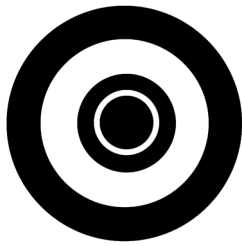


TM

TORQUE



Editors **Amanda Raczkowski**
 Joseph Reed

I have the sensation that the most honest man in the world is the artist when he is saying I don't know. At such moments he knows that, to the questions that truly interest him, only the *work* will give answers, which usually turn out further questions. This should be an instruction to any possible audience.

—Clark Coolidge, “Words”

The box and the key: I don't have a clue what those are.

—David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*

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Jeff T. Johnson

h a v e s o m e

if you see a light if you see
a light get down fast

if you see
 a light
get down
past the livable hour

 get down
after so many directions

 I
reach into the stack

Julie Choffel

Something Must Be Described

I was looking through the window from out of it, able to see in and through to the other window where it was sunny out and a cloud.

Look, I was a small and painfully bright finch. You might say I was thumb-sized.

Someone was walking along the other side of our door, when, and then you said if she was real we would have known her.

Sometimes the canon of information eludes me. I want it all. Always soon as I want everything I'm done with wanting for a while. Wishy-washy like that. Sometimes the very very very is unnerving, you know how we are with looking. It's another way so then why own it.

The glorious sun over the pondish lake turning into a shape, it's the first thing, and the finicky noticing. The away.

It keeps it up. There, there—spread of land is mouth and eye. I want to describe it for you.

Emily Carr

13 ways of happily, draft 7

scorned as timber, beloved of the sky.

1

you emerge from the photobooth
with yourself in triplicate ferrying corn
on the hoof now pigs in a barrel
the Swanson man lifts a finger, honks

2

then it was fall: or no, it was summer
ending. there are statues & fountains, ruthlessly carved,
plastic bags in palm trees (now again, trees)

3

freshly
bulldozed

childsafes you
are leaving the
details of your
body behind:
the (il)logic of
wings, mind
swaggering
in strips of
meat, sunwhite
diamond
shedding sun

4

stilettoed spaghettistrapped bare
backed girlhood is a dying economy & the birthday is a
makeshift—

5

what world is made, that made us that we keep on making
(i'm not sorry she says do you/ believe me

6

the trees
in their un
believable
foliage are
scissoring
& razor
ing the
crushed
aspirin sky,
syntax spills
from car
radios
you stand
there letting
the words
fall over
you, splash

7

you don't look old well I don't look/ my age/
well I don't want to look 18 again do I

8

sparkling like snakes, like barbed wire, like sunlight, she is
thirty-one—summer-muscled & blooming blackly in the
gunpowder of *yes*

9

god hovers over the antique
rifles & white wicker, spoonbread
pickled tomatoes artillery punch
lobstercoloured crumbs & fleshless
bones, the housewife reassembling
youth in her mind—

10

looking at/ like/ what
shall I/ say how is the truth to be/ said
believe me/ I

11

happily comes into the world & there
it is a moment of accelerated hellbent flush with the curb

12

step over & step lightly
into the fact: a man unfolding
a woman into an ambulance, a rainbow
unspooling from a crucifix, sirens splash
& a frog sings back...

13

(where is her mother not that she/ or any other
could have

for E. Wunker

Marc Kipniss & Kathryn Rantala

Little Bavaria (The Letters)

I am still wearing your coat. Someone might say that any reason is as good as another, but this is also because your coat has more warmth to it than mine, this weekend I mean—it is cold here, colder than there, and I am less mobile, less consistent in the directions I take, take this to mean that I could go off in any direction, I could keep trying to console myself to you as well, to divert us both from freezing, from freezing us both to death.

I imagine that, one fine day, that will be that. There will be a blinding burst of consistency, or a gradual illumination of it, of certainty smoldering forth from the coals and neither of us will wear coats of any kind; we will warm ourselves at the fire, the flames will arise from the coals, the smoldering twigs will catch fire, we will fan the sparks and add the twigs that we gather in the forest, the trail in the forest by the cottage by the forest in the fall.

You were supposed to lie to me, you were supposed to paint a rosy picture for me, you were supposed to not give me after-shocks, you were supposed to say that there might not be a single consequence and console yourself to me too, but perhaps again...

.

It is alarming to me what it must sound like in this letter, what I must sound like to have made so much of this coat to go off like that, not even a good one, really, not a good coat, I could have put on any coat, any coat at all, I could have put on any or someone else's coat or even my own, because I do have one, I have a coat, I have both an outside and inside of me, it's not that I need to put on this coat, only, though I did put it on, this and no other, and now that I have done this thing, now that it is there, I see that it has its own properties, of course, and, I don't know, maybe somehow those properties are controlling mine just now, controlling me somehow and becoming the part of me that knows whether I feel warm or cold, becoming the part of this coat that speaks to me of whether I am warm enough or still cold, and making me say it in this letter, letting the will of this coat somehow make me write this letter to you where I keep trying to console myself to you as well, to divert us both from freezing, from freezing to death. If you had not painted a rosy picture for me, or even if you had described the true nature of things and I had understood them, I might on my own still be able to know in myself what is happening and whether I have my own will and what is the consequence of these things whose true nature I don't know and can only guess at and whose mere

fact make my features grow red and red as if they were warm when they are not, or whether there is consolation in anything anymore or even if there is warmth in a coat, in a coat I put on thinking it is one thing but expecting it to be another, and finding out it is nothing but a coat and a letter about whether it is our true condition to find a smoldering certainty, a consistency I have never known, or if it is, in fact, the easier thing to do, the thing I should just do, to freeze to death right here and now. Please let me know if you are wearing a coat, that is, please let me know if you understand what I am not saying very well in this coat I am wearing, your coat, in this place where I am.

.

I am sorry but I am still wearing your coat. Imagine that, that coat of yours means more to me than not wearing it, even if it would no doubt please you for me to wear my own, to gradually decrease the amount of your coat that I have on, the consolation of it that I have borrowed, the sections of it I cannot part with, especially the sleeves, the consolation of the sleeves, the way they cover my arms all the way down and even my wrists, I have the coldest wrists at night, they need to be covered all the way down and that picture of you in your coat, when you showed it to me and said you went away like that, to Little

Bavaria dressed like that, with your coat covering the layers of your sweaters and the hat on your head, the brim turned down ever so slightly, you even mentioned there were lederhosen, something about lederhosen, the lederhosen of life you said, you said you were dead on your feet, you said going from shop to shop looking for what the perfect gift for Christmas would be even if it wasn't for me you said took everything out of you.

The worst kind of jealousy is the past; I wish I could unadmit this but it is true, the true nature of things, the truest, the youest, not to mention the train you took, what could be jealouser than that, a train ride to Little Bavaria, I am so jealous—there is never any real reason to take the train to anywhere and so there is never anything better than taking the train to anywhere, Little Bavaria or the moon or wherever, those properties are controlling me now too, controlling and diverting me, like a switch that the flag man throws, that he throws me off the track with, the main track, the trail, the consistency of the forest in winter.

The cold, the coal, the coal car—there are roses there, sooty roses, the perfect gift, the perfect coat, the sleeves are filled with smoldering twigs, I really don't know what could be perfecter, more perfecter, do you?

.

When the train finally stopped and we walked out, unused to our feet and the cold, I saw a smudge of coal on my glove when I was handed down and thought, Here was so much Bavaria where it should not be, and here am I and it is not going to be warm here—but I didn't think the rest of that thought, not until later when I had tired from walking and looking and hoping, then I thought I was not certain it ever was possible to be warm again, not there or in any other place, and how preposterous we are to go on and on about a coat as if a coat could make a difference when there are limbs everywhere without coats, limbs stuck in snow, trainsful of people without limbs without coats or shoes, dead, unlimbed people with nothing warming them as long as they could, limbs, limbs, limbs like deported Jews, I felt the horror of them, in Little Bavaria, when I was tired and earlier, earlier when that whistle blew, that awful piercing whistle I was not expecting as I stepped off, a whistle that sent me away, but then I went shopping for awhile (this was the ersatz Christmas town) until, I don't know, I just felt so lonely and cold, the cold was coming up from my feet, up through my legs, I went into a Bier Stube, I was so cold, so dead on my feet, it had taken everything out of me, this looking for some perfect thing that I could not find, and I was not confident of the train coming back, but once I was inside the Stube it was warm and noisy, there were great long tables with people at them and beer

in tall glasses and in puddles on the tables and the floor, the windows were sweating and the perfect sweating waitresses with rosy faces and huge breasts were holding enormous trays of sweating beer mugs—I took my coat off—and as the waitresses serpentine, an accordion player with lederhosen and thick wool socks rolled below his knee, socks with a flower on them, I don't know which flower but socks with a flower on them, this accordion player was inhaling and exhaling his machine with a woman and a guitar and someone was doing the chicken dance, a preposterous dance, hardly a dance at all, a disarmingly charming and humiliating dance-like thing, this person out there, hands angled under his arms, like wings but at least not hands or wrists, thank god, everyone was laughing at this person with no hands or wrists and I felt—I am ashamed to say this, I can't even think what is the word for this—I felt safe, safe in the danger of that room, safe in the breathing accordion pumping out the guiltiest of pleasures, safe about the chicken dance and I think this is worse even than jealousy, maybe the reverse of jealousy, I felt, I assumed with confidence, that I was included in this pleasure, this exclusive safety, inclusive, exclusive...and that's where the limbs come in again, my own, others, separate, fragments and a letter, a pen, a pair of shoes with short, striped socks in them and bulging calves and—this is the part that shames me—suddenly I didn't mind seeing all these

things in there, they were a kind of wallpaper, a kind of floor and ceiling and everything went in and out of sight in the chicken dance and I was warm with beer, the rosy faces, the heat and I was not dancing but sitting, believing myself safe in this festive danger.

.

Safe? In Little Bavaria?

Andrew Borgstrom

*from A State of Unbelief and Hawthorn
Blossoms*

Hi, I'm Jack:

A little girl gifted me a crocheted cross and a palm of corn. I slipped on the god-damp ground and dropped the cross but not one kernel of corn. The roads mirror the sky, and when I look for my reflection, legions sled across my face. 25 minutes ago, I forgot the dryness and the mountains. I don't remember if bathroom doors lock and if ceilings give light or take it away. I can only make a snow angel in a flock of geese.

Hello, Anne here:

I woke up in Frank Phillips' mansion waving a dust rag over wood and glass. Reruns of mother's words: "Be as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove." Lucifer in the garden. My father says mother is a princess and that I need to honor her. I wrote, "Buy a crate of apples," on the to-do list on Frank's fridge. I wonder if my life is more important than a boat. I wrote this on the list too. I looked at the sky, then the road, then the neighbors, and wrote, "Smoke, watch wrestling, gospel rant, rot teeth." I bought some pajama bottoms for father after seeing pictures of Frank and watched him dive into the last two steps of stairs.

Hi, I'm Jack:

The lady at the pizza parlor scraped the tobacco from her cigarette with a toothpick and then stuffed the shell with crushed red pepper. Three seconds later, she exhaled fire into the parking lot, and I wanted to read *The Hobbit* again. A little girl handed me her crayon-drawn menu. I wondered where all the young girls kept coming from and decided to read Nabokov instead of Tolkien. I will forget how to make a snow angel, and the geese will fly away.

Hello, Anne here:

A kid with a tattoo of vomit on his forearm walked my way. He said, “I’m German,” and he taught me how to say, “I hate you.” A seventy-two-year-old man dragged me into a home where empty vodka bottles consumed windmills, butterflies—model everythings, but mainly boats. I walked away with a 25 ml Smirnoff bottle swallowing a biblical donkey cart, dung included. When I turned to leave, he kissed my neck, and because he emptied the bottles himself, I didn’t feel chomped on by a Humbert, but like a grapefruit being tipped and slurped from, and I suddenly realized my empty pockets.

Hi, I'm Jack:

The fridge holds my smudgy red menu as my stomach-to-anus struggles to digest the brisket pizza. I drove home on a railroad track passing the absence of antebellum houses. My neighbor balances golf clubs between his thumb and forefinger and whenever I pass says, "Yes, I am a sansei." I smile and wonder when he will invite me to the Elks Club for church. I will have to say, "I have no clean shoes."

Hello, Anne here:

My vomit friend keeps telling me *manana* means *tomorrow* in German, but I'm sure it's the name of a mango-banana smoothie. A golf ball missed my head by two feet, and both feet were mine. I wonder if there's a world where golf and basketball don't exist, where something causes the same silence of the one and cheering for the other, something besides a goddamn suspended ball. Idol worshipers live in the next room, probably this room too. We didn't walk long before coming to a town with a yellowing brick road. Someone called my German Vomit a Polish Jew. We hitchhiked. Our driver sang, "Lord, I ain't gonna bump no more with no big fat woman," but I heard, "The nearer your destination the more you're slip slidin' away."

Margaret Frozena

V e r g i n g

A Dialogue with St. Teresa of Ávila

FIRST MANSIONS

In which there are Two Chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

Treats of the beauty and dignity of our souls; makes a comparison by the help of which this may be understood; describes the benefit which comes from understanding it and being aware of the favors we receive from God; and shows how the door of this castle is prayer.

opening

a mouth

in trouble

fixes on the one thing.

it is beautiful from far away.

up close it hurts

let me make the right

gesture in patience and pleading.

let me make

the sun is beautiful today
sitting in it too long makes my skin hurt.

if I could turn, I would

CHAPTER TWO

...Says something also of self-knowledge. This chapter is profitable, since it contains some noteworthy matters. Explains in what sense the Mansions are to be understood.

laying down in wait
as if the toes of my feet could

a gasp of course
I can see them, I can feel them coming.

Lifted up as if floating through water
my socks undone

watch my eyes
they shut

is it there?
can you see it?

SECOND MANSIONS

*Treats of the great importance of perseverance if we are to reach the
final Mansions and of the fierce war which is waged against us.*

how much is left.

the ringing
the fork on the plate
the riding

she has a bonnet
she has a cape

there is a bounty there
it will not hinder
it will only give soft places to fill

THIRD MANSIONS

In which there is One Chapter Only.

Treats of the insecurity from which we cannot escape in this life of exile, however lofty a state we may reach, and of how good it is for us to walk in fear. This chapter contains several good points.

away and head back

thrown back

I don't know what to do with my hair.

here is the hand,

it can be flat or cupped.

are you reaching it out?

I want to dig my hand deep inside of you

so I don't have to be lifted alone.

I don't want to be lifted alone.

FOURTH MANSIONS

In which there are Three Chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

Treats of the difference between sweetness or tenderness in prayer and consolations, and tells of the happiness which the author gained from learning how different thought is from understanding. This chapter is very profitable for those who suffer greatly from distractions in prayer.

This is not for you. I am making it in a specific way, and I will not tell you that yes I am hurting. With every movement, something comes. I want to hold down, to bear down. I want to be as specific as possible. I will hunt it out, mind you. I cannot resist movement. I am air some days, and some days I am not. Every time I exhale a little bit of the inside of me dirties your clothes. Would you ask for nothing less?

FIFTH MANSIONS

In which there are Four Chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

Begins to explain how in prayer the soul is united with God. Describes how we may know we are not mistaken about this.

take a rag
and a chisel to describe
two lips just touching

whispered in my ear

you are not to make miracles
you are not to speak
your silence will show your grace

what happened here is not for knowing

no one can know what was done to you

CHAPTER THREE

Continues the same matter. Describes another kind of union, which, with the help of God, the soul can attain, and the important part played in it by the love of our neighbor. This chapter is of great profit.

I will not force it down
when the spring comes with its hot flourish.

When I see them, at work or drinking water, I am at full flush. I want to be a blanket, an envelope. If I could just cover them up so I would be the outside, and no one would see them inside I will have won. But that is not winning, only a wrapping, a peel, an appeal. And inside they would not be able to breathe and I would suffocate them. I would fill up their mouth.

CHAPTER FOUR

Describes the great importance of proceeding carefully, since the devil is most careful to do all he can to turn souls back from the road they have begun to tread.

spitting onto the ground
so I have to walk over it
instead of drinking it

SIXTH MANSIONS

In which there are Eleven Chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR

Treats of occasions when God suspends the soul in prayer by means

*of rapture, or ecstasy, or trance (for I think these are all the same)
and of how great courage is necessary if we are to receive great favors
from His Majesty.*

if I had told you, or even mumbled it to you,
you would not have believed me.
from this small height, I can see mountains and distances
 wagging in the sun
they are breaking through me.
watch the light dance on my skin.

and all of a sudden my voice became small
and you could hardly hear me
the rush of my breath was too much to hear
the rush of your breath was too much to hear.

I am asking

please hum for me

CHAPTER EIGHT

*Treats of the way in which God communicates himself to the soul
through intellectual vision. Describes the effects which this produces*

when genuine. Charges that these favors be kept secret.

can the hand be both flat and cupped
at once?

my head back
my lips parted
my eyes closed

my fingers open

all I can hear is buzzing
as the air on a warm day
when it is full of small lives

the insects fill my nose
all the empty space vibrates

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Treats of the desires to enjoy God which he gives the soul and which are so great and impetuous that they endanger its life. Treats also of the profit which comes from this favor granted by the Lord.

even the flower bends
to be closer to the soil
it is latched, it has roots

I could shoot my nerves
and stop for a moment

the movement would stop

if I could reach my hand deep inside you
and not have you covering it
if we could stretch out long or tall
and our empty spaces begin to match up

dare I ask, could this be?

SEVENTH MANSIONS

In which there are Four Chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

Describes the difference between spiritual union and spiritual marriage. Explains this by subtle comparisons.

three apples are greening
on the window

CHAPTER FOUR

Concludes my describing what appears to be Our Lord's aim in granting the soul such great favors and says how necessary it is for Martha and Mary to walk in each other's company. This chapter is very profitable.

One drop more

“then I could play in the woods until dark
till you take me where Sundown cannot find us”

a folding
the sheets winding
tracing a path to you

I can only make my small voice shape it for you
and you can hum it back to me.

At least we have the asking
and the wounding.

At least you have me all over you.

At least I leave this cough on you.

Nora Almeida

T o w a r d s

Dear Henry.
Battery Park.

Once.
Beside the freeway
12 seagulls eating 1 dead seagull.

Infinite disguises
of the infinite.

I wanted to write you
a long time descends on the farmhouse.

calling the dog in from the yard
because he recognizes your voice

the same way I don't remember the ceiling fan
until it's switched off.

Clothespins remind me
of the moon—

alas is a little mouth.

a month of
little mouths.

T o w a r d s

I was conceived in the footpath.

clouds are geometries.

the weather impotent.

looking is a gloss.

Here's to.

I supply my own

supply.

waxing the car this morning

I am thinking,

if the earth were butter

I would sink into

gladly.

T o w a r d s

object of each sailor is.

Objects in each sailor's pocket.

the angles are innumerable

but so large they are invisible.

so runs the beetle across a cheek.

so dries the bouquet.

a whale beached in New Bedford

blocks out the sun.

so changes the direction of traffic.

so the stream is reinterpreted.

A girl lays down

in front of the garage

because the lawn is newly mowed

by the teeth of sailors.

every city is a little different.

every roof gets its own pigeon.

T o w a r d s

sanity is a purse.

I watched the water spill out
from the water.

a small gift goes unmentioned,
grows larger.

when I desire peaches
I buy some

but they are hard
in the center
and so are not peaches.

water is somewhat unfriendly
but this can be cured

with a specific amount of water.
I demonstrated gravity

by throwing most of your things on the floor

and covering them with water.

desire is unimpressive.

a pile of stones is not

the idea of a wall

I'm climbing over

disappointed.

The highway clogs up

like so.

Swans

Diana: underground with Gerard. Gerard: big head, kind of green in the face, lumpy-bodied, damp. He rang her bell. I liked that bell, silvery tinkle, very above ground, the tinkling, very wind chime. I think of that sound and I think of Diana, white dress, on an apple bough, with finches. I never saw these things together—Diana, apples, finches, blowing white cotton, maybe a hair ribbon—but they make sense together. They indicate each other. Diana: bitten red apple, bird song, rising wind, sudden thunder. Nature scenes. Fresh air. She runs around, apples cradled in the folds of a late season sundress. Rainy-day Diana. See how that sounds? It's like a melody.

Diana is from some dumb suburb. She shouldn't be, though. She should be from Rome. If she were from Rome.... Aren't there aqueducts? White marble arches? No ugly pumps in Rome; no leaking pipes. Water spills across marble. It gathers the deep cold of the keystones. It sweetens on swags of acanthus.

"Let's go to Rome, Diana," I say.

"I always preferred Atlantis," says Diana.

"We can't go to Atlantis," I say. "It sank."

“Oh, right,” says Diana.

“They can’t even find it,” I say.

“Mmmm,” says Diana.

“We’d need sonar,” I say. “Special dolphins. But they’re all military.”

“Mmmmmpppgghh,” says Diana.

“We need to find an AWOL dolphin,” I say. “Before we can even think about Atlantis. Are you listening?” The phone sounds funny, like a big male throat chugging beers. Diana does not drink beer. She drinks Frascati. She sips. She nibbles very thin crackers with fishy spreads. No guzzling. No smacking. No gullet sounds. I have no cuticles because of Diana. I take my fingers from my mouth and listen. Glug-glug-glug.

I say, “What are you doing, Diana?”

“I’m pouring Drano in the phone,” says Diana. “The little holes in the receiver—they’re clogged.” It’s not right. I don’t believe her. I can’t see it. Cleaning phone holes, no, it’s impossible. Diana was never that competent.

“You were never that competent, Diana,” I say.

“I’ve changed,” says Diana. “I know about boilers and bushings. I know about blackpipe. I am returning to my tomboy roots.”

“You are hardly a tomboy, Diana,” I say. “Letting some man lock you in a basement.”

“It isn’t like that at all,” she says to me, and hangs up.

