still there, still shining its light. You think the moon is enough, the way it watches, the way you keep looking at it. He takes forever to feel something good, to finish. By then, the self has buried its dead in moonlight that arcs across streets, in the numb movements to dress, to tidy the sheets, in the knowledge that you won't tell.
I've always been too scared to pull the trigger.

That's why I prefer my gun to have a needle attached.
I Can
Sally Deskins

I'm not interested
in being an
angry
feminist
or a
subservient
maid.
I simply
want
to be
the
best.

I can be
Comeuppance
Kari Anne Ebert

It was sheer loneliness,
I think,
or the crushing weight
of invisibility
that finally drove the elephant
to devour the room
and everyone
therein.
Senses
Tomas Bird

To listen to this piece, click here to be redirected to YouTube.
Sex after Rape

or Making Love to a Vulture

Michael Russell

[1.4 years later]

Here you are again, willingly trapped, in a scene
that looks like your crime scene, but cleaner—

the floors are scrubbed with Pine-Sol, the bed
is made, the white duvet is laid out with a dog ear.

You sit on the edge of the bed, white sheet knotted
between your fingers like a nervous stomach.

He slides his hand up your shirt (just like your rapist)
and your skin cracks from the cold.

Flowers used to bloom here, tulips,
even in winter—a sweet cologne.

Now there's nothing but a dusting of dead grass,
an uncombed mess of burnt sienna.

He pecks at the carcass of your neck.
Today your body is supposed to be worshipped

or something—turned into a God
yet you feel like scavenged meat,

rotting under dimmed pot lights,
wishing for life

to be a little more
gentle.
Sex after Rape  

or Making Love to a Wolverine  

Michael Russell  

[1.2 years later]  

The ad said beginners welcome.  
You think tenderness: the soft skin of lips,  
the pink membrane of the nipple,  
the rush of pubic hair like marsh water settling  
above and around the penis.  
Things like this comfort you. No sex, only exploration  
of the unknown animal—  
of the damaged self.  

*  

He wants inside you,  
asks until no becomes yes.  

You can feel his cock, wrapped in a hood  
of latex, slowly enter you.  

This is the first time since your rapist  
someone has made your body curl like a dying flower.  

He plants his fingers into your shoulder,  
growls like an engine and thrusts—  

you try to relax,  
dethorn your rosebush of nerves.  

He hooks his arm around your neck  
and his hips gallop against your backside.
From your lips: a cloud of warm mist—*stop*.
He doesn't hear it. You are a mouse on a farm of grunts.

Again: *stop*—this time like thunder.
He pulls out and jerks off on your back.

It's almost like you picked him
on purpose.
A Frightful Passage

W. Jack Savage
This is not a story
of blood or unhung limbs.
He left me a block away with his own embarrassment, sewn
into a grab-bag of narcissists and expletives.
He left me to my machinations:
singer, sewer, songstress, seamstress,
a disciple of whiskey and steel and F-150s
and bars that stay open for third-shift men with heavy dark eyes.

Bookended as we are in grit and grime,
there was no space for me to make you beautiful.
You ought to have been
born raw,
with the gravy of coal dust already in your mouth.
You ought to have limned blue skies with your mouth,
shown me brown, brown dirt in your dimpled, shriveled fists.

Show me fear, show me peace,
show me my own two thighs, pale and cold
and open for the wrangling of white-gloved hands:
show me authority. Show me grace.
(His gloves left corn meal between my thighs, silt of my own
home, a betrayal of place.)

If there is a woman in the world who says yes
I do not know her. Who says

*yes pull this cord blamelessly, spin your own pure-white thread
out of the possibilities you wash away.*

Who says *be selfish, be crucial, be an overgrown ear
that has been late-summer shucked.*

If there is a woman who says *this is okay
you are doing just fine* I do not know her, I did not meet her.
Being a kernel, you were one
of many.
A man with a vacuum who hummed a non-tune
like wind coming in through the stalks at night
asked me to focus on my breathing.
This is not a story
of anyone's blood but mine.
the hood can yell for itself. does not need your voice
to introduce its own. your quick mimic is a quiet crime
& a loud sentencing.

this dialect, the ebonics, is not a case study not a thesis statement
a sociology report not a buffet not a welcome
mat. your children have full mouths
of my children & you call it rebellion
instead of theft because rebellion looks better
with blood. you can learn every dance
& you will never know the sweat of needing to move
with nowhere to go. you can listen
to every rap song & you will never
live the lyric be the drug deal gone good be the love story gone
bad be the shit talk be a bar-b-q of good intentions
you can come to the house-parties & go
home. before the cops come before the song ends before you actually have to
understand. you can recite every line to Friday & never laugh
at the right parts. you can say “bye Felecia” without knowing her
crack addiction. without knowing the droop of her shirt & the beg
of her braids. how love & shame can be sisters
& look nothing alike. how hungry is always around the corner.
where survival comes without the guide or loses it
too soon. you can be the Huxtables or the Bradys
either way you don't know a damn thing about this. who you know
hiss like a hot-comb on the back of yo' neck? who you know really
trappin'? who you know trapped? whatcha’ know bout reckless? who you know really
wrecked with no insurance? who you know riding dirty? who you calling dirty? who
you won't bring home to yo mama? who you think you foolin’?
who you think a fool? survival is a sticky sap. slang is what happens when you eat it
every day & wake to lick the corners of your lips.

“our children play together” you say,
“picking up your children's bad habits.”

you convince them they are eating dirt
instead of telling them to stop taking
candy from strangers.
Chew, Motherfucker
Scott Wozniak & Janne Karlsson

Panic stricken, clawing the wind searching for an exit, yet afraid
to gnaw bone

clamped on by the trap you've set and sprung.

The time has now come
to chip teeth and taste blood.

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All the Ways My Assailants Tried to Name Me
AJ Urquidi

You should take your handicaps, channel them and feed them back.
—Bradford Cox

hey fatty fatboy fatfuck chubby hey beefcake cartman butterball sumo
  porky pudgy arteries clogged hey bye-bye arm
hey heart attack hey short-shorts poor boy doofus dipstick prep
  hey where's your mommy mama's boy

hey jabroni jackass asshole jackoff hey wiener bastard fartknocker bitch
  hey son of a bitch motherfucker pansy
hey asswipe asshat dickweed buttmunch cocksucker saladtosser fat sad ass
  hey mumbler cockblocker beatnik funnywalker arms don't swing

when you walk around hey turkey bozo numbnuts chump
  hey bonehead knucklehead fucktard jerk
hey psycho creeper awkward rapist big boy party-pooper hairless mole rat
  hey silent killer fratboy slacker molester-van tittyfucker pedophile stupid shit

hey dumbass cunt hey shitforbrains hey dork
  hey nerd hey loner know-it-all teacher's pet hey asking for it
hey trying too hard hey pencildick hey impotent twat
  hey doublechin triplechin look who's wearing a shirt in the pool

hey delinquent racist fascist handout-grubbing marxist hey pants-crapper
  chonies soiled bedwetter could have done better hey special sauce
get off the road hey maggot sorryass idiot kid why don't you watch
  where you're going cretin barfbag twinkletoes

hey fuckup failure disappointing cracker honkey whitebread scum
  hey white trash cholo white-fucking-devil hey pussy halfwit little girl
hey moron twerp dope overachiever hyper spazz crybaby you ruined my shoes
  hey pothead lazy thief don't fucking talk back to your mother liar

hey fartface fuckface ugly fuck hey face that was made to be punched
  hey face for radio only a drunkass mother could love
hey pitstain shitstain pain in the ass hey ballsack dick lips pissant cheat
hey newbie tattletale ratfaced snitch hey woof hey cow

hey chauvinist pig hey homo joto trailerpark faggot
    hey limp wrist queer bait attention whore hey maricon mierda guero
gringo puto hey looking for rancheros hey disgusting imbecile stingy stinky
    hey fuck yourself go screw yourself take a hike cut and kill yourself

hey brother son hey friend dead meat hey baby honey
    love of my life hey victim baggage random search
hey privileged colonizer oppressor class mansplaining cis-het
    hey tuna breath teeth crooked gingivitis need a tic tac

hey kiddo warm-body buddy bro labor-force member voter loafer
    hey give me that get over here
stand down turn around hey shut up suck it
    up and keep that to yourself
I hung up quickly, but the conversation had already released the tell-tale stench of relationship drama. The other passengers on the airport shuttle looked away, avoided eye contact. I didn't blame them, that's how I reacted when someone else's relationship problems flopped into public view like so much underwear falling out of a suitcase. The grey-suited lady next to me stared intently out the window, her jawline pulsing with tension. I wanted to explain to her that I was a good guy, really, and it wasn't my fault. It was the spiders.

The visit had gone well at first, though I was careful not to use the word visit—Marjorie and I lived together, schedules permitting. She was in Anacortes to start her third year of medical school with a month-long rotation at its small hospital. Anacortes occupies most of Fidalgo Island, just off the Washington coast, and is the kind of place where the population is invariably expressed as 15,000 souls rather than people. I joined her there without a fixed return date to my California life.

