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CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART

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COVER: Plastic Straw Scape / Robin Young

The Watermen

JeFF Stumpo

*a chant for XXXTentacion
and for John Taylor*

A poet and a thief walk into a bar.
But I repeat myself.
Child of the indigo element.
The wit and the razor.
I repeat myself.
The tortured tortures.
I repeat.

*Lewd
Lewd did I live
Lewd did I live & evil I did dwell*

17th Century like
and subscribe.
The oddity and those
who consume it.
Palimpsest soul.
History repeating.

*O stone, be
O stone, be not so*

Death at 75 or 20
on a long enough timeline
matters little. The obituaries
for reputation written
by pitchforked mob.
I confuse myself
the more I read.

Never
Never odd
Never odd or even

The question not
was he bad. The question
how bad. The question
how soon will we be made
to forget. The question
left
hanging
like a child-
hood.

No
No, devil
No, devil lived
No devil lived on

A Lack

Jes Tyler

Set aside and sanctified by American Spirit
smoke, we laid down in the bed of a truck.
This was the country after all, and our secret
spot was just outside of town past the creeping
hints of industry in an otherwise rural backwater.
We thought we were such hot shit those days,
the most interesting boys around, reading
Kurt Vonnegut and listening to Tom fucking Waits.
We were hot shit, if only to each other, with dreams
tangled like sheets around two pairs of legs in
his hand-me-down and rusting pickup truck.
He preached his life's gospel to me and
I whispered fresh poems in his ears.
Lay your head against mine and we'll sing
of lust and bundle our secrets together.
This loving and loveless years lurk behind me,
a presence barely visible in the side view mirror
that is hindsight. And while I say that I don't long to feel
those curls in my fingers or read his freckles like braille,
I know the danger of desire at a distance is closer than it seems.

Leaves

Jess Tyler

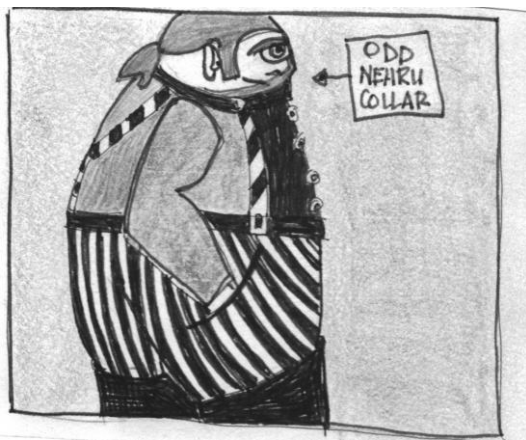
Leaves float down around you on currents of cool air.
It is a trick of the weather, a fool's gold of late summer,
but we will take that bet. Last season, we sat there about
this time on the tartan blanket you brought from home.
The leaves cracked and crinkled beneath the sheet.
You were worried that ants would swarm us as
sugary cakes led to even sweeter desserts. We didn't
see ants but you probably don't remember the
praying mantis, small and devout, stalking through
the stations of our picnic like a pilgrim on the Via Dolorosa.
In my prayers now, I see you there, entwined with
him on that same sheet, shielded from early autumnal decay.
I don't think that you remember me either, praying
and begging to give our fated end one more chance.
If I climbed the steeple of the church we could see
from that trysting spot and rang the great bell, could I
then re-insert myself, a grace note in your new song?
The light fades as the day shortens, and we leave
and are floating home to different beds again.

Reunion Illustrated

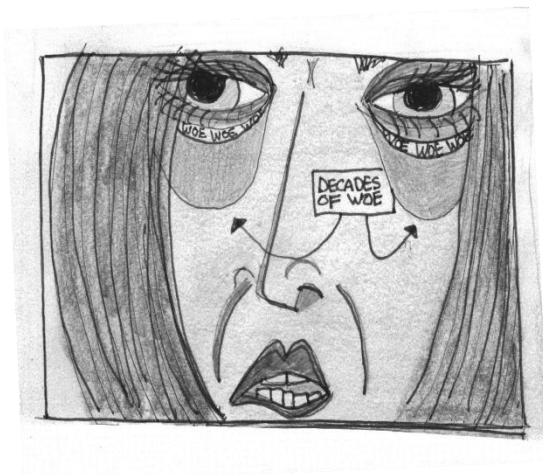
Leanne Grabel



We were all sixty-three. Some of us were wearing our lives on our faces like pantyhose. Some of us were wearing our lives on our bodies like lumps—I mean, wearing our lives on our lumps like bodies.