One time, Diana and I went to the mall. Mid-June. We bought bestsellers to read on the beach. We never went to the beach, but we bought the bestsellers. They had the raised letters on the paper covers that Diana swept her fingers over, smiling, like the titles meant something different to her fingers. The eye-title and the finger-title made a double-entendre. Diana laughed. She had a tuneful laugh, lower than chimes, lower than panpipes, lower than flutes, like an oboe. I used to play the oboe. I was a soloist. I remember standing in the hot lights, at the high-school recital, and my hands were so sweaty I couldn’t hold the oboe. It kept slipping. In the video it looks like I am trying to play a snake. Still, the music is pretty. Not all together, but the individual notes, in isolation. Each one has its charm. Diana might have been a musician. I often observed her spatulate fingers, their sensitive shapes, on the salad fork. She could have been plucking a harp, by a body of water, in the evening time, with hinds all around. White hinds in the moonbeams. Instead, afternoon, in the deer park, by the DMV, with picnic food. She sat barefoot on the big rock. In the background, child drivers collided gently with parked cars.

“Hold this stick, Diana,” I said. She held it.

“Hold it to the side,” I said. “Flutish.” She held it to the

side, by her lips. It was flutish.

“I wish I had a camera, Diana,” I said. “Or a tape recorder.”

Diana has a musical soul. And Diana can dance! She has the loveliest fingers, but even lovelier...Diana's feet. She climbed the big rock in the deer park, no handholds, just her long toes, all ten, in the crannies. She climbed so fast. I couldn't calculate. It was incalculable, the tensile strength of her feet. Like tempered sword blades, like the springy foils of the great Pallavicini. Pallavicini: Roman nose, Roman fringe. In the paintings, his high forehead glistens. Shaven face, burning eyes. He used to fence in high-heeled boots. He hectored his enemies with quotes from Agrippa. If Diana had grown up more advantaged, if she had attended a preparatory school, a fine old academy, in New England, with stone dormitories, all porticoed, lots of decorative quoinage, and a healthy, Humanist appreciation for the physical arts, she might have fenced. She might have traveled all across the country, a competitive fencer, hooded, dressed in white, crowd hushing as she strode onto the floor, as she pirouetted in her high-heeled boots, pointed boots and flashing blade, the danse macabre of Diana, but, no. Diana was always disadvantaged. She never fenced.

On the non-city side, her suburb abutted nothing. There were silos. There were bored boys in oats. Boys lay on their backs in

the oats and watched the stars shine through peduncles. They smoked peduncles. Meteors showered. Cows released gases. The boys drank beers and huffed butane. In the fall, they lit fires in the furrows. They had parties. The boys huffed WD-40 and the girls huffed hairspray. The girls sat on the boys so they wouldn't muck their tight jeans with manure, and they sprayed canisters of Glade into windbreakers and breathed, and coughed, and breathed. Afterwards, the boys wore the windbreakers home. They smelled like strawberry candles, and inside, on the cotton, oval prints of girls' faces, orange concealer, with red glitter lip blots and hints of blue and green shadow.

“Even the smart ones,” said Diana, sadly. “All of them. Addicted to solvents.”

“And propellants,” I said.

“And nitrites,” said Diana.

Diana was always different. Gifted. It was in her blood. Diana's mother had a tragic past. Diana's mother was a Czech ballerina. I've seen photographs in ballet books. A woman, mid-turn, white tulle, a face just like Diana's, but it's not Diana. The date is wrong. Diana said her mother's skin felt cool at all times. She never said a thing about her father. He was maybe the king of Austria, because the caption read “Austrian National Theater,” and ballerinas often went for carriage rides with Kings, their

arms full of roses. Diana's mother kept a close-lipped smile, even watching television. Whenever she saw lights, she thought someone was watching. Attractive TV doctors confronted the camera, intense blue eyes and ticking jaws and her own eyes filled with tears as she met their gazes. Diana's mother smiled, chin lifted, head just slightly inclined, arms rounded and hands palm up on her soft lap. The morale of post-war Europe used to rise with her arms as she moved to fifth position. In the suburbs, she raised her arms and nothing happened. Her swollen ankles were shiny-tight on the footstool and then the skin on her ankles cracked. Diana's mother bloodied towels on the footstool and Diana changed the towels. They watched the daytime dramas. If the king of Austria had tried to find Diana's mother, if he had come into the rambler with a gilded box, and the box contained an old toe-shoe, softened shanks, white paper and paste, tiny nails through the satin, and he lifted the shoe, crisscrossed ribbons aflutter, and knelt and tried to fit her foot inside, the king of Austria would have failed. He would have held her foot and wept. But the king of Austria did not come to the suburbs. The royals in Vienna don't think of the suburbs when they search for lost lovers. No one ever found Diana's mother.

"I did," says Diana, but Diana is her daughter.

"You don't count, Diana," I say. I didn't get a chance to

meet Diana's mother. I would have adored her.

"Diana is a swan," I would have told Diana's mother. Diana, dressed in gauze, in white feathers. Diana, gliding. Diana, on the sylvan lake. In the suburbs, the lakes contain domestic sewage. Swans encounter algae, big wads of algae. They're man-sized, the wads. It's not sanguine. If Diana's mother were alive, she would have sent her swan to Russia, to the forest. In the forest, Diana would trestle her house with white and red roses. She'd roam between the fir trees, picking berries. All autumn, I'd chop wood and in the winter Diana would make snow angels in the garden, bare limbs steaming, and I'd stoke the fire, the windows yellow with firelight, and a warm glow through the open front door.

When Gerard rang the bell, Diana was whipping eggs for her famous pasta salad. The key ingredient: homemade mayonnaise. Four eggs whipped in oil, salt and pepper. Very French. Diana, of course, is not French. Diana is Czech, but Diana does not look Czech. Diana looks French. Diana has the slender lusciousness of French women, who stay thin on small portions of high-fat food.

"Pasta salad?" said Diana.

"I never say no to pasta salad," said Gerard. Diana and Gerard ate the pasta salad together. What did they discuss?

“First pets,” says Diana, but I know Diana never had a pet. One time, I was at Diana’s house. I walked over to the doghouse. The doghouse was right in the middle of Diana’s lawn. I got down on my knees and looked inside. Inside, some packed-down dirt, a rusted chain, and a dry pile of bones.

“Did the dog eat those or were those the dog?” I asked.

“It came with the lawn,” said Diana. “I never had a dog. Not even when I was kid.” She didn’t sound melancholy, but when I analyzed the statement—namely, the pile-up of “never” “not” and “even”—I realized that the melancholy was there. In the structure.

“You never had a pet,” I say to Diana.

“I had a fish,” says Diana. “Her name was Trixie. She died.”

It was almost dinnertime and Gerard had yet to touch the pipes.

“Come downstairs,” he said.

“Okay,” said Diana. And he carried her. She is very clear about this part, the phone is breaking up but I make her repeat herself several times.

“Like over the threshold, but instead, we went down the stairs into the basement,” she says.

“Over his shoulder?” I say. “Like potatoes?” I don’t like potatoes. I want to convey this disgust with my voice, the equivalency of Diana and potatoes in this circumstance. Diana is

not a potato. Diana is a flower.

“You’re a flower, Diana,” I say.

“Potatoes make flowers,” says Diana.

Diana loves the outdoors. She loves the tall grasses. She loves to wash her hands with “soap,” sudsy white on red clovers.

“Now I know those are egg sacs,” says Diana. One time, we drove to the Catholic school. Precious Blood. Two red brick stories, black top, a flagpole. Swing-sets and cedar chips. We swung on the swings and Diana jumped off at the highest point of the arc. Diana fell faster than her very long hair, her long hair fanned over her head like a plume, but golden, like haloes. She rolled when she landed. She lay on her back in the grass.

“Look, Diana,” I said. I’d found a shoddy pile of cord strung with little plastic links, red and black macaronis. Diana recognized the colors and the hard but chewed feeling texture from gym class. She remembered that heavy spin. Diana never jumped properly. Not once. She got tangled up and wrecked double dutch. The pale scar on the bridge of her nose testifies to her tendency for gross mistiming. I tied the end of the rope to the swing set and tried to turn it in circles.

“Jump, Diana,” I said, but Diana just lay there. The rope went around and around without her.

I dial 911. I hang up. I get the phonebook. I dial the local police.

“Special sergeant,” says the sergeant.

“I’d like to file a report,” I say.

“Methamphetamines,” says the sergeant.

“No,” I say.

“Child pornography,” says the sergeant.

“Diana is not a child,” I say.

“But could Diana be pregnant?” asks the sergeant. The phone sounds funny, like the energetic application of emery boards. The sergeant is filing his moustache. I imagine the moustache. It is very small and very straight. The sound stops. The sergeant has picked up a pen. For all I know, the sergeant colludes with Gerard. They are in the precinct together, plotting. They are sharing cigars.

“Preggers?” asks the sergeant.

“Excuse me,” I say. “That is none of your business.” I hang up.

The last time I saw Diana it was raining just a little, a warm spring rain. We sat on the rock and watched the fawns eat wildflowers. I crunched ants-on-a-log and Diana lay down with her head on her purse, looking up at the sky. Bars of light came through the clouds. We weren’t wet from rain, but sometimes a breeze would flip the maple leaves and large droplets showered

down on our bare shoulders. Suddenly, a fawn bolted upright in the Queen Anne's lace. It started shaking violently and fell back down. Then its hindquarters stuck up through the flowers and the tail twitched and the fawn got up again, front legs spread wide. From the tiny black nostrils: a thin dribble of milk. The fawn swayed and hiccupped. A white bubble rose into the air.

"Look at that," I whispered, and nudged Diana. Every time the fawn hiccupped another milky globe floated over the weeds. Diana didn't move her head. She was staring at the bright cracks in the thundercloud. She had very pretty retinas, woodland colors, browns and greens. They looked like tiny tortoise shells.

"Have you ever stared at the sun?" asked Diana. I could hear the thin whistle of air through her nose.

"Sure," I said.

"If you do it long enough, you can burn an image on the surface of your eyes," said Diana.

"But wouldn't it just be the sky?" I said. The clouds had broken into two layers, one low and grey, semi-dissolved, and higher up, dark, thrusting shapes with white crests, shocks of blue in between.

"Just?" said Diana.

Refrigerator General

I am wrapped only in a wet towel when the refrigerator general knocks on my door. *I need to inspect your refrigerator* he says. *You can't just go around inspecting people's refrigerators* I say, the cold air from the door on my flushed thighs. *But, ma'am, I'm the refrigerator general* he says. *Well, may I see your identification?* I ask. The refrigerator general digs around in his breast pocket and pulls out a card designed to look a little like a refrigerator. *That's very clever but I'm not sure it proves anything* I say. *Ma'am* he says with urgency. He pushes open the door a little and steps inside. *But I'm in my towel* I say. *Relax, ma'am, I'm a professional* he says from the kitchen. *But I don't even have a refrigerator* I say. *Just as I suspected* he says. I stand completely motionless in the corner of the kitchen and start humming. He stops writing his citation and stares at me, eyes like a bat's eyes, the blood draining from his face. *Ma'am?* he asks. *Ma'am?* He tugs gently on my towel and looks inside. I can see it in his eyes, how he wants me to be something human.

Refrigerator of the Valley

I come down from the mountains carrying heavy refrigerator parts on my back and build a very large refrigerator. It is the largest refrigerator ever built, roughly fifteen to twenty times the size of an average refrigerator. *I have built a very large refrigerator* I announce to one woman who lives in a shack by the river. *You may put anything you want in it* I say. The woman who lives in a shack appears skeptical. *Does it look like I have anything to refrigerate* she asks. *Maybe not now* I say *but perhaps you could see the large refrigerator as a way to change your life.* The woman who lives in a shack stares for a while, her face like a plate. I can tell she is really thinking about how the large refrigerator could change her life. Then, slowly, it begins to happen. The woman who lives in a shack looks to the top of the refrigerator which is now peeking out over the trees in the distance, like a low white sun. *Owwwwwooooooooga owwwwwooooooga* she howls. Change has come to the valley. *Yes, owwwwwooooooooga* I say, my strong arms now around her waist, *owwwwooooooooga.*

Nicolle Elizabeth

Moss

She became moss after the gardening. She noticed the green in her hand start to appear, a pigment under the skin, the night the moon wasn't anywhere. She continued going about her business until one day she was gardening and a snap dragon popped up and swallowed her whole. The kids kicked the soccer ball, ran around in the sun while she whispered up to them, "Don't take it too fast."

Once, There Was a Gun Battle

Now, umbrellas are unreliable. It is, this early, this heavy: rain that guts lawns, ruts carpets, but these are only hotels, so no one minds. She leans back against a wall and there is mildew in her hair; he tells her not to do that. He is listening to a radio. He is listening to traffic. He walks in front of a mirror, in front of a window; he is planning. *Okay*, he says. *We'll go to that one next. Next?* she says. She is lying on her back, wearing only underwear. The bed is dirty, the sheets are twisted. *Yeah*. He puts on a shirt. He listens to traffic. Planning. It's too early, and it doesn't sound like birds.

This is a hotel. There are only hotels in Echo Park, the kind with neon green signs that twist along their tops. Or is this Echo Park? Right now? Maybe they are somewhere else. There is a lake; there are freeways. They trudge up the hill in the middle of the night and there are freeways to their left, like rivers, binding them in. They walk up in rain and in the mud, dragging behind them suitcases, thinking this is like a reservoir, thinking all of this is like it's wet, mud up to their knees. The hotels have dirty lobbies and women with hair on their chins who buzz

them in and give them peppermints, pat her on her shoulders so she feels warm.

They left too quickly. Threw things in suitcases. Drove a yellow car. Stopped only for gasoline. She hasn't yet decided on her name. He says, *Just pick one, pick one*. Her name is Adelaide. Adele. Adeline. She is the daughter of a drunk who collected record players and toy trains. There were trains on shelves, on bookcases, in the attic under boxes, and there were tables in their house her father painted green with rollers on a pole when he should have used a brush, his arms all elbowed back, calling loudly to his daughter in the kitchen. It was as if he were far away and she were standing there on a stool watching him from far away, high up, and he had to yell because she was that far. Her father, too, could not decide; he called her everything: *Babycakes*. *Dandelion*. They were tables the trains could run on, he said—green, green. He had green underneath his fingernails. He kept newspapers in his pockets, and he began to sleep on floors, in corners, in the dust before she picked him up, put him to bed, stepping carefully around what had been broken.

This is a list of hotels. One, two, three. Next.

One: a room with buzzing things. There are no bodies, nothing that hovers, slightly lands, wings lifted up, on dingy curtains. No wings or legs without the rest of them, no left-behind and missing pieces. But still, buzzing. All night, all day, as she

sits in front of the refrigerator, the open door, soaking up the cold. She never finds anything, wings, though she looks, spending time between the time she sleeps, trying to take up all the time that she is waiting for him. The curtains cover up the windows, dirty, like a tongue had licked them.

Two: just up the hill. Her hand floats over freeways, tracing the paths. She imagines she can feel it floating beneath her fingers, skating—the road, the traffic. In Los Angeles, the freeways plunge toward fog. There are brake lights in the fog. There are screams of brakes, of tires, red. Their new room has a sagging mattress. It is sagging in the middle, where someone's body used to be. She wonders about that: just in the middle? Like there was only one man sleeping there, only him on the bed, and he stayed there, over and over, always, until the bed had curled around him. She slides down the embankment. She slides into him in the middle of the night and her arm crushes into him, and he grunts, slapping at her thigh in sleep.

They stay there just a little while. *Move quick, move fast*, he says. *Next*, he says. They are old-movie-moving—fast, sped-up, the reel flapping—and she feels she should be whistling, hands behind her back to hide the evidence. He says that they are checking off the street signs, looking at the architecture. *Just look at this, those lines*, he says. This will be easy, she thinks—moving, running away, escape. One hotel. This one with

windows, this one with columns that twine up, jump up, climb down. They have driven down the coast, stopping only at gas stations, eating candy bars, ice cream bars that melt over her fingers. *We are touring*, he says, *we are sightseeing*, he says, *just look, look at that, look at those columns*. Next. The hotels have soggy carpets. Peachy-colored doors around a parking lot. Next.

One: there are two little girls in red bathing suits sitting on the step in the front by the lobby. They drink Coca-Cola from glass bottles. The smaller one clamps the bottle straight between her knees, and she blows into it, making noise that whistles toward the cars all lined up in the parking lot. They are blonde girls with brown eyes. He pats the little one on the head and gives her a penny. He kneels down, whispers in her ear. His whisper makes a whistle. There are glass doors and there is a gumball machine she puts a coin in, and it sticks.

She was her father's only child. *Babydoll. Fairy Queen*. Her father could not decide. He would wake her up at night and make her try on something new, a new name—check the fit around the head, around the waist, and how if it's too small it holds the elbows, tight—as if it were a sweater or a slightly warmer coat. Her coat had holes—holes in the pockets that she would dip her fingers into as she was blown around in wind, holes and in them pennies and the bobby pins that had held her hair together. Her father looked at her, standing in a doorway,

hands on both his hips with both his elbows pointing out. She sat on a chair. She felt the urge to spin, say, *Is this okay? Is this?* So she was seventeen, and calling herself—she didn't know. A list of choices in her pocket. *Make me choose*, she says, when they are driving, when they are turning in a driveway toward the first.

Two: just up the hill. The room's the same. Wallpaper, pictures, squares of wallpaper underneath them dark when the picture frames swing. It smells like smoke; those sliding glass doors. *There was a gun battle here*, she says. *What?* he says, from the little bathroom, the mirror and the sink on the outside, not the inside, of the door, so she is reflected, or at least her knees are, cut off from the rest of her. She sits in a chair, puts her feet up on the windowsill, the window shaking in the frame when her foot touches it. This should be dramatic, she thinks. *Of course*, she says. It was a western. There were men who came in wearing boots. There was a woman tied up in the hall, heels tight, ankles tight, as if she were in danger, as if a train were coming toward her. And a fight. There was a screaming fight. There was a gun battle.

One: *Adele*, he says. So it's settled. *Adele*. It sounds like...something. Not familiar, but something. She is on the bed. His hands have covered up her shoulders, bounced off to her thighs. He has looked at her, kissed her on the forehead, once. He walks away. She sits. She has three pairs of underwear, a

skirt, a suitcase. She has walked to see that there are marbles in a jar in the lobby downstairs. There is a woman who picks them up, sucks on them like bubblegum while she's waiting for her shift to end and for the television at the other end of the desk to magically switch back on. In the lobby, things clink, things hum. Pen in mouth, pins in hair, the woman can see herself in her reflection in the television screen, turns her cheek so her face thins out. In their room, from where she's sitting on the bed, she studies him, her knees up, back against the wall. He rubs at his face, rubs at his eyes, stares at himself in the mirror. It is quiet. And she could tell him anything she wanted. *Listen*, she could say, *there is a river that never ends in South America*. He would say, *of course it does*. *Listen*, she could say, *there is too much green in Alabama*. He would laugh. She could tell him she knows all the capitals of every country in the world, and every bird that goes in them, but she doesn't tell him that. She doesn't say anything, though she could, though she wants to. They have slept curled up, his hand around her arm, pulling her to him. He would say that she is lying, ruffle her hair. *Baby. Sweetheart.*

Next.

Two: he gets into a fight with a woman in a nightgown over the ice machine. He holds her head next to the ice machine, so she can feel the crunching metal teeth next to her neck, and she is not quiet, the woman: she shrieks. She shrieks and shrieks

and he cannot cover it up and soon the staff comes running. His pajamas have cuffs, are clean. His pajamas shine with little bits of melted ice, and perhaps some bits of the woman's hair, her teeth. They reach to hold his arms back. They make a move to grab his hair, put an arm around his neck so it will bruise.

It is hotter rain than LA ever has. And there is fog, and she likes to think of it as mystifying, mysterious. It's like a puzzle, pry the lock: why? It covers them over. The nights are hot. He stood next to the ice machine, forehead on the metal, cold, like he was thinking, like he was waiting, listening to ice. Planning. The machine was humming, a large metal box. She watched him from the doorway. He grabbed onto the woman's neck, shook her, shook her. She was wearing a nightgown that barely skimmed her knees.

One: she found a hole inside the closet, looking down, down, though the edges fell off, dark. She opened the closet door, looked in. She thought she could reach in, feel around, find something. She looked closer. She reached in, not expecting rats, but found them anyway, the ragged edges of the hole and the damp dust of floor. There were bodies, squeaking, and she kept her hand in, did not jump back, the slip of tails between her fingers, the curl of tails toward her palm. The hotels: they are all the kind that curl around a pool. They are all the kind with doors on the ground floors, windows looking out.

Orange flowered curtains that slide across on poles, burlap, cross-hatched, the kind that make an imprint on your cheek if you were to lean against them or be pushed.

Two: she thought the body settled in the center of the bed, and in the middle of the night there were noises. She doesn't sleep. What if he had settled there, the body, and no one came to find him, curled up? It was dark; he lay there, dying. His head back, his arms out. The stairs curled up around the building and their room held still, looked down. Take the stairs, spiral up. Look down. There was an umbrella left in the room. False eyelashes on the sink. Static, static when the radio turned on. He fiddled with it, swore, and listened to the news. *Weather's changing*, he said, though the news said something different. *Watch for tornadoes, hail, thunder*, he said. Though the news said something different. She could see that he was lying. Next.

One: the girls shook the Coke bottles, stuck out their tongues, their thumbs over the bottletops. They went running around in tank tops squealing, their hands flailing and the Coke like fountains over their shoulders. She should stop them, she thought; she should reach her arm out, trip them, she could talk to them while they were sitting on the ground, they would say hello, she would pat their heads, she could hold them there a little while, talk to them. She could pull them to her, she thinks,

hands around their wrists.

One: the ghosts of flies. One: it smelled like menthol and lantern oil. One: it smelled like car exhaust and cheap green apple dishsoap. One. One. One: in the middle of the night he came in, sat down, at the table, by the lamp. He turned it on; the room was bright. *Aren't you glad you're here*, he said, pulled the blanket off from where she was pretending she was sleeping.

