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**CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

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we came to a place that was grieving and gathered to listen

Irene Blair Honeycutt

CHORUS:

We gather to listen
That the wounded may be healed.
Without stories we lose our way.
What is forgotten will be remembered.
What is buried, unearthed.
Let the litany begin.

LITANY:

I was the minister preaching redemption.
I was the no-see-um in the pulpit.
I was the mantis preying in the offering plate.
I was the genealogy a mother burned in the garden.
I, the black snake, watched from her wash shed.

CHORUS:

There is a time for all
To speak, a time for all
To listen.

LADY LUCK:

I, Lady Luck, for years sat in the
Pews, until one day,
Weary of our liaisons,
I shot the preacher dead.
He dropped like a duck on my lawn.
I was ruled insane, locked away.
So many stories left untold.

MOTHER:

Shall I begin my own litany of doom?
What came after? What went before?

Once I was a leader in that church.
My husband, a deacon—
Finest man I ever knew.
I entertained speakers in our home.
Taught Sunday School. Canned
Tomatoes in the church kitchen.

CHORUS:

We have heard it said
This was not enough.
She craved more.
Each life hungers
For its own experience.

MOTHER:

I ran away from the farm.
Had little education except
In the fields. Married.
Bore children. Sold Avon.
Served appetizers
At Daylight Groceries.
Delivered politicians' pamphlets.
Babysat for doctors' families
Until . . .

Oh, how do I presume?
I ramble in this resume of ruin.
My children—I know they remember
how I tried.
Once a hurricane blew the glass

From the bedroom window.
I sat between them on the bed—
The Bible open in my lap—and prayed.

A few years later at church one night
I wrapped my arms around their shoulders,
Walked between them down the aisle.
Wanted to save them.

Lady Luck's minister (and mine)
Welcomed them into the fold.
He came to our house, too.
As did a friend's husband.
Something cracked inside
My heart. The center
Did not hold.

I became Lady Icarus draped
Over the clothesline
By wagging tongues.

CHORUS:

More than illusion.
More than delusion.
Something other than.
Something deeper than confusion.

MOTHER:

Oh do not ask what happened.
The good Lord knows.
My daughter asked me once,
Sitting next to me on the porch swing,
If I could help her understand.
All I could think to say was:
Loneliness.

People with loose lips blamed my demise,
My fall from the church—my scorn of it—
My agony and crazed state,
On the change of life.
A psychiatrist found my jokes amusing.

Nothing wrong with her, he said,
Returning me to my family waiting
In the lobby. At my own peril
I had become a Master Illusionist.
A Jester even he could not see drowning.

CHORUS:

The Muses say
Women have always tried
To unweave the past,
And have grown old
Trying to imagine a future.

MOTHER:

I will not defile this space.
Will not utter here all I said and did.
What I became other than this:

I became Lady Arsonist.
Burned the Bible in the backyard.
I became Madam Fury
Fanning the flames.
I became Lady Divinity in the kitchen by day.
Lady Wino in the closet by night.
I became Lady Bagworm
Dragging my home through the streets.
To my children and their father
I became the ghost that never died.

DAUGHTER:

Sometimes she comes as chimes on the wind
 Becomes choruses of frogs in swamp lands
 Sometimes she reaches for blushing lilies
 Sometimes floats on buoyant leaves
 She becomes spoonbills stepping into cool waters
 Becomes ghost beads rattling inside Peruvian shakers
 Becomes a mouse poised in an alley
 Becomes trees whispering secrets
 To nameless stones.

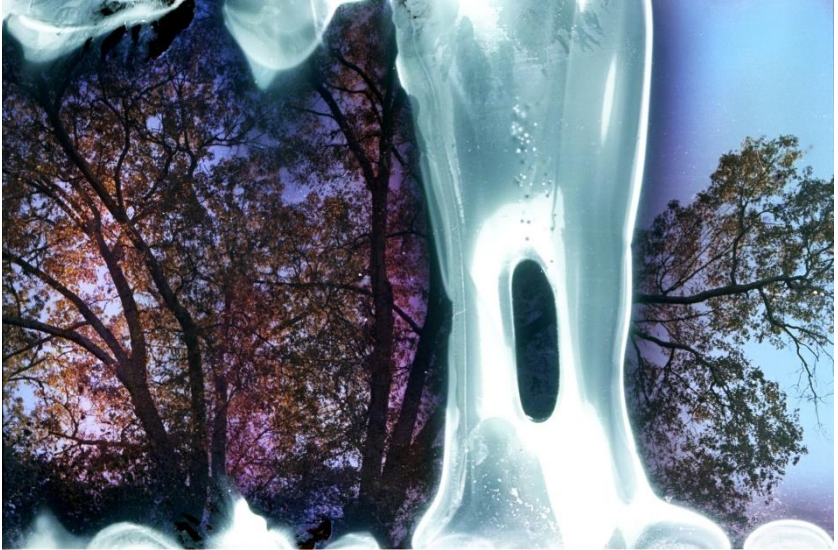
LITANY:

We, the humming birds she fed, tallied her visits.
 We, the bees, pollinating flowers, recognized her face.
 We, the willows, wept with her when she stretched out on our
 roots.

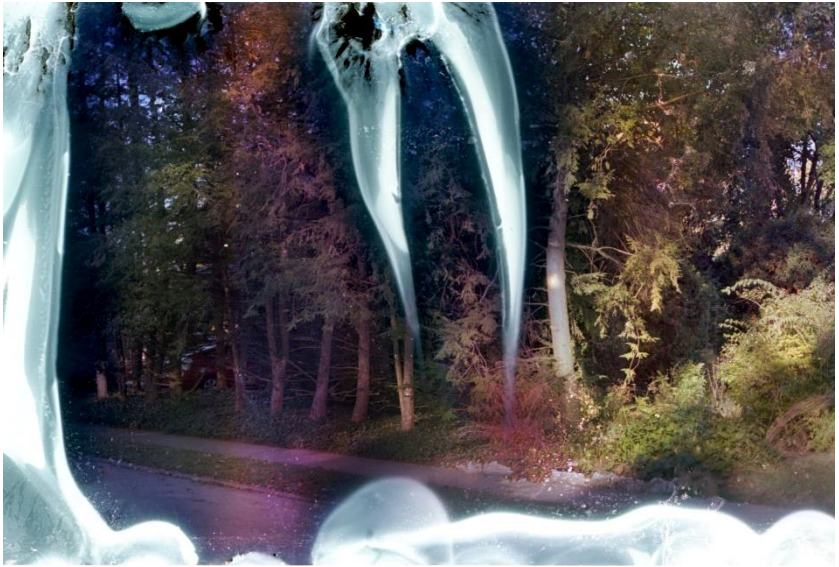
MOTHER:

My daughter,

When you thought you were lost
 I guided you.
 When you thought you were alone
 I brought you home.
 I picked up the prayers
 You dropped on the rug.
 I became the talking stick
 You held in your hand.
 Became the drum
 You could not stop beating.
 Wherever you go I am there.
 You carry me—a waxing moon
 at your back.



Strange Neighborhood 2 / Susanna Herrmann



Strange Neighborhood 1 / Susanna Herrmann

You Do Not Stop at Your Skin

Sunny Payson

It is the missing checkbook register. Proof, for the first time, that Diana had been taken, examined, done things to, and returned promptly at the exact moment she'd been extracted. At 12:23 p.m., she notices the checkbook register is missing. She had just recorded check #1034, remitted for pest services rendered. She had not risen from the chair. She had barely moved. It is not on her desk, nor at her feet. She searches around her workstation, flipping through books and shaking out legal pads that lay in orderly stacks, and the register is nowhere to be found. Her face burns with a new kind of pride. She is entangled, being called for this experience, finding, after all this time, that she is right, that she is truly a special being, a true starseed, meant for something on this earth.

How it was somehow overlooked, dropped from her hand, gently, to the floor. Perhaps hidden in darkness under the examination table, its worn pages, the bent staples that barely held it together, the numbers she'd scrawled diligently, because Jason would not be happy if he knew she hadn't kept up. Diana never forgot how he looked at her after seeing the scribbled withdrawals paired with unmarked balance columns.

What, she'd said, I can always check at the ATM.

He had been gentle, though, even though he was under a great deal of stress launching his new business. He'd grab her by the waist as she walked by his transitional office space, part of the living room near the kitchen, and spin her around on his lap, while she gripped the back rest, the room spiraling.

The shed he'd built for his office is almost finished. The splotches of joint compound sanded smooth and the unprimed drywall waiting for paint, solidly upright, not crooked like the walls of the small farmhouse they share with a semi-hostile housemate. She is like a teenager most of the time, drifting by in pajamas looking at her phone, on the way in or out of her room.

When they'd converted part of the living room for Jason's workspace, she'd dragged the love seat into her room, claiming that

the living room wasn't hers to hang out in anymore, and unless they wanted less rent, they would agree to it. Which was fine, it ended up working out, most of the time, with Jason in front of his computer, lines of code and text that Diana couldn't, nor did she want to try and decipher. She preferred their bedroom anyway, facing south, where the slant of orange light in the afternoon turns oblique, strikes a distinct diagonal line from the window to her bed, where her polished crystals are arranged on the nightstand and her embroidered pillows soften the wooden headboard and her thinking mind. And the small, rounded skylight, her keyhole to the clouds.

Even through the smoky and pale sky, a wishful kind of a blue, she senses the density of what is situated beyond it, that great black ocean, dotted with infinite pinholes, and beyond that, well, she is investigating those realms without her conscious awareness. Diana had been past what is known to man, and her body had opened to it, like a quickening.

Diana M. from Santa Rosa purchased a Community Learn/
Grow Your Group Workshop.

Serena K. from East LA purchased a personal tarot reading.

Aline P. from Calabasas purchased a hand crafted Shungite
Pyramid.

Diana slips the credit card back into her wallet, pleased to have found the website. Pleased that the cost isn't too high. She is not alone, wanting to create a community in her own town, in which she knows few people.

This workshop is a good start. A fresh start. Anything is possible in a constructed world, she whispers. Her life inside the farmhouse is hermetic, and good things happen when she leaves it, when she is paying close enough attention.

A rainbow stretches across the highway, the arc getting lost in the haze, and then suddenly, brilliant, hovering over the grocery store. Diana pulls into the parking lot, imagining the automatic doors shattering, gold coins spilling out across the pavement, rushing through the streets with ringing change.

She parks the car and goes in. Rows of garden shovels, neatly spooning, hung on rubberized steel rods next to the perennials sale. How many shovelfuls of gold could she put in the trunk? Separating a mini shopping cart from the row, she has to pull hard and two others come with it. Before pushing them back, she sees a twenty, folded tightly in quarters, in the bottom of the cart. She slips it into the outer pocket of her jeans, feels the thickness between her fingers. Could be sixty dollars. Good as gold. As the doors slide shut behind her, and the long aisle of refrigerated perishables stretches out in front of her, she catches a chill, and her body slows. Trapped in air like water. The cold lights overhead bring out the yellow undertones of her skin. She is looking at her hands, curled around the greasy handle of the cart, when she realizes she is unable to move at all.

And she remembers. She has been here before. Not *déjà vu*, but this trajectory she's already completed: this time of day, this same light outside, this oily shopping cart. She examined the backs of her hands exactly like this the last time. Her body is sending messages and she can't understand what they mean. Why she is stuck in place? Why are the lights suddenly not like lights but like paint, pouring from above, and the floor is suddenly mostly like liquid. It's a good thing, she thinks, that I have hold on this cart. But it's like someone is saying it to her, inhabiting her, while she is still present.

Can I help you? A woman in a royal blue smock comes close to her. Diana moves just her eyes to see the face, reads a name tag on her shoulder. Lisa. Weird place for a name tag.

Can I help you? Are you alright?

Lisa's breath smells like she doesn't drink enough water. She waves her hand in front of Diana's eyes. Diana blinks. She hears her own voice, not her real voice, squeeze up out of herself, as if her body is trying to keep it from escaping.

I am fine.

Her voice sounds garbled, though clear enough, but she stays stuck in place, leaning on the cart for support, and so, does not convince Lisa. Diana wonders if she looks pale. When was the last time she ate? Lisa takes out a small, ergonomic walkie talkie, and calls for someone in customer service, which Diana hears in the air in front of her, and after a delay, bouncing across the ceiling and the white sprayed I beams above.

Families slump by in groups, the kids belted into jumbo size carts, kicking at their parents, grabbing the styrofoam packages of bacon, throwing them at the floor. An older sibling smacks the side of their head and picks up the meat, tosses it back in the cart.

Sleepwalkers. The bloated focus in the mother's eyes sharpens as she drifts past Diana, briefly glancing at Lisa, and moving on. The teenager lags behind, neck bent to see her phone. Her mouth is parted as she scrutinizes an image and makes it larger with two fingers. Diana can see the screen as she passes. Coral pink bikini top. Glacially brilliant teeth. Plush pink lips, absent of detail, gleaming.

It all repeats itself like a broken piece of code, in this shambolic simulation. That's what Jason calls it, and Diana believes him. She's seen black cats double and split, slink off in opposite directions in kaleidoscopic symmetry. She expects she'll see another family turn the corner, the bacon will fall, the slap, the mother, the teenager, the phone, the bikini, the teeth.

Lisa is joined by another smock wearing employee, a grey-haired woman holding a price tag gun. Her name tag is right over her chest. Eliza.

Did you page?

You're not customer service, where is Barbara?

I am Barbara today.

Your name tag says Eliza, Diana says quietly.

Lisa may have heard but she is involved with telling Eliza what has happened. She is referring to Diana as the customer. Diana stops listening and watches as another family passes, this time from another direction, as they walk away from her. A jug of milk tumbles out of the cart. The dad smacks the kid on the side of the head. The mother leans over and picks it up, carefully placing the dented gallon under the cart, on its side. A teenager follows.

Diana experiments with small, light steps, and the cart inches in retreat. It's not like she can't move, but a feeling that she shouldn't. That she has been changed in ways she doesn't yet understand, like after a long yoga class, lying in savasana, absorbing the benefits. She is certain that Lisa would not understand and she won't bother to try and explain. Lisa and Eliza are still trying to figure out the proper protocol. Lisa hunches over her walkie talkie, tries to hide the fact that

she is paging a supervisor, which Diana can clearly hear echoing back to them.

Aisle Three, Supervisor, customer concern, please.

Diana continues until she is a good fifteen feet away, and quickly swivels into aisle four, Spices/Pasta/Tomato Sauce/International Food. She doesn't remember what she was supposed to buy. Digging in her pockets, only after she's reached the meat counter, does she find a list. The handwriting looks different from her own. More like her mother's careful letters.

Yes ma'am, what can I get you today?

Diana smiles at the man, snapping back into herself. His voice has a quality she recognizes, but not from where.

I'll take the farmed salmon please, enough for two people. She straightens her back, unties her fleece jacket from around her waist and puts it on.

Yeah, I wear extra pairs of socks working back here. All this ice. And the cooler. He gestures behind him, towards a scuffed up white wall. The metal door to the cooler hangs open. Several dents mar its dimpled surface, as if someone had hammered at it from the inside. Another man in a white coat with his back to them is wrestling with something unwieldy, lumpy. His body resembles a small boulder, rolling around an uneven floor.

Diana tunes her attention, watches the man at the counter laying out the filet across the white plastic cutting board, gently angling the edge of the knife to the fatty orange slab.

How much? Here?

Yes, she says, as she glances at his hands.

He sinks the blade into the fish while letting his eyes rest on Diana.

It is darker outside than when she arrived. The air is acrid still, with the distant fires, casting a dim blue veil over the rows of cars. To the far left of the sliding doors, by the loading dock, two seated figures smoke cigarettes. They do not speak. They are observing her. The long strips of vinyl swish in and out.

She slams the trunk shut. The lights above flicker on. A low buzzing noise finds its chorus and the entire lot swarms with

expanding pools of light. She is thinking of the meat counter guy and wonders if she knows him, already.

Jason is in bed reading on his phone when she gets home. One light on the nightstand points at the doorway, so she can't see his face.

What's for dinner babe?

Fish

Which kind?

Armchair.

Alright.

After dinner, as she's wiping dry the last plates, Diana tries to crystallize her afternoon, as it actually happened. She can't remember what exactly had occurred before she was frozen in place. It seems absurd that she was being treated like an old woman with dementia, or whatever deemed it necessary for those pushy women to immediately rush up to her, to try and keep her moving along. She recalls the events in order, rainbow, money, sliding doors, and then blank. She reaches into her jeans pocket and pulls out the bills. She was right; it was sixty dollars. She smiles widely and slides the money back in her pocket.

Jason rounds the corner into the kitchen, a thick joint over his lip, clicks on the burner and leaning low to one side, lights it in a few puffs.

What are you smiling about?

Nothing, just happy, Diana says.

He walks over to her, wraps his arms around her, her face at his chest. While keeping one arm around her shoulders, he takes a thick drag, touches her lips with his own. When she opens her mouth he exhales, and while she breathes in she forgets whatever she was trying to do, to remember. It was useless anyway.

Let's get out of the kitchen, babe. A plume of skunky smoke follows him back into the living room.

Diana pours two glasses of water, can hear Jason's voice but not his words. She flicks off the bright lights.

. . . would've done it differently, he says from the couch, inhaling the smoke with a low hissing sound, then holding it in as he keeps talking.

A seamless design structure isn't necessarily the best design, it's basically irrelevant.

He lets out the cloud of smoke in a controlled release.

Weights down the whole system and that's what causes the glitches, the big ones, that shouldn't exist in such great numbers. The ones even the sleepwalkers notice. What you've absolutely got to do, is to get the details perfect and let the seams be like air, like little blank thought bubbles. Let people fill them in, let people see that cat cross their path, but not again the same day. What a sham.

He takes another lengthy drag off the joint, runs his other hand through his hair, feeling the base of his neck, and closing his eyes briefly, exhales, and time stretches the room away from him.

Diana sits quietly, waiting. She wants the conversation to go into the subject of original design and theoretical control keepers. Right now, she really wants to tell him about the checkbook register, about the edgeless experience of traveling without knowing, and to ask him, what do you think, where do you think I was?

He looks over at his computer, and back at Diana.

Come here, babe, and he pats the couch next to him. She fits herself close into the side of his body, which he angles towards her, as he passes her the joint. There isn't much left, she takes a quick puff, barely able to pinch the sticky crinkle of paper at the end, trying not to burn her lips. The room sinks down while she exhales. The ceiling disappears. She leans her head back against the couch.

In the bathroom, she flips on the light and starts to floss her teeth without looking in the mirror. She hasn't seen her own face all day. The shower curtain is closed. She edges away from it. Closing her eyes, and rips it aside. A spider runs across the smooth white vinyl, tries to climb the wall, slides down again. It could be that the floor is sinking and the walls are lengthening.

The light is out in the bedroom. Jason reaches for her, his body animal with early sleep, and he pulls her to him. His hand brushes over her stomach, as he slips his palm under her t-shirt, over her breasts.

His fingers are warm and smooth. They weren't always. When he'd done construction, she could barely have him touch her. But he'd get home early, and they would shower together, fucking while standing up in the stall, the skin on his hands softening under the hot water. She missed that. There was no roommate then, either.

Jason pulls at her underwear, his fingers already seeking.

No, not yet she says, turning her back, and his hand retreats from between her legs, goes back to her breasts. His lips against her ear, how about now, he whispers, now, he repeats. Her skin is getting warm and she pulls her t-shirt over her head. His body pools into hers, sleek against her back. His hand smooths over her hip, trails down. His fingers stroking her on the outside, and she giggles a little. Diana feels like an animal, something cute, something adorable, and she is also getting wet. She pushes herself into him and he slides his fingers into her, and it feels good in a way she hasn't had it in a while. Maybe because the roommate isn't there, maybe because Jason waited longer for her, she doesn't know and is trying to turn off her brain when she feels something she would later describe as familiar,

A dark smudge of something like a man drifts in the hall, not quite there, not quite man, but a trail of a man, an idea of a man's body. She sees him just in the corner of her eye, and of course, as always when she sees what is and isn't there, he disappears. What doesn't make sense is that she is not startled, nor afraid, and while not unexpected, her body remembers. Not everything, but like a frame from a movie, filmed while she wasn't watching.

Where'd you go, babe?

Diana wonders. They start up again.

Jason is fucking her from behind, and she is trying, as always, to slow him down, to get into his rhythm, and the man-not man reappears. This time, directly beneath her as a darkish swarm and his hands-not hands are close, his fingers forming a buzzing arc just above Jason's cock; a dome or a hive of warmth and everything good, this sensation of movement and buzzing and mostly humming, like a body hums and rises, ringing at a frequency reserved for dreams and how a body feels in dreams, without specific sensorial detail, without the recording of smell or the contact of skin.

She shifts her weight from her hands to her forearms, turns her tongue in slow circles as if to discover a new shape. A brief and

bitter taste registers in her mouth, like a spark, and then fades as she starts to come. There seems to be no end to her, no resistance, only a blazing pulse she cannot bear and doesn't want to stop.