Most days I'd run down the main street past the faded antique shops and historic Majestic Inn where a banjo soundtrack would inevitably pop into my head and everything would take on the sepia tinge of old photographs until I reached the ocean. We stayed in the bottom floor of a house the hospital owned. It had the damp feel of a basement flat, with the dark wood furniture swallowing what little light the windows begrudgingly admitted. Marjorie was at the hospital almost every day, and we quickly settled into a happy routine of work, sex, runs, cooking, and sex. We slept well.

It was a few days before we noticed the spiders. I thought the first one was a mouse. We were in the bedroom when a brown blur darted along the seam between the white baseboard and grey carpet, its egg-shaped body rippling the shag of the carpet.

"What is that?" I asked, pointing. I reached for my glasses.

"Hoooh .... that's a spider," Marjorie said from the bed.

Glasses on. Holy hell, it was a spider. Including its legs, it was the size of my fist.
Marjorie squealed and dove under the covers. Spiders were one of the few things that set her off. I shrugged and joined her in bed. Pretty soon we were not thinking about spiders.

Her father met us for dinner after our first week in Anacortes. He was a marketing executive, in Seattle on a business trip. We waited for him in the narrow foyer of the Adrift Seafood Restaurant. Marjorie twirled in place, her blue-green dress swishing around her compact frame.

"It’s nice to wear something other than scrubs."

"You’re sure he didn’t want to stay with us tonight?"

"He said he needed to get back to Seattle. I think his flight is really early tomorrow morning."

Her father walked in. He was tall with a slightly stooped posture that caused his suit jacket to hang forward, the look of an old football player.

"Nick, how’s the professor business these days?" he asked as Marjorie hugged him.

"Nice to be away from it for a while." The bastard. He always brought up the professor thing.

Yes, okay, Marjorie had been my student, but it wasn’t the cliché everyone thinks.

"Well, I’m sure they miss you," he said.

It was one class, introduction to physics, and she never even came to my office hours. Nothing happened until several years after Marjorie graduated, when she got a part-time campus job while she studied for her second attempt at the admission test for medical school. She was the one who initiated things between us. But the actual facts of the matter got gobbled up by professor and student, especially since I was closer in age to her parents than I was to her. That’s all anyone saw.

We attacked a plate of crab cakes like hungry seals. Over the buzz of the busy restaurant, Marjorie’s father asked how our new place was.

"It’s fine," she said. "I don’t get to see it much, but it’s clean and quiet."

He looked at me, as if to get validation from another male that his daughter was properly sheltered.

"No complaints," I said. "It’s walking distance to these crab cakes, so it could be a tent and I’d be happy."
After dinner her father left and we walked along the main drag. Marjorie was forever fond of post-dinner strolls, wandering the streets as people hurried in and out of restaurants, the window displays of shops all the more intriguing for being dark. We veered off the main street and meandered, arms around each other, snug against the evening chill. The neighborhood grew residential, blocky houses painted in primary colors with well-tended yards.

I looked down at the white bag in her hand.

"Who brings home leftovers from a seafood restaurant?" I asked.

She tucked her chin down against her chest and looked up at me, reproachful brown eyes blinking through stray strands of brown hair.

"I know," I said. "Thrifty."

She smiled and leaned her head against my shoulder.

"I'll mix it in with eggs for breakfast," she said. "Yummy."

"Picking up nickels in front of a bulldozer again."

"And you were doing so good there for a minute," she sighed with a smile.

Two blocks from our house a large brown dog came charging across a yard at us, barking as it ran. I quailed, backing up and raising my arms. My only experiences with dogs were as a runner and they had not generally been good ones. Marjorie bent over, holding out one hand toward the dog.

"Hey there, buster," she said.

The dog slowed as it reached us and barked again. Marjorie knelt calmly in front of the shaggy beast while it sniffed the air between them.

After a minute Marjorie stood. The dog shifted uncertainly, its paws scraping against the cement of the sidewalk.

"Come on," said Marjorie. "It'll be fine."

She walked on ahead. The dog didn't move. I trotted after her but kept my eye on the dog until the autumn night swallowed it.
That night I saw a spider in the living room, as gargantuan as the first but sickly yellow-white. It made little clicking noises as it scurried along the base of the wall and disappeared into a crack between the fireplace brick and the drywall.

Later, as we got ready for bed, Marjorie spotted another spider.

"Ahhh! Nick it's back," she hollered and jumped into bed.

The spider vanished behind the dresser. We didn't sleep as well that night.

When I woke up Marjorie had already left for her shift at the hospital. There was a note on the kitchen table: "Hey pumpkin, can you call someone to come spray for the spiders? LUMA MCZ."

LUMA had somehow become our mutual abbreviation for "Love U More Always," part of the private dialect we had developed over the three years we'd been together. MCZ were Marjorie's initials and doubled as her nickname.

The next afternoon a surly man in a red flannel shirt showed up to spray for spiders. He inspected the inside of the house with tools I hadn't seen before—curved metal things, some with lights attached—then went out into the grey autumn afternoon to check the perimeter, where the dark brown siding of the house met the light brown grass. I trailed along and attempted to look like I had some understanding of what he was doing. Eventually he turned and looked at me.

"No spiders nesting here," he said.

"But, well, I mean, we've seen them. Several of them."

The man shrugged.

"I'm not saying you didn't. But spraying doesn't do any good unless there's nests."

"And ...?"

"No sign of nests."

"Okay. Is there any chance you could, maybe, spray some anyway? You know, preventively?"

The man eyed me as he put his tools back in a red metal box sprinkled with rust spots.

"Doesn't work like that," he said. "If they're just passing through, the spray won't do anything to 'em. It's only when they get big and nest that we can get 'em."

"But they were huge."
The man walked toward his truck, toolbox in hand.

"So you said on the phone," he replied. The tint of skepticism in his tone unnerved me. I should have taken a photo.

"Okay, well, thanks for coming out and checking."

The next week I got my photo. I was looking at a map on my phone when the living room spider emerged from the carpet in the corner. There were at least four different spiders inhabiting the flat—Marjorie argued for five—and we were reluctantly learning their habits. I fumbled the phone into camera mode and tried to get a shot of the arachnid as it ambled along the baseboard. The flashes seemed to startle it, as if I were a paparazzi to its celebrity, and it stopped and reversed course back under the carpet.

Marjorie had the next day off and we headed to the nearby state park for the morning. We ran along trails weaving through impossibly green pines, the mist cool on our faces, our breaths exhaling into steam. The forest gave way to the sea where the steady slap of the waves against the gravel shore mixed with the calls of gulls. We looked out across the grey waters of the sound at green islands ringed with fog. Slowing to a walk, we felt the ocean chill and leaned against each other as we made our way back to the car.

"What are people saying?" I asked Marjorie that night while she was on her laptop.

"About what?"

"The photo you posted, the one I took of Living Room Spider."

"Not much."

I looked over her shoulder to see who had commented on the photo. Four people, all male of course, two of them younger and single and thus on my mental watch list. One recommended evacuating the premises immediately.

"You can't tell how big it is from the photo," she said.

"Well, I didn't have time to put a ruler next to it."

Marjorie was quiet.
"If they really bother you we could move to a nicer place," I said. I had money, more than just professor money, courtesy of a well-timed year at a start-up software company.

"That’s a waste when we get this for free," she said. "We only have two weeks left."

"Two weeks in a hotel might be nice."

"A hotel costs too much. I hate the spiders but we'll stay."

The next Saturday found us back at the Adrift, this time for lunch with two friends of Marjorie's from Seattle who were en route to the San Juan Islands. Natalie was doing a fellowship in orthopedics and her husband Omid worked in technology. We ate calamari and talked of limb surgery. Then, apropos of nothing, Marjorie mentioned the spiders.

"This morning we were in the kitchen and this huge spider, the Bedroom Spider, came running across the counter right in front of us," she said.

Natalie shivered and Marjorie nodded with wide eyes.

"The bedroom spider, in the kitchen?" asked Omid, confused.

"There’s more than one," said Marjorie. "And they’re all huge. At first we thought the brown one was the Bedroom Spider, but then ...."

"It's a long story," I interrupted to polite smiles all around. "But you two have a house, do you ever have problems with spiders?"

Omid and Natalie looked at each other.

"Not really," said Omid. "We did have a few small ones right after we moved in."

"What did you do?"

"I bought some spray. That took care of it."

"I thought that only worked if they were nesting?"

Omid shrugged and looked over at the specials board. "Hey, does anyone want desert?" he asked.

"The stout float sounds interesting," said Natalie.

"I’ll split it with you, if you want," said Marjorie.

I wanted to ask Omid what brand of spray he used, but I didn’t get a chance before they left in a rush to catch their ferry.
On Monday I was scouring the internet for anti-spider strategies when I was interrupted by an email from Marjorie. She was at work and had forwarded me a message with the subject, "Photos from the Fourth." That summer, Marjorie and her friends had gone to the Freedom Fair, a big Fourth of July celebration in Tacoma. I was in California getting ready to leave for a conference in China. Apparently they met a photographer at the fair who eventually emailed her some of the photos he took. There seemed to be a lot of Marjorie by herself, and I shook my head at the cliché of my jealousy. She was gorgeous, though, in the way few short women are, as if her beauty were more intense for being concentrated in a smaller volume. I scrolled down through the emails they had exchanged before he sent Marjorie the photos.