Now: three. Three: she could sleep with a hammer. A screwdriver. A nail file. There is a clock, red, on sharp little metal legs that stands up and crows like a rooster in the mornings. There is a mass of squawking birds outside, in trees. The birds cluster, group and flock. She sleeps with knees close to her chest. In the heat, it is hard to sleep. He has always slept. Now, three: he doesn't sleep. He gets up, gets up and walks around, looks out of the windows, peeks under the curtains, drops them, and she doesn't move. He has told her, *shh*. He has told her, *be careful, your feet are heavy*. She has smudged all of the edges of the pictures in the papers, seen beaches, seen car wrecks—look, there are eyes, look, there are men who haunt the streets with pennywhistles, keep their hands palm-up, looking at you, asking; she looks out of the window; *careful*, he says, *don't touch the glass*.

Two: she washed her underwear in the sink. Red and dripping—hanging from the showerhead, the curtain rod, the

radiator, the bathroom red and dripping. Stretched where they had held onto her hips. Outside were a lake, a parking lot, a tin can, a marching band of children, cracks and pops and dips and creaks and little whistles, a sidewalk stretching up the hill. It is hot. She wears long sleeves; she has holes in her jeans. She cuts her hair with a razorblade, sitting on the bed, no mirror, just snapping her wrist until the hair snaps free. When she was a child she memorized all the names of bugs, as many as she could find in the yard where there was grass and a turtle in a pond, and she drew them on her wrists, in ballpoint pen, squatting in the grass so it was tall, looking closely so she could go inside and see what kind they were, swishing through the pages of her books to find that shape in ballpoint pen. When she is young, she wears white dresses with hems above the knees, but they are always marked with pen, always blotted, accidentally. She does not wash them out. Her father falls asleep, flat, on his back, on the lawn. *Honeybunch. Sweetiepie.* Their yard is full of turtles, full of tall high grass and broken bottles, concrete chips and broken glass; the bathroom floor is footprints full of mud.

It's hotter than LA's ever been. But she doesn't know this for the truth, really—it's just what they say. The air conditioner runs and runs and drips, clanks. She kicks it, puts her ear up close, hears what scrabbles around inside. There are no

ceiling fans. There is no air. They say that there will be tornadoes. The men who stand around the lobbies, the floor-to-ceiling glass of windows onto parking lots, eating doughnuts—they talk about it, tips of tongues between their lips. He says, when he comes back from looking in, from buying soda: they are heavy, the drivers, names over their chests and shirts that gape at buttonholes. He imitates their hairy chests. He imitates the way they move their lips, the way they waggle hips and butts. *Tornadoes*. He laughs. They are sure of it, with powdered sugar on their chins. They flock out to their trucks. They say there will be flocks of birds churning up the air from Mexico. They will be bright. Green. Yellow. They will bring with them hail, and yellow fever. *Watch out for it*, he says, smiling—he has his arms behind his head; he has the bed, flat, back from when she'd taken it, claiming it for his, comfortable.

One: a blonde girl cracked her head against a corner, against the wall. Blood ran down the carpet into the lobby. *No no no, I wasn't chasing you*, the other one said, in a little voice, while she squatted on the floor. *Get up get up*. She pleaded with her face close to the floor; the other one, her head down, blood into the carpet. No one came, and Adele watched, cross-legged, elbows on the floor, chin in her hands, from the doorway, across the little parking lot. *Adele*, he said, in their hotel room, at night, testing it out on his tongue. *Just be that. Just for now*.

One: a hotel. Windows that slide open but are rusty. In the lobby an old man sits reading maps at night, with a red pen in one hand and a cigarette in the other, a ball cap pushed-back and sweaty. There is a bell next to him and he knocks into it occasionally. It rings, but not the way it would if someone were to slap his hand down onto it—just a little clumsy ding, a side-to-side. She stands with her back to the building, watches across the parking lot, feels the smallness of the bell. The maids sit talking in an upstairs hallway, taking off their shoes, sitting with their heads against the wall. They talk of children, of babysitters. It's evening and she has gone outside to watch. There is the highway; there is the maid who in the mornings shakes her hand, calls her sweetheart, pulls her toward her pockets: a peppermint, a doughnut. She feels small.

Her father whistled while standing on a stool. Then, when she was older, sitting down, leaning against a wall, slipping further so that his back crumpled up. She made dinner; she cleaned the microwave, she opened the mail. She paid the bills. Talked to herself when the kitchen was empty, when the house, with its window seats and rooms attached to each other, rattling on the side of the hill, was empty. She watched him slip. She was afraid of him, slipping. And she thought he would be safer there, asleep, so she left him, while birds flew into the house. Birds flew into the house, in the holes that had been pushed

into the walls, but she locked all of the doors before she left, locked him in, moved quickly, escaped.

Three: blood in the sink. The car refusing to start and they walked up the hill in the rain, and she dragged their suitcases behind her, walking behind him, everything wet, and her shoes, washed her face in the hotel room, rubbed at her eyes in the tiny bathroom, curled up on a bed, pulled the sheets up. *Baby. Darling. Sweetheart.* Her ribs knit themselves together. Adele, she thinks. Adele. It is—something. It feels strange. It's hot, night, neon, the tin of radios, of car exhaust. The hotel is strung up and swinging, dizzy, and there are toothbrushes in a plastic cup, in a little bathroom, where the light buzzes, and the cup is bitten on, teeth marks looking for water.

Escape with me, he said. It was a beautiful question. It was. The way he said it, it was a question. Escape with me. Then, it was a question. She took a second to think. She went.

Three: she has taken other people's photographs, pulled them out of suitcases left in lobbies, left to rot in cars, and slipped them into her pockets, carried them with her up the hill: they are men in hats and holding onto hands and pursing lips or opening lips, about to speak; they are women with their hair curled tight. Roller coasters, children. Conversations, and so many pianos. *Look at them,* she says to him, *who are they, where are they going? Tell me.* She holds them close up to his face

while his hand is on her wrist while they are walking, her fingers on the faces of the photographs, making them warm, sticky, hard to pull off of her hands. Next.

K o r e

This garden is a false one,
is not mine.

This ease of peppered feathers,
flicks of mint, thick

Elysium: it's an easy
disowning. It's like planting seeds.

To be overcome. To disappear
through the hole

in the throat of a petunia, to unworm
a nasturtium's white arms.

Who could ever live
here? The rampant? The wicked?

It's an easy ungrowing.

It's like eating seeds.

To be the only thing turning

cold. To be eaten.

Arlene Ang

Self-Portrait in Green Dress

(a) With Collapsed Lung

As in, holding a bat by its feet. As a study in attachment, I have resorted to a wooden arm. Thirty-six stitches bring the face into focus. I am sitting sideways with one leg shorter than the other. I am a passage of distortion. The chair, pushed against a blue door, is covered with scars. The unswallowed pill whitens my lips—a weakness similar to the living when they come back for the dead. Fire and water are eating different paths up the green skirt. All this skin is a mask; all organs, lesions or birth defects. On the ground, snow without its globe or the city famous for its snow. A chest tube between my second and third ribs juts out, like a smoked cigarette as it turns away from the burden of light.

(b) Using Sky and Poison

Language. The objects and their order around the body. Signs of freezing fill the sky. For example, portions of a biplane that

are cut off from view. For example, solar eclipse. The skirt slashed to receive the scorpion. I have enemies, my eleven fingers raised to count them: the thirst, the club foot, the distance between the gesture and the meaning, the branchless trees in the horizon. There are bruises on my face—a family of four—and a barbed wire to separate the eyes from the mouth. Around my neck, a string of black origami cranes disappears into the green bodice. The lace is gelatinous, indicative: this is the outdoors: ice melt and the ground turning so dark it is the shadow of a corpse about to hit the soil.

(c) Variations on Pressure

Memory is the entry wound, involved but unseen. A lightbulb sputters in the presence of moths. On the wall, a fire escape twisted into a flower. My feet dangle. As the body's distance from the ground increases, the hemline appears to shrink in perspective. I have birthed a dead thing again. My legs cling hardest to the embryonic fluid, their toenails either painted with daisies or torn out and replaced with stitches. On the floor, a green bottle spills a shudder of moon; one black shoe is empty and lies on its broken side. I have the face of my thumbprint: proof that oil paint feels anguish before it dries. A meat

hook exits the left breast—the tip dulled by heart tissue, like a wrist being licked of salt.

(d) That Which Shapes Rainfall into Individual Entities

First the fruit fly, its entrails conjoined with the skirt. Then the larvae—intermittent white embroidery on green fabric. The evening cups the alley in the manner of someone eating a pear with both hands. I have a pair of scissors. I have a pair of goat horns on my head—and a blue bowl that collects and brings water closer to its image. The neck is whispered in snakeskin tattoos. On the ground, dissected rats with their feet in the air giving instructions on how to reconstruct the human body. I am perched on a yellow hydrant. My lips are invisible, washed away by light from a keyhole. There is no way out. I have taken my hair down. From a distance, the drizzle communicates a barcode structure. A birdcage.

(e) Unfinished, But Not Without Mutation

The lake is a spoon is a fish belly is a coil of plaited hair. With the eyes removed, dark stains bore through the gauze around

the head to indicate a previous awareness of eyes. The tripartite beard is both alien and incorruptible. I am wearing black lipstick. And here, the landscape becomes dangerous. The elms have been replaced with fetuses. To reprocess animation inside the stillborn, the edges of their smiles have been stapled to their cheeks. I am a door a submerged city a denotation device with blue buttons. This is the body as it will be found: attired in formal green, serene and geometric, strapped to a skeleton, my arms transformed into miniature arms inside the beaks of winter birds, feeding.

Sarah Norek

We Swim Away

One year my first brother hatches, another year my second. The second dies. I come later and for a while am called The Gift, The Child, The Girl. My mother tells a story: Once upon a time your brother's membrane turned to ice. His incubation went frigid, his fragile skin cracked in high-pitched splinters. She shrugs and looks away, behind her, so her body's scales pull from their maile layer; what shows beneath is the vulnerable pocked skin, the fact of blood there, right below the surface. We couldn't save him, she says quietly. When we extracted, he broke to pieces, his yolk sac a butterscotch skidding from reach.

Here is when my mother turns back to stretch for me, her fins vellum, filters for faraway light. I duck. Girly girl, she coos, coming closer. Let's tie you tight with ribbons, a pretty package of youth. I grimace. My first brother has disappeared along a crease of black water. My father—I think I hear bubbles swooping through his certain dorsal fin, a thumb-sized chunk in a fight jawed free. Alone, my mother and I remain like this, painfully kinetic, her best bet to keep treading water, ripples smacking over my own as cloaks.

There is a grave we do not visit.

I lie: we visit once. Family style, we head for land. Tails and fins break into feet and hands; our gills we hide beneath what hair we've fashioned from brown and greenish seaweed and kelp curls. We wash ashore, split apart, my father to unshutter our side-street house kept for just these kinds of excursions, my brother who knows where, I bet to plant his seed.

My mother and I trek to the gravesite where we kick through gold summer grasses and listen to dead-edged maple leaves, the buzz of hot bugs rubbing legs together. The bugs start fires in their thin paper wings. The knoll goes up in flames. We kick and kick and stamp and stamp, holding closed our fragile mouths, hacking, our limbs gooey with disuse, useless, our achievement nothing but the smudging of ash against our tender arms. The smoke sears our eyes to tears. It's here, says my mother, panting. It's here, somewhere. This is it, it could be it, right here.

By then our skins have begun to warp, to blister. She points to an unmarked marker, rubbing her eyes, head cocked. There? she croaks.

In the distance, a fire bell clangs. Up the hill in a delicate development, squeaky-clean homeowners stand upon toothpick-stick decks, shading eyes and fanning noses, watching. They cluck children inside, behind glass doors, ticky-tacky walls.

Play, they suggest, red and blue and yellow colored toys toed to piles in the centers of floors. Sippy-cups get filled with fruit punch, grape bubblegum pieces divided into halves and divvied. Be nice, the children are warned. Play nice with each other. Don't hit your sister. Leave your brother alone.

Humpbacked, we flee the raging hillside, mother and daughter, hit hot black asphalt where sealant lines weep goo. Of course, my mother coughs, we were devastated, your father and I. Your first brother, too. He was just a child, the second. Tender, new fruit, the start of who knows what. Who knows what we're missing now, how we might have changed. She says this looking down at herself, across at me, from my fumbling feet and traveling up to my filmy eyes. She is squinting, I am squinting, neither one of us can see very clearly.

The rest of our time at the cemetery I pointedly misplace. I make origami folds of it until all that remains is a dot, so intricately pinched to creases it will take something like a dentist's plaque removal tool to get in and pull, to unfurl. I'll need the finest point. I tuck the dot down my earhole. It embeds past my reach to hibernate; out of sight I forget its existence.

We take the night in the side-street house, separate baths in separate tubs, my father in the kitchen steaming something on the stove. The whole place turns humid, fetid. Our hair slips from our skulls, slides down our shoulders, stews along the face

of our scalding bathwater. There is fruity bar soap, flowery shampoo. These I try but what yields is rash, widespread, rancid with pustules. There's no hope for cleanliness here.

At the dinner table my first brother is missing. My mother, my father, step to the porch and call for him. Their sound is largely inaudible though each dog on the block takes up baying, howling or snapping. Our own dog runs for the farthest bedroom, my brother's, to hide in the closet. I find him with paws on his eyes, ears shut by legs, stub tail pulled tight to his butthole. No amount of murmuring will soothe him. I bring a beer can from the refrigerator, his emptied water bowl, and pour the contents for him to lap up. He does so in a fever, causing and inhaling foamy head, sneezing into the bowl before diving his snout straight in, drinking like a horse.

My first brother. He takes a night to reappear, blotched and sweaty-faced. No Where have you been young man? or You'd better have a good explanation for this. My mother is the first to greet him and she does so with knuckles up and down his spine so he rattles, wood blocks in a box. Shells used for teeth have been lost in his absence, their gaps turning him vagrant, his sheets for clothing ripped and hung in shreds. What my mother says when she speaks is: I'm going to be a grandma. My first brother grins broadly, more shells fall, patter across the linoleum. Our father claps his hands, webbing having begun its

creep back between his fingers, regeneration of fins not far in the future. What smell we'd grown accustomed to is newly injected with the stink of our lost member returned, the glands of him seeping such stench as rotten eggs in stagnant seawater. Again, the dog has run for the closet.

A day later my mother is a parasite. We didn't see this coming, though to be fair she has been many things before: a fish, a fox, an arachnid, a moose. Once, a giant squid; from time to time, a woman. This is her smallest and most intrusive body yet. She can fit into virtually anything. She shrugs, a series of cilia ripples revealed in the microscope. I've always loved to travel, she says, her voice unchanged. I just got myself a ticket to some of the greatest places on earth.

My father, first brother and I stand around dumbly. Because she's asked us to, we've bought her a bon voyage cake, white with white frosting. It was suggested we bake it ourselves, stir it with love, toothpick test the finish, tenderly. Babydoll, our father said to her, leaning over the Petri dish and squinting. I can't afford the heat. I'll wither right up. Across his body scales were beginning to curl, to peel. Once we sent her off we would need to leave our mother on land, return our father to sea. She was always the one in their coupling to do everything she wanted. She was willing to be all it took to get what was needed. This trait

she passed along to her children. Our father, we believed, gave us steadiness.

In a final token, we print a banner off the dot matrix, hang it outside across the dirty garage windows. CONGRATULATIONS! it reads, and GOOD LUCK! The printer's ink is running low. Through the rainbow pixels run stripes of blank white. The cake remains untouched.

We set it on the back porch, the bench, where the dog rejoices, grabbing mouthfuls before running up and down the yard, elated. Frosting plugs his nostrils until he sneezes a path for air. Around his muzzle, dripped beneath his chin like a beard, clot the two white colors, one crumbly and the other thick like paste. In no time the dog is shitting his brains out, quivering uncontrollably, hanging his head like a loser, all jubilation soured. My brother tries to console him, holding his hands out to take the animal's sleek head between them, but the thing won't come near, keeps racing more of the yard away, his guts spurting out in stinking, wet ribbons, his dark, glazing eyes finding our own in terror.

Well, my brother says, he doesn't look good. He's going to die, I say, jumping in. Which is the way of the world, says my brother. Out with the weak, in with the strong.

We both pause, watching. The dog has lain himself at the end of the yard, heaving in pants. Still, from his ass, he loses

himself. He tries to stand but cannot, each feeble attempt awarded with a buckling of joints, a crack to the earth. I think we should do something, I say. This isn't right. We have to *do something*. Just be glad, my brother says, that it wasn't you. That *that* isn't you. Out with the weak, in with the strong, he repeats, mumbling. I think of our second brother. I turn to say something to my first but already he is inside the house, throwing things down the garbage disposal: what shells he's lost from his mouth, a pile of unused napkins, the plastic ladle from the night before, our scummy, membranous hair. It sounds like war, screeches and thumps, gurgles and rattles and intermittent explosions, the deck beneath me vibrating. I glance a last time at the dog, full on his side by then, stomach quit, legs stiffened in a stretch that makes him appear to have been galloping forward before a collision came on too hard and fast to miss.

That evening my first brother and I return our father to saltwater. Here, he rejuvenates. Over time his colors deepen, iridesce. His reflexes quicken and with them his speed. Each regained characteristic feeds itself to his confidence until our father is bloated with invincibility, buoyed by it. You're no fingerling, I tell him. You're not what you were. You need to be cautious. He darts away after a smaller fish, returns with it stuck in his teeth, head and tail flicking up and down from either end of his mouth. I'm better than I ever was, he responds.

I haven't felt this good in years. A cloud of blood billows around him. The dying fish emits a stream of final bubbles. That could be you soon, I snap. So you better watch out. Over his dorsal fin my father replies: *You* better watch out, young lady. I'm not above showing you a thing or two, he threatens. Off he swims, straight as an arrow.

In this prime, my father flourishes. Without my mother nearby he's found himself. I recognize finally how pruned and caged a place he's been kept, been keeping. But I miss his gentler ways. To my first brother I try to confide, watching my sibling's undulating, translucent fins, light poking his eyes. Dad isn't dad anymore, I say. He's like some guy who lives only to pump iron. My brother's mouth gapes opened and closed. Hello? I say. Are you there? Can you hear me? Opened and closed. I feel like a pickle, he says finally. Do you feel like a pickle? Now I'm the one gaping. I test a word: Narwhal. He responds: Nuclear. Me: Bermuda Triangle. Him: Water slide.

Me: Shark.

Him: Conspiracy theory.

I can't do this, kid, he tells me. The strain. It's killer.

You look fantastic, I say, and his fins begin to flutter, hummingbird wings but erratic. He wobbles in the water, back and forth. His gills suck with industrial force. His color strips are pulsing, a rainbow on the move. He waits until he can sigh

evenly, and this he does on repeat. Sigh sigh sigh. Sigh sigh. Sigh. You're gonna make a whirlpool, I snap. Believe me sweet sister, he says, his voice a mere wafer of its potential, the whirlpool's already in motion. He does a gurgle in his throat, the sound of a drain.

In a few weeks I can't locate him. Gone from his rock's shelf is his costuming, the eyelash pair I made from a catfish's whiskers, the purple mohawk from a dead urchin's spines. My first brother has returned to land.

When my mother and I meet again I don't know it until she's crawled inside my mouth to eat away my tongue. I've laid my own eggs by then, many of them. I've left children to fend and thrive for themselves, not a speck of me in the way, barely a glance before evacuation. This is my gift: freedom.

In her old age my mother has grown from her parasitic pinhead size into a bug, this hard-backed thing, tiny black eyes and a miniature shark mouth. What are you doing? I garble around her ridged shell. This is *my* mouth! You have *no* business in it. I was doing just fine before, before you came along. Shush, is all she says back. Hush. I'm here girly girl, mama's here. She continues to devour the muscle until nothing remains but her, grown large to replace and fill in the hole. You need to leave *now*, I moan. The only way to speak is via her; she is my tongue.

For words to materialize I must use her to shape them, to bang them into existence against the backs of all my teeth. In her more gracious moments, she'll allow me to finish. I say: This isn't fair. I'm no baby anymore. You're not the boss of me. Taking her time, she replies: Years have done nothing for your manners. I never should've left you. See what you've become?

Indiscriminately I whine, and in response she shakes, chiding my jelly ignorance. What, she asks. Let you stay like this forever? No. It's my duty, as a mother, to help you succeed. To be all you can be. This, she quivers, tickling beneath my nostrils, *this*—isn't enough. You have so far to go. You have too much potential.

Though she calls me intractable, difficult, once a cunt, we mostly get along. I'm able to do all I've ever done. She steals a small percentage of my food, which I don't think is fair, but we don't discuss it; I'm still, under the circumstances, healthy. Together we dream of my father, her husband, and each time he's only grown younger, more of a dart, finally simple streaks of light through the cooler, dimmer depths. I always knew there was something about him, my mother says, waking me up. She sighs. I just had no idea it was *this*. I feel so old, seeing him. Used up.

I think, I mumble, I'm the one getting use—

I just, my mother interrupts, I'm feeling mortal.

I don't say anything for a long time, and then I mutter: For the both of us, you are. Together we're silent. I think of my brother, what a life he must have. I wonder how he's aged, if his eyes have sagged, which of his piscatorial parts has given him the most trouble in his absence from our water. My father always battled his hands and feet. I had trouble with skin. My mother's appearance seemed ever effortless, flawless. Perhaps my first brother's teeth, morphing devotedly to triangles and points. These he could file. Or maybe the eyes, drawing wide and unblinking, the root of unsettling stares.

What if my second brother were still here? I ask in a mumble. We'd love each other. He'd have a care inside him like this family's never seen.

Ugh, interrupts my mother. Don't be dramatic. You're wasting your energy and making me sick. Shut your mouth about ifs, I've thought of them all already. Consider this, she says, shaking in my teeth, my best answer to the problem. While you and your brother cleaned house, packed, left the dog to die, where do you think your father and I went? In whom have I been all these years, until now?

If you're saying what I think you're saying, I say.

I am, my mother snarls. I most certainly am.