After Jason pulls out and slumps into the space next to Diana, it is as if he's been dropped out of the sky. She remains stone still, lying on her stomach and holding her breath, trying not to disturb the warmth under her belly, hoping to keep something of the man-not man with her. She is being tricked into something, a vague dart at the back of her mind whistles, slicing through the vapor and breath of the chatter in her brain.

Any heart palpitations or blurred vision?

No.

Any headaches or memory loss?

No.

Anything you might be worried about at this time, or mental health concerns?

The nurse taps out Diana's answers. It seems to her the amount of letters clicking away exceeds the amount of words she uses. The monitor is positioned away from her. An uncovered bank of fluorescents provides scant light and several of the milky grey tubes seem to contain fluttering insects. Diana presses her hands together, thumbs interlocked, like she does at the dentist. She kneads her palm on the underside with one thumb, as hard as she can stand it. The steady pressure keeps her calm. She tries it during the blood pressure screening. No luck, 130 over 82.

Married, single, partner?

Yes, I live with my boyfriend.

She is a little proud when she says this, imagining Jason at home, building his company, bit by bit. He is so focused, that when she comes home, he hasn't even gotten up to drink water, his lips dry when she first kisses him, his phone lit up with messages and the snaking lines of code streaming down the front of his computer, like the stones of a building, rising, rising.

Contraception?

The nurse has stopped typing and is looking directly at Diana for the first time, speaking to her as if to a child after having repeated herself. Opaque turquoise eyeshadow shimmers against her dark skin.

What?

What form of birth control do you use?

The air in the room tightens around Diana, as it always does right before she lies. The walls bend convex behind the examination table, its stirrups like arms, reaching.

I'm on the pill.

OK, and the dosage?

Oh, I forget, I've been taking it so long.

The nurse stops typing again and looks at Diana, her hands still poised at the keyboard, her nails lacquered and sharp. They are briefly locked together, two lambs. The nurse doesn't hide her reaction, rolls her eyes, and slides the keyboard table back under the screen, which blinks out and is replaced by a lazily bouncing logo.

The doctor will be with you shortly, the nurse says into the air. She closes the door gently behind her. A slow click. Diana's clothes sway lightly on the plastic hangers on the back of the door.

Diana begins to cry, and is unsure why she is here in the first place. The annual. It's simply what we do, she had remembered. She looks down into her lap, her fingers all twisted together, her legs pressing into each other. Her crossed feet look unlike her own, resting against the speckled linoleum squares. Her body wants out.

She stands up, slips on her sandals, throws her jacket over her head, over the paper gown, and runs out the of the exam room, hugging her keys and clothes and wallet and phone to her chest. A different nurse pauses in the hallway, in slow and subtle movement, turns her body to see Diana. Her look is unsurprised. The heavy bar of the exit door clunks down and the pitch of alarm sounds waver on, then cut out as the door slams shut.

There is an empty field, an incongruous stretch of prairie near the freeway, that Diana has passed on her way in or out of the city more times than she can remember. And each time she passes it, she promises she will pull over the next time, and walk right into the

center of it. There is a concentration of spectacular energy, multiplied by the thousands of wheat-colored stalks, either created in their susurrations when the wind picks up, or perhaps the oddity of the non-native grasses themselves, originating from a thousand miles away, spread like a silk rug, woven in secret. That its power comes from its indifference, this square plot of land, seemingly owned by no one, unmarked or fenced in any way. An invitation, a wayshower stamped into the earth, for those who are looking, those who can see.

It is night now, and Diana cautiously drives onto the shoulder, into the border of the grasses, her headlights reaching no further than the first thick rows. Cars shave close as they zip by, hurry home. She wriggles across the interior of the car, exits from the passenger side.

A silent red light, blinking across the western edge of the night sky, drops off from Diana's field of vision, as she tries to expand the peripheral edge of what she can see. The limits are too close, she thinks, the field too narrow to capture signals, or to send them with her positive mind stream. She breathes in deeply to clear her body of any webby darkness, any doubts that might stain her consciousness. They do not reach out to human bodies in discord.

A semi truck downshifts off the curve in the highway. She can't see it, but the bridge is only a few hundred yards away. It is late and the traffic has subsided. She doesn't check her phone, the brightness of the screen will ruin her eyes for the night. She should go back to her car, back home, where the man-not man might be waiting, where the sign and signaler are together, she shouldn't have to look further into the stars, when the stars are pitted deep inside of her already, lighting up like seeds in a bed in spring, unfurling their fresh sprouts and pushing through pebbles and clumps of clay to reach the sunlight.

Diana presses her back into the dry grass and imagines a stream of light underneath her body, as defined as a shadow in full sun, extending downwards, punching a perfect copy of her silhouette through the center of the earth, blasting out the other side. She is a ribbon of liquid gold and is signaling fiercely. And the humming of the man-not man begins to thread itself through her, and she knows she's made contact. Radio, on.

When she arrives the house, the lights are all out. It's not so late, is it? She quietly closes the door to the carport, hangs her keys on the nail. And he's there, standing in the kitchen, a smoky figuration in

front of the refrigerator, its door open and the light shining through him in some places, other areas are more opaque, like molecules rearranging. Condensation is running in rivulets down the front of the freezer door. He stands still in a widening pool over the linoleum. She keeps her eyes on him, lowers her purse from her shoulder to the floor. The refrigerator light goes out. What did it say in the contact manual? Diana doesn't remember. So she whispers her intention, whatever my body directs me to do, I promise to follow. She feels a tiny circle of warmth at her sternum, just under the Agoudal pendant hanging from a silver chain. Diana holds the stone out from her chest as it seems to heat up, or freeze, a burning touch in the center of her palm, as she offers it to the man-not man, is it what he wants? But she doesn't understand. Of everything she can offer, it's her pendant?

A few steps forward, her whole body is being drawn into the dark corner of the kitchen. The compressor jerks on and the smell of vegetables packed too close rises up from the heated air below the fridge. The air is thick like oil. The agoudal has become unbearable against her open palm and she is afraid to see its soft shape in the dark. A pulse of white as a car passes.

And then it stops. The stone is gone from her hand. She is left with the sterling chain, and rawness in her hand. The fridge light snaps back on. This little 12W light blazes across the kitchen, the drooping produce and the softened milk cartons are illuminated like a fine painting, a still life, glowing gold and easing into decay. Diana shuts the door gently, and wipes her wet soles on the carpet when she gets to the bedroom.

The next morning, there is a note in the kitchen, a bright orange post it, stuck to the side of the fridge:

I'm sick of your collective shit.

An arrow had been drawn, with a bold black sharpie, pointing to the garbage can, which is stuffed with wilted kale and cauliflower, the cream florets tinged with black. A handful of yellowed scallions, slick at the ends. The heat still blowing full force from under the fridge. A window thrown wide open, and the smoky, residual edge of the fires lacing the dawn.

The puddle had grown and pulled out thin clumpy swirls of hair and dust from under the fridge, materials that have been gathering since they first moved in. What a disaster, Diana thinks.

Diana is at work, counting the minutes until she will leave, until she can exit this zone of the mundane, the dull, unrelenting ticking as the day passes. The words. She is so sick of the words she must use. *Absolutely. I can do that for you. Of course. It's understandable that you would. Clearly. Is there anything else I can help you with?* The efficient vocabulary of assent, bright with promises, buzzing with optimism, productivity, feels like bees in her mouth.

Someone she detests walks by. The sound of her loafers scuffing across the low pile carpeting sends a shot of adrenaline through Diana. She furtively reaches for an amethyst from her mini gem collection, a little grouping of thought-positive minerals, carefully placed in a circle where she can access them easily. She closes her fingers over the jagged, cool surface, takes a breath, and tries to release those feelings in the exhale. She closes her eyes, only briefly; she doesn't want to get caught with her eyes closed. She's afraid she might reveal something untoward in her posture, when she can't see her body. She can easily see the shoes in her mind's eye, however, their matte taupe leather, stitched up like a wound. If only she could will them away, instead of calling them closer. The woman's perfume. Diana composes an email to HR, again, pleading to disallow perfume in the office. A migraine begins to swell.

In her car, she is calm. In her car, she can breathe fresh air.

She is relieved to pass through town, is comforted by seeing everyone out, people doing everyday things. The sun beaming, an unusually clear afternoon. The shops mostly open, inside, customers bending in nutation to the sparkly lights and skillfully displayed goods. Stopped at the intersection, she looks through the open door to an ice cream counter, illuminated under a thick curvature of glass, two rows of abundant, swirling colors. There is a free parking space right in front. She pulls in, the opportunity too good to pass by. As she steps lightly onto the curb, something catches her eye. A little troll doll tied to a car antenna, its fiery orange hair still orange, but its body faded to an anemic yellow.

That must be Jason's car, but it can't be, she thinks. Of course he's working such long hours, it's possible he went out for ice cream, just like her, on a whim. The farmhouse can be lonely sometimes, it's

old, so many people have lived there and gone on, their absence creeps up on you, hollows out a warm corner with a gusty draft. Diana thinks of her room again, how lovely it is, how it seems not to share the evasiveness of the house. Her plants thrive in the window, little succulents in pebbles and a few rows of African violets. Maybe Jason should put his desk in there? She feels a rush of blood to her brain, an idea, a new way forward. She is excited to share this with him. It's already clear in her mind where the desk could be situated, and maybe adding a mirror to direct the light around the room, add movement and energy. Then he wouldn't have to contend with the roommate.

As she approaches Jason's car, the reverse lights flash on, and it begins to pull out, she can't be sure but it seems like there are two people in the car. The glare of the bright blue sky, obscures the view inside, like someone threw a sheet over the back window. As the car peels out, she sees a flash of a small hand flicking a cigarette out the window. A dainty arm, like a doll's, suntanned and ringed with thin gold bracelets. A small puff of smoke from under the back wheel which is spinning, dragging rubber across the asphalt. A terrible smell lingers, that sharp burning tires in the woods smell.

People pause, turn their heads, and then resume what they were doing. The holy slow development of a shared awareness, the woman scooping bright blue ice cream, the couple holding their paper coffee cups, breaks their gaze.

This fermata of experience shared by everyone, suddenly ignites Diana. A cleared pathway through collective presence! She knows that she could harness the same power, in the group she would start, as they look out from their immediate experience, and everyone, all at once, focusing on the same thing, at the same exact time. She couldn't believe that it hadn't come to her sooner. Diana reframes the incident. Maybe it wasn't Jason after all. Most likely it was an invitation, an instructive! Like a bell chimes to begin something new.

Diana has hope. This moment, carries her high, into the ice cream shop. Well, that and her checkbook's disappearance. Would it be returned to her? Probably not. Such things must have such little importance to higher beings. A ruffle of worn papers, carefully written numbers in black ink, names and reasons for paying them. It didn't matter. But it did matter that they'd let her go, and not noticed she'd left it. A piece of evidence of her existence, something she had touched

with her fingers daily. It did matter, that she'd also been asked, and examined. Her body knew. Her physical body was much more sensitive to their call, to the man-not man in her home, she just couldn't figure it out though, was he one of them, or one of her?

Sheila R. from Petaluma just purchased a Triple Light Wave blocker.

Katrina B. from Long Beach just purchased a Follow Your Body's Call Guide.

Diana M. from Santa Rosa just purchased an Agoudal pendant and ring.

The phone rings. It's Diana's mother. She doesn't usually call this early in the morning. Diana closes her laptop and puts away her credit card before answering.

Your father is really dying. You should go, Diana.

Diana pictures her mother on the phone, sitting in the tidy little vestibule by the kitchen table. The white walls unblemished, all surfaces immaculate. The Arizona heat kept at bay without any visual evidence of ducting, the advanced system's nearly silent hum and perfectly maintained temperature at 63 degrees Fahrenheit year-round. She is probably wearing a sweater, a light cardigan, cashmere. She probably still uses perfume that is better suited for baking pastries, notes of clove, vanilla, almond, rather than for one's body. Most likely there's a glass of sherry on the table.

Why should I go now if I haven't been in years? He won't even recognize me.

You know the answer to that Diana, her mom exhales and she can practically taste it. Probably still smoking 100s, as her own mother did, the longer cigarette useful for extended telephone conversations, also conducive to raising children, constantly having to pinch the half-smoked cigarette into the grooved holders in the ashtray. To break up a fight, to carry a child to the bathroom, to retrieve a fresh pair of pants, underwear.

Besides, her mother says dismissively, he probably doesn't even remember why he hasn't seen you in so long.

Diana remembers and all the times she forgot, she remembers. Her mother's face hidden in her hands, one eye puffed closed, dots of blood staining her pressed work shirt. Her father turning to look at Diana, lifting the handset from the wall, her father driving towards her and hitting the phone out of her hand, grabbing the back of her shirt as she tried to run. He never hit her, he used to remind her, and her mother's echo, you know he'd never hurt you.

Diana hangs up midsentence. She is drawn back into his house, his rooms, is afraid of what she could do when he is vulnerable, his muscles atrophied, the vigor released back into the universe. But the rage, she'd bet her life on it, remains at a blaze like the sun's explosions in the indifferent air of space. Diana knows she wouldn't try. What could it change? He's just another old man dying in the world. With any luck, he'll hurry up and go before her plane even lands. Still, she can feel the softness of a pillow in her fists and her muscles' tremor, as if she might.

The house front is unlit, save for the lights that dot the concrete path to the porch. Two rectangular glass panels on either side of the door allow a partial view inside. A circle of lamplight illuminates the hall. An enormous purse has been set on the console table by the front door, bulging against the wall, casting a lumpy shadow onto the floor, its brass hardware and chain straps gleaming.

Spotlights mounted high above the garage flood the front yard with icy light, motion detected. Diana loses her bearings, waits for her eyes to reassemble the steps up the porch, waits for the faint orange glow of the doorbell to reappear in the dark. A current of cooler air rushes in, swaying the tops of the pines. A wash of needles drifts to the ground. It seems unforgivingly isolated, at the end of the cul-de-sac. What few lamps are on, across the street, beam through the bare trunks of the pines, shooting defined blocks of light amplified by low lying fog. Diana raises her eyes to the night, the sky a soft woolly cover, suffused with orange, illuminated from the next town. No visible stars. Silent radio. She could use some help here.

The door unlocks and Diana opens her eyes. The nurse is there.

Diana, she says, wondering.

Yes, I'm Diana. It's been a while.

The nurse leans back slightly, her white sneakers in place, and flicks on the porch light, then steps aside, holding the door. Diana wants everything but this moment right now. The nurse has soundlessly shut the door and is whispering to Diana, but she is slow to hear it. A gentle line of questioning unspools from her mouth, how was the drive, the traffic, how is she feeling really, is she ok? Diana looks at the nurse's young face, wondering how many deaths had she seen, as if they could be recorded there.

She places her suitcase next to the door. She hangs her coat on the empty rack, an old wooden one, all the marks of her childhood still there. Her mother had marked her height every year with a deep notch, and now, the last recorded one etched level with her throat. She takes time removing her phone from the pockets, double checking where she put the keys to the rental, crinkling plastic ginger candy wrappers into a ball to throw away.

The rented hospital bed sits in the center of the living room, facing the sliding glass doors to a deck. If he were to open his eyes, he could see a thin strand of pines, and the small man-made lake just beyond. Diana lingers in the kitchen, searches for a glass. Waits for the water to run cold over her fingers. The nurse is leaning over the coffee table, which has been pushed right up against the low-slung couch, leaving just a small portion accessible, enough for one person to sit. She takes her phone and the can of soda.

Let me know if you need anything.

Thank you, Diana says, surprised by the meekness in her voice, as if her throat were wrapped up, muscles bound. When people are kind, she feels self-conscious, as if she should be handing something back to them, something she doesn't have.

The nurse retrieves her heavy bag from the hallway and points to the den. After she closes the door, Diana sits down, bedside. Her father lies still. She recognizes the quilt that has been laid over him, a wedding band pattern made from pink linen scraps and large cotton floral strips. There are pictures of her as a baby, struggling across the same fabric, darker in hue, straining to pull herself up, to grasp the camera, or her mother's hand. Desire sits there, lodged in the glitter of her tiny eyes, her fist squeezed tight like an unopened peony blossom.

Her father's breathing. He is turned slightly towards her. The muscles in his face have altered the structure, as if he were jutting out his chin, favoring one side for too long. His jawbone sharply visible, dry lips parted. She starts rubbing her palm with the thumb of her other hand, seeking the pressure points, relief. She doesn't know what to say, how to even begin talking. A tumble of voices come from behind the den's closed door. Laughter. The volume goes down.

The last sense to go is the hearing, her mother had said, so talk to him. You won't get interrupted, that's for sure.

Instead, Diana is tracking a fluttering moth and her eyes can't move as quickly. It settles violently against the lamp so she tries to cup it in her hands, to take it outside. It escapes and lands on top of the blanket, wings pressed flat, as though it had been painted on the quilt.

As his body shifts under the carefully spread cloth, the moth stays put. Brown and black zigzags across its wings, a thread of white dots at the edge. Diana moves cautiously, reaching her curled hands out, as if she were already holding something fragile. Her fingernails press gently at the blanket as she tries to lift only the body of the moth, not to disturb the dusty protective layer on its wings.

She flinches as her father suddenly attempts to speak, emitting a low crumbly moan. His jaw continues moving and the lips not touching, and the smell of his breath souring the air between them. His eyes are the clear, same blue of his younger self, shining. Pupils sharp as knife points.

He forms a string of sounds that lift her further out of her seat, out of necessity to hear, leaning far forward, turning her ear to him, to make sense of the thick, damp warmth of his breath, labored, and beginning to sound like a rusty whistle as he inhales.

You little cunt.

It takes Diana time to connect the meaning to sound and rather than falling backwards suddenly, she sinks in a protracted motion, until she is seated again, and a kind of searing occurs, as if looking directly into the sun, comes over her entire body. Her father's eyes remain open, fixed on Diana, and she is unable to move. Not because she is stunned, but that it just sits there, on her lap, like some rabid animal, daring her to make a move.

Gentle laughter sifts through the door. A clock strikes the time. Diana steps over to the couch, removes her shoes, and goes to sleep.

In the morning, a honking mass of geese crash into the lake, one after the other. Diana sees that the sliding door has been opened an inch; the air cuts in. She has been tucked underneath a bundle of puffy blankets. The coffee maker is hissing and gurgling in the kitchen and she can smell the first cups. She is thinking, with her eyes still closed, how much promise is contained in the brewing of coffee. How the morning hasn't been afflicted just yet, the day begins with each subsequent minute, intact.

Her father rests in the same position as last night. His breathing is even, quiet. The moth is gone.

Diana sees the nurse out on the deck, stubbing out a cigarette. She enters quietly.

Did you get some sleep?

Yes, Diana lied.

I'll be heading out soon, but you're in good hands, Jalissa is going to be with you today.

She gives Diana a tired smile as she gathers her things. Her skin is bright with moisturizer, fresh lip gloss. She looks at her watch. The doorbell rings. Diana pretends to be sleeping when Jalissa comes in. And then she pretends she is just stepping out, and drives home.

When Diana pulls into her driveway, it is almost dawn. It isn't until she gets to the front door that she realizes the whole of the house is dark. There are no other cars in the driveway but her own, the metal gently pinging and clicking as it cools. The house is silent. She flips on the kitchen light, a low buzz emits from the ceiling somewhere.

Hello?

Diana has an inexact sense that people had just left, a certain humidity indicating breath, perfume, sweat. She is disappointed, exhausted by the trip and had hoped that returning home would shake out the spindly sticks of discomfort rattling inside of her. A warm house. Jason at the computer, smiling to see her.

She drops her bag, and turns the corner into the living room. Jason's desk is tidy, the chair pushed in tight. The loveseat is gone, again, the fireplace exposed. The roommate's door is open, which makes her heart lurch—it is so unexpected. That door was never left open, only as the roommate came or went. She tiptoes over, noticing a new, small dent in the panel, torn at the edges showing splintered wood.

Hello? Her voice quavers. She stops moving, stands absolutely still to see if she can hear anything, any sign of life or threat. Nothing. Her heart swings up and she feels heat from her body, micro-currents of adrenaline charging.

She takes silent steps towards the room, flips the light switch. It doesn't work. She flips it back and forth several times. Her eyes are have adjusted to the semi-darkness enough to see that the room is empty, save for little pills of styrofoam scattered across the floor.

In her room, the bed is unmade. The tiny nightlight Jason had bought her on a work trip glows in the corner, its carved bear claw pattern glued over a piece of amber glass. As she reaches for the wall switch, the window darkens several shades and the man-not man is there; he's managed to take up more space, more light than what she remembered. He is less transparent and contains a density like a swarm, more defined, like a string drawn loosely around him.

Diana doesn't turn on the light. She closes her eyes. She imagines the stars again, and their material counterparts in her body, like magnets. Her angel is here. She lays back on the bed, feeling as though she's riding in an elevator which is plunging, stopping, plunging again. She sleeps. She remembers.