One sentence, one seemingly innocuous sentence halfway down, pumped my gut full of nausea. I stopped breathing.

"Sorry for the delay in response," she had written to him in August. "I'm actually in Asia right now visiting family and friends :)."

Marjorie was indeed in Asia when she wrote that email. I was there with her. Just me. No friends. No family. Me.

She had joined me in Beijing as my conference ended. From there we flew to Thailand for a jungle trek followed by whitewater rafting and waterfall climbs. Then we spent ten days in a villa at an exclusive island resort. We'd lounge by our private infinity pool in the mornings, drinking the sweet juice of unknown Thai fruits and staring out at the sea. The days were spent sea kayaking or snorkeling, then napping on our own white sand beach. By nightfall we would be ravenous and feast under moonlight on fresh seafood with piles of noodles. The entire flight home we held hands, glancing over at each other and smiling without needing to say anything.

It was on one of the days on the island that Marjorie wrote to the photographer that she was "visiting family and friends :)." Somehow the smiley face made it worse.

I rehearsed the argument ten times in my head before she got home, and still lost by a wide margin.

"It was a quick email, I didn’t even think about what I was writing."
"You have to think to tell a lie. It's the truth that doesn't take any thought."

"I didn't lie to you."

"You lied to hide me."

"I forwarded you the email. I wouldn't have done that if I was trying to hide something from you."

"That doesn't mean you weren't trying to hide something from me. It just means you're not good at hiding things from me."

"So I'm not good at hiding things. How's that bad?"

"You're pretty good at hiding me."

"Don't be ridiculous."

It went on from there, spiraling outward, that one sentence in her e-mail connecting via thin strands of past hurts to other grievances until we were tangled in such complexity of anger past and present that I could no longer make sense of the words coming out of my own mouth.

We wound up like battered boxers, too weary to raise our arms to throw any more punches. A silent armistice was reached and we bedded down unhappily for the night.

My mind was still racing. After a while I decided to put that energy to better use and work on a research paper I was revising. But leaving our shared bed could be misconstrued as an escalation of hostilities.

"Hey Marjorie," I whispered. She looked over at me from her side of the bed. "I can't sleep, so I'm going to work on my paper. But I didn't want you to think I was, you know, abandoning our bed."

"Go work on your fucking manuscript," she hissed and shoved me out of the bed.

It was a hands-and-feet combination shove and she's Olympian strong while I'm built like a javelin and weigh about as much. I skidded off my side of the bed and banged into the nearby wall. Stunned, I lay on the narrow strip of carpet between the wall and the bed. The thought of spiders soon roused me. I crept out of the room to my desk.

My manuscript dealt with optical physics, some calculations on bounded systems that appear to function differently depending on where the observer is placed. The physics sheltered me for a while, as
it always does. As I worked I saw Living Room Spider and later Hourglass Spider on their nocturnal sorties. Exhaustion eventually set in and I returned, cautiously, to my side of the bed.

Marjorie was getting dressed for work when I woke up. She moved stiffly and avoided looking at me.

I was still in bed when she was ready to leave. She came over and looked down at me.

"Are you going to fix your issues today?" she asked.

"Yeah, and maybe when I'm done I'll go visit some family and friends."

The blow struck me in the sternum. Her fist was closed, her face contorted.

"Asshole," she said as she hit me.

I sunk back down into the bed as she turned and half-ran out of the bedroom. The front door slammed and I heard the car start up and pull away.

Crap. That was an asshole thing to say. I got out of bed, my chest smarting. No bruise yet, but a circle of red.

I pulled on some sweats and surveyed the refrigerator. Grabbing a notepad I started planning out a nice dinner, maybe three courses. Risotto, she loved my risotto, so that was in. Flowers would be too much. Definitely some good wine. And a few lunches for her to take to work, better than hospital cafeteria food. Homemade turkey wrap with avocado. My signature duck tacos with strawberry-jalapeno sauce. To my list I added the top-rated spider sprays from my internet searches. Oh, and I'd need to get some tools so I could pull back the carpet and baseboards and spray underneath. She had the car, but a grocery store and a hardware store were both within walking distance.

I was about to leave on my shopping trip when I saw the Hourglass Spider sauntering along the wall at knee-level. A magazine was on the kitchen table, an old issue of Healthy Living. I rolled it up and hit the spider, stunning it. I hit it again and it was shaking, again and it was still, plastered against the wall, and again I hit it and crouching down against the wall I hit it again and again until it was a large brown smear and my shoulder was stinging. I dropped the magazine and slid down the wall to the floor, grabbing at my forehead with both hands, crying.

I'm convinced I would have stayed if it wasn't for that spider.
Thirty minutes later I was packed. Contrary to how it was later portrayed, I did not sneak out. I
texted Marjorie, which seemed the most appropriate form of communication since she was at work in
the emergency room.

"Going back to California for a while. We can talk tonight."

An airport shuttle service had a regular pickup each morning at a nearby gas station. I walked
fast and got there as the small white shuttle bus pulled in. It would take us to a transit hub about
halfway to Seattle where we’d transfer to a larger bus for the rest of the journey to the airport. We were
pulling out of the gas station when my phone rang. It was Marjorie and her words came fast.

"What's going on pumpkin?"

"I'm going back to California."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"We can talk about it later."

"I'll come home."

"But you have work."

"I don't care, I'm coming home."

"Stay at work. I'm already on the shuttle bus, we can talk about it later."

"Babe! Don't!"

"Look, we stop in Burlington. I will call you from there."

"I'm coming after you. I'll get you in Burlington."

"Please don't. We can talk about this on the phone."

"No, don't."

"I'm sorry, I have to go. I'm on this small shuttle bus."

"I'm coming."

"Don't. I'll call you from Burlington, I promise. I have to go."

I hung up as the stench of my relationship drama spread through the shuttle bus. She called back
and kept calling, but I didn't answer. Some thirty minutes later, as we neared Burlington, I saw her car
alongside us on the freeway. She parked behind us at the transit hub. The shuttle driver pointed toward a large green bus. It would leave in five minutes for the airport.

We sat in her car and talked. She was crying. She never cried. Stay, she said, please stay. I got out and walked toward the large bus. I could see her head against the steering wheel, her body shaking. I turned to go back to her and a guy bumped into me. He was young, with an orange Mohawk and a ratty black leather jacket.

"Sorry 'bout that," he said.

"It's okay."

I stood there. Marjorie had never said sorry. Not once.

I turned and followed the guy with the Mohawk onto the green bus. He gave me a little nod from his seat as I headed to the back.

Part of me is still on that green bus, will always be on that bus, forever headed towards the airport but never getting there. I’ve still got my shopping list from that day somewhere. The voicemails are saved on an old laptop, one of them beginning, "You are not allowed to leave." But what I wish I had was a better photo of the spiders, one where you could see how big they really were. Some tangible piece of evidence that would show people why I left.
Lost in the Woods
Sophia Jakab
The Prologue
Imaani Cain

i.
at age six, you are helen of troy
with a stripe of sunscreen on your
cheeks. in this life, paris has the same nose as you,
has taught you how to breathe underwater
and how to spit seeds across the expanse of the lawn.

in this life, paris watches you dress through the crack
in the door, cataloging the tender shape of your
back. when you catch him, he does not apologize
but you offer forgiveness anyways.

ii.
beauty is not the gorgon you had
hoped it would be. there are dreams
where the men all turn to stone,
their hunger frozen
into marble and with you
always out of range.

iii.
when paris's brother asks you to strip,
you wonder if that is just some form
of love that your mother has not explained to
you yet. his teeth flash in the dim lighting;
he says that you are the prettiest
thing he has ever seen.

iv.
your body is a land you have never
explored. it is the house you do not
have the key to--you can only look
at yourself with your head
half turned away.
v.
when he puts his hands on you,
you are six years old
in a frayed swimsuit.
forgiveness is already waiting
at the tip of your tongue.
Pathology
Dorian Kotslopoulos

Father must have been livid,
having spent the night inside
a file cabinet, zipped
into a body bag, naked
but for a toe tag.

The pathologist then severed
his heart from his lungs,
disentangling the veins,
leaving an isolated but intact heart,
to study etiology.

Father’s bloodless body
revealed my inheritance:
hair dull as bone,
a cavity growing inside.
It Was Over in an Instant

W. Jack Savage
If I Were on Display at Susan’s
Anthony Spaeth

What if I were on display at Susan’s? She could put me in the corner by the tea screen or among her collection of brass bells. I would go nicely behind the leather sofa (where the lamp is) or between the incense burners. She could, perhaps, perch me on the credenza like a bird.

The light in the great room suits me, I think. It suits the color of my complexion. But I’m too broad for the hallway. Even though the lighting is good in the restroom, that would never do. It must either be in the great room or the sun room. But there is nothing valuable in the sun room and I would probably be mistaken for a trifle or perhaps an unappreciated gift.