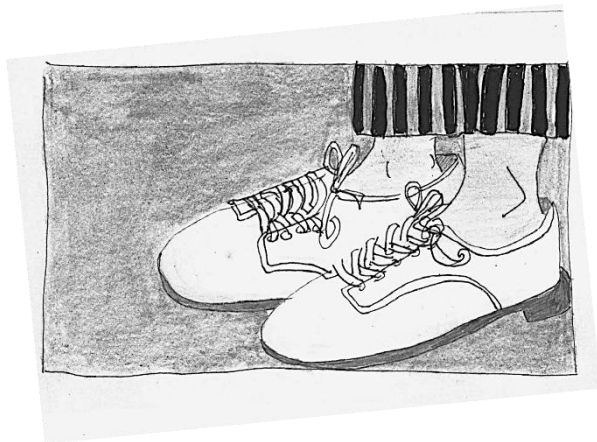
Did you see Peter Swenson, for instance? Unrecognizable. Round and big-bellied like a nesting doll. Red-faced and pockmarked like a dodge ball. His boots were as large as appliances. And that Nehru collar.



Did you see his old girlfriend Cissy O'Neill? She had small round sacs under her eyes like Kadota figs. It looked like she was storing all four and a half decades of woe in there.



I thought the beautiful girls avoided all that woe. It was tragic to her like that. So sullied by life. But she still had a perfect body. And she still had a perfect nose.



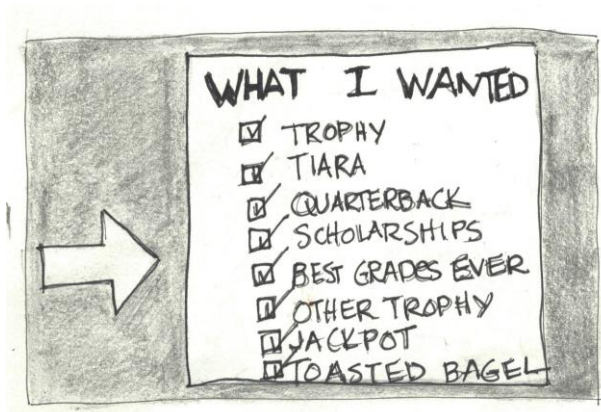
Did you see Gary Bronson? He was literally bouncing off walls. And bumping into people. As if the room were a mosh pit. But his clothes were to die for. Vintage white bucks. Black and gray striped slacks. A pressed linen shirt the color of tangerines. The shirt matched the soles of his shoes. I was impressed. And I tried hard to want him. But didn't.



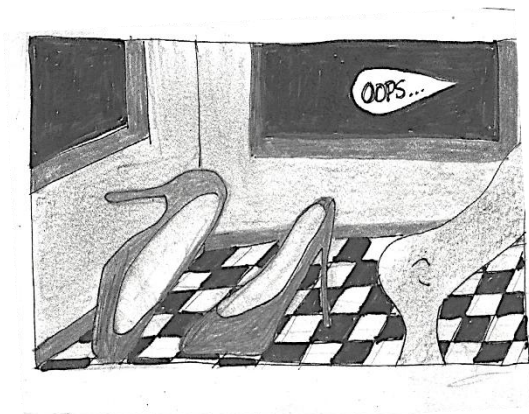
Did you see my blonde hair? It was the opposite of before. It used to be black. It was Mexican black. Remember? The rabbi said I was the darkest Jewish baby he'd ever seen.



Did you see my tight dress? As tight as my jaw. As bright as salmon roe.



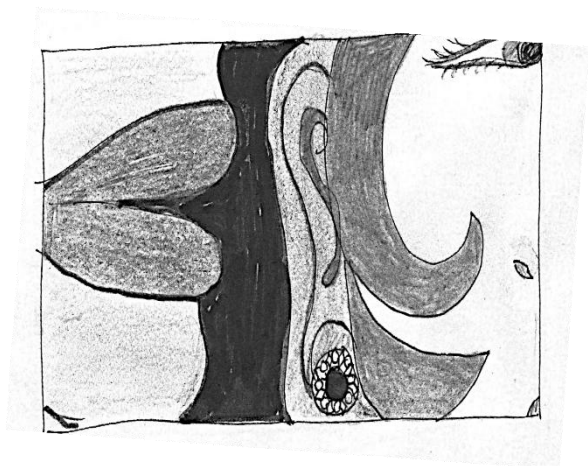
I was looking for a feeling that was the opposite of before. The feeling of winning at everything—looks and boys and sports and brains. I wanted to anchor relays, bring it in for the win, hands open, palming the baton, sprinting, chest open, winning. I wanted muscles AND allure. I wanted the trophy, tiara, scholarship, quarterback—and the most As.