It was into a lightless room, a room with no discernible temperature. The air was thick, but not humid. It was a bright day and the clear skies unusual. She never saw the faraway earth, the perfect blue and emerald jewel that astronauts breathlessly cite, post return. She also never experienced the painful juddering of a spacecraft, the force exerted on bodies on the way to space.

Lightless rooms existing perfectly, built in time, changing as the dreamer moves through them, without ever seeing their own hands, or touching the walls. A slim doorway. A window to an unguent sea. Her body remembers that they were not rough, nor gentle, but that they approached her body with expertise. And that time, was not

time, but passage, as she seamlessly went from recording numbers in a column, to the woozy awareness of the room. Object gone missing. Parts of her touched without touch and irrevocably changed, the seams and fissures of her own brain and tissues, having come together again. They'd given her a gift, the soft and generous murmuring she hears, not with her ears, but inside of her, as natural as her own blood.

She returns to her skin against the sheets, the perspiration, as it trickles minutely from her breast, trailing to under her armpit. The touch of an errant mosquito, a brushing against her. She wants to go back, where the men-not men are without language, promise nothing, but are as real as breath, pluming white in the cold morning air, and hovering.

The sun begins to rise up over the thick edge of dank morning fog, obscuring the wet lowlands and silvery leaves of eucalyptus. Her phone buzzes. The alarm for her first workshop. She had nearly forgotten. Brushing her hair into a neat ponytail, rifling drawers for a clean shirt. She sprays complexion mister all over her face, pinches her cheeks, and sits, without pants, at her little nightstand table.

Diana joins the meeting. The pre-screen displays her face, her neck and the collar of her shirt. The new stone pendant is still around her neck. She touches it lightly.

Waiting for the host to let you in.

She reaches for her glasses and can suddenly see, plainly, that she is crying, that her cheeks are shining and red. The virtual doorbell chimes and a band of faces are spread across the screen like cards. She cannot pretend to hide this from anyone.

The facilitator begins.

Welcome.

She speaks from a black square, nameless, at the bottom edge.

Everyone's eyes move restlessly. The books, the shelves, the kitchens, the lights, the curtains, the coffee cups, the glasses of water, the animals drifting in and out.

Let's begin with a question. How do you know there are others like you?

Diana raises her hand first. She already knows it's a trick question.

Dream of Emma Returning

Alex Stanley

All of my logic points to coincidence,
unless dreams are like roots in a forest,
connecting everything. I dreamt of you
the night your father died, made a note of it,
that you returned to me, that you were happy.
It's been three years since we last spoke,
yet I heard you cry, thousands of miles away,
waking me in my sleep, here, beyond the confines
of love, arms, the smoothing of your eyelids,
and when you told me you'd never speak to me
again, I didn't know another world could open.

Ergo Age

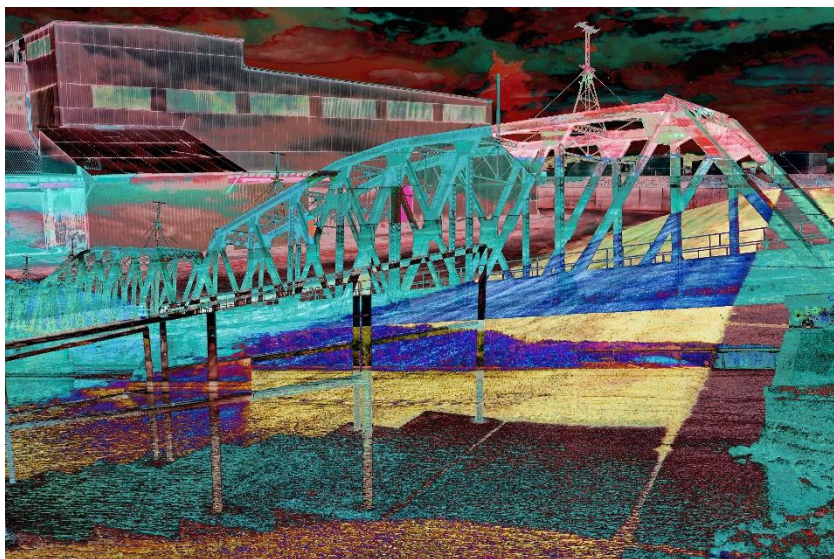
Alex Stanley

I walk in the spring that light warmth brings—
I walk in the sky that rages from night into day
as the bright ocean breeze grows silent as gold.
Let's leave the Appalachians and travel past
the Missouri into the glow of harvest wheat—
we will walk clear to the Pacific if we have to.
I walk with an impatient mind longing to wander.
I walk with a joyful spirit—my feet grow callused.
My charming friend, our encounter is fulfilled
down the road, at a time when we will make a home
out of our different paths, each leading back to the other.¹

¹ *Ergo Age* is a translation of Catullus's *Carmen XLVI*.



Store and Funeral Home VI / Christopher Paul Brown



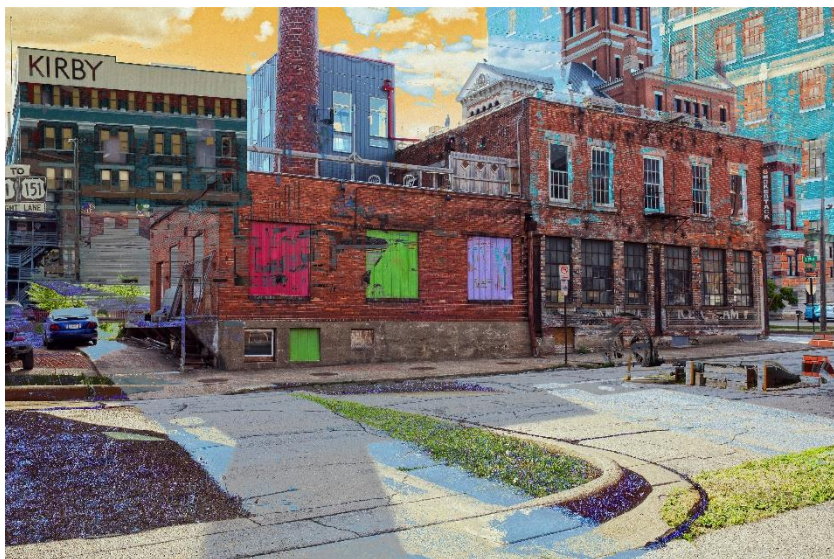
Untitled, North Riverside Dubuque Iowa 2022 /

Christopher Paul Brown



Untitled, North Riverside Dubuque Iowa 2022 /

Christopher Paul Brown



Untitled, East Downtown / Christopher Paul Brown



Anna in a Precarious Pose / Christopher Paul Brown

My Wife Dies During Birth

Oisín Farraige

1.
spinal tap then split her stomach open in
front of me. chiral winged death. angel
of the other side looming, crying in

want. crossing over provides certain
particulars for the attentive soldier of
god. the frontline is you, in the maternity

ward. the bridge is the depth of will
to cross it. this soul economy has
taken its toll and crossed you. though

you've taken your last you've given new.

2.
new blood it would've been in my time,
my son. there's this bending of the air
around you, heat death of father bonds.

i can't help but pile blame upon you,
lump flesh of mine, take and take is all
you seem to do. then you grasp at that

air and it insulates you, by the time you're
in my arms I've taken responsibility. little
glimmers of her brighten your crib: your

eyes and the patterned walls and sheets,
mobiles, toys she took ages searching for
into near perfect matches for the bump.

you sprang up faster than I could have
imagined, into something far greater than
your parts. maybe more of her was taken

for how unlike myself it seems you are.

After My Wife's Funeral

Oisín Farriage

//
 I wrote down
 Everything
 That I felt

Struck light
 Out of dark
 To burn these poems

Thinking If I could rid earth
 Of every
 Trace
 I
 Could let her go . . .

Now I spend the rest
 Of my life
 Writing to keep her here

//
 Color, scent, voice, touch of hand,
 heart, driven out by time—
 Straws if ever grasped again— always trying
 In a sushi restaurant seated for one.

My Grandfather Tells Me His Story in a Dream After His Death

Oisín Farriage

In the hills of Kentucky, where old men sit and
read small town papers Where tossed bike
frames crawl the walk in front of Bennet's,
tripping men for Ale-8 sips Where a plow is
pushed by cracked hands against impotent sod
Where the gravestone of my grandfather lies
disturbed, footpaths unbeaten Where the
mountaintop has been blown to pieces—soaked
the hollers in sickness for cars and comfort Where
you get sun at ten—lose it at two Where as
young as six you can tote your father's dynamite
for him You can haul a coal bucket one
hundred feet deep You can watch him clutch
his chest at your eighth birthday party searching
for breath You can see your own future—hacked
black globs filtered through bleeding lungs—in
the toilet bowl after one of his *fits* You can see
his pale face before they close the lid You can
watch your mother open the only mail from the
coal company to no letter and a check for half of
his weekly pay You can stop for gas thirty
years later at a Circle K and suffocate on your
phlegm going to take a piss in the bathroom
while your grandson pumps gas



Untitled, from the Facing It Together Series / Jack Bordnick



Counting on Neighbors with Cheerios / Valyntina Grenier

Of Brick

Miriam Borgstrom

to notice her hair was to notice her past / and when she offered
herself, the size of her hands differed / if we defined her hair,
we would reach zero / the frequency of voices would shatter /
once, we attempted sleeping while waking / twice, we
attempted new backdrops / and to notice this, has gotten us
nowhere / no less than where she began / she forgets the
texture of brick as we become experts on brick
please accept this glove I offer
or accept the glove and call it something else
this is a test on how responsible you are
in a way
in a time of great war between neighboring countries
and neighboring brick
presenting yourself in physical form
presenting a life with room for another life
or simply
replacing our batteries together

Reading Group A

Carolyn Dasher

It's a perfect day for work. The warm breeze smells like gardenias. The sun and surf and rocks at Moloa'a Beach look like something out of a kid's drawing—vivid yellow, deep blue, glossy black, straight from the crayon box. My mom used to bring me here when I was little. I'd splash in the shallows while she chatted up men. When I got older—when the men started furtively checking me out—she left me at home, which was a relief to both of us. And possibly to the skeezy men, too. But I'm all grown up now, and always happy to spend a morning at Moloa'a.

To get to the beach, you park on the street, duck under tree limbs at the end of the road, and then wade across a sandy stream. And there, kicking off his flipflops before crossing, is Len.

"Hey, kiddo. Nice to see you." It's never skeezy hugging Len. He's known me since I was four, and he's one of those decent guys who keeps you four in his heart forever, even once you've gotten tits.

"How's your mom?"

I tell him she's good. That she's hostessing at the new place in Princeville, and though he surely already knows this, he says, "Yeah? That's so great."

We detour around a pale, fresh-off-the-plane family setting up their beach chairs.

Len and my mom used to date. He's what my mom calls a trusty. Lucky ducky trust fund fucky. Not that you can tell by looking at him. His board shorts are ancient. His t-shirt is more holes than shirt. He buys his flipflops at Costco just like the rest of us. His tan is a deep mahogany and his hair is a little too long, these days, for his age. He's here for his morning swim. He'll take another one in the afternoon. Then he'll head out for dinner. Maybe with a woman, maybe not. He and Mom were together a long time. Long enough that he bought me several expensive birthday presents. Long enough that no one could blame me for thinking he'd be around forever.

But Mom understood he was temporary. She kept her eyes and her options open. After a few years, he just became . . . scarce. I mean,

it's impossible to avoid anyone on this island, but we somehow did not run into Len for about six months. And when we finally did see him, it was all friendly hugs and we'll have to catch up sometime, meaning not really, but hey, we're both okay and c'est la vie.

"New renters in that one," Len points up the beach toward a house with an emerald lawn and an expensively-furnished lanai. A line of palms studs the boundary between grass and sand. "Young family. Husband plays a lot of golf. Wife takes Pilates. I guess there's a nanny or something." Len lives nearby, and he has a keen eye for these things. And he knows—but is kind enough not to mention—why I'm here.

He ditches the ratty t-shirt and launches into the water. The guidebooks say you shouldn't swim at this beach. But Len could swim pretty much anywhere in pretty much any weather. When he was with my mom, he taught me how to swim and how to catch a wave, and he never once made me feel like I was in his way.

I head up the beach to the house he pointed out, snap open my straw mat, and start my routine.

Typically, they don't come out to chat on the first day. The first day is just for show. You should avoid even glancing at the house. You won't see anything in the windows but a reflection of palms and ocean. But you can sense when someone is watching. If you're lucky, it's not the wife or kids.

Focus on the routine. The stretching and twisting and balancing. You are strong and flexible and steady. The routine shows you off in all the best ways. When you're done, you sit on your beach mat, tailor style, watch the waves and emanate a sense of peace.

It's important not to appear agitated. No scratching. No fidgeting. No brushing off sand. Project a sense of dignity and calm. These men are on vacation. They're not looking for drama. Calm signals discretion. Which is one of many things they find appealing.

I calmly shift my gaze up the beach, and see that Len is out of the water now. He's lying down next to a couple of women. Younger than he is. Len has no towel, so he's soaking theirs, but he wouldn't think about that. It's warm. The towel will dry, as will Len.

I squint to make out who the women are. One of them is Kimbra, I'm almost positive. We were at school together. She's another trusty. Actually, the child of trusties, which, depending on the family investment strategy, is just as good. Her parents didn't like the

private Christian school on the island, so she attended public school with the rest of us. We were never exactly friends, me and Kimbra, but we were thrown together a lot in school, starting with Mrs. Matsui's Reading Group A.

No fish, no fruit, no animal names or colors for Mrs. Matsui, when it came to labeling her reading groups. She didn't see the point. As if we wouldn't have figured out that a particular fish was the best one, or a particular fruit the saddest and most loser-ish.

If she put you in Reading Group A, that meant that instead of the big reader with a rainbow on the cover and twenty years of student names inscribed inside, you read actual books. Books with chapters. *A Wrinkle in Time*. *Watership Down*. Instead of taking turns reading out loud, you took the books home and read them on your own. Then you discussed them with Mrs. Matsui.

Reading Group A was whispered about in the lower grades, and yearned for openly in the middle grades, by parents and students alike. But not by my mom. "There's a library," she said. "If you want to read those books, you can read those books." Which was true, but not the point. The point—which other parents understood—was to be in Reading Group A, whether you cared about the books or not. Reading Group A kids went on to take honors classes in high school. They were almost exclusively haole, Japanese or Chinese—so I had that going for me. But they were also almost exclusively kids whose clothes did not come from the Salvation Army in Kapa'a. Kids who did not live crooked stilt houses shrouded with blue tarps to keep out the rain.

My mom may not have cared, but I did. I cared tremendously about getting into Reading Group A. Which meant that all through fourth grade I was on my best behavior, turned in every assignment on time, aced all my spelling tests, practiced my handwriting until it was textbook perfect. When Mrs. Matsui gave us quizzes at the start of fifth grade—just to "see where everyone is at"—I had to leave the room to throw up before each one.

Then one morning she sat at the reading table pressing her hands against the sides of a stack of paperbacks until each copy of *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* was perfectly aligned with the one beneath it. Before I could raise my hand to go throw up again, she called my name. She called me first, even though my last name starts with P.

Then she called Kimbra, and Kiri, and Donald, and Hanna, and Linus, and Chuey.

I loved the naked envy on the faces of the kids who hadn't been called, and the horror on their parents' faces when they heard I had been. That was enough, at first. But then came the books and the questions Mrs. Matsui asked about the books. And the way she wanted us to disagree with her and with each other. I never loved anything about school as much as I loved Reading Group A.

Everyone in Reading Group A went to college except for Kiri, who got pregnant senior year and went straight to work at Big Save, and me. I made some noise about community college, but mom was getting older, and her golf course guy hadn't made the scene yet, and our meals had become mostly ramen or rice with little bits of this and that tossed in.

We needed money, and I knew how to get it. So I did.

Now Mrs. Matsui, when she runs into me at Big Save, looks past me into the distance, as if we never had those amazing conversations about Captain Nemo or *The House of Dies Drear*.

Kiri and I have stayed close. Most of the others got jobs in Honolulu or on the mainland after college—I see them around at Christmas time. We wave and smile. Kimbra got her degree and came back. She waves and smiles, too. She throws terrific parties, or so I hear. Kiri gets invited, but not me.

Kimbra works as PA for some celebrity with a house in Kilauea. Which means when the celebrity's arrival is imminent, she stocks the kitchen, makes sure the Range Rover is tuned up and the tank is full, orders the flowers, confirms that the sheets and towels and things I probably can't even imagine are all fresh and ready. She schedules the airport pickup, the golf rounds, the massages and spa treatments. And when the celebrity leaves, Kimbra makes sure the fridge is empty, the Range Rover is tarped, the pool is covered, the house cleaned, the lanai furniture cushions stored away. She doesn't do these things herself, I've been made to understand. She coordinates the doing of them by others. For this coordination, according to Kiri, she gets paid a shocking amount of money.

Good for her. She's smart to earn. My mom's grandparents came here from the mainland with money to burn. And they burned every dollar. They built two houses. Because they were not

imaginative people, they called the inland one Mauka (mountain) and the beachfront one Makai (ocean). When their inheritance dwindled, mom's parents sold Makai. So now there's just Mauka. The roof leaks. The stilts on the weather side are slowly rotting. The house kneels toward the ocean, like it's bowing toward a distant Polynesian ancestor. Some wet season not too far in the future it will probably keel right over.

Paradise, it turns out, is perpetually damp, mildewy and full of dry rot. But in the beautiful house behind me, and in the house Kimbra manages, the sheets are always dry and crisp. The towels smell as fresh as spring meadows.

I stand—no hands, because I can gracefully rise from the ground without them—and roll up my beach mat.

You never carry a beach chair. Not just because they're expensive—the good ones—but because you are not a pack horse. And because a chair hides your body, which entirely defeats the purpose of you being here, in front of this fancy house. No towel, because towels fill up with sand which must be shaken out—a matronly action that evokes scolding children for tracking dirt through the house. Your straw mat sheds sand the second you lift it off the ground. You bend at the waist as you roll it up and let whoever is watching get a good look at your lovely ass. You tuck the roll under your arm and amble up the beach as if you have all the time in the world. Which you do.

If you felt someone watching, you come back the next day—same time—and do it all again.

That's usually when he'll come out. Ask if you're "native." This is not the moment for a history lesson. There are shockingly few natives left on these islands, but these men don't come here to learn about things like that.

I have dark hair and a year-round tan, but I am completely haole. Any local would never think otherwise. No going into that. All he means is did I grow up here. "I grew up right down the road," I lie. My mom couldn't have afforded anything near this beach. But I spent plenty of time at Len's, and I gesture vaguely in the direction of his house.

"Beautiful," he says. Which could mean the place, or which could mean me. And that's when I know I'm in.

A few days later he informs me that his wife and kids have left for Maui—her parents have a condo there. He’s hanging back though. He needs the quiet for a deal he’s working on.

You never ask questions about the deal. A: you’re supposed to be a break from their routine. B: they’re sure you couldn’t understand it. When they’re sure about something, they’re happy, which is how you want them. A happy man, even if his happiness is an illusion, is a generous man.

A wife in Maui means expensive dinners out. It means modeling dresses and bikinis for him at the boutiques in Princeville. It means scrambled eggs—they are all so proud of their scrambled eggs; an egg is just an egg, but you can ooh and aah with the best of them—and coffee on the lanai. It means you can use the classes left on his wife’s Pilates punch card if you want.

There will be gifts. Gifts are the point. This is mutually understood. Express your gratitude but don’t act too blown away. Make him feel good when he gives you things, but never let him see your need. Needing is not sexy. Needing is messy. Thank him in a calm, low voice. Slowly extend your hand, angled to accent the delicacy of your wrist, and accept the offering of the moment. Bring the gift gracefully to your lips, your heart, wherever it is you’d like him to direct his gaze.

I tuck the punch card into my waistband—watch his eyes follow it as I take another sip of coffee. He’s golfing later, he says, so maybe I could take a class then. “Sure,” I say. “I’ll do that.” They like to keep you occupied. They don’t want you at loose ends, stretching and twisting on some other beach in front of some other guy’s rental.

Some gifts can be exchanged for cash later. Others must be used as intended. I put on my best gear and go to the Pilates class. The woman at the desk scrutinizes the card and its star-shaped punches. “I don’t remember you,” she says, “and I remember everyone who comes here.” She’s the little sister of someone I went to high school with—I actually do remember everyone—and she’s not quite certain if I’m who she thinks I am.

People talk about me. The same way they used to talk about my mom. I know what they say. But I don’t have a trust fund like Kimbra. And I don’t want to clean vacation houses or stock shelves at Big Save. Or rent out snorkel gear. Or any of that shit. I want to go

the beach and eat nice meals and enjoy eggs and coffee on fancy lanais. I want to try on pretty dresses and have someone else pay for them. I want to be touched by men who think my body and my skin are amazing, who make worshipful noises as I slide between their crisp, dry rental house sheets.