That gives me an idea. If Susan puts me on display in her house and Carl comes to her party, then I think that she should put me in the corner, naked, by the hooded lamp, and pose me so that I am leaning forward, with one hand against the wall above my head like a man trying to pass a kidney stone into a urinal. Then, when Carl comes over to admire me, I shall turn around.

She’d never have it. Susan wouldn’t. No, if I were on display at Susan’s house, she’d make me sit. Or crouch. And keep quiet. She’d want me out of sight, or almost out of sight, so that when she came over she could gesture at me slowly in her flowing silk dress and say, “This, of course, is Georgie,” which is a pet name I detest.

And I of course would cringe. I, of course, would cringe and smile. “Hello,” I would say, blurring out the word much like a cuckoo clock. But I would not stand. I would not offer my hand to anyone. I would stay there kneeling in the corner where she’d left me, where she’d told me I should be, like an affable gargoyle.

If I stared upward into the recessed lights from my gargoyle crouch, they would slowly blind me. I should stare at them instead of at the party-goers. I should listen to them instead of the conversations and hope the blindness would also make me deaf. If I were on display at Susan’s house, I would kneel there in the corner and stare up into one of the bright incandescent bulbs, smiling fiendishly and still as stone.
On Fire
Carla Sarett

After college, my friends teased me that I was never between boyfriends. They were half-right, but only half. I’d decided that monogamy was an artificial, even oppressive, construct—not that anyone I knew was forcing it on me. Unsurprisingly, my love life was a mess. I was always madly in love with someone and someone else was in love with me. My earnest, moon-faced therapist often got the names mixed up—they changed so often.

It’s what I talked that year after my brother’s death.

But this isn’t a cautionary tale. I don’t believe in those.

Eventually, I moved in with one of the men: an easy-going guy I’d known two or three months, who hadn’t minded about the rest. He wasn’t my type. I liked men who read Joyce and Cavafy, who read The New Yorker, and T. wasn’t that; and on that score, I was inflexible. Somehow, a chance encounter had turned into a weekend, and then spilled over into a week, and when money ran out, he was a solution. I wasn’t curious about him. I never asked where he worked or where his mother lived, or why he never visited her or why he’d quit college. But we got along, and never argued.

His place was rent-controlled, leased for the laughable sum of $75 a month—a studio on a quiet street, tucked behind Sixth and Houston. Hardly luxurious: a bed, a smallish card table, and two folding chairs, no pictures, no rugs, no books, no audio system, a tiny TV. A small stove of sorts, only used to boil water for instant coffee. But it wasn’t dingy or dark; and I reasoned, with rather warped logic, that the money I saved on rent let me continue therapy. I’d lost my job, and with it, my health insurance. Every dollar counted—actually, every quarter counted, since my father was bankrupt.

My days got long and quiet. If I didn’t get a temp assignment-- I walked to a newsstand for a copy of The New York Times, bought coffee and a bagel, and came home. After one hot, long nap, I went downstairs. There was a crowd of policemen, firemen, bright red fire trucks that barely fit into the narrow street, and neighborhood types—back in the ’70s, mostly Sicilians, who were on a fire-name
basis—Joey, Anthony, Maria, Teresa. I avoiding speaking to anyone if I could help it, so no one knew mine. They looked at me as if I were a living relic.

One of the cops – young, sly-eyed—said, “Didn’t you hear the sirens? They were loud. They’ve been going on a while.”

I wore the dress I’d slept in, low-cut, clingy, and way too tight. I ran my hands through my tangled hair. “I was sleeping. I’m a heavy sleeper, always have been,” I said.

Later, when I thought about it, I knew that wasn’t true. I’d heard the siren – faintly, but I’d heard it – and I’d decided to ignore it. One way or the other, it wasn’t worth the effort to get out of bed. But I told T. the funnier version, that I’d slept through a fire alarm—I knew it would please him to picture me oblivious, contented in our barely-furnished room. He kissed my shoulders, and neck and whispered how much he loved me. Usually, he only said that during sex, when people say all kinds of wild things.

So, I said, yes, I love you. I loved him in the way I loved sex or movies or food that anything that gives pleasure but can’t hurt you. But I guess he took it the other way, the serious way.

One night—was it weeks later or months later? —I drunkenly meandered home with a tall, blue-eyed actor, whom I’d met that night after an off-off-Broadway play. He’d been the lead. The street was spinning and the night air was muggy; and we kissed as we walked. His kiss felt dangerous, exciting. When we reached my place (or T’s place, to be accurate), he gave me his phone number. “It’s better that way,” I said. I was about to kiss him again when a paperback (one of my Henry James novels) fell from the upstairs window. It missed us, but not by much. I should have circled the block—but it was dark, almost midnight. I told the actor, “later.”

T. was shaking when I got upstairs. “You’re thinking of seeing him again?” he asked. “Is that why you took his number?”

It’s hard to be careful with other peoples’ feelings when you’re careless with your own. I shrugged, defiantly. “Yes,” I said. “It’s not the first time.”

T. held me by the shoulders, and said, “But you told me you loved me. I believed you.”

My mother was a stickler for saying please, and thank you—but she never taught me about apologies. Besides, I didn’t know one was required. “Not real love, no, never.”
“What did you mean, it's not the first time?” he asked with a quivering voice.

I was oddly self-righteous, as if he had no right to ask—and I was thinking about the actor like a kid thinks about a new toy. I answered: “Just what I said.”

He slapped me and it was a hard slap, too. Then he started weeping with shame, sobbing and his face grew red and swollen. I hardly felt the pain, but I was stunned by the reality of a man hitting me—I didn't care enough to hit back, though. I was, all at once, sick of me, sick of the idea of me, and how I'd landed where I was, in some man's apartment. That's what he was by now, just some guy— a detour, a wrong turn in a pathless journey.

I threw stuff into a small bag, like a woman on the run-- three or four dresses, some underwear, a few novels, and a leather-bound journal with mostly blank pages. T. was apologizing, but his voice was background noise, a distraction. When I lifted the bag, it felt surprisingly light, almost weightless.

I'd be back for the rest, I told him.

I should have felt many things that night as I closed the door. The slap had been ugly, a warning, as jarring as a fire siren. But we rarely feel the things we're supposed to when they're happening, and never in the right order. It's like a jigsaw puzzle where the all the pieces fall to the floor, and when you pick them up, the circles are squares, the reds have turned to blue, and you can't tell top from bottom. A taxi came in a flash, and all I recall is feeling wide-awake on a clear Manhattan night, with nothing to lose.
Mountain Ash
Melissa Eleftherion
Our Family Quartet
Jane Miller

Everybody plays an instrument,
mom's voice high and thin
as the rim of a wine glass,

my sister and I, woodwinds
we practice at home. After dinner
Dad performs drills, beating time

with his leather strop, a tune up
when it isn't my turn, for my little sister
at the kitchen chair, holding on

for the down stroke, our mother
off somewhere, and me upstairs,
his audience in bed, so cold

the dark sheets, the winter moon
through sheers, thin glass, a spotlight
on me, on what I have watched

play out, my sister's braced arms,
her small hands clutching the chair back,
she looks past slats at dirty cracks

in the red brick linoleum, at crumbs
from dinner rolls, her back facing him
I can't stop, his leather belt in hand,

my little sister plays her high notes
through its notches, again and again.
I try to warm her side of the bed.
The man, he did not say
if her eyes were closed or open,
if the fire took her sleeping or awake,
or if the ring she wore,
I gave her,
burned a metal circle
underneath the middle joint
of her left hand.
He did not speak to me.

Instead, he said
your daughter has been reported dead
in Herat, Afghanistan
at zero-six-hundred today.
And her father, probably,
said thank you,
and he closed the door,
like the one between his ribs
he never opened anymore.

I heard at fifteen-hundred.
Her brother’s voice,
crackling like fire
through my phone,
fell quiet when I screamed.
I’m sorry, he said,
I’m next of kin, and
she’s coming back to Dover,
but they won’t let you in.

So I drove Bay road,
blind with crying,
and braked over the brittle weeds
beside the chain-link fence.

I watched the aircraft’s
heavy metal gut unfold.
The green and mottled forms
like sharp, small sticks
bore out the boxes
wrapped with flags
like children, tucked,
nested, into bed.

“Ma’m?”
An officer made footprints through the weeds.
“You can’t stand here.”

I gasped and shuddered,
like the engine of her plane
must have shook
before it blew.
“But that’s my wife.”

I’d never said that before
and I never would again,
but the officer watched
from between his hat and beard
and said,
“I’ll stand here, so you can see.”

And he guarded my vigil,
and the last pallbearer set
my love’s remains five thousand feet away.
They gave the living back their dead.
And I died too, against the woven fence,
tears pressed into the metal grooves,
a woman unqualified.

Her body at Dover
and I, on the other side.

Today, the families of fallen soldiers are allowed to receive their loved one’s coffins at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Until 2011, same-sex couples could not obtain the military ID to enter the receiving area.
The day Prince died, I was walking to the audiologist office to pick out hearing aids, \textit{Purple Rain} playing on my purple iPod, my lipstick-red walking cane tapping its drumbeat on the sidewalk, vibrating through my wrist bones to my elbow bones to my shoulders to my clavicles to my brain, telling me: \textit{I am whole}. Without my cane, without that drumbeat, my brain gets confused: \textit{Where is my musical limb?}

The cane makes music just for me. When I walk to the beat, I drum to the beat. Doesn't matter about my hearing anymore. I am a walking musical instrument.