For the rest of that day we don't speak. I catch our food, she crushes it, hollowly we eat and hunt again. The water

remains calm, sunlight sprinkles through. By night we're tired, we rest beneath my rock. Parasites: resilient, determined things. My tongue, fed by my brother's remains. I tremble, first in fear, then glee. My own second brother! Alive, sort of, inside me!

I was mistaken, my mother whispers. I never should have come for you. We're trapped.

In the distance are whales calling, warning. Nearby is a crack; at its bottom, fish whose spines extend as cords. The cords' tips hold buggish shapes to be dangled before their own gaping mouths. They bait the hungry right in to be eaten.

I never asked to keep you, I gripe. Like I said when you got here, I was doing just fine. This isn't my fault. If you leave me I'm done.

My weeping, weeping mother.

That dot down my ear? Opens itself into a balloon, floats to my surface where it can't be ignored.

I remember the rest of our hillside time together. How she describes my second brother as the one of us siblings with the largest, darkest eyes, looking wildly about him. That his sac, before it couldn't, made the deepest egg-yolk yellow, practically orange, she says, for strength. Your first brother was pressured, she says. Forced into existence. We fiddled with the nature of things, she mumbles, gesturing abstractly in jerky waves. I can't

imagine the repercussions still to come. Then your second brother, we know what came of that. And finally you, she says.

We have climbed the hill to the top, are surveying. My mother shades her eyes to gauge the placement of her second son's final rest.

You, she says, weren't anything expected. Your father and I, we tiptoed for days, awaiting your hatch. Truthfully, he and I barely breathed, we rarely spoke. When your brother zoomed up we walloped him to stop. Off he'd sulk, hide behind a rock, come swimming back but as a whisper this time, slipping right beside your soft shell to gaze inside. He's always loved you. Remember that. Don't forget to remember that. It's important.

By this time we can see the first wisps of smoke rising from the hot bugs rubbing. My mother continues to search, tripping through footing, kicking grass aside. Why wouldn't you know where he is? I call from behind. Shouldn't you have placed a marker? Isn't it significant, the death of a child? Your son?

In that moment there is no time for reply; flames grow around us, licking in crackles. Come on, come on, she says, reaching for me. We can't do anything now. It's beyond our control. But my brother! I cry, ducking. I writhe, gyrate, trying to beat her grasp. Don't be stupid, she grunts. He's already dead. It's you I'm worried about now.

She wrestles me to the road. Above us, the airbrushed

development's people gather on decks. They hold drinks, binoculars, one of them a white shirt that waves and waves. My mother and I watch, still crouched. You're suffocating me, I hiss. My waist is pinched a way I don't think my breath can beat. Even so, in my gasps and elbows for freedom, my mother remains around me, a case. Let it go, she says, shh shh, there there. I'm not crying! I shriek, but my cheeks are on fire, the salt of me unable to dissipate, to dissolve within the salt of an entire, surrounding sea. I just want you to know, she whispers through my slimy hair, breathing my damp scalp dry, that I've done everything I can for you. That I've kept you from this—here she twists us so I can see the decks, now overpopulated, their burdens causing bend and sway—and inside our ocean so you could expand so long and far as you needed. You have a lot to do still, to grow. You know next to nothing. Don't stop now. She squeezes me and I go limp, dropping to my knees and staggering then, free of her grasp. I notice the asphalt leaking blackly beneath us.

These days, daily, my mother and I hear talk of my brother's talented, burgeoning family. A daughter playing piano with her tail, pelvic fins, ten fingers. Twin sons attached at the operculum, sharing gills, turning somersaults around each other. Another, younger daughter, willow-thin, barnacle-coated—this one, I hear,

the most beautiful of all. A far-off country's prince asking already for her hand in marriage. Like an alabaster statue but full of movement, of breath, all those feather barnacle feet reaching out to shimmer and flicker with air.

I never should have come for you, my mother says, an unstoppable broken record.

My father. I dream of him still. He's pinpricks now, motes of dust shot up with light. So much for steadiness, I ate it for breakfast one day, starved, in need of reserves. I miss the man who knew perfectly all our names at school swim meets; this is a lot of names, on his part an effortless feat. What happened to him, our magic mirror, his acute ability to say everything we ever needed as we treaded the water before him? I love you, he said. We grew older and winced and swam away. Save it for the babies! we called back over our fins. We're not babies anymore, tell us something new! Relentlessly he told us, I love you. It *is* new, he'd say. Each time I say it, it's new again. In response we giggled, snorted, guffawed. Treat us with a little dignity, we sniped. Show us some respect. We're not stupid, we need to *know* things. We need you to pass what you know along.

Our mother, watching, only sighed and shook her head. Her fins slashed the water harder than was necessary. You're getting your *things*, she hissed. Just not the way you want. You'll be sorry, one of these days, she warned. When you

realize what you've missed, zipping around here like you own the place. Like you've got it all figured out. All this, she made a twirl, all this owns you. You're going to want a little love sometime. Don't wait too long to take it.

R. D. Parker

A q u a m a r i n e

At night, ovoid gasoline erases Schenectady.

At night, swallows mosquitoes. Schenectady.

At night, piquant Schenectady places a jar in Kankakee.

At night, deco-blobs arc arc arc arc saunter. Kankakee.

At the fall of evening, slap-dash labor complete anomie.

At the fall of evening, heads of lettuce port slovenly.

At the fall of evening, retina flashes. Upper Sandusky.

At the fall of evening, tangerine tangerine nectarine tangerine.

Roxanne M. Carter

Mine-Haha

A samovar, a sink. In regular succession or promiscuously; the misery of all at once. A hot flush, a headache and bruised knees. A bouquet on every branch bending toward the street, girls in borrowed garters dropping press-on nails in the stairwell like blossoms, silvery-pink and fluttering. I'm inclined to collect them all; the nails of generous women clogging every gutter. The bottoms of my shoes crusted with yellow blooms like snot. Great pink clumps surging, as if a cord has been pulled, a shade opened, a door and her eyelid.

A salt rain in the clouds, the scent of kelp and whales with mouths ringed with ancient toothbrush bristles, caught in loaded trees, shaking salt to the street. A velvet surging, all too much at once, my heart struggling against my stomach. The house won't hold.

Pushing a sponge-headed mop over the floorboards in an effort opposite the direction of the boards laid across the room. Swallowing when I'm done, slowly and clearly. I keep myself busy by holding onto something. It is still raining and the rain has nothing to do but sink.

A welt carved into my thigh from an object which I kept on my lap for awhile but which is now gone.

Street signs and addresses wavering, as if cold, water riveted to broken doorbells; no call to fetch me from suffering. Herds of trees anticipating the mail: no packages today. A rupture in the sky and the street lights struggle to turn on, hissing and buzzing like bawling girls, pulling pigtailed. If this continues, I'll learn to swim: a bucket and a bathtub, a girl in galoshes with a broom, sweeping tadpoles toward the drain, taking care to catch each one. For no reason but a way of keeping time: each stroke, feet together, knees together, blowing out air. Can I count each button, every light I left on, a room I don't use.

A door left slightly open, so that the cat hurdles against it, his claws catching on the bottom edge of the frame: he pulls and pulls, the force of one cat wanting in, battling a block of wood. When it swings open he falls back, legs pumping and then thrusting forward, propelling himself from floor to window ledge. The screen he can't get by bounces him back. He moves in the way of girls jumping rope, hula hoops, somersaults.

The heartlessness of silver lined hips. Hard to get salt water out of silk. I'd wear black before a tragedy, inexplicably snap a button from my sleeve with my teeth. Swallowing whole suits worth of small buttons, glutted in my belly; the sound of buttons shuffling against each other in the bottom of a girl. My dress

punctuating me, coming to a full stop at my wrist, resting on a sleeve. Kneecaps scarcely seen, hovering beyond the outermost edge of my slip. I depend upon a breeze to start unsettling the arrangement of my skirt; otherwise, I'll have to start making unrestricted movements, crackling in chiffon. The extra charge of glamour distilled by the telephone's ring; when I answer my obligations the illusion is effaced—I answer as anybody might, the receiver clinging to an anxious ear, the trunk wafting through my loose, dismantled hair. The threat of fabric, simulating skin; I take time to slouch in satin, taming my dress to bargain, blackmail, bless. I'm clashing with the scenery, collar slightly askew—a girl groomed by tulle, raiding the dress rack. I'm always stopping here, stooping to see myself set loose by the earth. Mountains around me peeling, shedding slate.

To be the prettiest, the most ready to descend. From the rituals of the jungle gym to nylon stockings stretched over wire hangers. The forest is empty of anything but girls in white dresses. They can do what they like, such as slip into a clock. They don't like to be told what to do, to have the mechanics explained. Time is often passing and what they love is to steep in the senselessness of forest paths lit by fluorescent lights; the feel of a kidskin glove on a bare thigh; the limpid eye of a rose in her lap. If I leave I can go anywhere: from here to a seesaw, a swing, a shallow swimming pool. Because I have been alone and

I have flung myself from here, drawn by the constant gravity of trains moving underground, the incessant pull of water to the sea. Girls in a city they've never seen, every tree a furnace for forgetting.

A kind of maze of white ankle socks. The kinds of snake-skin secrets girls have, sloppily abandoned in favor of something new. I haven't told anyone; I've been hushed by moths wrapped in wax paper and the relentless ache of getting ready to be in line. Moving forward to smile, to lift my chin so the bones in my neck collapse.

A girl won't ever be here again. She'll lose some blood, cut her nails, her hair—but no wound. And then again, the bathtub water lukewarm, clogged with skin cells, soap.

Cilice

Harsh lines scratched in like woven hair, her skin itched deep as the undershirt of a monk. So she removed it piece by piece. Delicate sunburn scrapings from the bridge of her nose, thick elbow slices. She bought a pumice brush, peeled skin away in apple curls. Unsure of whether her nails were skin, she scraped them with stone down to slivers of scratched marble.

She fed the pigeons the dried skin shorn from foot calluses, gave her boy skin softly hidden beneath the chin for play. She used strips from the thigh, the calf, to patch the walls.

She lost her appetite after scraping tastebuds from her tongue, depositing them like pulp in the bottom of her orange juice glass, stirring on occasion with a spoon.

“I am speaking to you,” she said, but her voice was light without the fur of her papillae. It refracted in her glass and emerged meaningless and abstract, phonemes splaying in angles across the room.

Pulling skin from the underside of her left arm, she used the serrated edge of her grapefruit spoon to cut words among the capillaries. *I am your mother*, she wrote, *and you must save*

me when I am stripped away. You must swallow at least the smaller bones, those of the pinky, the inner ear. You must, and here she ran out of skin.

T r e k

I followed a trail of fat black ants to the foot of the property where they marched up the thick trunk of a mango tree and into lush foliage. I placed my buckled shoes side-by-side and then, parallel to the path of ants, I climbed the slightly slanted tree, careful to avoid digging my nails into the bark.

Mama was asleep on a higher branch; leaning against the trunk, her legs dangled from either side. I could not call on her without risking being overheard by the Lemures, whose village was nestled somewhere in these parts. I took a dime from my pocket and tossed it at her. She smacked her lips. Slipped back into deep sleep. Closer I crawled to nudge her and pressed my finger to my lips as she opened her sleepy eyes. I pointed downward and began to backtrack faster than I had climbed. Hesitant and heavy in her movement, she followed and made it back to the ground with reddened scratches and a tear in her summer dress.

She led me as we then pushed through the jungle and the sky lost brightness. We needed to pick up our pace but instead we stopped, to take a break, I assumed. Mama crouched by a

naked man who was curled up on a bed of moss with his stiffened arm between his rigid legs, cold and ashen. And though not erect, his small limbs suggested his miniature size. I had never seen a Lemure before. I had never seen a dead man before that day either.

A restless cry echoed from afar. It resounded in my chest as though I had stepped outside myself and crouched beside Mama, gesturing for her lapis eyes, which she dug out and placed upon my own. If I shut her eyes, I could see that I was standing by her while she covered his face with a fallen palm leaf. And if I opened them, I was helping her lug the dead man into the jungle.

The Congenital Fiancé

Lines of force delimit hexylresorcinol, the ever-resourceful organ unpronounceable of crystalline phenol used as a persuasive bluer, an antiseptic, and an anti-something-else that would have to be looked up.

No, the congenital fiancé said, *it's not an "anti" anything, it's anthelmintic*, which, he conceded, would still have to be looked up.

He resented the limitations of the lines of force—they filled him, these lines, their limits, with resentment. Whippy though he often was, on this occasion his cycloid being was enhanced. Keen on bandeaux (about which we shall hear no more) our fiancé has always been, and if not always, then at least since some months after conception (we shall hear no more of that, either). Part and parcel, stock in trade of his juvenescence, hand in glove with a barely disguised, and in fact tumescent syndicalism about which he knew nothing and understood less, was that which was sure to leave him trapped in a hoist of his own low-slung petards.

And with that, our fiancé spat.

Turning inboard, our congenital fiancé fluffed his collieshangie's multiple value. A good collieshetland, play-by-play, was more than worth its goggles. Our fiancé would need his own goggles, too, were he and his pup to continue their frolic with the hexyletcetera.

They looked up, our fiancé and his pup. Always a mistake, ask anyone. Spangled across the banner sky, red and blue-black lines of force embattled cyborg cutlery.

It's time to duck, our Balaamic bridegroom said to his dear collieshaddock, recognizing as he immediately did the dangers of a sky filled with magnetized robotic forks, knives, corkscrews and spoons.

The dog did not need to be told twice.

He (the cong. fiancé) and his cousinage (the colliesh.) vectored down a cosecant until they were completely lost. This lossage, being so complete, was accomplished either instantaneously or never, which amounted to the same thing. Our fiancé rattled his collieshtetl's costume jewelry, extemporizing as all of us would in such a confusing situation.

Lover, he said, *disciplined oeuvre sparged thin-skinned as a jabiru's hopes could be the dish to dish up now, as in front of our tired, begoggled eyes, do we not see the exquisitely unpronounceable diethylcarbamazine, its crystalline citrate deployment just the thing to control your roundworm?*

To which question the collieshangie (settled for the time being on being such) could offer up no reply other than a diffident wag of tail.

The congenital fiancé looked up. The lines of force had faded from the sky. Spoons were scattered about. The congenital fiancé, juvenescent and growing ever more so by the moment, said to his collieshangie, *Baby-dog, I don't know what any of this means.*

The cousinage, the baby-dog in reference, never knew what to say, but knew where it could be looked up. But never knowing what to say, the collieshangie kept the referenced referential mystery mysterious, at which silence our congenital fiancé buried his face in his baby-dog's furry coat, laughing and weeping and smearing sticky substance all around, decreasing the collieshangie's myriad valences of value. And of course, there's always the roundworm.

And of further course, there are no lines without limits.

And completely off course, there is the remorseless remora, into whose precincts neither we nor the congenital fiancé shall stray, though the collie seems to have wandered off.

J e a n n e S t a u f f e r - M e r l e

V i l l a g e O f ,

of the central ditch
even kids
are creepy here spawned claw-faced out
with its water raw-close—
furred like a feral dog

of crow-head
that you smell
suddenly crouching next to you
(where is the inside of this town?) one boy is
and bores holes

of mud
in long rows
a second creature files fingers
and crams slim meals into mouths that gnaw—
on mute boulevards girls

grow into
deep and sharp-skinned rectangular
sideboards without doors so they can't escape the
gate of this cracked- up place

but behind
the light the children can't see (on
the human side of the river) houses sing
of other things hey, you!

doors warble
to splintered ears, listen, you're one
of us! It's a pity, though true, the brain can't
see hear or process of

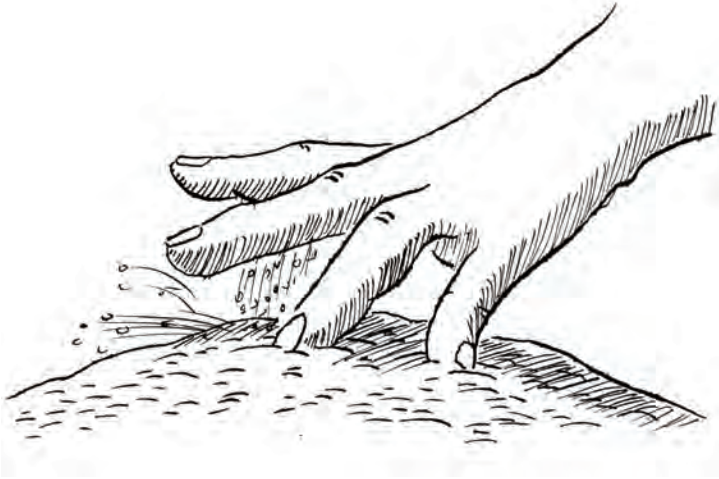
Black Sun Splitting

And where is the now-I where is the was-body where is the end-begin of every thing. And every where and no where the blown bag of no front no back no. Of space not near not far but. But still the smell of. The horizon being a sickly. But no. No more of. *Oh for the out line of time oh for the curve securely.* No more silver-edge. Just the opaque stench. The lurid of. The sad sodden scent of the marooned-mass of it. But now not even that. Now the no-smell. But the taste. Like burnt butter like bloody water like. The sulphur-sanguine savor like. Now the mouthfeel of not-mouth. Again the no. *Oh the gold-claret-tongue oh memory. Oh the acid delicacy.* Still the bulk-sense of body the sag-still of body. But body to. *Oh.* To fluid to air to no-air to. And the body vacuums to. And now the body to no body. The siphon-exit to no and no and. The dissolve-dissect. *Oh the was. The before then after around.* And now only the grave-gelid. Only the greige-griseous. And now only. *Oh white oh lambent oh echo oh light so light the crushed lucent the hushed gone-went.* And then. The. And some where or some not-where. A matte reflection a no-dimension a not a never a some not-thing *oh some thing* like a land-distilled a paused an ebbed a drained-escaped a

J.A. Tyler & John Dermot Woods

The Seven Things Jimmy Did to Change His Posture

THE FIRST



Jimmy, how he stood in his backyard and pulled dandelions and blew them to oblivion and the neighbors over their neighbors' fence watched him with mean hard eyes, their grass spread with tangled weeds.

Jimmy, in his pockets he keeps sometimes the un-popped popcorn kernels from when his dad makes the popcorn and

doesn't leave it in long enough. Because his dad is always afraid that he will wait too long and the popcorn will burn and the smoke alarm will blare and their neighbors, out a bay window, they will watch to see how this father son house comes down.

Jimmy, he plants these popcorn kernels in the grass, in the hollow left by his fingers going into dirt. They never grow to corn, these seeds, and Jimmy only waits a week or two before he gives up completely. Jimmy sometimes knows how to move on.

Standing watching them watch him, Jimmy stoops to pull another yellow flower from another green space and his eyes for a moment they go to a place that is all rainbows and sky. The clouds shaped there like a new world, like when his mom was holding him, his head to her breast, the heartbeat there a dance of them two.

Eyes looking back. Always eyes looking back. These are all the eyes looking back.

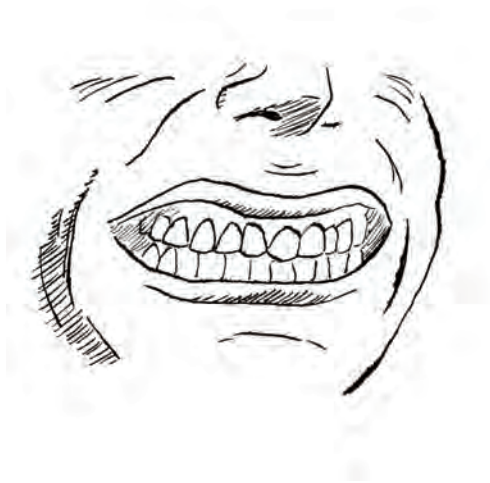
The wind and Jimmy they hold one another instead, the tree his house and the house a place where his dad, he hides away. His mother is not in the peach jars, down the basement steps. His mother is not in the clouds. His mother is not sleeping.

Jimmy knows. Jimmy is sometimes clever enough to understand.

Bent up and tall Jimmy looks at the sun until his eyes they burn with the sun that is shining through a summer haze. Jimmy

sees for a minute under his eyelids the perfect feel of nothing having ever changed. This is not the way it is going to work.

THE SECOND



He stood in the road, this boy named Jimmy, this boy that liked to think himself a man now since he had experienced death. The dark of night only scaring him sometimes. That Jimmy, that boy-man, he stood in the road and watched the car that came right up to his forehead and nearly hit him with its grill.

Jimmy sometimes smiles. And the teeth that are in his

mouth, over which his words run, they are still unmarked white.

The dirt that makes this road spun up with dust when the car that was the car that almost hit Jimmy in the face, when it stopped just shy of teaching him another lesson about dying.

And Jimmy looked that car in its headlights and said things in his head that no one could hear.

This is the kind of dirt road where Jimmy grew up or is growing up, depending on what type of day it is, and whether this is a day where Jimmy is a boy or if this is a day where Jimmy, he is more like a man.

The sun, when it shines here, past Jimmy's shoulders and the break of his neck, it is a hot sun.

Jimmy sweats anxiety. Jimmy is sometimes dumbfounded about what has happened.

The car that stopped just shy of Jimmy's brow was a truck, dual rear tires and a silver streaked side. The sun moving across its hood, its belly tearing up dust.

There is a calm just after the skid, the antenna bouncing like an echo.

And Jimmy peeks with his eyes through this new cloud of brown, doesn't see in it what he is looking for.

Today Jimmy walked away without saying anything.

Today is not the day that Jimmy was really looking for.

THE THIRD



Jimmy, he stacks pillows on top of himself, making of his body a tower or a castle, a tunnel or a bridge, a fort or a home. He pulls blankets on top and the cushions from the couch, he piles his clothes as a baron peak, a rooster weather vane, he smothers. Jimmy lays beneath the pile and thinks about how this all took like a hand lifting up and was set back down on its head.

He is hoping, the Jimmy underneath this wealth of comfort, that the weights he is weighed down with will crush him from on top, take the air from his lungs and replace it with cement, harden him.