This life comes with an expiration date. My mom is a restaurant hostess now, and she goes home to a boyfriend who mows the greens on the golf course. He's nice. She's happy. "I got it all out of my system when I was young," she likes to say. Also: "Why would you settle down unless you didn't have a choice?"

The receptionist's fingertips go white, she's pinching the card so firmly. Like I might snatch it back from her. I shrug. "My friend went to Maui, and she had some classes left. But if it's a problem . . ." She punches another star in the card and reluctantly releases it back to me.

I've taken Pilates classes before. I incorporate the more attractive moves into my beach routine. In flush moments, I've paid my own way. But usually a guy treats me. The other women in the studio can tell—like it's a scent I give off—that I don't really belong there. They shift their mats away from mine, wary.

That night my mom seats the two of us at one of the better tables in her restaurant. She talks up the specials, tells him they're running low on the seared tuna—this is her way of letting me know she'll save me one. She unfolds his napkin and offers him a long look at her cleavage as she drapes it across his lap. After the seared tuna comes a shared dessert—only a tiny bite for me, thanks—and a final scotch for him. Then Mom slides the bill in front of him. She turns and winks at me, the only moment of recognition between us. Even our waitress, who's known me all my life, doesn't give me away. But she'll be talking in the kitchen when she thinks my mom can't hear. "It's such a shame," she'll say. "She was so smart in school."

That night you have another drink back at his rental, and then a couple more. He puts on music and you dance. He's a good dancer. You never expect it with these guys, but they occasionally surprise you. He knows where to put his hands and how to guide you into a rhythm and before long you are on the fluffy rug in the living room, and he's taking off your top, and the drink is swirling in your head, and he says, "I just want to feel you. Really feel you." And you want to

really feel him, too, so you say yes. Yes to everything. And it's great. It's the best you've had in a long time. And since he's leaving soon, you let him know that it's the best you've had in a long time. And this is a mistake, because when you say your final goodbyes, there's no gift card, no special piece of jewelry, no little something to remember him by. He thinks he's already given you the gift of a lifetime.

Which, it turns out, he has.

The responsible thing to do is get a test. I'm in the parking lot at Big Save by seven a.m., right when it opens. But there's Kiri, dodging puddles as she runs for the door. She sees me and waves, opens her eyes wide at me as if to say, "Rain!" and "What are you doing here so early in the morning?"

I wiggle my phone at her, my eyes saying back, "Yeah, I know," and "Oops. Gotta go."

I'll come back later when, hopefully, someone else is working the till.

The swell is up, and Kiri's such a surf ho, I was sure she'd drop the kids with her mom and call in sick. But you can only do that so often. I briefly consider heading to Foodville, but Foodville means tourist prices, and I can't float that this month. I can't even float enough gas to drive down to the Safeway in Kapa'a. Which would be the best place. Although even there, I'd probably see someone I know.

Subtract out the tourists and it's a small island—all of us up in each other's business.

Where can I go on my last gallon of gas? What will I do with myself today? It's a Saturday—turnover day—so pickings will be slim. But you never know. No point in doing my beach routine until people are up and about though. Maybe Jillia will share the bounty from whatever house she's cleaning. But checkout's not til 10 or 11, so I've got time to kill.

Just then Paolo raps on my window. "Hey, girl, what're you doing here so early?" Paolo runs the Brazilian food cart, even though he's not Brazilian. The food cart people start early. Really, almost everything starts early here, so he shouldn't be surprised to see me. Everyone's trying to catch a wave or get in a swim before work. I do these things too, even though I don't exactly keep standard hours. Work starts when I want it to start. Sometimes it starts while I'm out

for a morning jog around the golf course, dressed in my best Lululemons and my too-revealing-to-be-supportive sports bra.

“You hungry?” asks Paolo. And yes, I realize I am. He fries me some plantains. I dip into my precious cash to treat him to a coffee from one of the other carts. “No coffee for you?” he asks. I lie and tell him I’ve had my daily quota.

Later, I sit at a breakfast bar watching Jillia empty out the refrigerator in her first house of the day. “You need any mustard?”

If you know someone who cleans rentals, you never have to buy mustard or ketchup—there’s an endless supply of barely touched bottles free for the taking. Also the dregs of chip bags and cereal boxes, of liquor and wine bottles. Partial six-packs of soda and beer, half limes and half lemons, and hit-or-miss containers of take out. I’m not proud—if it smells okay, I’ll happily eat it. Usually. But lately, I confess to Jillia, nothing smells good. Lately I’m having trouble keeping down even the blandest food. Just the smell of scrambled eggs and coffee would have me puking over the edge of the most beautiful lanai.

“I thought you had an implant,” says Jillia. She was the sharpest girl in my grade. Not the best student, not Reading Group A material, but she never misses a trick. “Paolo said you were at Big Save bright and early this morning, but you didn’t go in. He said you looked off, and he’s right.”

So this is what they’ll all be talking about now. Like mother, like daughter. My mom got knocked up when she was twenty-one. And here I am, perilously close to thirty, more than old enough to know better, following in her footsteps. I sometimes wonder when my expiration date will kick in, and today I think it’s more likely a matter of months than years. Maybe I should start applying for restaurant jobs. Maybe I should ask Mom’s boyfriend if he has any younger friends on the greens crew.

“It’s pretty old,” I say, probing the ridge beneath my skin. “I’ve been meaning to get it taken out.”

Jillia drops a half loaf of bread and a stick of butter into her cooler and puts her hands on her hips. “Well, girl, what now?”

I sigh and push the takeout container further down the breakfast bar, away from my sensitive nose.

“You should talk to Kimbra.”

I laugh. I haven’t talked to Kimbra in years.

“Seriously. Kimbra knows how to hook things up.”

I shake my head. I know how to hook things up myself. I’ve done it before, and pretty much assumed I’d need to do it again someday, seeing as I’m lax about things like replacing my implant. “I’m keeping it,” I say. Out loud and to someone else, so it must be true.

Jillia doesn’t respond. Maybe she disapproves. Or maybe she simply has to keep moving, keep cleaning. She has another house to clear by 4 pm. The most time-consuming thing is the laundry. The dryer buzzes. “I’ll get it,” I say. I start the towels and put clean sheets on a bed, and prepare to explain that I want to be a mom, and I know how do my job and raise a kid. My mom did just fine by me, after all. And I’ll do even better. If my kid wants to be in Reading Group A, or whatever, I’ll help her make that happen. But Jillia isn’t looking for an explanation. I return just as she finishes mopping the kitchen, and, as if no time has passed, she says, “I thought you might. All the more reason to talk to Kimbra.”

“For what? Advice about having a kid?” Kimbra is single and childless and has never shown much interest in me.

But Len has. I flash to the two of them, lying on her wet towel at Moloa’a. Talking intently. About me?

Jillia shrugs as if it’s not her place to say, and I decide I’d rather catch some waves than watch her vacuum the carpets.

The swell has died and the waves are shitty, but I do my best. When I get back to my car and fish my phone out of the glove compartment, there’s a message from Mom. “Hi honey. I ran into Kimbra yesterday. She wants to talk to you.”

Absurd. The last time Kimbra talked to me was shortly after graduation when she gave me some lame excuse for not inviting me to her summer luau. But we both knew the real reason why. I was already in the game.

“I’m expanding,” Kimbra says. She finally called me directly and invited me to lunch, which means I’ve joined her at the picnic table in front of Paolo’s food cart. “Referrals,” she spirals her fork in the air, indicating skyrocketing demand for her services. She needs someone to help her manifest the many luxuries that must be manifested whenever one of her clients aims a private jet toward our little island. That someone must be reliable, discreet, and smart.

“Len suggested you. And I thought, right! Reading Group A!” She holds out a fist and I obligingly bump it with my own. When I don’t lunge at her offer (needing isn’t sexy, needing is messy), she stifles her surprise and gives me a week to think about it.

A day later she calls and tells me the job will, naturally, come with an array of benefits, including, should I ever need it, maternity leave.

Two days later, Mom calls and talks about how much it would mean to her if we could afford to fix up Mauka. How, if I didn’t want to live there myself anymore, we could rent it out. Have Jillia manage it.

Three days later, Len calls. “Take the job, kiddo,” he says. “It’s the right play.”

Everyone on the island is in on it. They’re blocking all the other exits and channeling me toward this single remaining door, which might as well have “Opportunity” painted on it in neon letters. Once I walk through it, they can all applaud Kimbra for rescuing me.

I inspect myself in the mirror every morning. I’m not showing yet, but for the last two weeks my beach routines have landed zilch.

Mrs. Matsui used to tell us to make the most of our opportunities. She assumed that Reading Group A was just the first of many that would come our way.

Opportunities don’t always look the way you think they will. Also, you can’t eat pride. So I call Kimbra and say yes. She offers a salary which surpasses my expectations, but for form’s sake, and because I’m not an idiot, I counter with a higher number, to which she agrees. Then she says she’s putting the signing bonus (the signing bonus!) in the mail right away.

I walk around Mauka wondering how much mold lurks beneath the carpets—those will all have to be pulled up—and what it will cost to replace the stilts and repair the roof. When the signing bonus arrives, I pay all the bills with red “final notice” stamps on them and then decide it’s time to buy that test and confirm what I already know to be true.

On my way out of Big Save, my test safely hidden in a brown paper bag, I run into Mrs. Matsui. She has her canvas shopping totes slung over one arm, and she casts a disapproving glance at my paper bag. Behind her, her very fit, handsome son is asking do they need a

cart. Eric, I remember. He was a senior when I was a freshman. More of a jock than an Honors English kind of guy — possibly just to push his mother's buttons. He's recently back from the mainland, where he did something in tech. According to Paolo, he took a big payout and now he's home. Consulting. Which, since you can do it from anywhere, why not from paradise?

A family of tourists dithers in the store entrance. The rest of us, who need to be particular places at particular times, roll our eyes at one another and edge past them. The gap for edging past is narrow, which means Mrs. Matsui must either speak to me or make a show of being rude to me.

"Well, look who it is. I'm so pleased to see you," she says. All smiles. Her son is all smiles, too, behind her, where she can't see him looking me up and down.

"I hear you're going to be working with Kimbra. Such a great opportunity. Reading Group A girls sticking together!"

"Yay, Reading Group A," I say with a little ironic fist pump.

Eric laughs and winks at me. Mrs. Matsui purses her lips and hurries past me into the store. Her son follows, still smiling, giving me another once-over before he joins her in the produce area. I watch for a minute. He doesn't turn around to look at me again, but that's okay. I know the closest beach to Mrs. Matsui's house. I know where to find him.

Flipbooks

Mark Henderson

We're not so much moving
as repeatedly manifesting—

born and dying in rapid succession
under boredom's thumb,

reincarnated as different poses
from the same ol' paper.

We dare hold ourselves to yesterday and tomorrow
beneath the shade of looming pages,

indignant at the backward stares of our pasts.

We come to each other
through the inky pain of the long undrawn,

aching to be what someone else wants
against the flattened fibers—

sped along in dizzy samsara
until we are praying for fire.

Customer

Mark Henderson

I would say I was on break
or it was my first day on the job,
but I don't know what any
of those words mean; I'm just *here*,

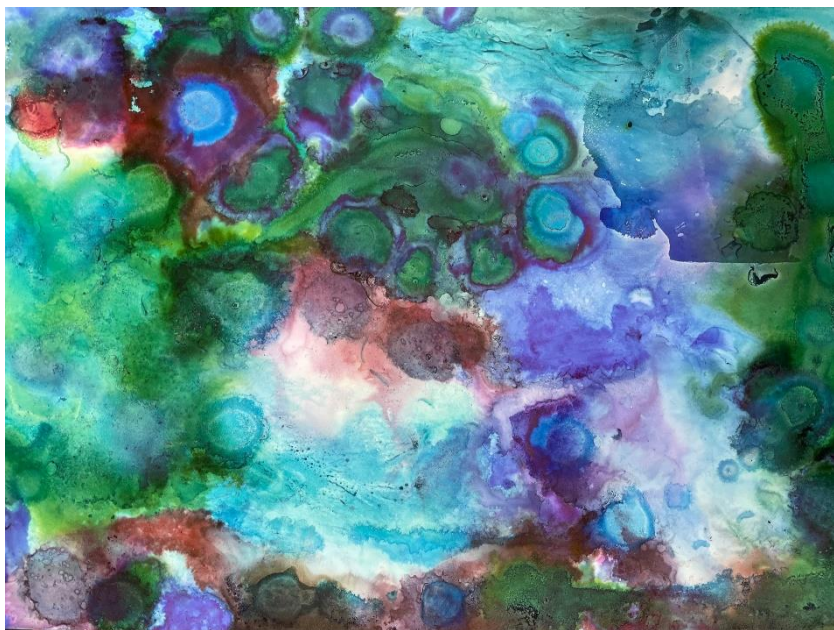
and I'd tell you what all of this is surrounding me
if I could tell the difference between sand and water.

Is this a boat or a desk?

A silence explodes, and
I see a dot far off as soon as I think about it.
It's growing, walking, threatening me
with the fact of it—

a Big Bang confronting
with the gravity of its universe,
looking for some sort of explanation.

And I don't know; I just work here.



Covid Color Set 2L / Cynthia Yatchman

Our Obit

Aarron Sholar

Quarterly Editor's Prize

(b.1999)

I would sit on the queen-sized bed in the guest room, dressed in a pair of pajama pants and a long t-shirt. The bed faced a simple mirror and a dark wooden bookshelf, which held an endless number of books to pick from each night. One day, mom brought me a book that had a magenta sleeve, maybe with some yellow as well, with a picture of a young girl on the front. Mom sat beside me and began to explain what the doctor had said about me being an early bloomer. She explained the process of puberty, what would happen, and that it's normal. She asked me if I had questions before bed, and she happily disproved the utterly confused question *of does a hole show up in my side and just bleed? Will it close up after?*

In the seventh or eighth grade, I asked my mom

how to shave my legs, like all the other middle school girls had begun to do. I imagine her face lit up as she explained the process to me: how you should lather your legs up with soap, go against the way the hair falls to be sure you get it all, *but be careful* she warned me, *it'll get addicting—you'll want to get every last hair.* I probably smiled back at her, nodding, trusting her words of experience. I still hear her words every time I shave my face.

Mom also read non-puberty books to me on that bed. When I was even younger, before I could read reliably, she showed me her favorite book series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. They felt and looked old, they even *smelled* old, but I nestled beside her on that bed as she'd read the chapter for the night. She never read in silly voices for different characters, as some parents might; instead,

she just used her own voice. I'd watch her flip every browning page, each one releasing more of the book's relaxing, albeit ancient, odor. Some nights I never wanted her to stop reading—this was our connection, books. I was the only sibling out of the three of us who actually liked them.

Mom would stand in the kitchen every Thursday night as she washed dishes and cleaned up post dinner. She had her drying towel in one hand, a plate in the other, being dried, and a green and yellow spelling book on the granite countertop in front of her. She goes down the list of vocab words for that week, protruding them at me with her voice: *definition, exempt, discipline!* I'd write all ten on my loose-leaf paper for her to check afterwards. If I got any wrong, she'd have me verbally spell out every word on the list back to her instead of writing them. If I got them all right during our practice, I could go play video games.

Mom drove my sister and I to McDonald's every month or so for a treat. We'd actually go into the building and not just through the drive

thru, as she knew this was more exciting to us. I got the same meal every time, six-piece chicken nuggets with a boy toy. I'd peel the semi-hard skin away, eating it before consuming the pale meat, all while playing with the *Narnia* Happy Meal toy I'd gotten this time. This series of toys had ended before I was able to collect all of them, so my mom dug through eBay to purchase the rest of them. After a few weeks, I could reenact the rising of Aslan properly, over and over.

Mom eventually got me my own, newer *Narnia* book set; this set came in a sleek box with shiny, gold lettering and a picture of the Dawn Treader on each side. The books were sleek too, the covers featuring reimaged pictures of series events, such as battles or major characters. This time, I read through them in my own voice. While I loved the stories, I was more so fascinated by them because mom loved them. I see now that I wanted to be closer to her—to not only see *why* she loved these books for myself, but to see a part of *her* in them.

(d. 2015)

In my junior year of high school, I stopped shaving my legs. Come the Spring, my cargo shorts displayed my leg hair to the whole school. My mom's once wide smile from those years ago was gone as she drove off to my sister and I's weekly music lessons without me. It was the hair. If I wouldn't wear pants, I wouldn't leave the house, is what I understood it as. From the front window, I watched as my mom sped away in the minivan. My violin sat beside me as I wondered what she told my violin teacher. Maybe I'd come down with a cold, maybe I'd injured myself somehow. I decided that I *was* not to be seen.

I sat on the loveseat, a pillow on each end; my mom sat in front and to the right of me, my gender therapist in front and to the left. My mom held a folded-up sheet of loose-leaf paper, the one I'd spent a week scribbling all over; this sheet of paper revealed to her that I was a boy. She had a smile on her face as I locked eyes with her, but her words said the opposite: *I'm not going to call you that.* My hands,

which I had forced under my thighs, began to sweat, my skin sticking together. Although she knew why I had stopped shaving, I was still not allowed in public with those legs. They were still the most disrespectful thing she had ever encountered.

Maybe a year later, my therapist suggested I offer a book to my mom, to help her understand what I was going through; that book was *Some Assembly Required*, the one I had read just after realizing that being transgender was possible and a legit medical thing with a diagnosis and everything. That book gave me hope for a future, and I wanted it to do the same for her. I left it on her desk with a note on top of it. Not a day later, it was on her bookshelf, unread—the note removed.

Still, I decided that I wanted to ask my mom to come with me to my hormone therapy consult with me. I walked into the kitchen, the struggling starting up again. Mom tended to do this thing where if she didn't seem to want to come to terms with something, she'd just ignore it, hoping it would eventually go

away. My arms rested on the green granite where that vocab book once sat: *Mom, can you come to my consult with me next week?* She stopped doing the dishes, the clang of plates and silverware sudden under the water of the sink. She didn't even turn to look at me: *No, it's just sad.* Her voice seemed to falter some, distressed. There's silence. And then: *This is important to me, please?* She begins washing again. *No, it's not important, it's just sad.* I left.

A week later, my mom sat in the examination room with the doctor and I as we discussed hormone replacement therapy, going over all the ins and outs. The room was sterile in every way—the smell of alcohol wipes stung our noses; the air we breathed was stale; our voices seemed to echo within the room; the paper sheet I sat on felt extra paper-y, more intense. My mom sat in the corner, her arms crossed against her chest and her eyes never meeting the doctor's. But, she asks—*Does she have to do this for the rest of her life? How does it affect fertility?* She may have been unhappy, sad, as

she'd said in the kitchen, but she was here, asking questions. She was present, at the least. And I appreciated that.

The day I was to have my double mastectomy, my mom and I both zombied out of bed at 4 a.m., got dressed, and wandered into the car. I remember laying in that moving hospital bed, the soft fabric of my gown brushing against my body; it reminded me of why I was there—these breasts didn't belong, they caused too much pain. My mom came into the “room,” really just an open space divided up by swinging curtains. She sat beside me, but I can't remember if she held my hand or not. I had to ask her for a hug before I was wheeled away. She gave me one, telling me *I'll see you soon, I'm going to get some coffee.* I told her that was a good idea; a nurse recommended some nearby coffee places.

On the car ride home, she told me that that hospital, George Washington in DC, was the one she was also born in, all those years ago. Isn't that funny? My mom was born in the same place a part of me died.

After my surgery, my mom was not necessarily happy to help with recovery, but she was *there* to help. She collected items off kitchen shelves for me that I couldn't reach, she stood beside me in every bathroom in the house, emptying my drains into a red solo cup (*yum*) before dumping the bodily sludge into the toilet before flushing. She made sure I was taken care of, but—

There were rules for my new body around the house: out of the shower, I still had to wear my towel wrapped around where my breasts would be; I wasn't allowed to be shirtless in front of anyone else in the house. I felt like I couldn't bring it up in any way. It was over, done with, so I had to ignore that it ever happened too, just like mom did. Regardless of her help, I was still she, I was still [redacted]. But this went on for years, so I'd get used to it; so much so that I'd ignore my own feelings of fake love. of rejection.

(b. d. 2021)

Finally, I sent my mom a letter. The letter detailed my feelings from the last couple of years: I appreciated her newfound

support; I was originally OK with my original name being used around the house; I was fine with being a *she* at home—but it wasn't OK anymore. Those words held memories, memories like being held home from school due to my unshaven legs, like my mom telling me how sad it is what I'm doing. I wanted to be that little girl in bed with my mom, reading peacefully, but a boy—I wanted that relationship back.

Mom called me on my way to work: *so I got your letter* — and we talked about it. I could hear her smile come back as she spoke:

Why didn't you just tell me that you were so upset? I didn't think you cared.

Do you want me to call you Aarron? Yes, dear God, please.

...

I love you, Aarron.

I was back in that bed with her. She was reading *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the part where one of the men at

the table exclaimed “mustard please!” for some reason I don’t remember, but that was my favorite part of the book (I was very upset it was not in the movie). I asked her to read it again, so she started the page over. I’d read this scene to

myself a couple of years later. Maybe I should dig that collection out and read it through again.