Except it does matter, because certain music saved my life. Certain music still saves my life. \textit{Maybe I can hear Prince like I did when I was a kid, I thought. How much of his music am I missing? What frequency is his voice?}

I wanted a purple hearing aid to match my pastel purple and pink hair. Unicorn hair.

Later, in the office, disappointment: hearing aids tiny as earrings, designed to be hidden behind my ear lobe like something shameful, scattered across the desk in colors as dull as thumb drives or computer parts: boring blue, boring silver, boring beige.

No purple.

Then I saw the flash of red. Hot red. Carousel red. Like \textit{Little Red Corvettes} for my ears. \textit{They will clash with my pink glitter glasses}, I thought. \textit{They will clash with my mint green cat-eyes}. \textit{They will clash with my hair.}

"You're going to want the red ones," the audiologist said. She was looking at my handmade pageboy hat, white with black vintage typewriters printed on it, the one I sewed because it would make me stand out, the same reason I sew all my skirts, bags, and other clothes. I \textit{have} to be different. I \textit{love} to be different. I \textit{need} to be different.
She pointed to my cane. "You're a colorful personality. I can tell."

I smiled.

"The colorful ones aren't for everyone. But they're for you."

***

They are for me.

As a kid growing up with epilepsy, I made myself colorful as a survival strategy.

Age 14, a sharp, distinct, intentional before and after: Before seizures, I was the shy, quiet girl drowning in baggy kitten sweatshirts and Wrangler jeans; after seizures, I showed up to school in fishnets, combat boots, heavy black eyeliner, and dyed red-platinum-orange-pink-black (whatever fit the mood that week) hair. While the other kids whispered Karrie is on drugs, Karrie is nuts, Karrie pisses her pants, Karrie is faking, Karrie is a freak, I said fuck it. I will show them a freak. My clothes got weirder. My writing got weirder. My musical tastes got weirder. My art got weirder. I got weirder.

I didn't know until years later that Prince did the same damn thing. Prince had epilepsy, too. Prince got freaky as survival strategy.
In 2009, he talked about his epilepsy publicly for the first time on PBS with Tavis Smiley. "From that point on," he said, "I've been having to deal with a lot of things, getting teased a lot in school. And early in my career I tried to compensate by being as flashy as I could and as noisy as I could."

Prince was a walking disability poetics.

After that, when I listened to his music, I thought: Prince has a Sparkle Brain.

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Sparkle Brain. My term for my Epileptic, Bipolar, Chiarian, PTSD-brain—for any neurodivergent brain. Sparkle Brain is big tent. Autistic brains are sparkly. Psychogenic Non-Epileptic Seizure brains are sparkly. Sensory disordered brains are sparkly. Neurodiversity in all its forms is sparkly.

I mean sparkle literally: my brain is extra electric. When my brain lights up, it sparkles like it's 1999.

But I mean it figuratively, too: sparkly, like a disco ball. A Sparkle Brain is shiny. A Sparkle Brain is beautiful.

Sparkle Brain is my fuck you to neurologists who only see me as broken. My fuck you to editors who want me to cut epilepsy out of my writing because they don't think it's relevant, they don't think it sells, they don't think it's sexy. My fuck you to neurotypicals who think I need to be fixed.

Sparkle Brain is Disability Poetics.

***

When I was fifteen, the neurologists told me not to dream big. They said I lacked realism in my aspirations.

My aspirations: earn a PHD, write books.

Prince is the affirmative defense.
Prince had a Sparkle Brain. Prince dreamed big. Prince made music so sparkly the neurotypicals are jelly.

I wish I had known about his epilepsy back then. As a working class (and often poor) kid with parents who didn't get it and didn't have the money or time or education to advocate, pre-ADA, I believed what the neurologists said. Don't dream big. Don't dream big. Don't dream big. I heard it in my head like an ear worm, like tinnitus made of words.

***

Last year, after the largest writing organization in the country, AWP, rejected every single disability panel for its annual conference, I filed an ADA complaint, and the Department of Justice mailed me a letter explaining they lacked resources to investigate. On the second page: a list of assisted living facilities and voc rehab programs.

Go bag stuff at Goodwill, they were saying. They wanted to funnel me into the sub-minimum wage disabled labor pool.

Don't dream big. May lack realism in her aspirations.

***

Lately, it's been hard to love my Sparkle Brain. I am struggling with word-finding, suspected auditory processing disorder, dizziness (hence, the walking cane), falls, eye-tracking problems, tinnitus, more frequent seizures, and fatigue.

When I got accepted into a PHD program, I asked friends for advice seeking accommodations. They said, "Whatever you do, do not use the word ‘cognitive.’ Ever. They will think you are dumb."

Even among people with disabilities, there's an ableist hierarchy: So long as your brain is OK, you are OK.

I bought into that shit. I internalized it. I was ashamed.

Once, I told a friend, "I don't have a learning disability. I have cognitive disabilities."
Later, when I found out my (maybe) auditory processing disorder is a learning disability, I thought: Will anyone ever believe me about my high IQ? Will people think I am stupid?

That's internalized ableism, and that's exactly why I can't keep this stuff secret and call it self-protection. It isn't protection; it's destruction.

What would Prince say? He would say: get freaky with it. Make it shiny. Make it loud. Make it your art.

***

Sparkle Brain is intersectional.

There was a boy I liked in high school. He told people I flopped like a fish. I dragged him by the arm into the hallway and made him say it to my face. He refused at first, and then, cheeks flushed and head hung in shame, he mumbled it.

"Look me in the eye," I said. "And say it again. I dare you."

And he did. And I punched him.

Preach whatever you want about nonviolence, but he never said it again.

He got beat up by a girl.

And not just any girl, but the epileptic girl.

That was survival strategy, too: Defy gender expectations.

Being epileptic was one thing. Being a girl with epilepsy was another. I hated being a girl. I didn't want to be a boy, but I sure as hell didn't want to be a girl.

***

Prince in that video for When Doves Cry, the way he crawled across that floor, all lean and sinewy, but soft, too. Boy, girl, it didn't fucking matter.

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I had sex for the first time when I was eight, or at least that's the first time I can corroborate. It was 1983. Little Red Corvette was a hit. My brother, the fast-car-driving mechanophiliac was sleeping on our couch.

I was his Little Red Corvette.

***

If you want to get away with rape, rape an epileptic. Nobody believes us. Nobody cares. We are crazy. We are hysterical.

**DISCUSSION AND DISPOSITION:** In summary, Karrie appears to have had several spells which are compatible with simple partial seizures. She seems to have had an additional spell with loss of recollection for the event which may have very well been a partial complex seizure. We therefore recommend repeating her EEG, pursuing an MRI and beginning Tegretol therapy. We will initially give her suspected hysterical seizure disorder.

In summary, Karrie appears to be a bright, active, generally well-adjusted teenager who shows no evidence of depression, anxiety, or psychosis. We have no adequate explanation for her spells from a psychological perspective.

**ASSESSMENT:**

Karrie Higgins suffers from seizures. They have been considered functional after workup in Iowa City. However, the pattern of the seizures raises concern about an epileptic seizure disorder. Dilantin therapy will be continued. Because of the low Dilantin level, on the one hand the patient is insistent she is taking her medications regularly, on the other hand her dose will be increased to 400 mg daily. Daily blood levels obtained. Thank you for requesting my assistance.

W. S. RISK, M.D.
03/21/90 krc
03/21/90

We are unreliable witnesses. We have bad memories. We are liars.
In high school, a teacher—not just any teacher, but the most popular high school baseball coach in the state, our very own Cedar Rapids, Iowa, version of goddamned Jerry Sandusky—forced his hand down the front of my jeans into my panties, yanked me toward him by my waistband, and whispered so close to my face I could taste his sour breath, "I know things aren’t right at home."

He said it like a threat. Nobody will believe you. You’re the freak. The epileptic. The poor, white trash. The kid with the father who skids into the driveway in his rusty Chevy pickup, breath reeking of alcohol. I know things aren’t right at home.

Later, when I overdosed on my epilepsy meds, he sent packets of math homework to the psych ward and refused to tutor me.

Don’t dream big. May lack realism in her aspirations.

When he died and everyone was posting eulogies on Facebook, I spilled it. "I waited half a lifetime to tell this story," I said, "because none of you would have ever believed it."

He got a baseball field named after him. I got unfriended.

***

Once, my father heard Darling Nikki blasting from my bedroom, and he called it trash. "No daughter of mine is going to play music like that."

Music like that. Music that made me feel like sex was OK, that I was OK, that my body wasn’t filthy, ruined, that maybe it even held secret powers, that I knew things the other kids didn’t. That I wasn’t trash.

You have to understand: sexual abuse sometimes felt good. It’s a normal physiological response. I knew stuff the other kids didn’t.