But did you see me fall down? I slid right off my shoes. They were serious heels. [The opposite of before.] And my feet were so sweaty. I was dancing to “Billie Jean” with Gary Bronson. I wanted everyone to watch me. I wanted everyone to watch me and think *Wow. She looks good.* I wanted everyone to want me.



But I landed on my ass in the middle of the dance floor. Did you see how everyone swarmed over to help? I was lying there, face up, arms out, hands open, dress slightly torn and only slightly hiked up [thank god]. And everyone swarmed over to help.



You know, I fell very quietly, like a whisper . . .



So . . . they must have been watching. They must have been already watching.

Ode to Love

Pablo Neruda

Translated from Spanish by Wally Swist

Love, let's do the math.
At my age it is not possible
to deceive myself or to deceive us.
I was a highway robber,
maybe,
I do not regret it.
A profound moment,
a magnolia for my teeth,
and a moonlight
matchmaker.
Very well, but the balance?
Loneliness kept
its interwoven web
of cold jasmine
and then
the one that came into my arms
was the pink queen
of the islands.
Love,
with a drop,
even as it falls
throughout all
the spring
night
the ocean is not formed
and I was naked,
lonely, waiting.

But, behold that
which passed through my arms
like a wave
that

it was only a taste
of evening fruit,
that suddenly
flickered like a star,
that burned like a dove
and I found it on my skin
unraveling
like hair from a bonfire.
Love, since that day
everything was easier.
I obeyed the orders
that my forgotten heart gave me
and I squeezed her waist
and I claimed her mouth
with all the might
of my kisses,
like a king with a desperate army
who snatches a small tower
from where grows
the wild lily of her childhood.
That's why, love, I believe
how tangled and hard
your way can be
but when you turn on
the heat again
like bread on the table
so, simply,
this must be how we love.
Love, that's what you gave me.
When for the first time
she reached out to me, my arms
passed like the waters
in a wild spring.
Today,
I pick it up.
With my small hands
and the narrow sockets
of my eyes,

I receive the treasure,
the hidden waterfall
of endless night,
the bread of its fragrance,
who are simply, Love, my life.

Oda al Amor

Pablo Neruda

Amor, hagamos cuentas.
A mi edad
no es posible
engañar o engañarnos.
Fui ladrón de caminos,
tal vez,
no me arrepiento.
Un minuto profundo,
una magnolia rota
por mis dientes
y la luz de la luna
celestina.
Muy bien, pero, el balance?
La soledad mantuvo
su red entretejida
de fríos jazmineros
y entonces
la que llegó a mis brazos
fue la reina rosada
de las islas.
Amor,
con una gota,
aunque caiga
durante toda y toda
la nocturna
primavera
no se forma el océano
y me quedé desnudo,
solitario, esperando.

Pero, he aquí que aquella
que pasó por mis brazos
como una ola
aquella

que sólo fue un sabor
de fruta vespertina,
de pronto
parpadeó como estrella,
ardió como paloma
y la encontré en mi piel
desenlazándose
como la cabellera de una hoguera.
Amor, desde aquel día
todo fue más sencillo.
Obedecí las órdenes
que mi olvidado corazón me daba
y apreté su cintura
y reclamé su boca
con todo el poderío
de mis besos,
como un rey que arrebatara
con un ejército desesperado
una pequeña torre donde crece
la azucena salvaje de su infancia.
Por eso, Amor, yo creo
que enmarañado y duro
puede ser tu camino,
pero que vuelves
de tu cacería
y cuando enciendes
otra vez el fuego,
como el pan en la mesa,
así, con sencillez,
debe estar lo que amamos.
Amor, eso me diste.
Cuando por vez primera
ella llegó a mis brazos
pasó como las aguas
en una despeñada primavera.
Hoy
la recojo.
Son angostas mis manos pequeñas

las cuencas de mis ojos
para que ellas reciban
su tesoro,
la cascada
de interminable luz, el hilo de oro,
el pan de su fragancia
que son sencillamente, Amor, mi vida.

Ode to Soap

Pablo Neruda

Translated from Spanish by Wally Swist

Bringing
the
soap
up to my face,
its candid fragrance
alienates me:
I don't know
where you come from,
aroma,
do you originate
from the provinces?
From my cousin?
Of the clothes
in the trough,
stars of cold
between my hands?
Oh, of those
lilacs,
oh, of those?
From the eyes
of Maria Campestre?
Of the green plums
on the branch?
From the football field
to the privy beneath
trembling
willows?
Do you smell of a bower,
of sweet love or a birthday
cake? Do you smell
like a dampened heart?