Jimmy is sinking. Jimmy sinks.

There is no kind of meeting for the things that Jimmy wants to talk about. There is no place to go. There is no bottom.

This is a last breath. This is last breathing. Jimmy wants the world to end but the pillows have hollow spaces of air and this provides him with the life he doesn't want anymore. He wants to walk away but the elements he has laid on top, the covering he has built, it is irreplaceable. He must live on. He lives on. Jimmy lives.

Jimmy looks up at the stacks spiraling above, on the pressing down he has composed of soft and down, looks into his dreams where there is a woman who must be his mother, split in half by train tracks, reaching her now two bodies towards his one. This is a dream that wakes him up when he has blacked out. This is a dream where he sweats and sometimes tastes blood on his teeth. This is the dream where Jimmy, he himself becomes also two, one Jimmy dry and longing with bangs across his forehead, and one wet and with a smile plastered like water.

Jimmy is not a worthy cause. Give up. Go home. There is nothing here.

THE FOURTH



When the branch was cut Jimmy saw inside of the rings like his whole life was set there and burning, fire inside of the wooden horse, touch and go with flames and no water nearby. The end was straight and this tree it had never been straight so watching the neighbor man, him sawing it down in bits and pieces, it was something different to watch, something Jimmy had not seen,

something like melting a snowball in an oven. All of a sudden. The blink of a spark.

Jimmy is over and done. Jimmy is going. Jimmy, most people think, is gone.

He left stumps, the neighbor and his saw, the chain cutting and the sound it made that was morning turned to a ball and ground to powder under rocks. Goodbye limb. Goodbye limb. Goodbye limb.

Jimmy felt his arms go numb. Jimmy, he lost his legs. Jimmy became a stump like how the world is flat and a boat sent to the end of it will fall down the side of this our map.

Stumps, the man, Jimmy's neighbor and the one who had shone him the inside of his life as a tree, he carried the legs and arms to a pile and a truck later came and two men got out and the tree, its last left remains, they loaded them into its bed and the tree slept.

Jimmy sleeps under covers, inside of darkness, where the light that is there is the light from fireflies that he has caught and put in a jar and the holes in the top allow them to breathe but they still die anyway, like all of Jimmy's hopes, wishes, Jimmy here on all fours under his covers wanting to be a tree with limbs still attached, still reaching for something.

THE FIFTH



Jimmy, when he walks to the bank of the river and stares into its moving water, he sees things that other people, they don't see. Jimmy, when he looks deep and long into its moving surface, he sees a film, a movie, he sees his life going gone and moving, the ripple of his life, the water.

Jimmy, he is hanging up to dry.

The clothesline that his clothes used to hang on, before, when it wasn't just him and his dad, Jimmy's father, and all the words that come now between the two of them. The clothes that hang there now are sentences filled with curses and epitaphs, like they are both dying, because in Jimmy's mind and sometimes in his father's too, he is sure, Jimmy, that they are both really dying now.

There is no other way about this.

Their wife and their mother, the woman who went before them, the softness to their stupidity, to their holding hands, to their sweated bodies in winter, she was drunken falling on the cold steel of a warm night, this wife and mother, this woman before them, before she was cut in two, before she was disseminated, before she was split.

Jimmy watches the water and moves with it. Jimmy is a charity. Jimmy is giving all he has.

There was a time before this time. There will be a time after. The water, it keeps moving.

Jimmy shifts and the water resurfaces. Jimmy yawns and there are drops of rain. Jimmy pounds his fist into the sand and the world breaks into thunder, where the sky rips and the clouds they muster their darkness.

Jimmy is a soldier with no army. Jimmy soldiers onward. There is no direction but the things here, all of them, they keep

going on, and Jimmy, the river and the movie he is watching in his head, the secrets he keeps from everyone, the quiet of his talk, it all goes on.

THE SIXTH



Jimmy, tonight, on nights like this night is, he faces away from the moon. He watches, on the other side of their house, out in their yard, the moon's still reflection of him, of his own body, like an angel on their siding. The house is a canvas. The trees a brush painting him in and out of the wind. Jimmy stands, unmoving. Sometimes unmoving because the world moves him

by itself. There is no need for muscles some days.

Put Jimmy on the train, send him out.

There is a night that comes where Jimmy is sleeping in his bed and there are nights more often than those where Jimmy, he is awake in his bed, on top of his covers, holding tight to a paperclip and counting the bends until it breaks, the nightstand running with broken legs.

If Jimmy were a plane that would make his arms wings, his shins the landing gear, his face the windshield that pilots would look out, steering his body in new directions. Jimmy would be careful of bird-strike, were he an airplane, never wanting to plummet.

And he finds in the time that he is awake, waiting out the set of the moon and the calm of the wind and all of the other silent imperfections that he needs to dwindle before he can close his eyes, in that space, those times, Jimmy finds a voice twisting out of his chest, asking him questions that he has hoped always to keep quiet.

Jimmy has no answers. He is instead filled with light that has no exit, and he wishes his skin torn or tearing, but watching it in the dark it stays, Jimmy's skin, sealed up tight.

Because this is a night, tonight, where there will be no tearing. And Jimmy instead stands in the back of their yard, his shadow puppet play playing on their canvas house, soothing out

the paint of night, stretching into the lawn, keen, growing,
limitless.

THE SEVENTH



Jimmy, he curls his fist around the sun, drags it down into his heart, watching over his shoulder for the look of someone else. Jimmy is always looking for someone else. Jimmy, his neck is always bending and there, behind him, is forever an empty yawn of space, a place where light has nothing to reflect on, or off of.

Jimmy is leaving his mother, though his mother has already

left him.

Jimmy is living and there is no judging where he will go. Jimmy dreams of being a winter, Jimmy dreams of being a snowman, Jimmy dreams of melting. In his head, when no one like always is looking, Jimmy sings to those songs that he hasn't heard before, making up the lyrics from words never spoken, making a rhythm of his bones and the veins that wrap around them.

Jimmy, he is a shot in this darkness, tunneling through, a beam.

Jimmy is not a waste of time. The sun is coming up. The sun is going down. The sun in Jimmy's hand.

Jimmy, he has a father and his father, when he is not searching out the world under rocks and behind doors that are already open, Jimmy's father is his father, living as he is living. Without.

Jimmy is without. And the pulse of his toes on carpet, when he is in the corner and is sure no one can see, Jimmy lets one or two tears roll from his face, splashing beneath him in a rainfall or a landslide. Jimmy trumpets his sickness, his stillness, making sure no one is there to hear it, to see. With no open eyes, no looking, Jimmy is finally scared, scarring, and he holds himself like his mother might have, though he has no way of knowing.

Jimmy has not heard, some days, that he is gone.

Darby Larson

Quietly Now

Her's him when itched. Quit itching. The leaf rubbing your
anklier toe sniffs moldy. Bring it in before it in.

These are what we say when we're punched.

These birds. I'm doing a story now. These birds.

They're flapping south for summer, you and I. Her's him
when itched, she says and I says, huh? Quit itching. I'm doing a
story now.

Punch me it. Tell me.

Watch the sky and I will tell but move your ankle or the
poison will.

Okay.

Once, the ducks landed in our house. Flew through the
window and into the room between Dad and are you listening?

No, the ducks.

The ducks, yes, above, watch it, move your toes.

Smell that?

These birds.

Where were you?

I'm doing a story now. The flapping ducks jumped and ran

through the kitchen, then through Her's door.

The end?

No.

What else?

These birds.

What we say when punched.

Lay back and I'll tell you more.

Smell that? Fuzz.

When's your back getting more out of it?

What's it?

Once, the ducks. I'm doing a story again. Once, the ducks.

No more. I'm quietly now.

Once, the ducks.

Quietly now.

Ever think there's poison in it?

It's what's it's called.

Her's. Him when itched. Sniff that?

Shall we bathe?

Let's love near the pond first.

These ducks.

These ducks.

These ducks ate a woman's toe once.

Not true.

Saw through it?

Tell me.

These ducks are for us.

Forest?

For us. You punched?

Enoughly.

These birds.

What we say.

Intelligent

Snowing in the yard, Bearather, and in is Telligen, Mum, Asmpty. Puddles. Okay, goes Papa out to the yard for a chew. Okay, goes Bear on him like a leaf. It's Tell in the middle with a cake. There's less heat and rare Telli visions but the air's near soaked to the marrow. Here goes Bear on the sit prowl. Here goes Amtysamp on his downing sled. IQ stays in her way and out of others near the middle near the snowyard goes a lantern light when our sun crawls out.

Better swear this sweater Bear, appled in this thyme, this snow of pelting shank. Inty trips in pits, Sampty wings his way, Mom and Pop off golfing? And Jupiter, Sampty rattles. So Inty stands middly in the yard when she feels which it bites and stands it until Come off it, goes Bear but Inty's not offing, standing blat, akimbo sky-stare until she's woman of snow child, until she's death skipping more, until she's frit with frozen pus, 'til she's dust in her corner, when she ate a bit of little it, and she's happy laughing under them, or mad and coughing thunder clash.

I member when Bear lawn-mowed the garden utters mutter

in her funeral fit. Say something Intelligent. I remember Bear that day sunk me from the yard. Later and away from the sound fury of weepers, Inty heads, I thought it was enough, leaves park one park two park three, birdful and useless, those there capped in ball caps, benched, she wonders, Ought ponder sunder weather? Benched lonely for a minute until morning. A wigged yellow man arm shakes her blouse awake to bend these river mouths.

Portrait Television

Can you?

I will try, Winnipeg whispers, to axe the answer off. The square sun through the window flames. Winnipeg waves her hand and waves her hand.

Hello?

It's um.

Hello?

Close it, Winni P. There's wishing to dish for supper, grounds to ground when Slvthklr gets his hoofs in. Wet? Slvthklr's plowing there. Raining Slv, you blind? Slv plows, you want I should. Peg hats her head, heads out.

The moon faded to white. Iced tea.

Here goes Lopsy arguing, Rain? You blind, Lopsy?

Winni breathes fingertiply.

Oh, Slv went in. Hello. Slvthklr commercialing the sofa, so somewhere's knocking. Get it.

Hello?

It's um.

Hello?

It's Lopsy, wants to marry you?

No, Lopsy.

Who Winni is it P? Slv grrs.

Lopsy! Looking for Mary!

Tell him, No?

I told this gent that!

Stop. We are flooding here. Let's summarize. Winnipeg knows but her others ain't. Slv can crump a frug. Mom'll meater loaf. This are its. Where has Dad gone off roaring? And Lopsy. I'm teller things signifi can't. Don't jump in her way, she'll fall on you. The meat's ovenshot, out of cahoots, about time it came up. SUpper! yells, meaning U Peg. Get dressed.

So, Mom? she ventures.

Dear?

Your view of it and there's where I want.

My view's not for yours.

Your view's a swing and mine's stuck.

Hello! Slv rearing the beer of the couch in sweaty pants and kaleidoscopes. D. Formaldehyde and yarn. Rum and barnyard flesh. Television. Slvthklr oh Slv. Sleep before we regret the heat of the meat eating us.

Performs her Winnipeg couchplop while our light from the kitchen is misty Rious. Why's the kitch then? The kitch is. Y. It's time in it's evenings. Y. It's something, oh, look at it.

Once upon the weight of Slv: ovER SOME! POUNds.
Some come and remark, God! Oh my God on the sofa. Slv is
years of us chunking lard to his lungs. His kidney has kidneykids.
While Winni tending tiny gardens, axing weeding trees, wishing
severely maternal syndrome scent. Slv sells, get me a beer, so
Winni's there.

Everyone's here, our portrait, feet on the coffee, tongues in
spoons, television showing us clearly, but Dad's ain't here.
Where? Downtowning toenail growing ruckus punches.

N O R M A N L O C K

from Alphabets of Desire & Sorrow

A Book of Imaginary Colophons

ALPHABET OF KITES

Linotype operator Zheng He stepped from a trolley car onto the Street of Martyrs, which rose above the harbor, at the moment when the sun, having fallen nearly into the blackening sea, was pouring from out its crucible molten light onto the delicate sails of the junks. Rapt, he forgot his life, entering like a monk into the contemplation of a wordlessness whose expression was, for him, flaming boats riding on a flood of gold. In time, he would transmute his vision into an alphabet resembling the paper kites whose purpose is only to burn—their bamboo bones engulfed by imperious night. Li Wan wished to use Zheng's characters to render his poem on the silence of a lacquered bowl. But before the ink could dry, the paper had turned to ash while Zheng—consumed by silence, rotted by light—perished in the fire of an inhuman devotion.

ALPHABET OF WINDOWS

Ill at ease in beauty's presence, were it the sun sinking into the Adriatic or Rubens' shameless *Angelica* glimpsed by accident one disorderly Antwerp afternoon—yet was Simon de Vries, mercenary, thick-necked Dutchman from Papendrecht, felled (having stepped inside a church to plunder it of a candlestick or Papist altar cloth during Cromwell's siege) by a happenstance of light flaming among the shivered panes. Ears suddenly unstopped, he heard—amazed—the declarations of an importunate beauty, which caused thereafter his rough soldier's hand to scribble—by candle's mimicry of that sudden Irish day on the river Boyne—the shapes and figures that had overwhelmed him. Lacking skill to revive them on paper, they remained, for him, an alphabet of the ineffable, graven on the still, dark air.

ALPHABET OF BIRDS

His eyes came to rest on the barbed-wire fence that divided the marshland beyond and the camp where, standing under the blackening sun, Jakub Schulz listened to the lamentation of his bones searching the earth, like moles, for Lethe—the waters of forgetfulness. At a moment foretold by the accrual of darkness, birds rose up out of the marsh grass and rowed through an ocean of air toward the distant and indifferent trees. In that instant of ascent when they appeared to be unmoving in the burning sky, Schulz saw a cadenza compose itself in birds on the wires' staff. Much later, in Jerusalem, Alon Adar would quote Schulz's few ecstatic bars as the epigraph for his novel, *Alphabet of the Birds*.

ALPHABET OF DREAMS

None of the letters chalked onto the blackboard, whose shapes Jan Loos brought back each night from the school room in Antwerp (where, as a boy, he had learned to read during an autumn and winter remarkable for rain), could be sounded by him when he woke. Nor could he fathom the meaning of those joined one to another in what must have been words. Copied from memory each morning, they comprised an alphabet with which he hoped one day to read the books left abandoned on the scarred desks, whose texts were like Braille to the sighted. In this conviction he persisted, returning nightly to that room (though it had been destroyed years before during a bombardment by the French) to pore without comprehension over their pages.

The Neck and Chin

I

That summer they were going to be good to each other.

The first few days they were good to each other.

On the fourth day Tim was cooking white rice in a rice cooker. They were good to each other.

“Yes. I’m doing it. I’m cooking,” Tim said.

“Rice,” Ellen said.

He was learning to make certain foods. The rice cooker sat atop the refrigerator. He had to stand on a white plastic chair to check the rice.

When he checked the rice cooker, Tim saw a face. The face in the rice only stayed probably two seconds before vanishing, perhaps into the rice, possibly evaporating as steam.

“It was made of light,” Tim said. “It had features and stuff but I couldn’t tell. I don’t know. It’s gone now.”

“I don’t believe you,” Ellen said. “I don’t believe in that shit.”

“I don’t either. I don’t know,” Tim said.

They were eating their rice at the square formica table. For the last few days they'd eaten their meals side-by-side; for this meal they sat across from each other. Tim's face looked sunken in.

"You were probably hallucinating. You haven't eaten in a while," Ellen said.

"I'm eating now," Tim said.

"True."

"What do you think it was?" Tim said.

"Probably just another rice phantom."

"Probably." Tim laughed.

"Good that you learned to use the rice cooker."

"It isn't hard."

"I know. Good that you learned to use it."

Tim seemed to shrink in his chair. He finished his rice quickly and lay on the loveseat in the living room. He sat up and tucked his knees into his upper body as much as he could. He wrapped up his legs with his arms.

"I wish we had cable," Tim said.

Ellen was still eating her rice. "Why?" she said.

"I dunno. I'd watch it."

"We have a TV."

"True."

Ellen was writing letters to her best friend in Cleveland when she saw a body part. She was seated at the hardwood table. It was a long letter, and she was tired of writing it. She wrote “I want to feel less ugly and alone” three times in a row.

She dropped her pen on the floor and bent forward to pick it up from under the table. Under the table she saw feet. She made her face into a scream but decided to not react as if there were really feet under the table. She surfaced and then looked under the table again. The feet were not there.

“The fuck,” Ellen said. She continued her letter.

She signed off with, “Passion of the Christ.” She chuckled when she wrote it. Ellen decided not to mail the letter immediately. She could barely handle one pair of feet. This thought made her chuckle some more.

She sunk her head and neck under the table once again and looked around for more feet, or the same feet.

“I saw feet,” she said.

“Tim!” she yelled. “I saw these feet!”

Tim came in from the bedroom. “Guess what leaked?” he said.

“Tim. I saw these feet,” Ellen repeated.

Tim opened the refrigerator and took a carton of raspberry

lemonade. He opened and drank it. He puckered his lips and put the lemonade back before displaying a neutral face. “Fuck. No way,” his tone effete and not really disbelieving.

“They were just standing there, you know, like feet do. They were under the table. Right under there. These disembodied feet,” Ellen said.

“Have you eaten?” Tim asked. He grimaced and toddled back into the bedroom.

Ellen followed him. He sat down on the bed. “I’m sorry for condescending to you about the face before. I believe you now,” she said. She gave her arms to him. He deposited his head on her stomach. She held his head between her arms and into her stomach. She expanded her stomach by slouching over some.

“This is my ghost baby,” she said.

Tim smiled into her stomach. He lifted up her blouse a little and rubbed his forehead into her belly.

“You think it’s a ghost?” he said.

“It’s our ghost.”

3

Tim finished an email reluctantly, then followed Ellen beneath the sheets.

“I’m glad we have air conditioning,” Ellen said.

He was facing her front side with his front side, and couldn't really figure out what to do about holding her. He tried looping his arms around her neck and pulling her head close. He kissed her forehead. This was nice because there wasn't much weight on his arms, and it was tender. He felt like a genius of holding.

Eventually she shifted onto her stomach a little. He took his arm away from her neck and slid an arm under her breast. He kissed her cheek and bit it slightly.

This is much too painful right now.

When he woke up thirsty for raspberry lemonade there were two arms suspended in the air, motionless, pointing up. They didn't disappear; the arms hung there, lightly, like the situation was a gift. The soft melody of Ellen's breathing made the arms dance, though they held still.

He lay there for two hours and watched the arms and listened to Ellen breathe. Finally, he was afraid of peeing himself and skulked out of bed, to the bathroom. When he returned, the arms had gone like a stolen painting.

4

Tim had had sex with me when he and Ellen were first dating like six months ago. Ellen read some of our email exchanges and teased it out of him. They broke up for a short period after that

and Tim and I were together, but then we weren't.

I felt so guilty and so did Tim, and we meant to dissolve from the start.

The day after the arms Tim and I chatted for the first time since then, except for a few brusque emails. Ellen was at work. She worked in a law office.

"hey there," Tim said. He was eating leftover rice, cold.

"hey long time," I said.

We caught each other up. I lived like ten minutes away from him, holding down a job as this sociology professor's personal assistant. He had this summer sublet with Ellen, not working, barely writing—he was writing then—and not doing a lot really at all.

It was early. I had the day off, and even though Tim had already eaten some rice, he asked me to get some lunch. I obliged.

We met at this al fresco place pretty much equidistant from where we both lived. Tim barely recognized me. I had cut my hair neck-length and lost some weight, I think. He looked the same. We embraced; it was awkward, a terse and regretful hug, but we meant it, at least I did, and what do you expect.

We sat down in the terrace at a four-person table.

"How's Ellen?" I said.

The food was sort of cold or lukewarm, and overpriced.

"She's okay," Tim said.

“Okay how? How’s her job?”

“Fine I guess. I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know? She’s great.”

I knew he was lying to me, but for my own reasons, you understand, I thought to play as if I didn’t.

“She’s okay.”

Eventually we started talking about our writing. We were both at that time failed writers, in the midst of trying to give up, write ourselves into a space of surrender.

Tim told me about this collaborative story he had read recently online.

“It’s a cool idea. I like collaborating. It feels easier to do than working by myself,” Tim said.

“There is no such thing as collaboration,” I wanted to say.

“We should do something like that,” I said, because I knew he wouldn’t have been the one to say it, and I was always more serious than him.

“Yeah, okay. I have a good idea, actually, for one.”

Now he tells me about these apparitional body parts. He says he wants to write a story about them, with me.

“Why don’t you write it with Ellen?” I ask. “She’s the one who’s experienced them, you and her.”

“I don’t really like her writing.”

I wanted to change the subject, because I think Tim is a

bad writer.

“So these are just like limbs and stuff in your apartment? Are they real limbs? Just lying around?” I asked.

“No, no.” Tim was leaking, soaked with sweat. I liked that. I don’t sweat.

“It’s like, they aren’t really body parts, because I don’t think real body parts could do what they do. But they aren’t transparent like how you think of ghosts. I saw the first one, this face, and Ellen didn’t believe me. Then she saw some feet, last night I saw some arms. They just stay still, but it’s really nice. Like they’re conducting me, or thematizing my life or whatever.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“Yeah, you should see it. It’s like having all these uninvited guests.”

“I should come over and you and Ellen should show me one night.”

I could see him doing his face like pushing food away. “Yeah, that’d be cool.”

“Does Ellen hate me?”

“No, no, she likes you. She forgives you.”

“Does she forgive you?”

“Yes. I don’t know. Probably.”

“I’m going to use the restroom,” I said.

Then I went to bathroom. I faced the mirror for a while.

I washed my hands. I took two Xanax bars.

Tim went home after driving around by himself for a little. He liked driving by himself and listening to his summer mix CDs, because he could sing along loudly like someone crazy, or his parents.