It wasn’t just the lyrics. It was that voice. God, the way Prince could grind with his voice. My father heard a man celebrating a woman grinding. My father heard something threatening to the social
order in our house, where he ruled over my mother, my sister, and me with an iron fist and the buckle end of a belt.


***

*Music like that.* My father screamed at me when he caught me with my hands in my underpants. I was seven or eight. I had already been to the doctor for unexplained bleeding, unexplained infections. Nobody made the connection with my brother. I was shameful. I was sinful. I got a beating with the buckle end of the belt.

Later, when the truth about my brother came out, my father didn't believe it. He visited him in secret. A couple years ago, I mapped his criminal traffic violations to prove it. He visited my brother, praised my brother, called him his favorite son.

My father was more disgusted about me touching *myself* than *my brother touching me.*

Prince told me, *fuck that shit.*

***

My brother taught me my value was in my body, in my looks—not my brain.

My father did, too. Once, as the entire extended family watched from the dinner table, he lifted my skirt until my panties were showing, and said, "The boys must like it."

***

When I got prescribed a walking cane, I *read shit like this on the Internet.* I thought: I will never be sexy again.

Strangers feel entitled to tell me: *You would be so pretty without the cane.*
But you know what? Prince had a walking cane. He had a goddamned sparkly rhinestoned cane. And he was still sexy AF, and only liars would deny it.

Prince is the affirmative defense, always.

Prince was a walking, sparkly disability poetics.

***

I have a collection of walking canes now. All loud, all colorful.

***

When a fellow Sparkle Brain dies young, I take it hard. Sparkle Brains are 11x more likely to leave this earth too soon. They are more likely to die if they abuse drugs than non-sparkles who do. They are more likely to commit suicide.

The Sparkle Life is a tough life. The Sparkle Life burns out fast, like a high-wattage bulb. I feel the clock ticking every minute of every day. I swear I even hear it: tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick.

My first thought when I read Prince died: Did the epilepsy get him?

When I shared this fear with friends, they said things like, "I heard it was a drug overdose." "He was addicted to painkillers." "It would be sadder if it were a drug overdose."

They do not know the fear. They do not hear the clock ticking like I do.

They do not understand: his disabilities cannot be erased. Even if it was drugs, it is still about disability. Pain is disability. Addiction is disability. And epileptics, if they do abuse drugs, are more likely to die young.

***
The past few days, friends have posted tributes: Prince helped them love their broken, weird selves, they say. It’s beautiful, how he did that. But they leave out his epilepsy, the whole reason he made himself so colorful in the first place. They leave out the disability poetics.

***

Prince was intersectional in more ways than one.

As a straight, white woman, my experience of disability is different from an LGBTQA person of color, for a lot of reasons, and I want to be blunt about that, because so often, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity get erased from the disability experience. Prince meant a lot to me, but there were a lot of things he couldn’t mean to me, not like he did to Ekundayo Afolayan or Jack Qu’emi Gutiérrez.


***

My able friends were surprised when I posted on Facebook about Prince's Sparkle Brain. They might have read about it, they said, but they forgot.

But we, the Sparkle Brains, we never forgot. It meant everything.

***

When I got home from the audiologist, the news about Prince broke. It’s too late, I thought. Even with hearing aids, I will never hear him like I used to. It will never be the same.

But the truth is, I never understood music. I never heard it like other people hear it. In elementary school, when we learned the keyboards, I didn’t understand the scales. I had trouble discerning subtle differences in tones. I memorized finger positions—visually, I mean, like snapshots. I heard notes as beats.

It’s how I process poetry, too. I do not hear stresses. I struggle with scansion.
That's the auditory processing disorder. The learning disability. The one I refuse to be ashamed of.

The one that means maybe I will always hear the music like I used to. Maybe even with my hearing loss, I am not losing anything. Maybe sometimes a learning disability means you learn things other people don't.

***

The day after Prince died, I walked with my purple cane and cried and cried, blasting Darling Nikki and Little Red Corvette on my iPod.

I felt the tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick acutely. I felt the drumbeat of my cane. I am a walking musical instrument, I thought. My body makes music just for me.

I am making music with Prince.
Contributors

EUNICE ANDRADA is a poet, arts organiser, and journalist based in Sydney, Australia. She has performed her work in diverse international stages, from the Sydney Opera House and The Banff Centre to the UN Climate Negotiations in Paris. Her poetry has been broadcast on The Guardian, CNN International, and SBS Radio. Her poems have also found cosy homes in *Peril* and Deep Water Literary Press, amongst others. She was awarded the John Marsden/Hachette Australia Poetry Prize in 2014.

ALLISON AUSTAD is a typical recluse with poor social skills and no friends, (except for Muffin: her lovable, four-legged roommate.) Though it is difficult for her to tell herself this, she is a strong and brave woman who survived years of childhood sexual abuse as well as separation from her birth mother when she was six. She wants to show the world that abuse and mental illness are real and terrifying things that shouldn’t be stigmatized the way they are. She has submitted these art pieces, which are actually entries from her journal, because she just wants to be able to answer certain questions like “what was your childhood like?” and “are you okay?” without lying through her teeth.

HEATHER BELL’s work has been published in Rattle, Grasslimb, Barnwood, Poets/Artists, Red Fez, Ampersand, and many others. She was nominated for the 2009, 2010 and 2011 Pushcart Prize from Rattle and also won the New Letters 2009 Poetry Prize. Heather has also published four books. Any more details can be found here: www.hrbell.wordpress.com.

MAJNUN BEN-DAVID lived and worked in Africa as an anthropologist until he returned to the US and decided that fiction was a better way to tell the truth. He has published two short stories, one of which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and a third is in press. He can be found online at www.majnunbd.com.

ELEANOR LEONNE BENNETT is an internationally award winning artist of almost fifty awards. She is an art editor for multiple publications around the world. Eleanor’s photography has been published in British Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar. Her work has been displayed around the world consistently for six years since the age of thirteen. This year (2015) she has done the anthology cover for the incredibly popular Austin International Poetry Festival. She is also featured in Schiffer’s "Contemporary Wildlife Art" published this Spring. She is also a published writer and poet.

TOMAS BIRD was born in Scotland in 1983. He is an only child, tall, tattooed and scruffy from the neck up. After listening to Leonard Cohen in the early noughties, Tomas by chance stumbled across A Book of Longing also by Cohen and was inspired to both start writing poetry and songs... Cohen has yet to inspire him to paint; there is still time though. To date, Bird has released an album called The Cut and an E.P, Three Glasses a Day for Good Health and Lively Blood, with his former band The Blonde Spirit. In 2015, he released another E.P called Blemished Bone & Ink and is currently recording another album in the Limoseum, which is the name of his friends shed. Lastly, Tomas has released two collections of poetry entitled Shallow Sea and Hot Moon. Any and all proceeds always get donated to charity.
EMMA BLEKER is a 20-year-old poet from Austin, Texas attempting to live a true and convincing life. She has previously been published in *Electric Cereal*. You can find more of her work on tumblr at [www.stolenwine.tumblr.com](http://www.stolenwine.tumblr.com).


IMAANI CAIN was born in San Diego, California but grew up in New England. Currently, she lives in Boston with a shaky bookshelf that is crowded with far too many novels. She is an editorial assistant for *Talking Writing Magazine* and has been published on both *Thought Catalog* and [www.Exsistentia.net](http://www.Exsistentia.net). In her spare time, she studies French and paints watercolors.


LISA D. CHAVEZ has published two books of poetry, *Destruction Bay* and *In An Angry Season*. Her essays have appeared in *Arts and Letters, The Fourth Genre* and other magazines, and in anthologies. She lives in the mountains in New Mexico with a pack of Japanese dogs, and an ever-growing perfume collection.
HANNAH CLARK works at a small college in rural Nebraska where she writes about things that people think are not in rural Nebraska, like porcupines, tsunamis, and love.

MARTHA CLARKSON manages corporate workplace design in Seattle. Her poetry, photography, and fiction can be found in *monkeybicycle, Clackamas Literary Review, Seattle Review, Alimentum,* and *elimae.* She is a recipient of a Washington State Poets William Stafford prize 2005, a Pushcart Nomination, and is listed under “Notable Stories,” Best American Non-Required Reading for 2007 and 2009. She is recipient of best short story, 2012, Anderbo/Open City prize, for “Her Voices, Her Room.”

RYDER COLLINS has a novel, *Homegirl!* Her chapbook, *The way the sky was now,* won Heavy Feather Review’s first fiction chapbook contest, and she has two chapbooks of poetry, *i am hopscotch without hop* and *Orpheus on toast.* She wants to pull a cloud down from the sky & give it to you.

CAMERON CONNER is an aspiring author and photographer based in New Jersey. She was raised in a small town with a dream of making an impact somehow. Her writing and photography focuses on mental health issues, which she hopes will connect to her readers. She wants to be able to reach people in a way that others cannot in order to make people realize that they are not alone.
MELINA COOGAN is a freelance travel and adventure writer living in Asheville, North Carolina. Her mission is to inspire those living with fear and chronic illness to find curiosity, hope and transformation within their own journey. Follow her latest adventure of facing Chronic Neurological Lyme Disease on her blog, www.TheWilderCoast.com, or on Instagram @thewildercoast.