(b. 2021 —)

She hasn’t messed up my name since.

Only Water

Julie Esther Fisher

Rigel 2022 Winner

She would sometimes bring him food in the tub. Feed him with her naked arms. He splashed around in the water, eating a cream puff, her hand spooning it into his mouth, a migrating finger on his chest if he spilled.

His mother had just sudsed up the tub. Rainbow bubbles stood on the surface and he splashed them, poked them, watched them fly upwards and drift back down. His mouth was filled with small white first teeth. He had not yet been washed, the water was pristine, and the woman with her large hands leaned over the rim of the tub that separated them. He caught hold of a bubble and held it on his outstretched palm with a mouth and eyes of delight. He held the bubble out and slid it on to her palm. It slid on its little river of what flowed from him to her, easy, without resistance, and stood there quivering.

“Gloria, kindly tell me what is the meaning of this?”

His father: arid, his voice the clack of two dry bones.

He brought an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her.

“He won?” she said. “My boy won the Ivory Soap competition? His face will be on every billboard between here and San Francisco.”

His father cracked his knuckles.

“Gloria, you have lowered us. Made us common. People will say we needed the money. You’ve brought shame on us.”

“But look at him. Look at your son, Henry—that face.”

“We’ll write to them. Tell them we changed our minds.” He shoved paper and pen at her. “Take it down, Gloria—Dear Sir—”

“It’s too late, Henry. Didn’t you read it? The billboards are already in production. It says so here.”

She put down the pen and paper, turned toward the tub.

“You’re playing a game with the soap?” she said to the little boy.

Beaming, she held out a cream puff.

“Put that down,” his father said. “Put it in the bath.” He too looked at the boy. “Now eat it.”

“But there’s soap in there, Henry.”

“Then let him eat that, too.”

“Henry, please--”

“You’re turning him into a Jew sissy.”

He stood there. Stern. Seething. Knuckle-cracking.

His mother leaned over and when she and the boy rubbed noses her bosom hung inches from his nose. He gazed deep into the crevasse. The sight of it wet some strange appetite. His mother fed him, delighting in the act that contravened her husband.

Now, in other humid vapors, the grown man Clifford wants to melt the fat from his bones. To become that boy. A bubble-producing sack of happy skin in a room of twos. Two breasts perched on the tub rim. Two hands slapping the water, sending bubbles airborne. Two pairs of eyes to see it all: the bar of soap sliding around the back of him, brushing by his buttocks, slipping between his legs. Ivory soap. *His* soap. He thinks of the little face with its halo of curls on all the billboards. The three of them saw it everywhere, and each time his father looked away, his face screwed with fury.

The memory is lodged somewhere in Clifford’s fat, if only he could feel himself beneath it all, beneath the tire rings around his belly.

Profiteroles sit on the side of the tub. He dips a foot in, holding on to the metal bar. Tears squeeze from his eyes.

The last bath. Alone . . .

He’d known women. Asked them each, to a one, to step into his mother’s shoes. Never wanted sex with them. Only wanted the water, the washing hand, the food, the glittering eyes that drank him in.

He gazes over his blubber, trying to join these sights with the little boy that still splashes within him. He loves that boy. Or does he just love *being* that boy? There’s a difference, he tells himself. No matter how big he got, he was never big enough to fill that bath alone.

Cream puffs? In the tub?

In the warm water the cream floated, the same color as the soap.

Sweet. Bitter.

“Never let anyone see you like this,” she said, smothering him in a towel and pressing him to her breast. “Don’t cry now.” She pushed

him from her and gazed at him with eyes as calculating as a shark's. "You're my beautiful boy. You won. You're my winner. My Ivory Soap baby."

He *had* cried, but it felt good. Good to eat the food, the sloppy mess slithering out the gaps between his few tiny teeth, the swallowing gulps between the gasps that shook his body. He didn't know why it should feel good when he was doing something so horrible, when the tastes had gone from sweet to bitter, scouring the insides of his mouth. They were both still here. His father as tall and rigid as a telephone pole, she kneeling, pink and dimpled with mystery in places that his seeing made him shudder. What they shared was as dangerous as the journey of that single bubble he had passed from his palm to hers. A covenant. Theirs alone. His body could feed her too.

Humidity. Steam. Taps on full. Memory pouring out.

His last day here in the Squire Hotel. Too dangerous for such a beast to get into the tub. This is what he tells himself, though he's been eyeing it all week, feeling the bubbling up of some glorious ache he's been harboring all these years. The bathtub? At the sight of it the strange pain pulls at him.

His father hid a stash of Playboys under the bed.

What was wrong with Her—she, who hung over the side of the tub? He, the little boy, looked in these magazines, poured over them, yet was there a single woman as beautiful as she?

At the foot of the mountain of his tummy, his dangly lies slumbering. He can barely feel it—this part of himself—and cannot see it for what lies in its way. But he recollects the stirrings from long ago that warmed the creature from its hibernation. He feels these vague stirrings now.

It happens by accident, the food coming to the wrong room—the sweets trolley clattering with silver platters of profiteroles, strudel, gateaux. The knock comes out of the blue. The trolley is wheeled in and Clifford, thrusting his hand into his pocket for a few bills, thanks

the boy and closes the door. A moment later he calls the boy back. He looks deep into the boy's solemn eyes.

"I didn't order this," he says. "There's been a mistake—but then, I don't believe in mistakes. Do you know that when I was a little boy. . ." He looks straight at the boy, who shifts awkwardly. Occupational hazard, Clifford imagines, entering guests' rooms, listening to their ravings. You must hear the strangest things.

"I'm sorry, son, I'm making you uncomfortable. I just need to tell someone . . ."

He looks more probingly at the boy—at his face, his skin.

"How old are you, son?"

"Sixteen, Sir."

Clifford's eyes linger on his. "Nobody's sixteen. Sixteen is a fiction—an impossibility . . ." He shakes his head. "Do you know that when I was your age—"

He's been drinking and yes, he *is* a little drunk.

"—I was beautiful. Such a beautiful boy. I don't know what . . ."

He indicates his present body and starts to leak tears. So help him, he is bawling his eyes out. He can see the boy wondering whether the tips will be worth it.

Pointing to the sweets trolley, Clifford says, "You see that? You see what's on there? You want to eat sweets, but sometimes you can't. Sometimes you just have to eat...soap."

In the silence, the sound of the tub filling.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is for a man like me to get clean? How dangerous it is? Do me a favor, son. Stay with me. Make sure I come out. I don't want to be alone. I need to fix myself up. I have a big day tomorrow."

He is spewing tears.

Mother and son play with the bar of soap in the tub. He tries to catch it. She sends it up between his legs. Oh, but it tickled his dangly, as she called it. Now she was reaching in there and his eyes were wide with delight, her fingers brushing by it. They laughed. He did not know what delighted him exactly—bubbles, soap, food, breasts, laughter, the humid atmosphere? It was a puzzle. What sent his father in? A cold

gush of air cutting through the dense intimacy. His father interposed between them. She got up. Not immediately. Not at first.

His father never sets foot in here. He is always out there, chair bound, reading his newspaper, smoking his pipe, pretending not to think of his stashed magazines. So why does he come in now and talk to her so gruffly? Why does his father look at him with such disdain? His skin hurts when his father looks at him. A fire in his father's eyes incinerates everything. Not even this water can put it out. Poor boy. She feeds him, but he is her meal. With every word, look, touch, he knows this at two, three, knows it more surely than something known at twenty, thirty, sixty, seventy. He wanted to say Daddy get me out of here. His father—God, how he loved the man for making him eat soap!

“Do me a favor, son,” Clifford says to the room service boy. “Stay here till I get out. There’s dosh in it. Lots.”

“But, Sir, there’s all the other rooms to serve. And Mr. Carter, he’ll have my guts for—”

“Life is full of Mr. Carters, son. I need you more than he does.”

Looking askance at Clifford, the boy says, “You ain’t gonna slit your wrists in there, are you?”

“No.” Clifford smiles ruefully.

They are silent a moment. Then the boy says, “Mr. Carter. He’s very particular. Last year he won room service of the year award.”

Clifford nods. “Once, a long time ago, I won something, too.”

“Cool,” the boy says breezily. “What?”

“What, indeed. That’s the question.”

And now he steps into the bathtub, and the hulk of him, naked and quivering, stands here, afraid to lower himself in.

He looks over his body. Wave upon wave of the flesh that is him. Or is it? He can see the little boy, feel him here, flailing in the torrent. Save me, he calls. Or does he? No, worse, he says nothing. He is flat now, a photograph...no more.

The tub is filling up, yet he dare not do more than sit naked on its edge, holding on, his toe swirling the contents so that the waves spanking the sides fill him with a kind of aching delight. He remembers

that she used to do this, though with her hand, swirl the water and they would play a game of find the soap. He remembers with the same aching delight the perfect diamond-ringed hand moving through the steam and coming toward him, coming down in slow motion, as if she were conscious of another layer of meaning that now required this agonizing slowness when all he wanted to do was get on with the game. He would never forget that hand, his anger and disgust for the betraying slowness of its journey. Diamonds sparkled on the polished fingers. And when the hand broke the surface of the water, he was aware of a certain feeling of corruption. She swirled the water, thinking it would delight him, sending the Ivory soap slipping off between his legs and away. He slapped the water, this time not in delight, but in wordless indignation.

“Now, now, Cliffy, don’t make a fuss.”

Only the little hands could express the desolation at the turn in the water, the bittering of something sweet that no perfume of hers could cover up. She leaned in. He brought his knees up to his chest and curled his back, depriving her of a view of his anchor. He didn’t know why he did this, hid the birthmark, clearly it displeased her. He felt that they were both floating now, in peril, without destination. That was when his father came in. The Ivory was lost somewhere in the water. Yes, he *would* eat soap! Oh, how he wanted to! *Let* him wash his mouth out! *Let* him digest it! Undo the corruption, the loss. And somehow his father knew. Knew that he’d saved the boy. He couldn’t stand this—it wasn’t what he meant—*hadn’t* been when he marched into the bathroom and demanded to know “the meaning of this.”

Her hand crept up his back.

“Baby. Baby boy. Winner. Let me wash you.”

Wriggling away. It’s a game? Why did he feel afraid?

Smiling of the pink lips. She laughs again.

But he knows this is a warning.

What’s threatened? Why should he not wriggle away from the silver cascade she makes so hot? It hurts him! And her hand? Something scrubs his back. An alligator?

“When you are clean,” she says, “you can have this.” She holds up a fat cream puff. “Don’t cry, Mama’s little boy. What do you have to cry about? You’re a winner.”

Something is gone when the room clears. Like returning from a dream—bad or good, he cannot tell. He only knows that it is done—something, done. Is he crying only because it was so hot?

They agree on that reason.

The anchor is stamped on him. She draws her hand across it. Knives of pleasure slice through him.

He wees into the tub, holds on to the soap. She swirls her fingers in the water, creating what vortex into which he'll be sucked if he looks up at her now, laughs, does anything to delight her.

“Don't leave,” Clifford calls out to the boy waiting in the bedroom. “Not much longer now.”

Taps, tears, time—all run together.

Then comes the voice.

“Sir, are you all right?”

Clifford stands dripping over the bathroom floor.

“Don't worry, son, you'll soon have your dosh.”

“It isn't that, Sir. . .”

The door opens. Tears jump from Clifford's eyes. The boy's eyes widen with shock and horror at the sight of the quivering flesh. In spite of themselves, they rove over the body as eyes do at sight of a ghastly accident.

He knows that the boy will never forget this moment. Never forget it because he will never understand it. He feels sorry now for using him, for frightening him, confusing him.

“I wasn't always this way,” he says gently, letting the bar of soap slip from his hand. “I'm sorry. I'm frightening you. I'll cover myself up.”

A towel hangs from the dripping arm, but it is too small—what part of himself should he cover up? The chest with its fabulous tits, his belly that is not one but the rippling waves of many, or the wan genitalia that hang lifeless underneath. Useless. The boy has seen it all.

Clifford says, “Tonight I've subjected you to something you'll never forget. But I want to tell you why. You should at least know why.”

He knows that the boy waits and that his waiting is like the waiting for an ambulance after an accident. He wonders what to say? How to explain?

At length, he walks to the edge of the bed and sits down. He can feel the boy's eyes on him, rapt, bewildered.

"I want to tell you why, but I don't know how," he says simply.

The boy walks over to where the soap lies on the floor and picks it up. He doesn't know what he holds—doesn't know the meaning of it to the man who's dropped it, but it is a tender gesture from one so scared, it takes courage, like picking up some personal effect from the asphalt after the body's been thrown from the car.

"I knew who I was once. For a little while . . . I wasn't always like this. People didn't always look at me—the way you're looking at me now. Once--"

The boy lowers his eyes.

"No, no, son, don't look away . . . Once. . . But that was a long time ago now . . . If it wasn't for a picture—a single photograph taken long ago—I'd never believe it possible either. I'm trying to explain it to you," Clifford says when the boy looks up. "Because boys understand. But boys become men. And then they stop."

Afraid he might cry again, he lowers his eyes. He knows he has the boy's attention, totally and without qualification. He knows that something is happening between them. He knows that the boy feels it, too—feels that they have passed from some weird, potentially vulgar encounter to something mysterious, a story—something he might still be telling years from now.

Sometimes big things happen to little people and little things happen to big people. The thing is, sometimes the big people *are* the little people.

Now the boy walks over and covers the shivering body with the blanket he pulls from the bed. But it is the boy's presence that wraps Clifford in warmth. The fact that he is still here. Stays. Doesn't run away.

"I've wet your floor," is all Clifford can think to say.

"It's your floor, Sir," the boy replies. "Your room." He looks Clifford right in the eye. "But not to worry. It's only water."



Kearney Noir / Larry Hill

Rigel 2022 Runner-Up

Santa Corona

Michael Pearce

Rigel 2022 Runner-Up

1.

Sailing on my bicycle, my silent chariot,
 along streets my bike knows, has been
 a hundred times

but they're different now
 their colors are brighter
 their quiet quieter and
 the vigilant families that walk them
 glide by in crystal bubbles,
 I swerve wide arcs, speak soft hellos
 so as not to shatter . . .

these are not the same streets.

Familiar smells hang in the air we plunge through—
 the smoke of grilling beef
 the harsh perfume of fabric softeners
 the exhaust of a diesel 18-wheeler
 the pungent stink of frying fish
 the simmer of tomato-plantain-sausage-yucca
 the pitchy fragrance of fresh-cut fir—
 familiar smells now drawn with effort
 through a mask infused with the chlorine and sulfur
 of paper and the dank sour of my breath.

An old couple on the sidewalk,
 dark freckly faces on the move
 step lightly as if they were barefoot,
 and they are quiet, too intent to smile or nod,
 unlike the nearby parents and kids.
 I see them through your eyes now
 needless martyr (obscure and ubiquitous

tragic and foolhardy and absurd)
 I see fragile lives, shaky as fall leaves,
 matchflames under torn umbrellas
 I see . . .

I'm not sure what I see
 I try to see what's there and then some.

2.

You can't see dead saints, they are
 a presence close and intent
 you wonder if that ripple of shame
 or clarity is their celestial breath.
 A dark shimmer, a silent crackle
 that animates the air around you
 they arrive without summons
 loiter with smug abandon
 your prayers spread you open
 like butchered meat you become
 their ward, their project, their prey.

Santa Corona is in the neighborhood,
 a floral bloom, a waxy reptile scent,
 an expectation as before a ballgame
 or concert, she has no dimension
 but in a crowd, among the buzz
 and titter, she is the bond and
 roar she is the worry and awe.

Spirit and breath that animates,
 infectious smile, choral amen,
 exhalation of promise of resolve
 of resignation of compassion,
 a slow, anxious pant, a steer in
 a chute, not quite choosing
 where to go but going calmly
 and with a timeless comfort:
 you can't see viruses or dead saints.

3.

Drawn to the chicken factory
 the prison the old folks' home
 the mortuary the clinic the hospital
 drawn to the tomato sorter
 the handler of meat mail fruit garbage
 cash plastic bags and boxes
 to the hands the eyes the mouth
 the breathing lungs of the handler
 to the husband the children
 the parents the friends of the handler
 I sidle to snuggle with shudder
 under hands warm and sticky with
 the thick juice of desire
 oh people!

 people you are my destiny
 my calling my happy medium.

Drawn to the west side of town
 the tall tenements the sturdy bungalows
 of faded paint and spike iron fences
 sounds of Tupac Lauren Wu-Tang
 spill from grated windows
 defiance in a pumping meter
 you exhale a martyr's affinity
 for the tired, the hungry, the homeless
 yearning to breathe free
 knowing the blue flame under
 that cliché is pestilence the terror
 of pestilence the vigor the hunger of
 insatiable submicro purpose
 gone global gone
 hostile gone takeover.

Drawn to the teaming beach
 the sports arena the nightclub
 the concert hall the restaurant
 the slow parade the ardent protest

she is in the air she sticks around
awhile maybe longer maybe
migrates to another fertile field
another undawn in the overbelly
billowy bags she inspires she
incites to riotous fever pitch
she consumes with an untropy
that is beyond passion.

4.

I don't remember when she first arrived,
I wasn't home maybe, or slept,
or yanked the front door open to
receive a package. Maybe Grace,
my kid, snuck her in when I
was in the shower. She lives here now.

Lives and whispers, runs barefoot
round the block, dances on
the kitchen table, chews my sweets
mouth wide open
files my nails with a calloused sole,
takes off her mask and tells her story
with a salesman's wink and shake,
she's here until the experts say she's gone

and then she's here again.

5.

Don't touch me stranger
don't cross that line
your gifts are gift horses
your food is tainted
you people smell bad
clothe your face
remove your shoes
she has a stained aura
disinfect with holy water

quarantine at Ellis Island
you chinks with your flu
you wops with your diseases
you kikes you niggers you faggots
you huddled masses when
I touch what you have touched
I feel a fine damp dust spread awhirl
from my fingertips I feel
a tingling in my blood
this simmer in my lungs
takes on a grim weight

6.

My domain has expanded
to every corner of your life
my genome shed in pernicious bits
we enter the air you breathe your home
your water your conversations
your routines your eating habits
your tentative gait the way
you meet talk love sob
every ache cough sneeze worry
pulls you home to me

7.

I am a vacuum
I inhale I devour I plunder
I prey I dismember I consume
I engorge I digest and shit big
I contain lies that suck out
the valor of honesty
the balm of kindness
the leveling of facts
I contain the absence
of empathy generosity
compassion simple pity.

You elected me you can't
escape my words my decrees
every fart from my mouth
goes viral every twitch of my
infectious prick breeds pain
every tick contagious
every action murderous
I luxuriate in such fetid slime
without containment
I am communicable
I contaminate multitudes.

8.

Underneath her laugh
another tireless voice keeps
a new life burning.

9.

Who are you?
Italian, they say, married
to a Roman soldier
tromping through Syria
a century after your so-called savior.
A crypto-Christian who they say rushed
to comfort a Christian martyr
and plunged into the demented cruelty
that Romans visited on Christians
that Roman Christians visited on
the rest of us Jews Huns Mongols
heathens heretics scientists.
A teenage girl, they say, cursed
with passionate empathy
precursing martyrs of all stripes . . .
Who are you?

10.

Trillions of us and then some
you better learn our ways

You figured me out, farmgirl,
sorted grain and pulse you
cultivated like crazy
sniffing and sifting for
sugar starch and crumby bulk
you couldn't see the math
but found the method
unlocked the vault of my bounty
the gate to your majestic city

I'm the skinny one
if you want them melonic cells
go north I'm a red chili pepper
can you feel this tiny allele
this micro-cuz come to steal
thunder from that buzzy
mal-aerial bloodbug but hey
don't thank me from the
bottom of your anemic heart
this skinny sicko guy aint
so hale it aint all good baby
but it good enough
you *feel* me?

We find our way we adapt
we're in it for us and no
one else it's on you to figure
two and two then dash
like a sprinter with dense shins
and fast-twitch thighs
you're up against time and
multitudes that don't care

Trillions of us and then some
survive by sifting the shifting
codes the stubborn mutant chunks
that twist and claw from freak

to function to fiddle fight and
fuck you up

11.

The cool green-blue that clothes us
masks danger tedium dead sweat
the cruel math of risk . . .

The dry airy pulse of machine
that is your lung for now
your-last-breath, your-last-breath . . .

Automobiles, each its own cell
waiting dully hummly for some
dumb thing to climb inside . . .

Triage in parking lot tents
beds counted and coveted
bagged bodies stacked like sheaves . . .

A life saved and delivered
horizontal on its gurney limo
a wan smile to tired applause . . .

My chest, that chamber that refreshed
without effort, now boils hacks burns
in chronic sighs, *sus-pir*, *sussss-pirrr* . . .

My head the center of gather input
decipher intend respond control
now throbs boils grinds me big . . .