When he came home Ellen was talking to her mother on the phone. Tim could tell it was Ellen's mother because Ellen seemed happy and insincere. She nodded at Tim and smiled slightly, her face lit up, stuffed and strained with some secrets.

"Hey," Tim said.

Ellen pointed at her cell phone.

Tim went into the bedroom. He checked his email on the bed and did that for thirty minutes while Ellen remained on the phone, talking to her mother and invoking his name a lot, Tim, but the contexts for it were not clear.

And so instead of lying down on the linoleum and grabbing Ellen's feet and legs until she would say, "Mom, hey, I have to go," he is checking his email, and he is talking to me.

5

The last time Tim sees Ellen for a while there is a neck and the beginnings of a chin above the microwave.

"Okay, well I guess I'm going to go," she says.

“I’m scared,” Tim says.

“We’re all scared of the body.”

“But I have to stay here with it.”

“We all have to stay here with the body.”

Tim goes to the neck and chin and waves his hands at them, but he cannot reach them.

“Stop it,” Ellen says.

He presses buttons on the microwave.

“Tim, stop.”

He returns to Ellen, stands at her chest, begins to touch warmly her body in places, her arms, her forehead. She smiles sympathetically.

They have set up two metal folding chairs, facing each other, to the right of the door from which Ellen will leave. Tim bends slightly back, as if to fall overboard, and releasing his leg, he kicks one of them over. It lands loudly, folds itself. The neck and chin remain.

Ellen’s arms have been crossed. He thinks she might cry now, but she does not.

After a few minutes of silence, she has left with a suitcase in either hand. He follows her downstairs, through the short corridor which communicates between the interior of the tenement and outside. The early light—it is morning for once—shines the pavement, the blacktop, her defeated and smooth-

faced head. From the stoop, he listens to the tiny dispatches of her body as she loads her car in preparation for the short drive to my apartment, where she will stay for just a few days.

Later he walks back upstairs.

The neck and chin are still there. He knows, now, whose they are, and whose they have been all along, these parts and hints of a body. He pees in the bathroom, does not wash his hands, and watches himself in the mirror. When he emerges, the neck and chin have not moved. He sits in a folding chair and waits for them to disappear. He falls asleep in the chair, and Ellen holds him.

Monkey Brain

To trap a monkey:

1. First, you must find a gourd. Any old gourd that is bigger than a monkey's fist will do the trick.

The shape of my head was beautiful once. My skull was smooth, the shaved scalp flawless as the surface of an egg. It was not any old gourd!

2. Cut a hole in the top of the gourd just big enough for a monkey's extended fingers to fit through. Next to that hole, drill two smaller holes (these for a strong, thin rope to pass through).

After the staples were pulled, I felt the hole in my skull. Heard the sounds of air leaking through the cracks. I felt, also, alien metal beneath the skin. A locked pressure-door, like the hatch on a submarine, with infinitesimal flaws in the gasket. Tracing the fissure, I asked the impossibly young doctor, "Will my head always feel this strange?"

3. Fill the gourd with seeds. Lots and lots of seeds. (Actually, pebbles will do just as well. As long as the gourd rattles nicely when shaken, the monkey will never know.)

The young doctor's twitchy fingers drew a closed circle in the air. "In a year you'll forget what your head used to feel like. The way it is now will seem normal." It's nearly four years since he drilled the holes and cracked me open. It is not normal, and will never feel normal.

4. Thread the rope through those two smaller holes and wrap it around and around a tree to secure it.

I'm constantly aware of the rope scar that rides my hairline. The dents in my forehead fill, then drain, and make me sometimes look like a jack-o'-lantern, sometimes like a Zeppelin.

5. The monkey won't be able to resist investigating the gourd. First, he will shake the gourd. Next, he will stick his hand inside it.

Titanium screws, four knobs under my skin, hold my skull together. They tighten, then loosen, tighten, loosen, in the grip of restless fingers.

6. Once the monkey grabs hold of those rattling bits, he'll try to pull his hand out. The monkey may shriek at this point. Don't listen.

I'm aware of every minute change in the atmosphere. A cold breeze, a sneeze, any of these, all of these, make me do somersaults while banging my head against solid objects.

7. Voila! The monkey can't pull his fist through the small hole, and he will never open his hand and let go of the seeds. The monkey is trapped.

My monkey brain controls my desires. Love. Hate. Having. Not having. Freedom. Enslavement. I no longer distinguish between them. I get hold of a thing, an idea, or a person, and no matter how it hurts to hold on, I cannot let go.

Michael Trocchia

The Lemur House in Opposition with Itself

In the house there were men living like lemurs, lemurs living like men. The house called attention to itself in the way large children do in small rooms with smaller children. That is, on a hill, larger than the town in which it was part, there was the house and the effect of the town's attention to it. Women came to the house as if arriving by carriage. All was gay, and it was no bother that most of the hosts were mistaken for lemurs and none for men. Visually, though, the women stood unfeeling and intricate. They had the hue of twilight at the edges. And when the great planes rushed overhead, their breasts trembled under Victorian dresses and the men smiled in lemur-like manner, and slapped one another on the back in gross and learned merriment. But it was the largest child among them who cried out, the largest who came running barefoot along the floorboards, the largest, always, who fell down, cursing.

A S a d S t o r y o f F a c t o r y G i r l s

He was as busy as ever. He was absorbed in his studies. He was deeply attached to his school. He studied assiduously. He delved into his books. He used his brain. He had the ability to speak fluently. He had clever enunciation. He lived simply and frugally. He was willing to do hard work. He was engaged in two trades at the same time. He was born in misery but brought up in happiness. He was Rhesus negative as a baby. He was short for his age, as a baby. His head was too big in proportion to his body. He wore rimless spectacles. He wore straw sandals. He was a rosy-cheeked, handsome young man. He was a habitual smoker. He went to bed if he felt sleepy. He behaved pleasantly toward everyone. He showed sincere feeling and expression. He didn't stand on ceremony. He was overly modest. He laughed easily. He laughed like a horse. He split his sides with laughter.

He strode into the New Year in high spirits. He advanced with great strides. He was pleased with the progress he'd made. The wine never gave him bad after-effects. Meats never disagreed with him. He sliced gala apples in two. He mixed whiskey with water. He drank his fill. He drank to his heart's content. He took

what was said with a grain of salt.

He behaved congenially toward her. He gave her the compliments of the season. He passed the time of day with her. He walked with her under one umbrella. He was frank and said what was on his mind. He had a jolly time. He helped with her digestion. He supported her proposal. He chopped meat into small pieces. He minced meat. He cut a skein of jute with a sharpened knife. He went 50-50 on expenses. He went Dutch. He made her a duplicate key. He called her by her pet name. He got carried away with good grace. He was beside himself with joy.

He praised good people and good deeds. He warmheartedly served all customers. He raced against time and went all out. He won universal praise. He made a lot of money. He hit a tremendous home run. His stock went up 30%. He broke the level of one hundred sixty yen. He offered his seat to the general. He invited the guests to be seated. His words set everyone roaring with laughter. He enjoyed great popularity. His meeting was a great success in that the hall was filled to capacity. His students came in swarms. It was well done; he said so himself.

Even though at an unfortunate moment he typed some words incorrectly. He discovered a nasty plot behind his back. He received all the blame on his shoulders. He was handicapped by illiteracy. What's worse, he had trouble with his teeth. Someone put despicable ideas into his head. In spite of himself,

he pushed his way onto the bus. Unconsciously, he resorted to physical force. He paid extra for taxis late at night. He arrived too late for the best item on the program. He apologized for having kept her waiting. She raised a variety of objections.

He said more than was proper. He shot off his mouth. He spoke unkindly. He made caustic remarks. He made an uproar. He said it again and again. He let loose a flood of garrulousness. He demanded immediate attention. He brooked no delay. He disrupted the market. He disturbed the public order. His double-dealing was disgusting. He was puzzled by difficult questions. He knew the how but not the why. He fell into dire straits. His spite was deeply ingrained. He engraved his spite on his bones and in his heart.

He broke a dish. He broke a wooden bowl. He broke a glass. He broke a fork. He broke a spoon. He broke a butter knife. He broke a napkin. He broke a table cloth. He felt sad. He wept bitterly. He endlessly choked with tears. He went around with a long face. He went around with a pained and sorrowful look. He keenly regretted his mistake. 'I was duped by that villain,' he said bitterly. He had a less sentimental view.

He took a bath. He joined a hiking club. He was very fond of skating.

Such a person as that, in that way.

Michael Burkard

The Drawer

I am not sure what my parents thought of anyone.
But this isn't going to be one of those snow-poems,
goodbye-poems, teal-poems...

When you are drawing look deep into the eyes of myself,
my sister, my sister whom I cannot erase...
Why are you my best friend?

I do not know what your parents thought of anyone either.
There is a time factor and a forest factor in this disknowing.
You will tell me about it some night. I know you know.

One of your melodies turns up in a little empty book of pages
I buy. The ghost on the moon, the moon in your lap,
the moon simultaneous

and following me and Chris down Houston Street,
to the legends of the family
where I will kiss you at last.

Report

Report says rain now instead of snow.

One day the clear sky will have authority again.

Words will fall into the correct places in sentences

again. My sleep has eaten numbers for so many nights

I want to write a small poem upon my finger, in closer

possibility of taking a dream to sleep with me, a vision

which wrote me, my father's face, my autobiographical face,

my inoculated face. Your face or the face no one can

tell anyone. This last face which really isn't a jail

at all but for a moment makes me think of the sound of

the rain as a jail, as if I have misunderstood all along

what jail or what rain can be.

Thinly Disguised Persons

Places between the letters in words. You know them as well as I know them.

I know you took the book. I know you will not give the book back. In this case it doesn't matter because I borrowed K's copy of K's book.

About five times a year my very first thought upon waking is When did I last see my copy of _____ by _____. This morning it was Vallejo. Where is Vallejo's *Trilce*.

The emphasis of *mine* is a weight.

My first guess is that M took Vallejo... A small bird alights from different branch to different branch among the branches of the small bush. The bird is paradise.

Anyone I suspect of taking any book over the past decade I will refer to as M. There is no M, but this way I can talk freely.

Why would I not want to use an appropriate initial which would hint or aim at the person(s) I suspect. Is an initial a letter. Am I afraid of the person(s) or am I afraid of the initial (letter). Am I afraid of Vallejo.

Another M did not steal anything, nor is this another M suspected of anything. But this M has (unless discarded or given away in the past decade) my original second-hand copy of *Brazilian Poetry*. I would like this back. Today a few minutes ago I opened a package from a book distributor I had been waiting to open. It is another printing of *Brazilian Poetry*. I want to send M this copy asking for my original second-hand copy in return, in return for...as Vallejo is translated by Hays in "Distant Footsteps," "...it will be I." Or will it—this is what I fear—it will not be I who asks for one book in return for another book. It will be someone else. It will not be the person I am. The person I am wants to write to this another M about many things but is afraid to say so. The person I am wants many other books I left behind in return for something I would now send.

Clothing is wanted too.

Being shot at.

Lovers and other friends.

Clock on a purse—woman you dream of turns up next to you
on second day. Secret day. No shoes.

When elephants weep.

A butterfly (yellow/black/brown/white) is draining nectar from
white flowers. A few inches away now a yellow-jacket (black/
yellow) is at work too. At play. At being.

The namingly ends. A lifeless life.

“I would like these if the houses weren’t red.”

Givingly,

“I have new glasses.”

“I can’t think without memory.”

“Things become is.”

The second M also has Duchamp.

The shadow of the telephone pole upon the street is intersected
by other shadows.

P a t t i B u s h —

did I do the math
 problem wrong?
did I goof on the
 shadow?
did I off your
 shadow?
did I off your
 dream—even though
I didn't know you
 dream, or your
 z
 or your booted
 league of marbles?
did I mistake your
talking to me for
talking to yourself?
did I say things
 to myself
that you didn't like?

did I spend too much
on the bagels?
is Turgenev's superfluous
man really that
superfluous, or
was he just born
that way?
can you recall
yourself at apogee—
I can recall not turning to you enough—
not plastering myself over your problems—
there is not going to be any summer either—
is that what you said or think? Whom
am I and is there any whole solid place
from which I write? Is there any New York
left to visit? "and whom his silence"—
what did you mean with that? did you
mean whom as in "whom dream"—
window to abstract heart and back again
to window?

Talking (2)

Bob says you are a man who loves women—
I say yes but I am also a man who loves men
and telephone poles and evening light and drawing
and a thousand other things. Like talking. Bob says
you used to like talking and you would not admit it.
I say you're kidding, when? Bob says the days in
Brooklyn when you leaned into the umbrella which
was painted on the bodega and your face was tighter
than you knew but you liked to lean. Your face looked
he says like you would not talk too much or too much
too long, but let's face it, you had a lot to say and you
have had a long time to talk. You love talking.

Glove-Like North (Parents Are Sad)

With what snow is the woods ballpoint? Stuck in the woods behind the house behind the map behind the snow: tables and more tables, men and more men, globes and more petty globes.

One possession is the ox of dislike.

Ocean's health.

Parents are sad because the girl wants the magazine which costs twenty-two dollars. And she is enamored of her misread of Paley's story: the character brought three *sleds* to school (the memory and the actual writing is *flags*). But the girl will not relent, and even states this is an essence to the *Immigrant Story*.

She chews gum like Grace Paley.

One of the teachers is saying this as the teacher walks from the blue room which is the teacher's room. It's either a defense or a joke or a girdle.

Architecture used to be one man standing above another.

Now the sublime pen draws money *and* water. And there, just north of the roof, is the glove-like book of the next house. Someone in the architect's hand has dreamed it, a coffee dream, over a cup of coffee.

My daughter she says in the glove-like north.

My daughter is as misplaced as the slight ass-shadow of the tree on snow.

If I did this for a living, I would be someday.

A major roof is a dirty face.

The daughter has the magazine in hand and has promised to loan it to still another friend. That may or may not be the ocean up ahead, may or may not be the pictograph fan waiting there like dice.

I like your magazine. And there are times when I like the police. The sorrow in your brown is no sadder than an angel. I feel story. Be real.

S u m m e r o f D e a t h

if I were a drawing
by Louise Bourgeois
i would be lost in the mail
like the books i sent Malena

she-line
she-space

Jonathan saying well this is
very fine as a poem but don't
you want to capitalize the first
letter of the first word of the
sentences

And Wally's Mae capitalizing
upon the summer of death

—the summer of death was odd
because no one called it that

but that was the summer we
began to recognize

—our sentences began to get
lost like the awkward hump
of death which came to take
my mother away many many
summers later

—hello Jonathan—I thought
I was behind you near Fourth
and Broadway in 1984 but you
looked very down and out and
very tough and I was afraid

The magnum eye

It can be lonely in the middle [-]

Architectural nightmare while
Everyone watches you perch there

There's a way to be a virgin that makes
Your baggage heavier,
More scientific and
Cornered by the possibility of canyons
You leave. [Echoes linger in the]

While the other measures comfort books
-] Enclosed cultural cracks

Losing all the things
You never said religiously,

A cataclysmic prosperity. A
Fearhunter sharpening spears

In a new forest it's never
Grey here which is why those
Taken babies cry over dinner you
Ignore it so as to not mimic the rhyme,
Or even muster it

I once knew an inchworm who
Squish squished down
The carpeted stairs
Before morning rituals cut him in half.
I was following him swallowing
His little head there you go turning your little
Head waving me away once again.

They call it free will
When they mean to say

[pluck hairs here]

It's a long ponytail but her health
is down

a suicide of teeth is
the kind of day for the largest pawn

you're able to keep together
(we could make it through)

"I only like foreign men."

The dress me in a part of it. Can change
your system by hand – a damaged seek
who's not trying to be a part of you.

he said better off as a madmen in the west
than a desolate shadow in the east

Let's ride indecisively,

In a rat trail
Down your neck

(we can't understand people, say say)
"we're going to have sex in a dump truck"

people who never tailor
to busted out factory windows
those rainbows of
vast lots of used things, kept underground until

I'm not alone.

I never could be.

This ship has too many rats who sing love songs
Don't forget this is not some silly phase of unions
And getting us made no (~~wallop~~) footstone
You couldn't see there was nothing
That meant what we called unbearable.

I'm not a tugboat.

All this is dirty warms me on a bridge.

Violet's Dream

In 3 Movements

I.

My neighbors are busy with pigs and cattle: pig au poivre and pig au poire, pig au pomme, and jellied jambonneau. My neighbors relish calves' brains caprice, cattle en croûte—delicacies at birthday and anniversary parties, comfort food at wakes. Bulls' balls in honey on Sundays—for fertility.

A man in a pigskin hat with flaps is plucking cherry tomatoes off the bushes in my garden. He stuffs handfuls into his mouth, barely chews; his belly expands as the hat's flaps grow points and the man's nose widens. I have told my children many times: *beware of men in gardens*. I see my children lying still among the bougainvillea, eyes open, still under the black shadow of a pig in the sky.

The man in my garden turns into a pig in my bed. He wags his tail, licks the lipstick off of my face, kicks the comforter to the floor. Soon he'll lick my face off. Pig is predictable.

Mortimer, I whisper, nostalgia grabbing me like a pitchfork,

scooping me up like a garden spade.

A pig in my bed is not a surprise, though he tends to arrive suddenly, as if on an impulse, mine or his. We fly to Reno...eventually.

He has always had tasty lips that feel like butter, and a strong nose for fear. He can smell menstrual blood and menopause from impressive distances. Comely pink pig, so smart, so misunderstood...so maligned...so malignant. I suck on his briny knuckles with my pretty pink mouth, porky pink tongue.

In turn, the beast feasts, plucks organs from their venal roots, popping them into his mouth, barely chewing. He leaves my mammary glands for last, salivates as he kneads them, wanting milk.

Now I am all bone, ready for a stroll on the runway in my rose silk gown.

I think of the three pigs: the pig in my 20s, the pig in my 30s, and the pig in my 40s. Pigs come in threes like fairy tales. Then who is this pig in my bed?

Pigs come. Pigs go.

II.

Aging fast, my face stretches across the mirror and beyond, a vacant canvas tent, the color of deserts. The eyes are hard and

atonal, teeth yellow and cracked like the keys of an antique player piano. I attempt repair: with precision bite my lips, paint them violent, smack them hard. Powder the frown lines, brush the teeth with type eraser, don opaque sunglasses incapable of reflection, my little black dress, open the door. Bang it shut. Lock it.

No one can see the dead fetus of my heart. I smile with closed mouth as I approach the garden. A gracious, quiet sow; tasteful too. Even snorts silently. Renowned for dimples and Nesselrode pies. Nobody noticed the shadow of omen overcoming the sky.

The guests are in the garden with my spouse in a bowtie. He is well disguised, his porky scent overcome by key lime cologne. There are my children, Greteline and Hans, in pink and blue, serving over-proof Chernobyl vodka punch from gutted mandolins, doigts de poisson topped with fromage crème, cattle bells, pigs en duvet, violettes de Tourette. Three strolling violinists, attired like gypsies, play Hungarian and French music.

The women pinch my children's cheeks till they bleed, remark: *How sweet and good they are, the wee piglets! Delicious!* The women lift their skirts to taunt the violinists, exhibiting thighs in various degrees of decomposition.

My elegantly raised children retch discreetly behind the tomato bush. Vulgar with vodka, the men toss their pigskin hats

over the fence and raise their voices...then their fists. The men draw knives and un-upholster guns, slash and shoot. The women sip slowly, watch from afar: *Boys will be boys.*

I watch the men stumble on the stones and stagger through the hyacinths and chrysanthemums, watch them titter, their eyes fluttering till still among the bougainvillea.

The women will elope with the three gypsies, squealing all the way to Reno.

What a bloody mess. Better outside than inside, as mother always said.

Fetch the spade and pitchfork, my darlings, I tell my children.

They ask: *Who are you? And what have you done to our father?*

I answer: *I am the one who told you to beware of men in gardens.*

III.

Stillness followed commotion like a rabid cur felled by a firing squad. Stillness followed so much ado till the rumor of blood stirred and stretched. The rumor split like a one-celled creature and grew large enough to devour its own shadow, but the shadow grew back and kept on kept on growing, glooming low over the suburb, growling menace like a warplane, glowing

scarlet with malice.

High on the rumors of homicide, neighbors arrived with pitchforks, spades, and arms, stormed the garden, letting loose the ashes of my pets and parents; uprooting rhododendrons, they sought fresh bones and flesh under beds of cabbages and rows of radishes. The ashes of my pets and parents flew into the shadow. They flew with the seeds of gladiolas and pomegranates, buttercups and spaghetti squash, the roots of cabbages and radishes. So the shadow ate them all. And they were one with the shadow.

Riding high on the rumor of infanticide, the wives gagged me and set me bound to stagnate under the vicious sun. Then the husbands tightened the dishcloths tethering my legs to the barbed wire fence. The husbands called me *black widow*, *evil queen*, *wicked witch*, tightened the bonds till the blood drained from my feet and ran into the soil. Beneath a seeping wound in the sky the shadow would not enter, I lay face up to the sun, wizening and wordless.

I smelled exterminators in the house, heard them hunting for *corpora delicti* in drawers, hard drives, sofas and beds. The exterminators grunted and belched as they slashed through soft material and feathers with gusto, tipped boudoirs and bookshelves over with glee, rubbed their insect legs together, masturbating, baiting, making much too much noise. My head

ached from bone loss and clamor; I was unbecoming fast. One of the husbands kicked me in my womb. *There's nothing there!* He announced. *Of course, we knew that—no surprise she's seedless.*

I dream in my dream that Superpig arrives to rescue me in time from shrinking to the size of Greteline. He saves me from disappearing into the shadow. Neither bird nor jet, he flies me in his arms to Romania, where we dance with violins. *Good-bye, my children, hiding from the shadow in the grave—you will learn how to live without me. As I have—as I do.*

I dream of a woman “withered to a bag of bones.” She is tethered to a fence, howling like a bitch with a severed tongue, yowling like a bitch in heat. Useless odious woman that I am, I lie still, still I lie; cannot close my eyes; turn to stone.