KRISTA COX is a paralegal and an associate poetry editor at Stirring: A Literary Collection. She writes because she thinks it's her best shot at changing the world, even a little. Her poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in Rogue Agent, Whale Road Review, and Pittsburgh Poetry Review, among other places. Find her work and more at www.kristacox.me.

VANESSA CROFSKEY is an awkward ironic from central city New Zealand. If she was a fruit she would definitely be a grapefruit, but would put mango at the top of her list. A current art student and illustrator, she delved into writing through several intense relationships, bad choices, and an inability to articulate anything effectively in person. Combined with a taste for the melodramatic, she soon became known for her performance poetry, rising up in Auckland's ranks. During her first slam (held by her university) she took out the 2015 Champion title and has since graced many stages to whine poetic about growth pains and other angst-filled subject matter. "Body Back" was previously published in Kate, UoA's annual Feminist magazine. You can find more of her writing, art and general tomfoolery on her Facebook page (Trashqueen), which links to her personal blog.
SALLY DESKINS is an artist and writer who examines the perspectives of women in art, including her own. She has exhibited and published her work internationally. She created art for *Leaves of Absence* (Red Dashboard, 2016) and *Intimates and Fools* (Les Femmes Folles Books, 2014) which recently won the Nebraska Book Honor Award for illustration and design. She is founding curator of *Les Femmes Folles*. [www.sallydeskins.tumblr.com](http://www.sallydeskins.tumblr.com)

MARTA DJEKIC is an independent artist and unpretentious genius. She draws, paints, swims, loves to read books, watch movies and occasionally does photography and illustration. As all great painters, she simply loves to do self-portraits. In all her works, it’s all about emotions, inner world, struggle, happiness and things from every-day life. When she doesn’t make self-portraits, she focuses on the people she loves. Marta has participated in numerous international group exhibitions and manages to have some solo-exhibitions from time to time. Despite of 8-year experience, her family mostly thinks that her work is “nice”. On the other hand, she thinks that her work sends emotional messages to those who know how to look and listen. She lives in Belgrade, Serbia, and hopes for the best. If you’re interested to see more of her works, please visit [www.behance.net/artsmarta](http://www.behance.net/artsmarta).

LIZ DOLAN’s poetry manuscript, *A Secret of Long Life*, nominated for a Pushcart, has been published by Cave Moon Press. Her first poetry collection, *They Abide*, nominated for The McGovern Prize, Ashland University was published by March Street. An eight-time Pushcart nominee and winner of Best of the Web, she was a finalist for Best of the Net 2014. She won The Nassau Prize for Nonfiction, 2011 and the same prize for fiction, 2015. She has received fellowships from the Delaware Division of the Arts, The Atlantic Center for the Arts and Martha’s Vineyard.
TYLER EARLS is an aspiring poet and musician from the small town of Roscoe, Illinois. His poetry can be found at *Persephone’s Daughters, Moloko House, Sock the Monkey*, and at [www.plankstand.tumblr.com](http://www.plankstand.tumblr.com).

KARI ANN EBERT has been passionate about writing since the age of six when she wrote her first poem. Focusing on fiction as well as poetry, Ms. Ebert dreams of making her living as a writer and wearing her fairy wings as often as possible. She also enjoys making up-cycled wearable art. Kari has been published in *The Broadkill Review* and *Leaves of Ink*, and was nominated for a 2016 Pushcart Prize. She splits her time between her home in Dover, Delaware and the magical fairy forest of her imagination.

MELISSA ELEFTHERION is a writer and visual artist. Brooklyn-bred, she is the author of five chapbooks: *huminsect, prism maps, Pigtail Duty, the leaves the leaves, & green glass asterisms*. Recent work appears/is forthcoming in *Flag+Void, Lunch Ticket, & Vector Press* among others. Melissa lives in Mendocino County where she works as a Reference & Teen Services Librarian, teaches creative writing, & manages the Poetry Center Chapbook Exchange. More of her work can be found @ [www.apoetlibrarian.wordpress.com](http://www.apoetlibrarian.wordpress.com)

SAMANTHA FORTENBERRY is a photographer from a small town in Northern Alabama. She currently studies at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia. Her series "Abandoned" is a cathartic exploration of anxiety, depression, and multiple personality disorder. This film photography series was a discovery process of finding, dealing, healing, and portraying different mental afflictions.
SIAARA FREEMAN is your friendly neighborhood hope dealer. If the something in the world saves you, you should try and save something in the world with whatever it is you got. She’s got poems. Siaara’s chapbook, *Live from District 11*, is available on Kindle.

KATE GARRETT writes and edits. She is the founding editor of Three Drops Press, and a senior editor at Pankhearst. Her poetry and flash fiction appears here and there, most recently or forthcoming in *After the Pause, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Blood Moon Rising Magazine*, and *The Fem*. Her latest pamphlet, *The Density of Salt*, will be published in 2016 by Indigo Dreams. She lives in Sheffield, UK with her beardy husband, three clever trolls who call her "Mum", and a cat who long ago declared war on all of their ankles. [www.kategarrettwrites.co.uk](http://www.kategarrettwrites.co.uk).
DAVID GILLETTE was born in rural Colorado into a family of schoolteachers, ranchers and uranium miners. He has spent his life living in small towns that serve as the basis for his fiction. He studied creative writing at the University of Iowa, and published his first short stories while working odd jobs in Europe. He lived in rural Japan for many years then returned to the United States for graduate study. To put his Ph.D in English to use, he taught in Florida, Japan and Australia and finally settled in California where he teaches writing at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. He is currently completing a novel about a ranching and mining community in Western Colorado. His short stories recently spun from the novel have been awarded honorary mentions with the Annual Zoetrope All-Story Short Fiction contest, and with the latest fiction open contest from Glimmer Train.

KARRIE HIGGINS is a writer, ink-maker, forger, performance artist and soon-to-be PHD student in Intermedia. Her work has appeared in The Manifest-Station, Los Angeles Review, Quarter After Eight, Full Grown People, DIAGRAM, the Cincinnati Review and Western Humanities Review. www.karriehiggins.com

SOPHIA JAKAB is a “half ancient, half child” swan maiden from Hungary, who is currently a finishing English Literature major in the mornings and a painting student by night. Right now she is in the midst of her application process to fine art universities in the UK, with the hope of developing herself in practicing fine art, literature and art theory. She likes to experiment with multiple disciplines, be it drawing, painting, sculpting, photography, etching and sewing or street art. Her primary influences include gothic literature, mythology, folk and fairytales, Czech surrealism and everything Shirley Jackson.

JANNE KARLSSON is an insanely productive artist from Sweden. His books are available at amazon and Epic Rites Press. www.svenskapache.se
DORIAN KOTSIOPOULOS has featured at various poetry venues in Massachusetts. Publications include *Salamander*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *JAMA*, *Women's Review of Books*, *WomenArts Quarterly*, and *Main Street Rag*. A member of the Jamaica Pond Poets, Dorian lives in Canton, MA and works as technical writer. She is currently writing a funny biography in her head during her daily commute.

KATIA KOZACHOK is a girl who used to dream of fireworks, but currently dreams of sleep. She spends her days editing with *Polyphony HS* and the *Blueshift Journal*, writing for various publications, and otherwise trying to change the world. Her work has been published in *Words Dance Magazine*, *The Cadaverine*, and *Sierra Nevada Review*, among others. She plans to take endless walks through cities until some curious stranger talks to her, wherein she will then recite poetry or famous quotes, depending on her mood. She enjoys pretending to be Professor Trelawney and talking to cats so everyone else leaves her alone.

SHAWN LASOTA is a high school English teacher, currently teaching in Fort Scott, Kansas. His work has previously appeared in *The Cow Creek Review* and *Sediments Literary Journal* and he is a recipient of the Charles Cagle Fiction Award.

LILI LEADER-WILLIAMS is a sometimes poet who dabbles in prose when a particular memory won't quiet down. Her favorite hobby is kissing her husband in public and snooping on people in the subway. Her work can be found in *Slim Volume: This Body I Live In* from Pankhearst and at her personal website: www.liliwrites.deviantart.com

MANDEM is one artist in two bodies. With an academic background in mythology, critical theory, and gender/queer studies, MANDEM works across media and materials, intentionally destabilizing genre in terms of content and media. Their art has been widely published in literary journals, recently including *Nonbinary Review*, *Scissors & Spackle*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Dirty Chai*, and *Red Fez*. During 2016, MANDEM is an artist in residence at the Associazione Culturale Il Palmerino in Florence, Italy. www.MANDEMart.com
JM MILLER’s poetry has appeared in the *Summerset Review, Mojave River Review, Broadkill Review, Midwest Quarterly*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, among others. She received a 2014 Individual Artist Fellowship as emerging professional in poetry from the Delaware Division of the Arts.