Tough fist crams hard plastic tube
through choking throat into chest
that burns struggles acquiesces . . .

He calls himself a long-hauler
you call yourself fighter
the press of time knows better . . .

My self contracts around me
some days beyond exhaustion
sometimes your body is your soul . . .

12.

Cars hum, trucks groan, bicycles slither,
we walk past the bakery the drugstore
the dead movie theater walk into
the market with its onions and oranges
its rice and beans chicken and broccoli
bread milk beer toilet paper
its invisible clouds of pregnant droplets
its workers basking in nasty air
some have left, most are still there for us.

You don't breathe like you used to
or smell or taste or step or think
you've been somewhere I haven't
maybe you have a story maybe
you survived with nothing to say.
Maybe we stand, a rotten fence between us
one of us hacking and aching in
this warm room on that frozen street.

Those old men and women waiting
in line, murmuring — have they been spared?
That package deliverer that chicken slaughterer
that short-order cook that hospital orderly
that old cop that grocery checker —
guess who's been granted immunity
or bought it for thirty shares of Amazon
guess how safe that makes them
guess when your turn will come
your turn to wheeze, boil, choke, croak,

your turn to savor the fruits of science
 the exorbitant gift that zooms in close
 plucks snippets of code the itty bitty bugs
 that fiddle with your micro nuts and bolts
 and make decisions final.

There is history and there is forgetting
 and here we stand, masters of both—
 ride this littered road that leads
 everywhere including a future without
 the choke of contagion with only a smoky
 memory of an orange and black masque.
 Maybe we're a peloton each hugging close
 to the one in front yet trying not to kiss
 that spinning wheel . . .

never trust
 metaphors about love or death.

She walks these streets not like a saint
 we're talking something else here
 her words follow the rhythm of her breathing
 and of her stubborn steps and
 history is the story of our infectious
 love of ourselves, each other,

we inhale.



The Weaver / Serge Lecomte

Rigel 2022 Finalist

Witch of Wals

Bryan Edenfield

Rigel 2022 Finalist

For some reason it has not trickled down to the man on the street that some physicists now are a bunch of wild-eyed, raving mystics. For they have perfected their instruments and methods just enough to whisk away the crucial venom and what stands revealed is the Cheshire's grin.

— Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

FIRE

I am a follower of the Witch of Wals.

I follow her on all the platforms. I subscribe to her newsletter and listen to her podcast. I bought her book when it came out last year through Chronicle Press. I don't usually fall for the hype, and I'm no social media maven. 40 Followers; 40,000 Followers: it makes no difference to me. I don't know an Influencer from a Flux Capacitor and can't tell my tweets from my toks. I'm not tech illiterate—my Office skills are topnotch—but the faces in my book are mostly default purple.

Maybe that's why she appeals to me. No one notices me. I've spent four decades cultivating invisibility. If I had the nerve, I'd make an excellent thief, but I lack the burning desire for danger. Give me nerve, please. Send a charge through my inert body. I don't mind if you charge for the charge; that only makes sense, considering the first law of thermodynamics. My credit is a vision of the future. But I can't feel my skin sometimes. The world glosses over me like a featureless thing, less than a breeze. I'm not quite numb—I can feel temperature, pressure—but certain tactile qualities allude me, the timbre of texture muted. Where is that vibrancy of life I hear so much about?

The Witch of Wals asks these same questions.

She has only 20.8 million followers online. She follows 4; I haven't bothered to see who. On a planet of nearly 8 billion people, 20.8 million equals only about one quarter of one percent of the whole. How much influence can she really have? That's less than the population of Beijing but very slightly more than the population of the New York metropolitan area. But her reach goes beyond her followers. Many of those 20.8 million people worship her fervently and share her teachings with messianic urgency. Even if that were not the case, would it matter? The 26 richest people in the world own as much as 3.8 billion poor people. Does it matter if a house cleaner in Kolkata knows nothing of the Witch, when prominent and wealthy entertainment moguls spread her gospel?

I'm not sure how I stumbled onto her work. The algorithm, right? The flow of energy harnessed and redirected via binary code. One has to wonder if the algorithm now aligns with god's will, syncs with the moral arc of the universe. Originally, they designed it to channel propagandistic content—ads, or worldviews—to those most likely to respond to it. That response need not be positive. We either swallow it or negatively react to it in a way beneficial to the status quo; either way, we do what they want. But over time, maybe the algorithm's logic evolves away from capitalism and towards a different cult of mystery.

It is a mystery cult, isn't it, the Cult of Capitalism? We're all prey to its whims, but only a select few are initiated into the inner sanctum, their status achieved by right of lineage. Occasionally, new money is admitted due to perhaps low birthrates amongst industrialized countries. I don't know; I'm just spitballin'. I don't fault Capitalism for aspiring toward spiritual status; it never made sense as a rational philosophy anyway. Fittingly, one wonders if this introduces a Hegelian antithesis into the supposed enlightened secularism of liberal economic ideology. If we worship mystery, how can our allegiance to a self-flagellating series of rules founded on rational certainty make any sense? That'd be sacrilegious! The professional Capitalist, pretending as if he didn't know, makes no claim that his sacred path is a path of mystery, but that's because he was born into the Inner Sanctum and to him sacred knowledge is banal. That doesn't seem like how a mystery cult should work. Maybe I've got this all wrong. Moving on.

My point here is that I'm perhaps not the kind of person that you'd peg for a follower of the Witch of Wals. But I am. And I'm going to go see her tomorrow.

EARTH

She's stationed near the produce, but accessible only via Aisle 9: Bath and Body. Her location ascribes to disobedient physics. To enter the cave, ascend the silver and black escalators towards the blue neon lights. There, you are greeted by an elder clad in blue robes. He ushers you toward avenues of sacrifice and bounty: a pound of my flesh, my labor, for a dozen rolls of paper towels. The busy sun beats down on the earth a frenzied energy, and the earth takes the fire and turns it into life. We dig into the earth and turn it back into fire: see it there on the walls sparkling; see it in your very own hands, buzzing and chiming; see it blinking across the skyline. We swallow the earth. With the energy, we grow food, we eat it, we swallow it more.

I wander through the illuminated valley, the procession of vegetables glittering beneath a constant spritzing of water vapor. I can't even comprehend the energy we've poured into this lettuce. The human body aches to transform the earth so that it may produce this lettuce. Our machines, our chemical inventions, manipulate the genomic composition of this lettuce, maybe. Our chemicals keep the pastures clean, chemicals forged in the fire of the earth, from the wet life of the earth.

These are the teachings of the Witch of Wals. There is no better home for her than here, amongst the products of the assembly line. Beyond, in a different indoor biome marked by dimmer lights and carpeted floors, home goods beckon, arranged in simulation of the Middle-American home. A chant drones over loudspeakers, a folk tune of static thumping weight, a real pop banger structured chorus chorus chorus chorus. What's this idol's name? It's on the tip of my tongue . . .

Just as I think I've remembered, a priest's voice booms with a subdued crackle and speaks in tongues a command that only the initiated can understand.

Part of me feels sick, moving down the white corridor, passing pictures of pure white teeth, chiseled bodies, intestinal ailments illustrated via red exclamation marks hidden within the aural body,

depictions of the earth's healing gifts that can be combined to give perfect bounce to our hair, perfect glow to our skin, perfect wit to our mind. Part of me feels sick in a way nothing here can cure, not the melatonin, not the aromatherapy treatments, not the rejuvenating ointments and balms. I feel sick like terrified. So many frozen eyes stare at me. Every other bottle or box has a face on it, smiling, staring. Why is everything so bright? I don't know why we associate the color white with cleanliness but I'm pretty sure our reasons are not pure. What is cleaner than darkness? Rich, black soil may be decayed matter, but it is the stuff of life. We are what happens when decayed matter is transformed. Forget that we are aging. Forget that we wither. Forget the nasty bugs that roost in our bodies, eating us, sometimes slowly, sometimes not. How fitting that I'm reminded, on my way to the Witch, of all of my impurities and imperfections. How fitting, this cardboard cut-out of a fitness celebrity and her sworn formula of ingestible dirt that keep her muscles articulate and her ugliness silent. She is the last thing I see before I cross the final threshold. I imagine, briefly, the magazines waiting for me on my way out of this place. I want out. I have regrets. I am unsettled.

I'd been mostly ignoring others within the temple, but that isn't possible now. I'm in a waiting room with a few dozen people. There is no coherent line and I desperately want there to be because it gives me anxiety, not knowing precisely where to stand. This is a test. Let go of my need for order. Embrace this enactment of sacred anarchy. Shove down that Pavlovian reaction, that indoctrinated thought, that this is all . . .

Study the faces. She is a hopeless beauty queen. He is a hapless locomotive. They are a goliath Gemini. That little one is a terrorist, nipping at its mother's heels. The mother is a mountain of nails and hair and rainbows. The father is a silo of scorches and tattoos. They want to win a car. They come bearing meager gifts, credit cards. A man flosses his teeth and a businesslady spouts supremacy into her cellphone. A couple fuse their bodies together in quasi-erotic union, but clothed. A plump fellow watches. The loudest person in the room is a muscular man who's devoted every inch of his body to the teachings of the Witch; he expounds her gospel to a young doe-eyed woman shivering at his hypnotic dance. Perhaps she's eager. Perhaps she has the same trepidation as I.

I don't belong here. This isn't meant for me.
The meek shall inherit, and so forth.

ÆTHER

“I only take cryptocurrency.”

I am prepared for this but hesitate.

The Witch senses my misgivings and says, “Don't you think there's something mysterious there? Is cryptocurrency a collection of occult signifiers and runic infestations?”

I know this is a rhetorical question. For some reason, I start blabbering. “Cryptocurrency requires an enormous amount of computing power. This, in turn, necessitates an enormous amount of energy usage, straining our already taxed globe and contributing to CO₂ emissions. There are some green [*in air quotes*] alternatives, but even they necessitate some amount of energy usage, or computational power.”

I think of nuclear power plants. I imagine us tearing open atoms not to heat the world, but to mine for imaginary currency. Am I a hypocrite? Typing these words, disseminating them for public consumption (if such a thing happens), and even reading them (maybe), all of it takes power. Power cannot come from nowhere. We suck it from the earth. We pull it from raging waters. We siphon it from the sky. We gut it from atoms. But I'm no hypocrite. The line is easy to draw. For the world's most prominent cryptocurrency, [name redacted], yearly data transfers consume the same amount of energy as a country. My word processing isn't the problem here.

Because I can't keep my big mouth shut, I share my luddite concerns with the Witch.

She smiles lightly and folds her hands in her lap like a patient elder. (She is a decade younger than I.) “Why does cryptocurrency require such disproportionately enormous energy usage?” she asks. Before I can answer another rhetorical question, she continues. “Maintaining security for cryptocurrency transactions requires diligence and power. Something cannot have value if you can't rely on its inherent existence.” She winks. “Right? If gold sometimes disappeared when you touched it, or teleported from your hands and into someone else's, willy nilly, it'd make a volatile economic standard.

Don't you think? But cryptocurrency doesn't adhere to an archaic gold standard. Its standard is *data*."

She lifts her hands to the sky and arches them widely, as if drawing an imaginary rainbow above her. "What *is* data?" She then grabs her thin arms and pinches her flesh. "Is it this stuff?" She pounds on her chest and I hear a dull thud. "Is it this? Inside us?" She shakes her head theatrically. "The most valuable data is data created by the most advanced computers. Do you know what that data is? Do you?"

I shake my head.

"The answers to riddles."

She waits for that to soak in, but it doesn't mean anything to me, so she continues to explain. "The most valuable piece of data is the answer to a riddle that only a supercomputer can solve. Of course this operation is enormously expensive! As is the mining of any mineral. The ecological toll of mining has never been one of its selling points. We don't mine for coal because it makes rivers healthy. We don't mine for data to learn anything about this *stuff*." She takes an object from her small desk and holds it up as an example. It is a small black tube of hand cream, made with indigenous methods to bless our skin, \$29.99 before tax. "No, these are not the riddles that our Oracle decodes."

She sets the hand cream down and takes a sip of tea, then puckers her lips with a satisfied smack. "The most valuable answers are the unambiguous and certain ones, nonetheless extraordinarily difficult to come by. Moral quandaries are unanswerable. But computers can solve madly complex math problems, or find the correct alphanumeric combination from a nearly infinite set of combinations, and unlock a special chamber with nothing but itself hiding inside. This alchemy mints new coin by asking the supercomputer—the Oracle—to do increasingly difficult operations. Puzzles. Riddles. This is hot activity!" She fans herself sardonically and catches her breath. "Imagine! Server farms buzz with power. Fans and cooling systems keep everything from overheating, from bursting into flames. Imagine! Our computers may overheat from relatively mundane tasks, like uploading content to the Internet. Now, imagine an entire warehouse of that, and then imagine many giant warehouses, all over the world. We think our virtual space, our virtual realities, have no consequence or materiality. But these spaces are made from the earth and the heat of the sun, just as anything else."

I nod. Isn't she making my point? Wisely, she sees that I do not see, and continues to guide me.

"Imagine the most powerful computer possible. This computer can answer the most complicated riddle and thus create the most valuable crypto-mineral. There is no greater alchemy. The most powerful computer possible, if you can manage it, might consume the whole of the planet, or the whole of the universe. The more resources we pour into building the supercomputer, the more crypto advances in value, the greater the riddle we solve. We are betting on our own enlightenment but also our own annihilation. Cryptocurrency takes as its gold standard consumption and revelation. The Oracle unfolds riddles with seemingly no existential import, makes prophecies about its own capabilities to make prophecies. It becomes more powerful; the riddles become more complicated. Eventually, the riddle becomes, 'What will happen next?' When the computer can tell the future, we have closed the loop. The future is gone."

She pauses, as if for applause. But I'm frozen.

The Witch smiles with practiced patience. "The Oracle answers our final question. *Nothing happens after this*, she says. *It took all of existence for me to answer the question.* The computer, now the whole universe, thus speaketh. And then there was darkness."

The loop closes.

AIR

I must have briefly passed out.

The Witch's hovel is dark and smells like a burning wet desert. The air is too cold; I realize she lives in a secret room behind the refrigerated pantries that line the back walls. I can see my breath and it looks polluted. I push too much hot air into the world. If we all stop breathing, will that solve our problems?

But the air in here, though cold, is delicious. I want to slurp it up. Black banners fall from the walls, tapestries illustrating the cosmos and its ephemeral internal structure, its ghost organs. The place is lit only by organic candle light, smells provided only through sustainable harvesting and foraging. The air is purified and I feel clean, so clean that it's gross, so clean that I feel I should be cleaner. I should have no body at all, be pure soul.

This is wrongheaded. The body is an enactment of the soul. The body is how the soul becomes.

I can hear her breathing. She is surrounded by alternating lunulas of handmade jewelry, framed by dangling strands of Christmas lights, seated on a stool available for sale in Aisle 3. Crystals sparkle on her necklaces and her hands are covered in webs and runes, unreal, inked into her skin. I don't understand that stuff. I don't entirely buy into it. The skeptical inquisitor inside of me begs for sweet release. The devil's advocate rests on my shoulder, ready to puppet my mouth.

But the devil is the witch's friend. The Witch of Wals is no acolyte of Light. She harnesses the darkest power. Her website says so. If you visit her About page, you'll find that darkness has, according to her, a bad reputation. Nature resides there, the wilderness a trickster demon. And so on and so forth. Yes, I think I see it! I see the trickster in the woods! I see the divine in shadows! Ghost things follow us everywhere.

This is silly. It's all a lark. Wait until I tell my coworkers about this. They'll laugh and laugh. The building will suddenly have less air to breathe. Air and space are the same thing. Suffocation is a closing-in. Breath saves us from the crushing force of gravity, the room constantly trying to collapse on us.

I can't breathe right now. I suppose I'm just nervous.

She asks me if I feel okay. The hair on the back of my neck pricks up, as if trained by her voice. Hasn't it been, via podcast, via YouTube tutorials on smudging and tantric meditation? My hairs now know to be alert. Pay attention. But the rest of me can't move. She laughs, gently, because she's a gentle and kind person. "I won't bite. Unless that's what you want."

A good joke sets a person at ease. That's from one of her tutorials on charisma.

I take a deep breath. "I was thinking about what you wrote in one of your recipes for ancient-grain risotto." I blurt this without meaning to, without thought, as if she pulled sound from me without my permission.

She nods. I continue. "You talked about how certain foods can make you feel at home." I shift in my seat. "Not me. Certain foods remind me of where I grew up, I suppose, but that doesn't feel like home. It's a sick place. The food is sick food. It makes me sick. My stomach rebels, my body rejects. That's why I liked the recipe. It was

alien. It avoided all of the things that make me feel queasy. This feels better than home to me. Maybe I've got my wires crossed. Maybe this is simply a matter of semantic—"

"Hush." She whispers, harshly soothing, like a short fable with gruesome subtext. "Sometimes words only get in our way."

"I agree!"

She leans close. "Would you like to know a secret?"

I lean closer and nod but air can't escape my lungs, can't vibrate my chords, can't animate my thoughts. Air fails me. I feel hollow.

And then she tells me . . .

WATER

Lesson learned. Wisdom taken. A flow of information.

After, I need to use the restroom. It took me some time to find, and once I did, the door was locked, and it took me more time to find a robed disciple, carrier of secret password, which I then dutifully whisper with my fingertips into the door's digital ears. Bashful, it opens with resistance, as if I'm pushing through an airlock, or combating not density but attraction. Sometimes a thing is immovable not because it is large and heavy, but because it is compelled against you.

I'm unsure what to make of her revelations. I empty my body of fluids, thinking them toxic and interfering with spiritual clarity. Many others have done the same; the stall walls are sprayed with psychic cleansing. Only the third door opens into something even remotely sanitary. This is another test, I think.

I sit and doubt my place on this earth as I empty and spray my clarity into the void. Oh, what am I talking about? Social anxiety gets the better of me. My stomach folds inside-out because I've just unwillingly taken part in a performance for the audience of the unseen. We, the Witch and I, stumbled our way through a skit for god's benefit, and not the big god at the center of the table, but the scurrying ones underneath, shredding the scraps, conspiring and plotting. They chant, *Soon*, louder and louder, faster and faster, another propulsive pop melody, another infernal banger.

Soon soon soon, baby baby. Soon soon soon, baby baby.

Soon what? Virgin sacrifice? Firstborn? I don't know. I don't know anything.

I won't tell my coworkers about this. I've always been a little ashamed of my interest in the occult.

I regret leaving such a wet mess, and pity the poor cleric or initiate that has to clean my sin. I consider cleaning it myself, erasing any evidence of my existence here, but I don't have the proper instruments.

Two shopping bags—I'd forgotten the reusable ones at home, but these are made from recycled paper—rest at my feet on the sort-of clean floor. We fill our lives with stuff we like, stuff that makes us feel better, stuff that gives us joy: the smell of a burning wet desert, or a polished stone that resembles the universe solidified in shadowy amber, or the blood pitch of a leafless tree. The difference between the hemoglobin that carries oxygen via our blood network and the chlorophyll that helps plants turn dry harsh light into something wet and soft is only one atom. I don't know what this means. This isn't something the Witch told me; it's just something I know. I learn a lot from TV and the internet. Or was it a nature documentary at the film forum? A pub quiz? Magnesium and iron. Annie Dillard wrote about it. Did I learn it from her? Did I learn from a book?

I'm drenched in sweat and very thirsty. When I leave the bathroom, I consider reaching into my bag and taking out the bottle of locally brewed hard cider that the Witch recommended. That won't help. I study the label. Apples sweat too. Expertly, they are set out to slowly wither in a wooden crate only just a little, just enough so that when you press your fingers into these apples, they take the pressure and reflect it back to you with intimate bruises.

I go home. I imagine it's raining, but it isn't.

Another loop closes.

The Fall

Steve Capra

Rigel 2022 Finalist

Canto I**Paradise****The Lord:**

Let there be light.

Angels:

Glory to the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth—
And of all things visible and invisible—
Radiant is His presence—
And His mercies know no end.

The Lord:

This is Eden, My gift to you, My children—
The tendril of My grand imagination.
This is the Orchard—eternity's brash lover—
The blossom and the fruit of My mind.

The glorious blue of the glowing sky, the mysterious
Blue of the sea, and the fleeting sunset's yellow!
The green of summer leaves, and the red of clay
For your delight, my clear-eyed mignons. Paradise!

Adam:

Black the earth and rich—
Deep the root and warm the moss—
Speak and we exalt!

The Lord:

These are the blooms that blow in the verdant spring,
These the tempting fruits that bring the fall.
These are the tickling grasses that stroke your feet
In the mornings, and the sweet, gentle nights.

Eve:

High the sky and wide—
White the clouds and bright the stars—
Speak and we adore!

The Lord:

Adam, alpha man, my eye's mirror,
The glory of the grove, and Eve his rib,
The Tree of Life and a thousand spreading vines—
All but the Tree of Knowledge are your pleasures.