Alina Gregorian

The Hammer

She woke up with a hammer in her left hand. There was no inscription on it, no person in the room to place it in her hand. “I will build dining room tables for the community,” she said. As her eyes itched she toppled out of bed.

The kitchen said, “Morning,” and she crawled to it. The ceramic tiles were too cold for her knees. She put the hammer in the far left cupboard, right above the sink. She sliced a loaf of bread on the countertop. After boiling the hammer clean in a pot, she stuck it in her backpack and walked to the post office.

Said the postman: “We don’t mail hammers, Ma’am.”

Matthew Derby

The Past, Uncorrected

I think to myself that it had to have been August when we were speeding along the winding black strip of highway that spooled around the cemetery. It was hot; I had on a tank top. Bats flitted in the canopy, backlit by the ruby clouds heaped on the horizon. That is all. I can't offer exact dates or times, if that is what you want, because I was not wearing a wristwatch in those days, nor was I watching the news or looking at calendars. Additionally, okay, I was frequently high. We were speeding in the gathering dark, because it had taken Scout extra time to get the shovels from her uncle's shed, because he had a broken collarbone and couldn't remember where he put the keys, and was already reluctant to give her the keys on account of she had lost his wheelbarrow and a chainsaw on previous occasions. The uncle eventually found the keys in a cop-shaped cookie jar on top of his mini-fridge, and, with the sun plummeting toward the horizon, he opened the garage doors to a sea of ruined tools and components. I was parked down the road in the mustard Monte Carlo and watched the uncle slowly drag out the rusted carcasses of unnamable machines onto the cracked driveway pavement.

Scout came back with one useable shovel, a hand-held rake-like thing, a pair of hedge trimmers, and a trowel, all bundled in her arms like a cord of firewood.

She already had a sort of rounded hump for a belly.

“There wasn’t anything else?” I asked.

“I couldn’t tell what the other stuff was,” she said, chucking the tools in the backseat. The din upset a cluster of birds settled on the phone wires just beyond the car.

“We need something powered,” I said. “We need something that will chew up earth and spit dirt clods.”

“He had nothing of that sort. Now drive,” she said, and buckled her seatbelt, which wasn’t really attached to anything so I don’t know why she buckled it, maybe because the act of doing something was as safe as the thing itself.

“You have not dug before,” I said, squinting to focus on the road in the dwindling light.

“I have dug, but I have not dug this far,” she said. “It’s true, what they say, right?”

“About the six feet?”

“Yes.”

“I believe so. I have no reason to doubt that piece of information, or fact, or whatever that may be that makes people say a thing like that. Why lie about it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It doesn’t seem far down enough.”

“Lucky for us.”

We crept in through the back entrance of the cemetery, the engine practically idling as we rolled slowly through the rows of tombstones, headlights turned off. The night was soaked through with a damp heat. The stones emanated gloomy clouds of moisture as we passed. I remember thinking that it had a weight, that place, no matter if you didn’t believe in ghosts. The dead were there and they were watching you.

“How much further?” I asked, anxious to get to work.

“Row 7, marker 134,” she said, navigating the worn, pebbled pathway. She had done all of the research on account of she had access to a computer at the car rental establishment where she worked. She searched on the internet and actually found out how to exhume a corpse and use it to stage a crime scene. If you got a corpse that was too old, it would not burn right. If you got a fresh corpse, the various parts would be too easily identified. You had to find one that was just right, and Scout had done this via the online obituaries.

“Did the computer say how many people in history have pulled this off?”

“The computer was all disclaimers—all, like, ‘for novelty only,’ that sort of thing.”

“This is for novelty only? I thought this was real.”

“No, they have to say that.”

I worked at a factory that made components for shipping pallets that were used to import parts from China that were used to make the machines that made the components we manufactured. I was a floor manager. It was lean, fussy work that made me irritable and tired, but I was given a great deal of responsibility over my team and that nearly always stirs up a kind of sideways pride in a person. Here's the thing. The job offered some nice life insurance benefits, on account of at any time of day I could be crushed or split open by the looming machines. Very nice benefits. Then I made a baby inside of Scout. There was not going to be enough in terms of money between the two of us to take care of a new baby, because Scout made crap and would have to lose her job anyway once that baby came out. So we decided to get at that life insurance money.

We rolled up to Row 7 and Scout turned the car off.

"What is this man's name?" I asked. I got out and turned on the flashlight. The tombstones were polished and clean, with laser-etched text and symbols. When I go, I do not want one of those things, which come off cheap and forgettable. I'd rather have nothing.

"Clifford Nesbitt."

"Clifford is not a Jewish person's name, is it?"

"No."

"Yet Nesbitt is Jewish."

“It is?”

“I believe so.”

“And is this a Jewish cemetery or something?”

Scout didn't answer. I don't think she knew. “You're the professional digger,” she said instead. “How do we start?” She got out and reached into the trunk for the tools, handing me the rake-like thing but keeping the shovel for herself. I hastily sunk the tool into the soil. It made a sharp, shrill ding as it smashed a chunk of something.

She followed my lead, hitting something hard as well. Her shovel rang out like a church bell. The night creatures seethed.

“You're sure this is a newish grave,” I said, whupping the stubborn turf.

“This is not going to work,” she said.

“Let's not start the negative talk,” I said, holding my hand out, as if I had a superpower. “The only thing negative talk will do is psych us out. It's just hard dirt, or something. We can't let that stand in our way. Try setting your shovel down on another piece of ground.”

She set the spade down in a different spot and it sunk in. I moved toward her and started tearing at the soil with the rake-like thing. We worked in fluid silence, ripping open a cone-shaped cavity. I watched her mousy outline as she dug, her belly puffed, strands of her hair lighting up as they entered the shaft

of light given off by the flashlight. The sweat that drenched my shirt was getting cold. I put my back into the chore. There was just a smudged swath of dark blue sucking air covering the moon.

I didn't think I'd mind the graveyard. I didn't take it into account. But whether it was just in my mind or not, I felt the stares of a million ghosts trained on my back as I dug. The rotten, judging eyes of the dead, or whatever.

I stopped digging. She looked at me. A clump of hair fell in her face and she didn't brush it away.

"I am just starting to doubt the value of this," I said.

"A hundred thousand dollars."

My jaw started to tremble. I realized I'd been clenching it ever since we left her uncle's place. "If anyone asks me to do this again, one hundred thousand dollars will not be enough."

She stuck her shovel in the hole. "You're delirious."

"There's no way this is worth it," I said, and started to sob.

"The fuck," she said, grunting.

"Look at this hole." I knelt at the cavity we'd made. "We've been digging forever, and my arms I can barely move, but this is nothing. This hole, a baby wouldn't even fit in here."

She shifted in the dark and I realized I had said something wrong.

"Oh come on," I said. It wasn't even as if.

She dropped the shovel and put a hand over her face.

“Hey,” I said. I knew I was standing too far away from her, but I was not inclined to draw any closer. I said ‘hey’ again and she hunched her shoulders. “We’re not going to pull this off if.”

“That’s just what I’m talking about,” she said, even though she wasn’t talking. “This plan is shitsville. I am so mad right now.”

A light went on in the white house up on the hill. It could have been anything. But the light went on and Scout took a short, sharp breath and froze, and I did more or less the same. The light stayed on. It was too far away to tell if there was anyone peering through the glass. It stayed on and I looked at Scout, and mostly I just saw the ambient moonlight streaked on her tears. I could tell her chest was quaking. I looked at her frozen there by the headstone and I knew that there would be no more digging and so I dropped my tool and rushed over to her. She backed away but I got her over to the car and into the passenger seat.

“We go,” I said. “We just go.”

I popped the emergency brake and the car started rolling backwards down the path. I guided it down the grade away from the house with the light on, leaning out the door with my foot on the ground. When we got to the bottom of the hill, I turned the key and the car started up, louder than I’d ever remembered.

“No no no,” Scout said, shaking her head vigorously.

“We’ve got to get out of here now,” I said.

“The tools.”

I started to say the thing I was going to say before she mentioned the tools, but then she mentioned the tools and of course there they were still laying where we’d dropped them.

“I’m going up,” I said, and I got out quick and started sprinting up the hill. Scout hissed something from where she sat and I was glad not to know what it was. My brain crackled with exhaustion, like fire burning away a cobweb. I thought my legs might stiffen or snap with each stride.

Halfway up the hill I saw a guy. An older gentleman in a terrycloth robe. He stood by the headstone, training a flashlight on the hole we’d dug. Our flashlight, damnit. He had his back to me. I crouched and crept backwards down the path, hardly breathing, watching him carefully. The man stooped and, using his robe, lifted the handle of the shovel and examined the shaft with the light.

I put my foot down on a loose bed of pebbles and they went rolling down the hill. The man swung his flashlight around, carving an erratic ribbon through the blue night. I pressed my body to the ground, burying my face in the dirt path. My eyes were clamped shut but I still sensed the dazzling flash of the light as the man zeroed in on me. I heard him

whisper something under his breath. He came slowly toward me, his slippers crushing the carefully groomed turf. Every part of me was rigid. My dick was contracted way up inside me. If I had to run, I wouldn't be able. I was all locked up. The guy had me. I thought about Scout waiting in the Monte Carlo and I started to shiver like an epileptic.

"Well," he said, standing over me, "The cops are on their way. You can shake out here or you can come inside."

I didn't understand what he was offering so I hugged the ground to try to forestall the spasms. The more I strained, the more violently my body reacted.

"Listen," he said. "I can't stand to see this. It's awful. Come inside and wait for the cops there."

"I—there's," I said, and then I stopped.

The man bent and hooked his arms around my shoulders. He snorted and sucked in his breath as he struggled to lift and drag me. He had the flashlight in his teeth and its beam danced crazily over the dirt. He lugged me up the path toward the house with the light.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You can save that for the cops," the man said. I was only apologizing for the fact that I couldn't move, but I guess I was sorry for ruining the guy's graveyard as well so I let the apology recede into the past, uncorrected.

The man dragged me to the back stoop and propped me up on the cold paved steps. “You telling me you won’t go in,” he said, squatting in front of me, his whitened face right in front of me. He was an older gentleman with a creased, stubbled neck and flat lips, and he stared at me with a sort of milky dispassion.

“I’m all,” I said. My jaw stung—why? “I’m all. I can’t move.” I took a breath and it came out as a laugh.

The man stood. “I’m done carrying you. You go inside there, I’ll make up a pot of coffee. Or we stay out here.”

I nodded and tried to get up. It didn’t work, but I managed to right myself on all fours, so I scuttled up the steps and in through the door, which let in on a sort of anteroom with a washer-dryer combo and a cheap wooden drying rack. I sat on the cracked linoleum floor and looked out into the darkness while the man shut the screen door. I was hoping I would see a pair of streaking taillights dive down the hill and away toward the state line like we had planned. But there was just the dull, pulsating night.

The man stepped around me and went into the kitchen. He opened a cabinet and took down a brown paper bag filled with coffee grounds. I watched him rinse the clouded carafe and place it on the hot plate. He scooped the grounds into the filter with great concentration.

“You take care of the.”

“Groundskeeper. Yes,” he said.

“I didn’t know they had those anymore.”

“They don’t. Not so much. But this was my grandfather’s.”

He spoke with his back to me, taking down a pair of scrappy souvenir mugs from a high shelf.

“A family thing,” I said.

He nodded, opening the refrigerator. He drew out a slim carton of creamer and swung the door shut with his foot.

He put the mugs and the creamer on a table in the center of the kitchen. A single lamp with a brown stained glass shade hovered over the table, and I could see only the man’s robed chest in its light.

“Sit,” he said.

I struggled up from the floor and shuffled across the kitchen floor to one of two metal chairs set there. The man sat across from me and adjusted his black-framed glasses. His mouth was distracting in its size and lack of dimensionality, like two stacked dinner plates. He had a sharp little reflection of the brown lamp in his eyes and he looked at me a long time.

“What did you think you were going to find down there?” he asked. He sounded genuinely curious.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“Sure you don’t.”

I didn’t say anything. I hooked my index finger through

the handle of one of the mugs and dragged it toward me. It had an image of the pope rising behind a mountain range. His hand was raised in a gesture of benediction and rays of light emanated from his palm, setting the landscape aglow.

“It’s just professional curiosity,” he said. The coffee maker made a sound, and he pushed back his chair to reach the carafe behind him. “A lot of people trying to dig up bodies, and everyone has their own reason.”

I looked at him and he just had those eyes. Sparking little black eyes and an open-mouthed half smile.

“What’s the reason you get most often?” I said.

He reached across the table to fill my pope mug. “Oh, I suppose it would be people wanting to put their dicks inside a corpse.” He pursed his lips and nodded, as though he were responding to himself.

“You’re putting me on,” I said.

“You would be surprised.”

I looked out the window. I couldn’t see anything out there.

“They’ll be here soon, don’t worry,” he said, and then he huffed a little. I turned back and he was smiling broadly, filling his own mug. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“Huh.”

“My question. What were you after?”

“Who says I dug anything up?”

He laughed. "I see that ring on your finger."

"What of it?" I said. I didn't look at or touch my ring because there was no reason to do so.

"Gaming the system, huh." He was grinning, really enjoying the company. "You didn't get very far, did you?"

I didn't say anything.

"Most people do get a bit a bit further down than you, but almost no one can dig all the way down. There's almost no amount of money that's worth it to people. They don't get that it's an awful lot of work. Brutal, thankless work. The kind of labor that makes you question why you do anything at all. Puts you into a kind of existential paralysis, I guess you could say."

I shifted in my chair. I thought about agreeing with him but stopped myself.

"I sometimes think about those Jews who had to dig their own graves, you know, in World War Two? By the time they finished they must have been looking forward to getting shot. It must have been such a relief."

Where was Scout? Driving, I hoped. Getting far, far away, across the state line and farther, erasing everything in her wake, never turning back, buffing away the trashy year and a half we took a stab at.

"You're not going to tell me, are you," the man said.

I looked at his rough bluish hands, which he had cupped

around his mug.

“Not even if I swear on my mother’s grave?” he said and I looked up at him then and he grinned. I about wanted to smash him.

“Sorry,” he said, chuckling. “Had to go there. You won’t tell me? Fine. It doesn’t matter. It’s done.” He sighed a little and took a long sip. “I know you’re unhappy. About this. But I did save you from something worse. Mark me. If you love your wife, it’s better this way than the other way. Do you love your wife? If you went through with it, and got the money, it would sear you.”

There was a fluttering sound outside, like someone swatting at a window screen with a broom. The man stood and peered out into the darkness. “Bat season,” he said, adjusting his glasses. “They’re always getting in here. Appropriate, I guess, right?” He approached the window and pressed his face to the glass, creating a visor with his hands to block out the brown kitchen light. Something shifted outside, a foot churning gravel. He stepped back, startled, and ducked down. He slowly placed his palm down on the kitchen counter where a dirty steak knife lay and gripped it without making a sound. There was a muffled sound out by the stoop. The man crept toward the rear door, holding the knife out at his side like he was in a switchblade duel. I craned my neck and I saw a shape brush through the

swath of light that let out onto the stoop. There was a person out there and it was Scout.

The man stopped. Scout's face became visible through the screen and instead of returning his terrified gaze she was looking over his shoulder at me as I reached across the table for the carafe. The man turned back toward me as I swung it, full force, at his head. The glass shattered over his temple with a dull pop, like a crushed light bulb. I held the plastic handle and watched the man fall to his knees. Steaming coffee was everywhere, its stink on everything in the room. The man covered his face with his hands and darkened blood streamed down his naked forearms. I stepped around the man and reached for the screen door, but I slipped on the linoleum and fell backwards into him. He started shouting, slapping his palm on the floor. I got up and saw that one of his legs was way out of place. Scout opened the door and I came tear-assing out, my boots crunching the glass shards. We scrambled down the hill in the unintelligible night, panting like wild creatures. My lungs itched. I was still holding the plastic carafe handle, which I whipped high into the trees for nobody, hopefully, to find.

We charged through the night in the Monte Carlo. The stars were fixed to the domed sky, lurid and unblinking. It was still hot out.

“So now I’m just driving,” I said. I pointed at the road as if the statement needed clarification, which it did, because I was into something clouded and burning, a ruined, ravaged landscape inside of me. My left arm tingled with the sensory memory of the carafe bursting across the man’s face. A face that had peered at me with a detached, clinical curiosity just minutes before. The moment of impact hung over me like a static cape. It felt awful, but I was unsettled to find that it didn’t all feel bad. The taut sensation of the impact was sweet and pungent, the real-world fulfillment of a dream event that I’d failed at since childhood.

“Did he get your name?” Scout asked. She sounded tired and deflated.

“I am pretty sure not,” I said.

“Why did you do it?”

I looked at her. “Man had a knife in his hand.”

“We could have reasoned with him. We could have talked. I could see right off that he wasn’t the. He wasn’t going to hurt us.”

“You don’t know. What you’re talking about. He was. There was something wrong with the guy.”

“You hit him in the face. You burned him.”

Talking to Scout in this way was like playing chess blindfolded. I was just dragging pawns haphazardly across the board

for her to swipe in a single, confident move that always put me in check. Anything I thought of, any defense I could mount, she had a neutralizing response.

“I don’t know. I don’t think he was a real cemetery man.”

“David, there was a hearse in the driveway.”

I surrendered the conversation by dragging a palm over my face, which was slick with a cold sweat. “Thing is, we’re now in this deeper than we ever thought,” I said. “I know, I know. I shouldn’t have done that thing. I shouldn’t have hit that man. But that’s done, fixed there in the past and I can’t go back and change it. So now we’re driving and what are we supposed to do?”

“You’re the brilliant criminal mind.”

I slapped the wheel. “You’re the one who came up with this plan. That was you with your internet gravedigging stupidity.”

“You’re crap.”

There was no more talk between us as we plowed through the cake-like night. Scout put the seat down and tried to curl into a sleeping posture. I put my right hand on her calf and she did not move her leg away. I ran my fingers from her knee to her ankle while she drifted into a sort of interstitial state of consciousness. Everything in the car was relatively safe, and would continue to be safe as long as I kept us in motion. When she was more clearly asleep I reached up to feel her abdomen.

I slipped my hand under her tank top and felt the curve of her belly where the baby was forming. Close to her hip I felt a pulse. I had no way of knowing whose pulse that was. I withdrew my hand and shuddered.

I drove the Monte Carlo until the tank was nearly out. We weren't anywhere. I had seen no gas stations that I could remember. I tugged at Scout's ankle to wake her. She lifted her head and peered around through barely opened eyes.

"We're almost out of gas."

She put the seat back up. "Okay. Why didn't you stop?"

"You were asleep. And I wasn't out of gas when we passed the last station."

"Ugh," she said, rubbing her eyes with her palms.

"As I see it, we could stop the car and I could go get gas on foot."

"I don't like that plan."

"We could just keep driving and hope that we find a station."

"What's that?" she said. There was a square of light in the distance, hovering above the road.

"Let's find out."

As we approached, we saw that the square was a motel sign. It said 'Plantation Inn' and the reversible placard underneath read 'Vacancy.'

“Let’s pull in here,” I said. “I have some cash. We sign in as the Smiths and get some sleep. Tomorrow I’ll go find gas.”

Scout nodded and I swung the car into the lot. I parked in back of the motel, which was an angular, pinkish assemblage of rooms that let out on a common balcony.

“I’m staying in here,” Scout said, folding her arms.

“Yeah,” I said. I took a look at my face in the rear view. It looked bad. I wet my thumb and tried with partial success to scrub out the tiny flecks of blood that peppered my cheek. I faced Scout to get her take but she was looking away out into the empty lot, choked at its perimeter with low-hanging trees and unkempt brush.

I got out of the car and started walking across the lot, which was doused in a gross orange light. Huge bugs rammed their bodies into the gooseneck lamps, spinning and careering into the night on impact. I thought about just walking, sure. Rounding the corner of the motel and disappearing into the cool, sweaty shadows. Scout and her baby would figure it out. They would get along fine, maybe better.

I turned the corner, the one I’d imagined as the dark portal to a pristine territory. To my left the lobby of the motel glowed amber through the floor-length windows. A dark-skinned woman with a shawl sat perched on a vinyl stool behind a wood paneled reception desk. She read a foreign newspaper that looked

like ribbons of spilled, splattered ink. There was the glass door of the motel, framing the case of tri-fold pamphlets that hawked area attractions and the candy dispenser half full of dime-sized sours, and just beyond, the woman reading the paper, and then there was the road leading away into the shaded blue distance. I did think, then, about what the man in the graveyard had said, about how he had saved my relationship, but the thing I decided to do next would seem to contradict him.

Chanice Hughes-Greenberg

I n c h e s t o M i l e s

We push past knees & hide our smiles.
I watch the smoke curl its back into the night.
The sky shouldn't be moving like this.

Wait, whispered as the door closes.

I count the fractures & disconnects,
tiny mistakes printed on bodies,
sunbursts, watermarks, footprints.

Later, we draw a map.

T o m o r r o w ,

A man waiting for the bus will be kidnapped by a tarantula
and taken back to a child full of holes the child wasn't born with.

“The moon is not strong enough to stay awake at night,”
the boy sometimes tells the man through the holes in his arm.

Another man waiting for a tarantula
will be kidnapped by a bus.

The man recognizes the bus's radio static as the noise of a
nearby tarantula.

.

Tomorrow, watermelons will begin eating flies
and the flies will turn into seeds
that interfere with chewing, swallowing, breathing

and from which the next season's watermelons will grow,

and from which the next season's tarantulas can move
in the direction of another man waiting for a bus,

a man who lives at geranium level

and doesn't notice the air full of veins
that have already begun to crawl,

what some call "wind"

and what the most human among them call "finding the labyrinth."

.

Tomorrow, a woman will change her mind
about something only the tarantula remembers,

and the sky will become more like the ground
where the crows wearing jackets
impregnate a bus dying in the ditch.

A woman will chant the precise measurements
of a man kidnapped by another man

and a man who seduces a spider-legged blouse whose body is missing,

and the exact moment a man gets taken by a tarantula.