What do you bring to me,
soap,
to my nostrils
so suddenly
in the morning,
by entering the water
of the dawn
and by going out into the streets
among the people overburdened
for your product?
What smell of town,
far away,
what flower
of silver silken slip,
what honey of wild girls?
Or maybe it's the smell
of the old
forgotten market
and its provisions,
the white canvass prints
in the hands
of ordinary people,
the *chancaca*'s delightful
sweetness of its thick sauce,
or a carnation
like red lightning
from the sideboard
of my uncle's house,
like a red arrow?

Is that
your sharp
cheap store
smell,
a cologne
unforgettable, of hairdressing,
of the pure province,
to clean water?

That is what
you are,
soap, pure delight,
transitory aroma
that slips
and shipwrecks us
like a blind fish
in the profound depths of the bath.

Oda al Jabon

Pablo Neruda

Acercando
el
jabón
hasta mi cara
su cándida fragancia
me enajena:
No sé
de dónde vienes,
aroma,
¿de la provincia
vienes?
¿De mi prima?
¿De la ropa en la artesa
entre las manos
estrelladas de frío?
¿De las lilas
aquellas,
ay, de aquéllas?
¿De los ojos
de María campestre?
¿De las ciruelas verdes
en la rama?
¿De la cancha de fútbol
y del baño
bajo los
temblorosos
sauces?
¿Hueles a enramada,
a dulce amor o a torta
de onomástico? ¿Hueles
a corazón mojado?

¿Qué me traes,
jabón,

a las narices
de pronto
en la mañana,
antes de entrar al agua
matutina
y salir por las calles
entre hombres abrumados
por sus mercaderías?
¿Qué olor de pueblo
lejos,
qué flor
de enaguas,
miel de muchachas silvestres?
¿O tal vez
es el viejo
olvidado
olor del almacén
de ultramarinos
y abarrotos,
los blancos lienzos fuertes
entre las manos de los campesinos,
el espesor
feliz
de la chancaca,
o el aparador de la casa
de mis tíos
un clavel rojo
como un rayo rojo,
como una flecha roja?

¿Es eso
tu agudo
olor
a tienda
barata, a colonia
inolvidable, de peluquería,
a la provincia pura,
al agua limpia?

Eso
eres,
jabón, delicia pura,
aroma transitorio
que resbala
y naufraga como un
pescado ciego
en la profundidad de la bañera.

Ode to a Woman Gardening

Pablo Neruda

Translated from Spanish by Wally Swist

Yes, I knew that your hands
were those of a reclusive
flower, a silver lily;
that you had
something to do
with the ground,
the flourishing
of the earth,
but when
I saw you dig,
dig, remove
pebbles
and handle roots,
I suddenly
recognized
my farmer,
that
not only
your hands
but your heart
was of the land,
that there
you were doing
things that
were yours,
touching
wet doors
where
the seeds
circulate.
So, that
from one

to another plant
newly planted,
with a kiss
of mud
soiling your face,
you were going
but you came
back blooming,
you were going
but from your hand
the stem
of astromelia
raised its
solitary elegance,
the jasmine
dressing the mist
on your forehead
with stars of scent
and dew.
Everything
grew from you
penetrated
the earth
and became
immediate
green light,
foliage and power.
You communicated
your seeds,
my love,
red gardener.
You hand
was familiar
with the earth
and instantly
there was
clear growth.
Love, so too

your hand
of water,
your heart
of earth,
which give fertility
and strength to my songs.
You touch
my chest
while I sleep
and trees
sprout from
my dreams.
I wake up, I open my eyes,
and you have planted
inside of me
amazing stars
that rise with my song.
It is like this, gardener,
our life is
the land:
your mouth is a plant of light, corolla,
my heart works in the roots.

Oda a la Jardinera

Pablo Neruda

Sí, yo sabía que tus manos eran
el alhelí florido, la azucena
de plata;
algo que ver tenías
con el suelo,
con el florecimiento de la tierra,
pero
cuando
te vi cavar, cavar,
apartar piedrecitas
y manejar raíces
supe de pronto,
agricultora mía,
que
no sólo
tus manos,
sino tu corazón
eran de tierra,
que allí
estabas
haciendo
cosas tuyas,
tocando
puertas
húmedas
por donde
circulan
las
semillas.
Así, pues,
de una a otra
planta
recién
plantada,