Adam:

Tallest in the grove—
Enough itself, the Tree of Life
Blossoms in the Lord.

Eve:

Artless is the bloom!
Apples are a shady tree—
Knowing Good and Bad.

The Lord:

These are the creatures of Eden's hills and sky,
Its cool rivers, its muddy, rich plains.
Of its noons and its glittering nights, these are the forms
That I give life—and you the several names.

Adam:

Teeth and fur and claws!
Lick my face, my playful friend.
Kin, I call you bear!

Eve:

Soft the call, the cry—
 Pretty cousin, sing and fly!
 Song, I name you Lark!

Adam:

Soft on pads on paws—
 Peaceful as an evening's hush—
 Tiger is your name.

Eve:

Low as soil and quick!
 Quiet as a missing moon!
 Spy, I name you Snake!

Adam:

Playmate! Swim—mate! Laugh!
 Break the surface! Weave the waves!
 Dive! I call you whale!

Eve:

Here beside! Above!
 Here and far and back again!
 Buzz, I name you bee!

The Lord:

I am in love with the fleeting forms of time
 And my pleasure is walking in the garden.
 Play, my naked children, these but one
 Your toys, your treasures. Joy is now begun!

Eve:

Paradise is joy—
 Say you love me, Adam, here,
 Heaven be the earth.

Adam:

Timeless is Your Name!
Praise to You, the seed of joy!

Eve:

Speak and we believe!

Angels:

Glory to the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth—
The Seed and the Fruit of time—
We give thanks for His wondrous gifts—
And righteous is His law.

Canto II**The Temptation****Snake:**

Mother Eve, Oh Mother Eve,
We never know what we believe.

Mother Eve, Oh Mother Eve,
How cool the shadow of these leaves!

Mother promise, Mother Eve,
What suggestive fruits are these?

Eve:

Gifts of His the Lord.
I have heard Him speak my name—
Morning is His word.

Snake:

Mother Joyance, Mother Eve,
Plainly might the Word deceive.
What the secret of this tree?
What the falsehood you believe?

Eve:

Nectar of the bloom
Satisfies the hummingbird.
Still, the handsome snake.

Snake:

Mother Wonder, Mother Eve,
What sweet taste the apple leaves!
What tied powers could it free!
What fleet visions might you see!

Eve:

Adam may be near.
Sounds in Paradise are soft.
Be afraid, the beast.

Snake:

Brave Madonna, Mother Eve,
Man will think what man will please.
I offer so much more than he.
Taste the apple! Set us free!

Eve:

Eden is a dream.
Lest the sleeper waken, hush!
Go, the snake! Away!

Snake:

Mother Eve, believe in me—
The Lord above will never see.
I love you more than ever He
Who made you loves you, Mother Eve.

Eve:

And do you love me for my thought?

Snake:

For what is thought and what is not.

Eve:

Do you love me for my heart?

Snake:

Thought and heart are not apart.

Eve:

Do you love me for my words?

Snake:

Your words and words I have not heard.

Eve:

Do you love me for my touch?

Snake:

Touch the apple: such is such.

Eve:

Adam! Come! Listen! The snake has made me
As wise as the Lord! My sight is as keen as His
Who painted Eden! Such tricks he plays! Deceit!
Do not believe! Come to the shadows—and taste!

Snake:

Mother Sorrow, Mother Eve,
What a stench from core and seed.
As I fell once, so you and he.
Smell the guilt, but taste the grief.

Angels:

Glory to the Lord, creator of heaven and earth—
His mysteries are eternal—
Infinite is His reign—
And His wisdom is without end.

Canto III

The Expulsion

The Lord:

I am in love with the fickle forms of time
And my pleasure is walking in the garden.
Adam, I am enjoyed of your presence, life—
Eve, I am Mystery, your suitor.

Where is my son, my Adam, the master of Eden?

Adam:

Here, Lord.

The Lord:

Where is my Eve, the paragon of Paradise?

Adam:

Here Lord, next to me.

The Lord:

Why do you hide, my innocents? What your shame?

Adam:

We are naked.

The Lord:

And do you despise my pride, my incarnation,
The wonder of your bodies, bone and flesh?

Both my jewels, lost among the flowers.

In this garden I have grown you, there was
A signal order that granted the joys of creation.
Now your lives will ever be grief for Eden.
You were at home in Paradise. Now you are lost.

Snake:

Mother Eve, Oh Mother Eve,
We never know what we believe.

The Lord:

Go! Wander homeless! Live bereaved!
Cry, disloyal Adam! Keen, Eve!
Gnash your teeth and tear your burning hair!
Weep, banished Man! Woman, Shriek!

Snake:

What a thought the mind conceives!
What a weight the heart must heave!

Adam:

Lord, we did not believe—

The Lord:

You will parent thankless generations
Who will curse you as the cause of death.
Loss will be your life, the grave your goal,
Your lover will be white, brutal fear.

Snake:

What a word the lips might breathe!
What a burn the blossom leaves!

The Lord:

East of Eden—and at its barred gates,
A hundred hungry angels with salt on their swords!
Only because you praised me once, misery,
I leave you a leaf of Eden: each the other.

Adam:

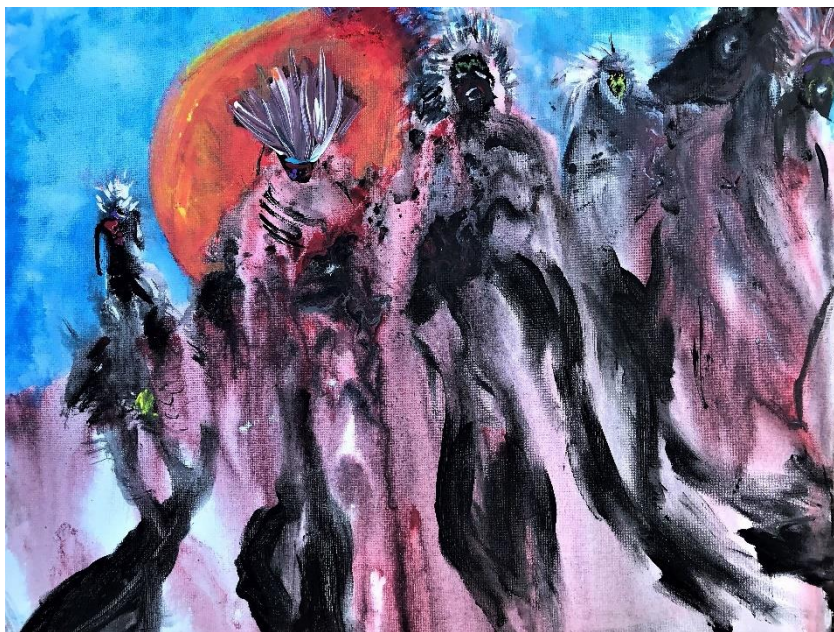
The earth is hard.

The Lord:

Go! Wander helpless! Mourn, bereaved!
Cry, accursed Adam! Keen, Eve!
Wring your hands and tremble! Wail and grieve!
Weep, wretched Adam! Shriek, Eve!

Angels:

Glory to the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth—
And of all things visible and invisible—
Radiant is His presence—
And His mercies know no end.



Being as One / Dave Sims

Rigel 2022 finalist

Time Enough

LG Pomerleau

Rigel 2022 Finalist

Chapter One

Goll sheese ny liargagh:

A bad omen

Port Erin, Isle of Man

May, 1904

Nan said, "Come." So Euphemia went, though she had so much to do after supper, before the evening singsong 'round the hearth. And Baby Hugh might fuss in her absence, wanting to nurse. Besides, she was bone weary, as usual at the end of the day, having cooked three meals for nine people and tended to the baby since dawn. The boys needed supervising to do the dishes properly, the floor wanted sweeping . . . she sighed, inhaling the comforting scent of the chicken they'd had for supper. That needed stripping for tomorrow's sandwiches, too. No matter. Nobody could deny Nan. She ran the household with a gentle but firm hand; although Euphemia was her daughter-in-law, with six children to raise in the tiny cottage, Nan was definitely in charge. Love and respect bound the two women together, and routine kept the days running along smoothly. Euphemia's curiosity was piqued by Nan's invitation, too. Her eldest son, Henry, always accompanied his grandmother to Faery Hill of an evening, for the ritual offering to the *Little Ones*. Henry's eyes posed a question. Euphemia returned his gaze with a shrug of her shoulders as she closed the red cottage door. Blackie, the sheepdog, tagged along.

Gripping Nan's elbow, she carried the wicker basket on her left arm, clutching her skirt as they trod up Cronk Howe Mooar. A cool breeze fragrant with gorse and blackthorn flowers swept them

along. She heard little blue tits chirping in the thorns. Robins, too, chatted softly amongst themselves, preparing for nightfall. Euphemia allowed all the sights and smells to distract her, knowing that Nan was listening for the faeries on the wind. Do they have words for me tonight? Is that why I'm here? But Manx faeries don't speak English, so I won't understand. A giggle bubbled up, but she suppressed it. She would never mock Nan's beliefs.

As the path ascended, the wind teased their hair and swished their skirts. Sheep browsed on the purple and yellow hills. Clouds roamed the sky, basking in the last rays of summer sun. Waves crashed at the foot of the cliffs edging the landscape. In the distance, cattle were lowing, waiting to be driven in for the night. Just like in the song about Little Lord Jesus, came the sudden thought, and Euphemia wondered if her baby had awakened. The image of Hugh tossing in his cradle tugged milk from her breasts.

"Hang on a mo', please Nan." She handed over the basket and untucked her blouse, wet on the front with milk and round the waist, with sweat. Never mind, she thought, the wind will dry it. Ah, it feels good to stop, catch my breath. Nan's not out of puff, though. She's used to it, I reckon. It is so beautiful up here, looking out to sea. It's like all mankind sprung from the tiny Isle of Man. Like the Garden of Eden. For me, life began here for certain. Nan gave her a nudge, interrupting her thoughts. There she goes again, urging me on, as though we've an appointment to keep. What's the hurry?

Skylarks reeled overhead and, above them, seagulls threw lonely cries across the water. A few more steps and they reached the summit of Faery Hill. Our courting place. We haven't climbed this hill in years. Why not? We should come up, have a picnic with the little ones. Our little ones, not *the* "Little Ones," though they'd be welcome too. I wish I could see a faery, just once. Or hear them, like Nan does.

The drowning sun spilled curdled milk across the Irish Sea. She hadn't been on the water since William had rowed their boat along the coast to Kitterland, the islet near the Calf of Man. She smiled at the memory of making love on those wild shores on her honeymoon. They'd been free to go naked as Adam and Eve: not a soul lived there. For a lark, they'd flash their bare backsides to tease the fisherman in the boats off-shore. The memory made her glow.

Our one and only holiday. We ought to go back, take a picnic, just the two of us. William never even goes out to fish, anymore. Always too tired now.

Crests of waves sparkled, pierced by gannets expertly diving into the depths. Blackie raced ahead to a green mound and sat, patiently waiting, obviously following Nan's routine. So pleasant. Peaceful. Little wonder Nan comes here morning and evening, and she had five boys, and all. I ought to have come along before now. She recalled performing the ritual with William long ago when Nan was ill, and felt once more her wonderment at the notion of faeries living under the hill. Still, it doesn't take a belief in faeries to feel the magic here.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Nan echoed her thoughts. She always seems to know what I'm thinking, bless her. Affection washed over Euphemia as she nodded in response. Nan dropped to her knees on the grass; Euphemia followed suit.

Nan reached into the basket she'd packed, and, from under a tea cloth, extracted two cups no bigger than thimbles. Setting them in a depression on the mound, she drew out the handkerchief tucked in her sleeve, and then smoothed the square of white linen on the grass with her wrinkled, knobby fingers. After carefully rearranging the cups, she filled them from a battered flask in her pocket, before sprinkling crumbs from a small loaf, reserving a good-sized piece for Blackie, who wagged her tail but didn't beg. Whispering in Manx, Nan bowed her head, and placed both hands on the ground. After a few moments of silence, Nan tapped Euphemia's arm. Her eyes had been closed as well, observing Nan's rituals.

"Help me, up, would you, lass? It's not the getting down, but the getting back up that's hard," she said, grunting with the effort. "My dress made that noise, not me," she said, and winked.

"Of course, of course, Nan. Why don't we just sit awhile? May we?"

"Aye, *Themselves* won't mind if we tarry a while," she said, relaxing. "They know we're here, but will stay put 'til we leave. The rascals will listen in on our conversation and gossip about it later."

"Thank you for bringing me tonight. I'd almost forgotten how fine it is, the place, and the ritual, both. I used to do it with William when I first came, remember?"

Nan nodded. “Those were troubled times. All things must pass. It comes ‘round right, in the end. Remember that, my *chree*.”

“Can you hear the faeries, Nan?”

“I do, be’times. Always have.”

“But you go to church. How do you reconcile both beliefs? The Sisters in the orphanage said —”

“No harm in holding to the old ways, lass. God is everywhere. With Themselves, too, ye ken. Everyone needs a belief in a higher power, otherwise we sink into a bog of despair. So many troubles . . . What do you believe in, *ban my chree*?”

“Hmm, good question, Nan. I once followed the Catholic faith at St. Hilda’s. But then, when I left and some things went wrong, I lost my beliefs, I reckon. I go to church now for the sake of the children, and you. As to the faeries, well, they don’t speak to a Yorkshire lass like me, any road. Hmmm . . . hmm.” She started to hum. That’s it. “Music. I know! I believe in music. It lifts me up; gives me hope. Yes, music. I never realized that before.” Her head buzzed with the revelation. She thought she could hear a tune, southing on the wind.

“That’s God, too; *Themselves* agree. Can’t you hear their flutes? Listen.” She cocked her head like a robin, then clicked her tongue. “Ah, the English. I’m sorry to say that they don’t understand Manx traditions, any more than they ken our language. I should have taught you more about the meaning behind our ways. It’ll be up to you now, as the mother, to pass them on to your children.” Her voice seemed to come from far away and a sad, forlorn look clouded her blue eyes. Euphemia shuddered with the apprehension that someone had walked on her grave.

“Whatever do you mean, Nan?” Her tone harkened back to fifteen years ago. Is she sinking into depression again, after all this time? Oh no. “You’re here, Nan. We’re all here. Our Henry’s learning from you; the others will too. There’s no rush. Don’t you always say there’s time enough: *traa dy liooar*, is it? I’ve learned that much, you all say it so often.” She attempted a laugh. Please, please let me bring her out of it, like I did before.

Nan patted her hand. “Well done, *my chree*. You’ve an ear for Manx.” Then she shook her head. “I’m sorry to say, there is no more time.” Her muffled voice dropped the words into her lap. She pounded

her fist against her thigh, then raised her head to meet Euphemia's gaze. Suddenly it seemed the birds fell silent and the wind dropped to earth. Whatever can she mean? She seems angry, and sad, both.

Nan inhaled, as if preparing to push a boat into the water. "The *Little Ones* had something important to say, t'other night. Terrible news, I'm afraid, *my chree*. *Themselves* said someone in the house will pass over. Soon. "*Goll sheese ny liargagh*: he's going down the slope, fast." Didn't need them to tell me that. I know it. As do you."

"Know what?" A roar like crashing waves on the sea blocked her ears against Nan's shaky voice.

"Please, we must be honest and face facts, dear one. I've suspected since New Year's morn. Saw it plain as day, in he ashes from the *chiollagh*, which I spread on the floor, to foretell the year ahead, ye ken, according to the old ways. The faery footprints led out the door, not in. Luck has left our house." Nan paused and looked past the cliffs, breathing harder than she had after mounting the hill.

The ominous tone tempted Euphemia to laugh. Nan seemed to sense her doubt. "I didn't want to believe it, either; I've watched for the signs and now I'm sure. William's been poisoned, by the lead mine. We call it "the milk reek," *my chree*. The sweats, the shakes, and especially the ill temper, so unlike my boy. He's getting worse every day. *Goll sheese ny liargagh*."

Euphemia's lips parted, but the protest caught in her throat, as if clogged with ashes from the hearth. She collapsed backward, nearly overturning the little cups. Nan lifted her head and held the cool flask to her lips.

"Drink a bit, lass."

Euphemia jerked upright, grabbed the flask, and gulped. She coughed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"It can't be," she said, sputtering. As she tipped the flask back again, whispers whirled around her. "Yes, yes, it is. Yes it is. Yes it is." The hair rose on her arms. Her head swam. Tears stung behind her eyes but wouldn't fall.

"Aye, doesn't bear thinking about, *my chree*, I know. I tried to pretend, too. I've seen you do the same, seen the worry at you, when William coughs, or shouts at the boys. It's not him. It's the sickness, *my chree*. Oh God, the loss of another son to those damned mines." She hit her thighs, as if hurting herself could ease her pain. Euphemia

recognized that impulse. “So many families torn apart. So many wid—” A sob completed the awful word.

True. Eva, Mary, Amy, others whose names she didn’t know, gone away, forced to find work in English factories after their husbands’ passing, their children left with kinfolk, or orphaned. If anything happens to William, could I leave my five youngsters, least of all my newborn babe? To be raised by their grandparents, who mightn’t live long enough to see them grown? Now tears and milk spilled freely. My milk will be spoiled tonight, curdled. Hugh will get the colic and not sleep . . .

“Shh. There, there, I’ve a solution.” Nan’s voice brightened as she expelled one word: “Thomas.” Euphemia thought she detected a note of excitement, where usually Nan sounded disappointed, even angry, when mentioning her youngest surviving son.

“Thomas? What? You think he might come back? From America? No.” She reached for Nan’s hand, which trembled in hers. “Please, there’s got to be another way, Nan. What about the farm? Henry loves helping Grandad with the sheep. He’s nearly thirteen. He could quit school anytime, and I could help—”

“We’ve not enough land to support the family, lass.” She hunched her shoulders and sighed, picking at the grass. “That’s why our boys went down the mine in the first place. Only our Arthur avoided that fate. His bones lie here, looked after by the *Little Ones*. My sweet lamb. Took by the diphtheria. The mines got the rest of them, too, one way or t’other. First the twins, buried alive. Inseparable in death as in life, lying under Snaefell.” She stopped for a moment. “The only good from that came when Thomas brought you to help me through the grief. It laid me low, as if I had to climb Snaefell meself, to get out from under it. I loved you like a daughter from the start,” Nan said. Blood rushed to Euphemia’s cheeks. Nan had never expressed love for her, in words.

“Ah, but then the mines won again, didn’t they? For Thomas left to escape working underground. At least that’s what he said. I’ve always thought there was more to it than that.” Her inflection suggested something. Euphemia lowered her gaze, cursing the blush that rose to her cheeks. After a pause, Nan continued.

“And now, why, the mine’s killing my William. Well, not if Themselfs and I can help it.” Her voice retrieved its headstrong tone.

“Thomas brought me a daughter, and you’ve given us grandchildren. He’ll do his duty again, you’ll see. I’m awaiting his answer.”

“No, no, please, Nan ...” The last thing she wanted was Thomas to return. Well, there could be one worse thing. She fell back on the ground, damp seeping into her clothes. She yanked at the grass with clenched fists.

“Come, lass, the dew’s falling. You’ll catch your death. We’d best get back or they’ll think we’ve been fetched away. Not a word to William, mind. I’m prepared for a battle with him. Quick, there’s the first star. Help me up,” she said, patting Euphemia’s knees.

“We mustn’t be caught here after sunset or the *Red Caps* will take us, sure. The way down is much easier. I can almost run, like a young girl. Ah, was, was,” Nan expressed her customary wistfulness for times past. “Here’s the basket, *my chree*. Let’s see who gets home first.” She threw the challenge backwards as she trotted down the hill with Blackie trundling along behind.

Euphemia stumbled and tripped down the rugged path, the empty basket banging against her side. Now alone, did she hear voices in the bushes? Her heart pounded. What did Nan say would happen, should a *Red Cap* appear? I’d be carried off to another world? She quickened her pace, following the smell of peat smoke rising from the whitewashed cottage up ahead. In the twilight, the footpath almost disappeared. She knew the way, but when was the last time she’d run anywhere? Arriving at the red door, she leaned on the frame, to ease the stitch in her side; she waited for her heart to slow before pushing down on the metal thumb latch. Warmth and light from the peat fire spilled across the threshold. Blackie greeted her with a wag of her tail and a sloppy kiss.

Lifting the teapot in salute, Nan chuckled. “Here she is, young’uns. I told youse she’d not let the *Red Caps* get her. Hand me your mother’s cup, Henry. She’s white as a sheet.”

Chapter Two

“Ogh-cha-nee: Woe is me. Ta graigh-ayn: I love him.”

“The Phynodderree: A Tale of Fairy Love”

REdward Callow, 1882

Grandad rosined up his bow, preparing for the evening sing-song. “What would youse like to hear tonight, young’uns?”

“Phynodderree, please, Grandad,” Edward begged. *“Phynodderree! Phynodderree! I love saying that word!”*

“Shh, mind you don’t keep repeating it or you’ll conjure up that hairy elf, foolish boy,” said Nan, snapping a tea towel in the air. “You mustn’t tempt fate.” She stood at the kitchen dresser, replacing her precious crockery on the shelves, arranging it “just so.” Then she sat in her bent willow chair and set it to rocking.