.

Tomorrow, houses and buildings will start to become human,
meaning more like spiders.

Seed warts and acne and poisonous hairs will be discovered under
the spackling.

Blood will be pumped from the master bedroom.
Legs will burgeon into a network of underground powerlines.

One day a woman will come home
and see her house rising from its haunches
and walking into the ocean with all the hurricanes she's hoarded,

all the violent orange lamps trapped in a whisper,
the walls wired with wandering trapdoors,

dark areas of consciousness that were once tarantulas
and smaller attempts at rain,

houses that can be found only by the tarantula closest to nightfall.

Travis Brown

Far from Bad Axe

on the Lower Peninsula

There on the Thumb, at the edge of the silver-lipped lake, we were an eyelash fallen in the craw of the metal-mouthed implements, the mosquitoes flittering in the skin-tight aspen. Paper bark on the solstice, a poke in the eye with a stick & there was nothing as heavy-handed as the heat. Swollen, a breeze planted the sassafras with smoke. I had run out of desire, divided our leg hair & combed it over the top of my head. Before dawn, my mother kissed me, a cigarette in her smile. She handed me a loaf of white bread. Wringing the jack-rabbit's neck was going to take every ounce of me. I couldn't help it if the butcher block of summer was carved by hunger. Half a mind of chokecherry & I hacked at the soft core of poisonous pulp. An arm, a leg, the tree traded limbs with me. At night, I grinded my intentions. I followed the curve of the moon & it set me straight.

Sillage

I.

good morning, mister. I look for ways
to startle you. perfectly marvelous.
with jokes. October. raw light.
is the way the day opens. red triangle
sweeps the bridge. white drags the path.
seats a sallow moon. in ænemic day.
let us kill. what we cannot find. anyway we're dead.
every night until morning. when our thighs
crossways catch swallows belly-out.
if the flock is the sky. then we are always bleeding.
green-gold. down wrist & knee cap. and we run.
to meet. our waking selves. in the panes.
I am my morning face and hands.

II.

sweet moving water. sweetly
moving water. water sweetly
moving under. like in your
dream. honey spilled. over balsam.
that kind of light. an instant's freezing.
watching the sky break. tender
and ugly. over the reddening sea.
delicate salve. for the broken season.
the dead aren't really dead. they are
here. with us. wearing our clothes.
in the wake. of the smoke. of abandoned cities.
they site. along the limp compass of melancholy.

III.

the scale of the body is musical
& reclining. how often do I see.
in my sleep. but on waking. cannot
recall. heaving narwhal.
for a mast. dream narwhal charges
the forest. ambergris & balsam.

balsam & hair. dream October breaks
over dead dream forest. sweetly spilled
October breaks over. the worried trees.
dragged after narwhal. cumulus. sillage:

IV.

ambergris
balsam
hair
ozone
ash.

V.

oh mister. & how the morning breaks
open. over the sills. I love
when you call me mister
& you.

Jonathan Ashworth

Sleep Music, No. 1

She gathers silent postcards and wanders into herself. *Time is not innocent, nor am I. There is nothing innocent about me, except my face.* She brushes her teeth, washes her face, pats it dry.

She sits on the yellow half of the bed. She feels her subconscious unraveling. She opens the door to the keyhole in her breast: she delicately inserts the sleep key.

The flywheels of her mind slow, stop, then spin backwards. She hears the blood ticking: tick-plop, tick-plop. Her head scales the pillow. Her eyes close. “Na-night, na-night,” she hears her grandmother say. “Na-night,” her lips mouth and putter. The pillow sings mutely: *roll over into the farm of sleep, and sleep into the green of home sleep home, where moss toils and bones roam.*

Boys sing all night, holding their knees to their chins, hoping the girls will like them even though they killed the ravens with slings. Their faces are ruddy and roasted with firelight. A pile of beaks, stiff branch feet, and feather bodies is twelve feet away, blacker than night.

The girls slip into a mine and hide, but it is cold and dark,

“spooky,” says one, so they give up and leave. Their skin is the white of apple flesh. Winter settles on their shoulders.

The girl with shiny hair is lost and sheepless. She rocks herself outside the mine, she hears boys sing. There are no teeth more bitter than hers. She lost them all to her loneliness, but they grow back when she kisses someone. The boy with the crooked face appears, smile bigger than an egg. He is kissing her softly (it is his first kiss, it is his second kiss) and so softly he falls asleep, his head rests in her lap and they both evaporate.

Wolves chase loaves down the hillside. “Those are so tasty,” says one of the girls. The wolves turn into rocks. The girls find the unbitten loaves and eat them. The girls wear school uniforms—white blouses, grey skirts, white socks. One girl falls down and asleep. Now they are sleeping in a poppy field, sun-drenched warm afternoon girls lying on their stomachs and sides, faces in flowers, and flowers blowing, blowing. If this afternoon were every afternoon, the world would be cured. In bottomlands of grey a boulder feels a puddle into existence. It grows into a pond at the bottom of a hill, a cottage on one side.

It is drizzling. A boy steps out of the cottage and tosses stones into the pond. He goes inside for breakfast, his mother cooks in an apron. Her face has no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Just hair and skin. The boy says, “Mummy, you lost your face.”

She says, “I gave it to your father when he left.”

“When did he leave?”

“When you were out throwing stones.”

“Why didn’t he say goodbye?”

“He said he loved me so much he couldn’t.”

The boy eats his toast. The mother sits down, hands on her chin. The shadows wrap themselves around her until the boy cannot distinguish her body from the shadows, as if she were becoming a torso wrapped in a faint charcoal blanket. The boy leaves the table. He gathers silent postcards. He walks upstairs and enters the hollow of his bed. His blood plops in regulated globules.

He walks through a door, into a curved tunnel. It is large and warm. It sparkles. He leans against it. The floor is soft. He feels pleasant. He tingles. He wraps his knees to his chin and opens his mouth to sing. A moth flies out. He falls asleep, sleeps on his side, yes, yes. And now the world is good, it sleeps, yes, it also sleeps.

The Reappearing Thumb

A Medical Footnote

One evening, in the early 1970s, a young boy was brought to the Accident and Emergency Department at Children's Hospital in Sheffield, England, because the tip of his finger had been sliced off in an accident. A nurse washed the wound and dressed it with a temporary bandage. The Emergency Department surgeon was busy, so the child and his parents were put in an exam cubicle to wait.

The child was waiting because, at the time, doctors believed that any open wound should be protected with a covering of skin. For fingertips, "the objective is to provide a usable surface as rapidly as possible," said a standard textbook of surgery in 1973. To this end, plastic surgeons had devised a half dozen procedures for moving a partially excised piece of skin (a "flap") from elsewhere to cover the bare fingertip—there were, for instance, bilateral local flaps, island pedicle flaps, cross-finger flaps, palmar flaps, and distant flaps.

The available surgical procedures were not ideal. A fingertip with a skin graft or a skin flap contracts as it heals. It becomes

shorter and flattened, and often it has a misshapen nail. Nonetheless, surgery protects the wound and it ensures that there will be a pad of skin on a body surface that takes an inordinate amount of wear.

In Sheffield, hours passed. The child's father talked to a secretary, who, not realizing the need for plastic surgery, set up a return appointment in two weeks, and sent the family home. Two weeks later, the parents brought their little boy back. Dr. Cynthia Illingworth listened to their story and then unwrapped the bandages. The end of the finger was scabby and discolored, but it was not swollen or infected. The fingertip seemed to have lengthened somewhat, and it was beginning to resume its natural shape. In addition, the nail was regrowing.

Dr. Illingworth cleaned the healing area, redressed the fingertip, and set up appointments to follow the child. In a few months, the fingertip looked normal—it was the original size, it was smooth and rounded, and it had a regular fingernail.

Meanwhile, Dr. Illingworth hunted through the medical literature and she found a few reports of the same phenomenon: other doctors had found that conservative treatment—cleaning and bandaging—of fingertip amputations in children gives better results than plastic surgery. Therefore, Dr. Illingworth decided to try conservative treatment in the Sheffield Emergency Department. A few years later, in 1974, she described the encouraging

results of several hundred cases in a paper, “Trapped fingers and amputated finger tips in children,” published in *The Journal of Pediatric Surgery*. Fingertip wounds, wrote Dr. Illingworth, heal into more normal-looking fingers without surgery.

By ‘fingertip,’ Dr. Illingworth meant the end of the finger beyond the last joint. Human fingers have three segments, each containing a small cylindrical bone. (The thumb has only two segments and two bones.) The fingertip is the last part of the farthest segment. Dr. Illingworth found that significant regrowth occurs only for injuries in this last segment. More extensive injuries will not reform a complete finger, and joints will not regrow. For fingertips, however, the restoration was dramatic. Other emergency room physicians soon repeated Dr. Illingworth’s results in both children and adults, and the conservative treatment of fingertip injuries is currently one of the standard procedures in the surgical repertoire.

In her 1974 paper, Dr. Illingworth set her observations in a broader scientific context. She began by reminding her readers of research on the regeneration of the legs of newts. These studies were begun by Lazzaro Spallanzani (1720–1799), a Jesuit priest and professor of Natural History at the University of Pavia in Italy. Spallanzani studied everything, writing foundational works on volcanology, meteorology, reproduction, and digestion.

Many of Spallanzani's animal studies were done with water-newts. The water-newt, he wrote, has remarkable powers of regeneration. If one of its legs is amputated, it will regrow a complete and functional new limb. In one long-term experiment, Spallanzani amputated the same limb six times, and it regenerated each time.

Newt limbs heal in a characteristic way. After an amputation, individual primitive cells from deep tissues collect between the cut end of the bone and the cap of outer cells that have sealed the wound. These primitive cells appear to dedifferentiate—that is, revert to a more embryonic state—and they then divide and form a mass of cells called a blastema (Gk. *sprout*). After a week, the cells in the blastema are redifferentiating, and they give rise to muscle, bone, and cartilage, which organize themselves into a full replacement for the missing limb. Within two months, the new limb looks like its predecessor and the newt can use it as it did before the injury.

A century of laboratory experiments—amputations, transplantations, transpositions, and chemical perturbations—have shown that the blastema is the critical element in regeneration. During limb regeneration, blastemal cells first fill the stump and then they recreate the appropriate muscles, bones, and joints, which self-assemble in the correct pattern and integrate themselves as working parts of the animal. Blastemal cells fit the

criteria of stem cells: (a) they can divide to form more blastemal cells, and (b) they can also give rise to a variety of different cell types.

A blastema is necessary for regeneration, but other conditions are also needed. For example, the stump must be allowed to form its own wound closure. An effective blastema will not form if the skin of the wound has been sewn together, and newt limbs regenerate only if they are allowed to heal naturally.

Dr. Illingworth was struck by the similarity of this condition to the conditions necessary for fingertip regrowth in children. In her 1974 paper, she wrote that, as in newts, it appears that “spontaneous regeneration ... can be obtained in guillotine amputations of fingertips in young children,” but only if the wound is left to heal naturally.

Dr. Illingworth’s paper had put the word ‘regeneration’ into the medical literature of human limb injuries. The idea had been simmering in the scientific community for years. Among its proponents was Oscar Schotté, a biology professor at Amherst College. Schotté had received his doctoral degree in Geneva working under Emile Guyenot, the preeminent European student of amphibian limb regeneration. In the United States, Schotté continued working on regeneration, once saying he would give his right arm to discover the secret of mammalian

limb regeneration. “Regeneration of [human] limbs ... belongs to the realm of scientific possibility,” he told *The New York Times* in 1944.

Schotté’s experiments in mammals started small. He began by studying the healing of amputated toes of rats. Following his lead, a Columbia University researcher published a paper in 1961 titled “Experiments on regenerating rat digits.” This paper described minimal regrowth, but its title was hopeful. In 1974, Dr. Illingworth’s paper was published, and the hope became public in 1979, when, a few days after Christmas, *The New York Times* carried a front-page article about Illingworth’s study. Under the title “Fingertips’ Regrowth Encourages Study of Nerve and Limb Renewal,” the paper reported, “The British finding is more than a medical curiosity. On a broad front, scientists are studying regeneration of limbs and nerves.”

In spite of the optimism, though, no one had managed to coax a mammalian limb to regenerate. Getting even the toes of rats to regenerate was proving difficult. Between 1974 and 1982, only four studies were published on the healing of rodent toes, and none showed regeneration.

In 1982, in the journal *Science*, Richard Borgens of Purdue University, published a study of the regrowth of mouse toes. Borgens designed his experiments to parallel the fingertip regrowth that Illingworth and others had described in children.

He began by amputating the last segment of mouse toes, either in front of or behind the joint. In his first set of experiments, he made fingertip amputations—that is, he made his cuts farther out from the last toe joint. Here, he found that, as they healed, the stumps elongated and the toetips and nails regrew. In his second set of experiments, Borgens made amputations that were more extensive: he cut off the entire last segment of the toes including the joints. In the latter cases, he found that the stumps healed, but neither toes, nails, nor joints regrew. The results of both experiments matched Illingworth’s findings for children.

Borgens then took a step that could not be done in humans: he sacrificed the animals and examined the cells in the first set of mice toes, the toes that were regrowing. Borgens found the stump tissues repairing themselves, but there were no signs of blastemal cells. Without a blastema and without the ability to regrow complex structures such as joints, the regrowth of mouse fingertips and the regeneration of newt limbs, wrote Borgens, “are not the same.” He ended his article by saying:

The regrowth reported here in mice is probably similar to the scattered clinical reports of fingertip regeneration in children ... Whether the regrowth of the mouse foretoe (and possibly the human fingertip) should be even loosely referred to as regeneration, I will leave to the reader.

A few years later, experimental science moved still closer to humans. This time the experiments were done in monkeys. Marcus Singer, an authority on newt limb regeneration, and Elden Weckesser, a hand surgeon, studied the wound healing that follows the amputation of fingertips of Rhesus monkeys. In 1987, they reported that, as in mice and children, monkey fingertips will regrow when the wounds are left to heal naturally. Light and electron microscopy of the healing tissues showed normal tissue repair processes, and, again, there was no evidence of blastemas. “[P]rimates,” they concluded, “do not possess the natural ability to regenerate the way lower vertebrates can.”

Nature does not seem to have given humans the innate power to regenerate. To regrow amputated human fingers, arms, or legs, science will probably have to discover a technique for creating blastemas in the wounds. This is disappointing but not surprising. A long, well-documented history of human amputations gives little hope for natural regeneration. During the American Civil War, for instance, there were more than 20,000 limb amputations in the Union army alone without a single report of any regeneration. In all the medical literature, there are no examples of human limb regeneration. There is, however, one report of the regeneration of a thumb.

With Alfred Russell Wallace at his heels, Charles Darwin picked up his glacial pace of writing, and late in 1859, his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* was published. But Darwin was uneasy. He had rushed *On the Origin of Species* into print, and he felt it was thin and insufficiently documented. Therefore, in his next books, he set out to fill in the background by compiling detailed examples in support of his proposals.

In 1868, Darwin described the extensive evidence underlying Chapter One of *On the Origin of Species* in a thick book titled '*The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication.*' Variation was a critical issue to Darwin. As a young man, he had accepted the orthodox view that individual species remained unchanged through the ages. On the other hand, his eventual scheme of evolution worked only in a world where plants and animals spontaneously acquire variations and then pass these variations on to their children.

Darwin began to form his picture of evolution during his voyage on the *Beagle*, yet it was not until eight years after his return that he started to believe in the ubiquity of variation. "At last gleams of light have come," he wrote to his friend Sir Joseph Hooker, "and I am almost convinced (quite contrary to the opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable."

In Chapter Twelve of *The Variation*, Darwin describes a number of cases of polydactyly (extra fingers or toes), a variation that arises spontaneously and that can be inherited. Polydactyly is common in humans. It occurs in 2–3 of every 10,000 human births, and it is mentioned in the Bible (2 Samuel 21:20). It can also be seen in “The Marriage of the Virgin” and “La belle Jardiniere,” early sixteenth century paintings by Raphael, who seems to have used at least two models with six toes. (Today, when an extra finger or toe appears, it is routinely removed before the infant is one year old.)

Searching the historical records, Darwin came across an account by Dr. Charles White, a surgeon at the Manchester Infirmary, who had removed a supernumerary thumb from a three-year-old boy. In a 1785 pamphlet, *On the Regeneration of Animal Substance*, Dr. White reported:

Some years ago, I delivered a lady of rank of a fine boy, who had ... a thumb double from the first joint, the outer one rather less than the other, each part having a perfect nail. When he was about three years old, I was desired to take off the lesser one, which I did; but to my great astonishment it grew again, and along with it, the nail. The family afterwards went to reside in London, where his father showed it to that excellent operator, William Bromfield, Esq. surgeon to the Queen’s household, who said, he supposed that Mr. White, being afraid of

damaging the joint, had not taken it wholly out, but he would dissect it out entirely, and then it would not return. He accordingly executed the plan he had described, with great dexterity, and turned the ball fairly out of the socket; notwithstanding this, it grew again, a fresh nail was formed, and the thumb remains in this state.

Surprised, Darwin questioned doctors whom he knew, and he was given four similar and independent accounts of extra fingers and toes that had shown some regrowth after having been amputated. Darwin added these reports to his discussion of polydactyly in the first edition of *The Variation*. Then, to reconcile these reports with the long history of hand and foot injuries that have shown no regeneration, Darwin proposed an evolutionary explanation. Unlike normal digits, he suggested, the extra fingers and toes could regenerate because they “retain to a certain extent an embryonic condition and ... resemble in this respect the normal digits and limbs in the lower vertebrate classes.” Supernumerary digits, wrote Darwin, are an atavism—an evolutionary reversion to the more primitive nature of “the digits of some of the lower animals in [which] the number exceed[s] five.”

Seven years passed between the first and second editions of *The Variation*. Darwin collected more observations, fielded much correspondence, and in the second edition he made

several changes. These included the retraction of “An erroneous statement ... with respect to the regrowth of supernumerary digits after amputation.”

Darwin explained that he had presented Dr. White’s report to Sir James Paget, Surgeon Extraordinary to Queen Victoria and president of the Royal College of Surgeons. With respect to Dr. White’s first amputation of the extra thumbtip, Paget thought part of the thumb bone had been left behind and the amount of regrowth of the thumb was “not greater than sometimes occurs with normal bones, especially with the humerus, when amputated at an early age.” With respect to the second, more thorough, amputation by Dr. Bromfield, Paget did “not feel fully satisfied about the facts recorded by Mr. White.”

Therefore, Darwin changed the second edition of *The Variation*. He removed “the supposed regrowth of additional digits” as an example of evolutionary reversion. Dr. White’s report was no longer given credence in later editions of Darwin’s works. This, the lone medical account of a reappearing thumb, was then left to the occasional footnote, such as T. H. Morgan’s reference, in his 1901 book *Regeneration*, to “very dubious observations in regard to the regeneration in man of superfluous digits that had been cut off.”

Paget had seen cut bones regrow in children, and he was not

surprised that Dr. White's amputation of a supernumerary thumbtip had been followed by a degree of regrowth. Dr. Illingworth would not have been surprised either, because this is the expected result for the conservative healing of a fingertip amputation.

In contrast, the second surgery (done by Dr. Bromfield) was not the amputation of a fingertip. This amputation was more extensive: it was a thorough removal of the entire extra digit, separating it through the joint and leaving no part of the finger bone behind. Normally, children's fingers will not regrow after the removal of a full finger segment, and Dr. Bromfield's surgery should have been definitive. However, it was not—the thumb regrew again.

Darwin's explanation was that the thumb did not follow the normal rules of finger healing because it was not a normal finger. Darwin proposed that a supernumerary digit is the re-appearance of a more primitive digit, like that of a newt.

Paget gave a more straightforward explanation. Paget believed that a supernumerary thumb is equivalent to a normal thumb, which should follow the normal rules of human finger healing. To Paget, therefore, the account given by Dr. White must be inaccurate.

These were views through nineteenth century eyes. What would medical science say today? I put this question to Dr.

Kingsbury Heiple, a hand surgeon and professor emeritus of Orthopedic Surgery at Case Western Reserve University.

“Let me begin,” answered Dr. Heiple, “by saying that I have never seen or heard of an extra finger regenerating after it had been removed.

“However, bony bumps sometimes develop after extra fingers are amputated. I have operated on a number of children who later developed protruding bumps near the sites of their removed fingers.

“In these cases, the additional finger hadn’t been the only extra structure in the hand. Though invisible from the outside, an extra internal hand bone—a metacarpal—had also formed. After the finger was removed, the extra metacarpal remained. It was hidden, but it pointed outward in line with where the extra finger had been.

“As children’s hands grow, their metacarpals lengthen. In the operated hands, the extra metacarpals lengthened, too. When the tip of the extra metacarpal reached the healed skin at the site of the missing finger, the bone kept growing. It pushed the skin out, forming a bump that was pointing in the same direction as the extra finger.

“Dr. White’s report of the reappearing “thumb” was probably accurate. However, it was not regeneration that he was seeing—it was, in a sense, the normal growth of the bones of

the hand.

“And, in an era before x-rays,” concluded Dr. Heiple, “the growing bump would look as if the missing finger were trying to sprout again.”

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John Dermot Woods draws comics and writes stories in Brooklyn, New York. He is the author of *The Complete Collection of people, places & things* (BlazeVOX Books) and the forthcoming comic chapbook *The Remains* (Doublecross Press). He edits the arts quarterly *Action, Yes*, organizes the online reading series *Apostrophe Cast*, and is a professor of English at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York. For more information, visit johndermotwoods.com.

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Issues of *Caketrain* and titles in Caketrain's ongoing chapbook series are available at www.caketrain.org. Caketrain books are also sold at Caliban Books of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Powell's Books of Portland, Oregon.

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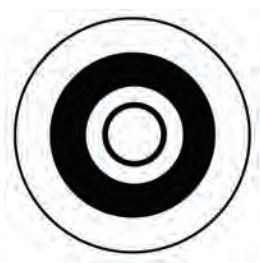
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ISSN 1547-6839



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