LAKSHMI MITRA is a 19-year-old college student living in Calcutta who occasionally frustrates herself into a bout of writing. When not doing so, she can be found reading, studying, craving sleep, and complaining. She is mostly polite, a lousy conversationalist, and doesn't like sudden movements. Therefore, it comes as a great surprise to her that her cats still don't like her. She blogs at [www.sightsinunderland.wordpress.com](http://www.sightsinunderland.wordpress.com) and [www.anotherwinterheart.tumblr.com](http://www.anotherwinterheart.tumblr.com).

JENNIFER PARKS is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University. She is a busy working mother of three, spending her free time working on her novel and distance running. Jennifer is a contributing writer for the Bluegrass Writers Studio blog and has served as an assistant fiction editor for the literary journal, *Jelly Bucket*. Her poem, “Lifeline,” appeared in an anthology of poems by Accents Publishing.

DUSTIN PEARSON is an MFA candidate at Arizona State University, where he also serves as the editor of *Hayden’s Ferry Review*. He was awarded the 2015 Katherine C. Turner Prize from the Academy of American Poets. Born in Charleston, he is from Summerville, South Carolina.
SIMON PERCHIK is an attorney whose poems have appeared in Partisan Review, The Nation, Poetry, Osiris, The New Yorker, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is Almost Rain, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, including free e-books, and his essay titled “Magic, Illusion and Other Realities,” please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

ALISON RUMFIT is an 18 year old writer who lives in the South of England. There isn't much to do there. Writing seemed like a good option. When she isn't doing that she's standing around in the kitchen at parties, or running away from things, or trying to formulate a life philosophy built on chips n dips. Her poetry has previously been published in Persephone's Daughters. Find more of her at www.readrum.tumblr.com.

MICHAEL RUSSELL is a 25 year old queer poet who is working on his first collection. He lives in Toronto. In his spare time he likes to read and write and participate in random nonsense. His work has appeared in The Quilliad, untethered, and QDA: A Queer Disability Anthology. www.seamlessyesterdays.tumblr.com

BARBARA RUTH photographs and writes at the intersection of Potowatomee and Ashkenazi, disabled and neuroqueer, fat and yogi, not this and not that. Her photography, memoirs, poetry and fiction appear in the following anthologies (among others) published in 2015 and 2016: Tales of Our Lives: Fork In the Road; Yellow Chair Review Anthology; Biting the Bullet: Essays on Women of Courage; QDA: Queer Disability Anthology; Lunessence: a Devotional to Selene, and Barking Sycamores Review Anthology.
In the past five years, CARLA SARETT’s work has appeared in numerous small literary magazines, including *The Linnet’s Wing, Subtle Fiction, Scissors and Spackle, Blue Lyra Review, Loch Raven Review, Crack the Spine,* and *Rose Red Review,* as well as story anthologies (humor, horror, even cats.) Her essay "Sam’s Will" was nominated for Best American Essay. She’s a refugee from academia who’s worked in TV, film, and market research.

W. JACK SAVAGE is a retired broadcaster and educator. He is the author of seven books including *Imagination: The Art of W. Jack Savage.* To date, more than fifty of Jack’s short stories and over seven-hundred of his paintings and drawings have been published worldwide. Jack and his wife Kathy live in Monrovia, California. [www.wjacksavage.com](http://www.wjacksavage.com).

ELAINE SCHLEIFFER is a writer, daughter, dreamer, and loud recluse. Her written work has been included in *Ultraviolet’s Purple Poetry Journal, Stylus,* and *Pudding Magazine.* Her activist work can be seen in Cleveland, OH.

Born in a housing project in The Bronx, MARIAN KAPLUN SHAPIRO is the author of a professional book, *Second Childhood* (Norton, 1988), a poetry book, *Players In The Dream, Dreamers In The Play* (Plain View Press, 2007), and two chapbooks: *Your Third Wish* (Finishing Line, 2007) and *The End Of The World, Announced On Wednesday* (Pudding House, 2007). A Quaker and a psychologist, her poetry often embeds the topics of peace and violence by addressing one within the context of the other. A resident of Lexington, she was named Senior Poet Laureate of Massachusetts in 2006, in 2008, in 2010, 2011, and 2014. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2012. "Rape" won 1st Prize in 2012, California Writers Association and was previously published in *Homestead Magazine.*
RAJENDRA SHEPHERD is a writer, journalist and artist who works at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine. His published works include "La haine de la diablesse". His novel-in-progress was shortlisted by Myriad Editions in 2015 and short story "Dessert heads" was nominated for the Aeon Award 2015. His non-fiction book *Tilt – the gaze that changes everything: 90 ways to rule your world* is a transformative work on language of the self and is available on Amazon.com for kindle and in all major bookstores in Trinidad and Tobago. "Emily's Keeper" is voice acted by Guyanese actor.

MEGHAN TRASK SMITH teaches English at a boarding school in Groton, MA where she lives with her husband, spit-fired daughter, and squishable baby boy. She writes poetry and fiction whenever and wherever the Muse calls, on coloring books, progress reports, or the margins of analytical essays she happens to be grading. Her work has appeared and is forthcoming in *Mom Egg Review* and *Blast Furnace*.

ANTHONY SPAETH’s short stories have recently appeared in *Beloit Fiction Journal, Imagine This!, Jelly Bucket*, and *Meat for Tea*. He was a finalist for The Hamlin Garland Prize (2015, 2016) and The Salamander Fiction Prize (2015).
MEGHAN STERLING lives in Asheville, NC with her husband and cat. She says of her poetry, "The only way I have learned to deal with the neuroses of living is to write my way through." Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in Fredericksburg Art and Literary Review, Chagrin River Review, Lingerpost, Yellow Chair Review, Cladesong, WNC-Woman, Allegro Poetry Magazine, Clementine Poetry Journal, Chronogram, Stone River Review, and Freshwater.

CARISSA L. STEVENS lives in Berea, Kentucky with her husband and poorly behaved dog. She's an English teacher at a large public high school, which means she excels at multitasking, teenage lingo, confiscating cell phones, and projecting her voice. She's currently working on her MFA at Eastern Kentucky University and hopes to someday publish a young adult novel of her very own.
MARY STONE is the author of the poetry collections *One Last Cigarette* and *Mythology of Touch*, and a number of chapbooks, including *Honey and Bandages*, a collaborative chapbook written with Katie Longofono, and *The Dopamine Letters*. Her poetry and prose has appeared in *Gargoyle, Arts & Letters, South Dakota Review, Stirring*, and other journals. Currently, she lives, writes, and teaches in St. Joseph, MO, where she coordinates the First Thursday open mic reading series.

ANI TASCIAN has her M.F.A. from St. Mary’s College of California (2015) and was a VONA (Voices of Our Nation’s Arts) participant. Recently, she teaches creative writing to elementary school kids with Take My Word For It! Her work can be found at *Citron Review, Bird’s Thumb*, and elsewhere.

ANNE THÉRIAULT is a Toronto-based writer, activist and social agitator. She is the author of *My Heart is an Autumn Garage*, a short memoir about depression. Her work can be found in the *Washington Post, Vice, Jezebel*, the *Toast*, and others. Her comments on feminism, social justice, and mental health have been featured on TVO’s The Agenda, CBC, CTV, Global and E-talk Daily. She’s really good at making up funny nicknames for cats.
Originally from Monterey, CA, AJ URQUIDI has studied poetry in Los Angeles and New York City. His poems have appeared in such journals as *Chiron Review, Foothill*, and *Thin Air*, been nominated for Ina Coolbrith and Pushcart Prizes, and won the Gerald Locklin Writing Prize. He has led creative writing workshops at CSU Long Beach and Beyond Baroque in Venice Beach. He lives in Long Beach where he edits *indicia*, an online journal, and investigates grammar for the Los Angeles Review of Books. He writes, "I'm an asexual writer from California. I like the idea of airing our taboos, as my life is built on the foundation of being the receiving end of various physical and emotional abuses at the hands of family members, past relationships, and common bullies." His last name is Basque, so no one has to ask.

CLEMENTINE VON RADICS is a poet and the founder/CEO of Where Are You Press. She has toured internationally and across the country performing spoken word and is the author of two collections of poetry, *Mouthful of Forevers* and *Dream Girl*.

ELAINE WANG’s piece "This Is How It Happens" was previously published in *Front Porch*. 
SAM HERSCHEL WEIN is a Chicago resident working in social services. He has been a fellow at Tent: Creative Writing for Nonfiction in Amherst, Massachusetts, and is currently the Editorial Assistant at Construction Magazine. His work has appeared previously or is forthcoming in Mobius Magazine, New Plains Review, Salt Hill, and Twelfth House.

JERRY WEMPYLE is the author of three collections of poetry: You Can See It from Here, The Civil War in Baltimore, and The Artemas Poems. He is also co-editor (with Marjorie Maddox) of the anthology Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets on Pennsylvania. Wemple’s poetry and creative nonfiction have also appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. He teaches at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania.

SCOTT WOZNIAK is a poet, short story writer, chaos enthusiast, and champion monkey wrench thrower. His work can be found at Red Fez Magazine, Carcinogenic Poetry, Midnight Lane Boutique, Flash Fiction Magazine, Mad Swirl, The Five-Two, Dead Snakes and Horror, Sleaze, and Trash. His chapbook Bumrush The Fantasy was published by Flying Wrench Press.