Euphemia shook her head. She acts as if everything were normal. When I can hardly stop my tears. My throat is on fire. Grandad obviously doesn’t suspect: his tone is cheery, as always, when he’s entertaining.

“That old chestnut? I know it’s your favorite, since my fiddle can practically play it without me,” he laughed. “Sing then, boys.”

*The Phynodderree went down at dawn to the round field
and lifted the dew from the meadow.*

*The maiden’s hair and cow’s herb, he trod them both beneath his feet.
He stretched out his width across the ground and threw the grass
towards the left.*

“Tell us again how the hairy elf flattens the crops into patterns, Grandad,” John asked when the song ended. “You’ve seen the circles in the fields, yes?” His wide brown eyes gleamed like burnished copper in the firelight. Euphemia smiled. Sweet, sweet boy. He’s got my eyes. And hair. Maybe I am softer on him than the other three, as they accuse me.

“Look, can’t you just imagine the elf in the flames, John? Bending the wheat in all manner of patterns and designs, making mischief? He’s like you, Edward, in that way,” Henry said, punching

his brother's shoulder. Henry sat cross-legged on the rug like his younger brothers, Edward, John, and Tom. Except his knees jut out a lot further, Euphemia observed. Henry's a scarecrow. Head and shoulders above the rest, too. Tall, like his father. Edward nudged back, hard, and then scooted off to sit beside John. Henry's an awful tease. Our Edward, on the other hand, likes to dish it out but can't take it. Just like his father, came the sudden thought. Stop it, she told herself. Her fingers were as cold as the steel knitting needles in her hands. A Phynodderree just appeared, indeed. She shuddered.

The homey scene of the family gathered by the fire resembled a quaint old painting, she thought. It might be a hundred years ago, for nothing ever changed, on Man. A surge of pride warmed her through, like hearty soup, from the inside, out. My sons: five strong and healthy lads, each one different and special in his own way, from the eldest, so eager to become a man, to the youngest, still at the breast. And my sweet Ann, small as a fairy, quick as a fox, bright as a penny. How she loves to rock on Nan's knee, of an evening. How ever am I going to break her of that thumb-sucking, though? My family. All I ever wanted. Why I chose William and to live in this crowded little cottage, on the edge of the sea, on the edge of poverty, too. My first real home.

Her mind turned to how the scene might change, if William were to become too sick to work, or even . . . pass away. Nan said I must face facts. Henry, he'd go below ground, in the mine, though not yet thirteen. The other three boys would be relegated out of doors, to the cold, filthy washing floor below the water wheel, separating ore from slag. Like so many village boys. And poor women too, come to that. Only Ann and the baby would be spared, for the time being. Whilst I, what on earth would I do? Stay here, take in washing? Or go back to Douglas? Oh my God. Anger suddenly boiled up and she tasted metal. Why is William lingering outside? He ought to be here, with us, damn him. Oh, don't even think that.

"*Themselves* can do anything, can't they, Grandad? Good and bad?" John persisted. Grandad set the fiddle and bow aside to stuff his pipe with fresh tobacco. A gust of cold air blew in as William opened and closed the door. All heads turned. Euphemia suppressed a gasp as her heart dropped. Hark at his pallor and the circles under his eyes.

She noticed Grandad's bushy black brows gather in a frown. Does he know William is ill? Nan could never keep it from him. They're like one person, after so many years together. That's what I dreamt of for us someday. We'd be a couple of old fools teasing each other, singing the same songs, playing with grandchildren . . .

"Grandad? They do magic, yes?" John insisted. Ach, that boy never lets go until he gets an answer, like a dog with a bone. Now, where was I? Euphemia gathered up the knitting needles, askew in her lap. She'd dropped the last stitch.

"Where was I?" Grandad stared blankly at John. He tucked his pipe between his teeth and picked up his fiddle. "Ah yes, you asked about the Phynodderree. Half man, half goat. You never know if *Himself's* inclined to grant a wish, but no harm in asking. Just remember, *Lhiat myr hoiloo*: to thee as thou deservest. You might well get what you deserve. Themselves are neither good enough for heaven, nor bad enough for hell, and they delight in tricking us mortals." His blue eyes sparkled as he deliberately squeaked his bow and lowered his grey head in the children's direction with a menacing look. They instinctively moved back. Grandad sputtered a laugh.

"And what *do* we deserve, Da?" William's voice scraped across the room like his chair on the slate floor. "To slave in a mine threatening to close every day, for starvation wages? Potatoes and proverbs, that's what we live on. Don't these bairns deserve better?"

Silence, but for the popping fire and the knitting needles, clicking out of time. Euphemia's shoulders tensed. It's no use; the wool keeps slipping. I'll have to unravel all tonight's work. Start again. Her eyes blurred.

"Mum, don't knit." Henry moaned. Euphemia pursed her lips. Cheeky bugger. "Please," he added, with a look that reminded her of Blackie, begging forgiveness. His father's harsh tone toward Grandad had obviously upset him. And the other boys, too, who sat frozen, hunched over, staring at the fire. Euphemia wound the skein around the knitting, placing it in her lap. Edward's head shot up as though he'd been struck by lightning.

"Sing us an English tune, Mum. Tom, you next, in Manx," he said.

"My goodness, you're a proper choir director tonight, Edward. What shall it be, then?" Her heart wasn't in it, but she hoped to lighten

the mood. “Early one morning, just as the sun was rising . . .” Somehow she made it through. Flat on the high C’s, she knew. Should’ve chosen a lower key. Henry fetched her a glass of water. He knew I was off.

“Ah, beautiful, *my chree*,” Grandad said, repeating the refrain on his fiddle. “Tom, you’re learning to sing from the best. Did your wife’s voice soothe you, my son?”

William dropped his head on the table, covering his face in his crossed arms. Euphemia cringed. Oh, that song was a poor choice, dammit. Too sad. He’s overcome. Dare I go to him?

Grandad resumed playing. Nan rose to her feet, leaving the chair to rock, cradling Ann, fast asleep in her arms. She motioned with her chin to the boys: time for bed. Euphemia lifted Hugh from the cradle and hastened after Nan to settle the youngsters into their trundle beds. Edward and Henry scrambled up the ladder to the loft quicker than usual. All that talk of the Phynodderree, Euphemia thought. Maybe he’s after them, and all.

Grandad spoke to William, his warm tenor carrying easily to the back rooms. “We Carines are one of the oldest families on Ellan Vannin, ye ken, probably here since the time of Olaf the Black. You’re no doubt related to the bugger, given that crop of dark hair on your hard head. Mine’s grey now, more’s the pity, but still just as thick. The Manx are a handsome lot. I turned many a lassie’s head in my day, now I tell ye,”

Nan cleared her throat to draw Euphemia’s attention to her eye roll at Grandad’s boasting. “That man,” she said, her voice warm with a smile, as she lowered Ann into the trundle bed below John and Tom. Euphemia stood rooted in place, clutching the baby.

“Put him down and light the lamp, *my chree*. It’s too dark to see these scallawags.”

It took two matches, her hand shook so. Nan lifted the boys’ covers.

“You can’t sleep in your clothes, lads. Go get into your nightshirts.” She tapped their backsides, then made her way to the washstand. Their wan faces matched the white sheets. Nan wet a cloth while the boys quickly donned the nightshirts waiting on a chair. After a perfunctory wipe-down, she tucked them in, planting a kiss on each forehead.

“Don’t fash yourselves, boys. Your Da’s just tired and not feeling well. Sleep tight. God bless you, my loves.” She whispered

words in Manx, put her finger to her lips and tipped her head to call Euphemia out of the room. Grandad's voice penetrated the wall, sterner now.

"Stop being so cantankerous and set an example to your family, William. We've survived invasions, plagues, famines. Manannan's mist hid us from the Romans, kept us safe. Ellan Vannin is our home, best place in all the world."

He accompanied his assertions with notes on his fiddle. Why does he play while he talks? Euphemia wondered. It's annoying. Ah, but his words are a song, came the silent answer. I could almost sing it myself, so often have I heard the refrain. William's next statement echoed her thoughts. We're connected too, like Nan and Grandad.

"Ach, I've heard it a thousand times, Da." William sounded exasperated. His next breath caught in his throat. He coughed and coughed. The flat of a hand struck wood. "Fine words. But they don't put food on this table, do they? Goddamn mists haven't prevented the English stealing our wealth, have they? Next, they'll be taxing the very air we breathe. It never ends."

The music stopped with a painful sound, like the pull of a rusty nail. The two of them are just sitting there now, staring at the fire. Euphemia pictured their faces in profile: jaws set, bushy eyebrows furrowed, high cheekbones catching the light. Two sides of the same coin.

Gathering Hugh to her hip, she followed Nan next door to her own room and laid the baby down on the bed. Her hands trembled as she fought with his diaper pins.

"Here, lass." Nan gently moved her aside. After removing Hugh's wet nappy, Nan left him to kick his chubby legs. "He loves to be naked," she said, shaking her head. "Just like a man."

"I hope the cold air doesn't make him wee; I've no more clean sheets." Euphemia let herself fall sideways, next to him. "What does it matter, any road?" She moaned into the pillow.

"Hush, hush now, darling girl. *Foddym gra gyn danjeyr dy bee dy chooilley nhee dy mie,*" Nan whispered. She petted Euphemia's head, twirling a strand of long brown hair that had come loose from her coif.

"What's that you say, Nan? Oh, I'm that worried. I can hardly breathe."

"Don't take on so, darling. All will be well, the saying goes. Get yourself to bed and rest easy. I'll settle his little lordship, *smoor*

the *chiollagh*, with prayers to Themselves and blessings for the house, and set the table for morning. William can bring the cradle in later. Come on wee man. Oh, you're getting heavy," she groaned, as she lifted him and headed for the door. She opened it and Grandad's voice entered.

"We've come through worse, my son. A Manxman's always a leg to stand on. Our three-legged man rolls along. Don't give in to despair. For all our sakes."

As if he hadn't heard, William spoke in a voice that sounded as far off as the waves below Faery Hill. "There's rumors they'll close Bradda Mine, Da. They claim it's no longer profitable. Damn English. Money's all they care about. Never mind a man's livelihood."

"*Oie vie. Immee dy chadley.* You'll need your strength for tomorrow. Go on, get some rest now. Things'll look better come morning."

Grandad's tone with William is like Nan's with me, Euphemia realized as she rolled over. Poor old folks, doing as best they can not to panic. To keep our spirits up. Then she registered William's words. What's that he said? The mine might close? Christ, what next? Shivering, she put her feet on the cold floor and hastened into her nightgown, then burrowed under the damp sheets. She swam her legs back and forth to create heat. Dammit, my feet are freezing. Ought to have left my stockings on. William, come to bed, she silently summoned him. Let me hold you while you weep in my arms. We'll cry together. She squeezed her hands into fists. I've closed my eyes to his pain and he's suffered all alone. What's wrong with me? I always go on pretending, no matter what, I guess. Learned that at the orphanage. Pretending my mother would come for me, that she hadn't meant to abandon me, she'd rescue me, and we'd be together again, safe, rich . . . Castles in the air.

Under the Spell of Molly Bloom

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky

Rigel 2022 Finalist

with borrowings from James Joyce's *Ulysses*

In a dream that rings the Campanile's bell I'm back in Flanagan's "Ulysses" seminar he's pacing the floor dropping ash from his chain-smoked cigarettes giving voice to Molly's magic spell *and then he asked me would I say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes O Flanagan with your elfin prance in Wheeler Hall never mind your professorial Harris Tweed you're Molly Bloom you're river flow conjuring lives I've not yet lived but though I lack your Irish lilt it's Molly I've been when I cast my spell in the dark parked car for yes I'm wanton and full of yearnings and yes I know I scare him yes I know he's rising to me yes I've set the scene from my bedroom window while my parents think I'm sound asleep he's gazing up at me from the street a sickle moon my naked breasts and yes I have outfoxed myself lost myself in an old stone fortress with a drawbridge only he controls but he can't hold my gaze so full of himself so empty of me all I see is his abandoning back until one day I show him mine all the way across the drawbridge yes Flanagan I do because Molly's got me under her spell I say yes to the man with the flute to the man with the drum to the man with the tools who can fix my car and yes it's a bloody mess and yes I've seen my own faithless back and yes along came one who says Yes to my gaze and Yes to whatever blooms in me even now as we come to the owl's eve and the river's mouth approaches the sea in a time when the air hangs heavy with plague and the old gods shudder and pass away and trouble is a giant in seven league boots bent on toppling the world we thought we knew even*

now as I lie with my love in the bed we've made together over
half our lives I am still under Molly's spell thanks to you O
Flanagan though you're long gone to glory I can still hear you
voice those holy words *yes I will yes I will Yes*

Contributors

Jack Bordnick's sculptural and photographic imagery is a reflection of his past and present forces as well as the imagination of his life's stories. They represent an evolutionary process of these ideas and how all of life's forces are interconnected, embraced and expressed through creative art forms. He calls it "my quantum and metaphoric moment, the changing from one form to another." They express and implement his thoughts and feelings regarding taking risks without any guarantee of their success.

Miriam Borgstrom resides in the neon desert of Southern Nevada. She is an advocate for ampersands, eyeglasses, and avocados. Borgstrom's most recent work can be found at *Monday Night* and *Dream Pop Press*. Find her online at www.amiareiaam.com.

Christopher Paul Brown is known for his exploration of the unconscious through improvisation and the cultivation of serendipity and synchronicity via alchemy. His first photography sale was to the collection of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana, and his video, *You Define Single File*, was nominated for the Golden Gate Award in 2004. Over the past four years, his art was exhibited twice in Rome, Italy, in Belgrade, Serbia, and his series, *Obscure Reveal*, was exhibited at a Florida museum in 2017. His work appears in two hardcover books released by Manifest Gallery, and in *Tusis, Manipulated Images, a Dek Unu* (2019).

Steve Capra is a playwright and theater writer living in New York City. His plays have been produced in New York and the UK. His dramatic poem, *The Fall*, was a finalist in The Bordighera Poetry Prize Competition; his play, *The Shanghai Arsonist*, was a finalist in The Tennessee Williams Short Play Competition; his play, *At Night in Praha*, was a finalist in The American Globe Festival and placed third in The New Venture Festival. His book, *Theater Voices*, includes interviews with leaders in the British and American theater.

After a nomadic, army-brat childhood, **Carolyn Dasher** found her true home in Portland, Oregon, where she lives with her husband and a cat who thinks it's a dog. When she's not writing, she's probably fixing something in her hundred-year-old house.

Bryan Edenfield is the author of *Cake*, published by Really Serious Literature. He was born and raised in Arizona, but has lived in Washington State since 2007. He has been alive for a few decades.

Oisin Farrage writes poetry and lives in SC.

Julie Esther Fisher's stories have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Alaska Quarterly*, *Chicago Quarterly*, *Prime Number*, *William and Mary Review*, *Other Voices*, and others, and is forthcoming in *Bridge Eight*. She has been a finalist in Boulevard's Short Fiction contest and in Arts and Letters Unclassifiabiles. A passionate gardener dedicated to sustainability, she lives on several hundred acres of conserved land in western Massachusetts.

Valyntina Grenier is a multi-genre artist living with her wife in Tucson, AZ. She works with paint, ink, Neon, encaustic medium, recycled or repurposed materials, and words. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Fever Dream/ Take Heart* (Cathexis Northwest Press 2020) and *In Our Now* (Finishing Line Press 2022). Her work appears in *Impermanent Earth*, *The Journal*, *Lana Turner*, and *The Night Heron Barks*. Find her at valyntinagrenier.com or Insta @valyntinagrenier.

Mark Henderson teaches English at Tuskegee University. He earned his Ph.D. at Auburn University with concentrations in American literature and psychoanalytic theory. He has poems published or forthcoming in *Cozy Cat Press*, *From Whispers to Roars*, Defenestrationism.net, *Bombfire*, *Former People*, *Neologism*, *Broad River Review*, *Rune Bear*, *Flora Fiction*, *Flare*, *Visitant*, *Blood Tree Literature*, *The Closed Eye Open*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, *Burningword*, *Better Than Starbucks*, and *The Racket*. He was born and raised in Monroe, Louisiana, and currently resides in Auburn, Alabama.

Susanna Herrmann is a designer and visual artist from Bloomington, Indiana. She studied philosophy at Georgetown University before doing some photography and curation work and pursuing an MFA in studio art at the Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture, and Design at Indiana University. Susanna's work is based in theories of visual perception and is influenced by space and landscape. Themes of orientation and navigation are found throughout her work. She enjoys mixing analog and digital methods. Her current work centers experiences of landscapes.

Discharged from the Army in 1955, after being exposed to Asian art, **Larry Hill** discovered the renowned New York School of Painting. Seeing the work of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning changed his life. Hill's work was displayed and sold with theirs at the Sidney Janis gallery in New York. According to Samsung, he is one of the top 100 living artists in the world. He gets up almost every day, walks to his garage/studio and tackle a painting, usually one over six feet. At an Ikebana Society show, the great William Saroyan left him a note describing his work as "heroic." <https://www.larryhillartist-writer.com/>

Irene Blair Honeycutt's fourth poetry book, *Beneath the Bamboo Sky* (Main Street Rag 2017), is subtitled *Poems and Pieces on Loss and Consolation* because "It is my attempt to honor life by giving voice to sorrow and joy. Much of the book is about the loss of siblings—a grief not often recognized in our culture." Irene founded Central Piedmont Community College's annual literary festival Sensoria. Her work has been published in *Nimrod*, *Southern Poetry*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology: VII*, and *Virginia Quarterly*. Garrison Keillor included one of her poems on *Writers Almanac*. Irene has studied in the Czech Republic, Ireland, and Iceland. She lives in Indian Trail, NC.

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium and spent his teens in South Philly and Brooklyn. He joined the Air Force Medical Corps and was sent to Selma, Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement. There he was a crew member on helicopter rescue. Lecomte received a B.A. in Russian Studies from the University of Alabama, and earned an M.A. and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. Lecomte is also a published novelist, poet and playwright. For several years he was the poetry editor for *Paper Radio*. He recently moved to Bellingham, WA.

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky won the Atlanta Review International Merit Award, the Blue Light Poetry Prize, and the Obama Millennial Award. Her fourth full-length collection, *The Faust Woman Poems*, trace one woman's Faustian adventures through Women's Liberation and the return of the Goddess. Her new collection of poems, *Death and His Lorca*, was recently published by Blue Light Press. She is the poetry editor for *Psychological Perspectives* and blogs about poetry and life at sisterfrombelow.com.

Sunny Payson received an MFA in poetry, but has gravitated to fiction over the years. Payson lives in Vermont with family.

Michael Pearce's poetry has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Nimrod*, *Spillway*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Sun*, and elsewhere, and has won several national prizes (New Ohio Review, Oberon, Dogwood, and others). His collection of poems, *Santa Lucia by Starlight*, won the Brighthorse Prize and will be published in 2022.

LG Pomerleau is a writer of poetry and historical fiction, living in Nanton, Alberta, Canada. Pomerleau has written two novels and is a published poet, with poems currently in print in literary magazines and anthologies in Canada, the US, and abroad.

Aarron Sholar is a transgender writer who has essays forthcoming and published in *Dead Skunk Magazine*, *Broadkill Review*, *Beaver Magazine*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *45th Parallel Literary Magazine*, *Hobart*, *Polaris Magazine*, and

others. He holds a BA from Salisbury University and is an MFA candidate in CNF at MNSU, Mankato, where he is Head CNF Editor of *Blue Earth Review*.

A retired educator, **Dave Sims** makes art and music in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. Since 2016, his paintings and comix, both old-school and digital, have appeared in dozens of tactile and virtual exhibits and publications. Recent work is available or forthcoming in *Fauxmoir Review*, *Peatsmoke*, *Beyond Words*, and *Inverted Syntax*. He just finished a new song for another beautiful grandchild named Waylon James, who was born on June 18th, 2022. Experience more at www.tincansims.com.

Alex Stanley is a graduate of Boston College, and he received his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of California, Irvine. He is a former sports journalist, and his sports writing has been featured in *Sports Illustrated*. His published poems have appeared in *American Poets Magazine*, *HCE Review*, *Helix Magazine*, *Duck Lake Journal*, *The Write Launch*, and *Doozine*. He is a recipient of the 2021 Academy of American Poets Award. He resides in Costa Mesa, CA.

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based artist and art instructor. With an M.A. in child development and a B.A. in education, she has a strong interest in art education and teaches art to adults, children, and families. As a former ceramicist, she studied with J.T. Abernathy in Ann Arbor, MI. After receiving her B.F.A. in painting from the University of Washington, she switched from 3D art to 2D. She works primarily on paintings, prints and collages. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections, and she has shown nationally. She is a member of the Seattle Print Art Association and COCA (Center of Contemporary Art).

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