con el rostro
manchado
por un beso
del barro,
ibas
y regresabas
floreciendo,
ibas
y de tu mano
el tallo
de la astromelia
elevó su elegancia solitaria,
el jazmín
aderezó
la niebla de tu frente
con estrellas de aroma y de rocío.
Todo
de ti crecía
penetrando
en la tierra
y haciéndose
inmediata
luz verde,
follaje y poderío.
Tú le comunicabas
tus semillas,
amada mía,
jardinera roja.
Tu mano
se tuteaba
con la tierra
y era instantáneo
el claro crecimiento.
Amor, así también
tu mano
de agua,
tu corazón de tierra,
dieron

fertilidad
y fuerza a mis canciones.
Tocas
mi pecho
mientras duermo
y los árboles brotan
de mi sueño.
Despierto, abro los ojos,
y has plantado
dentro de mí
asombradas estrellas
que suben con mi canto.
Es así, jardinera:
nuestro amor
es
terrestre:
tu boca es planta de la luz, corola,
mi corazón trabaja en las raíces.

Ode to the Spoon

Pablo Neruda

Translated from Spanish by Wally Swist

Spoon,
basin
of
the oldest hand
of man,
still
it shows in your shape,
metal or wood,
mold of the palm,
primitive,
where
water
transfers
its freshness
and the blood-
frenzied
palpitation
of fire and hunting.

Spoon,
tiny
in the
hand
of the child,
you raise up
to his mouth
the most
ancient
kiss
from the earth,
the silent inheritance
of the first waters

that sang
on lips that afterwards
covered the shore.

The man
added
to the detached hole
from his hand
an imaginary arm
of wood
and
he left
the spoon
around the world
each
time
more
perfect,
accustomed to pass
between plate and pink lips
or to fly
from the poor soup
to the forgotten
mouth of the hungry.

Yes,
spoon,
you climbed
with the man
in the mountains,
you descended
the rivers,
you filled
soups and cities,
castles and kitchens,
but
the difficult road
of your life

is getting together
with the plate
of the poor
and with your mouth.

That's why the time
of the new life,
that
fighting and singing
we propose will be an event
of tureens,
a pure panoply
of spoons,
and in a world
without hunger,
illuminating every corner,
all the dishes set on the table,
happy flowers,
an oceanic vapor of soup
and a total movement of spoons.

Oda a la Cuchara

Pablo Neruda

Cuchara,
cuenca
de
la más antigua
mano del hombre,
aún
se ve en tu forma
de metal o madera
el molde
de la palma
primitiva,
en donde
el agua
trasladó
frescura
y la sangre
salvaje
palpitación
de fuego y cacería.

Cuchara
pequeñita,
en la
mano
del niño
levantas
a su boca
el más
antiguo
beso
de la tierra,
la herencia silenciosa
de las primeras aguas que cantaron
en labios que después

cubrió la arena.
El hombre
agregó
al hueco desprendido
de su mano
un brazo imaginario
de madera
y
salió
la cuchara
por el mundo
cada
vez
más
perfecta,
acostumbrada
a pasar
desde el plato a unos labios clavelinos
o a volar
desde la pobre sopa
a la olvidada boca del hambriento.

Sí,
cuchara,
trepaste
con el hombre
las montañas,
descendiste los ríos,
llenaste
embarcaciones y ciudades,
castillos y cocinas,
pero
el difícil camino
de tu vida
es juntarte
con el plato del pobre
y con su boca.

Por eso el tiempo
de la nueva vida
que
luchando y cantando
proponemos
será un advenimiento de soperas,
una panoplia pura
de cucharas,
y en un mundo
sin hambre
iluminando todos los rincones,
todos los platos puestos en la mesa,
felices flores,
un vapor oceánico de sopa
y un total movimiento de cucharas.

Ode to a Star

Pablo Neruda

Translated from Spanish by Wally Swist

Leaning out into the night
from a terrace
of a skyscraper
so tall and bitter,
I could touch the night vault
and in an extraordinary act of love,
I took possession of a celestial star.

Black is the night
and I snuck
down the street
with the stolen star in my pocket.
It looked like
trembling glass,
and appeared
suddenly
as if I carried
an ice pack
or an archangel's sword in my belt.

I guarded it,
fearfully,
under the bed,
so that no one would
discover her,
but its light
crossed
first
the wool of the mattress,
then
the tiles,
the roof of my house.

My most
private needs
were made
unbearable.

Always with that light
of astral acetylene
that pulsated as if it desired
to return to the night,
I could not
worry about my duties
to everyone
and this is how I forgot to pay my bills
and I was left without bread or provisions.

Meanwhile, on the street,
passersby rioted,
wordly sellers
undoubtedly attracted
by the unusual brilliance
that they saw emitting from my window.

So
I picked up my star again,
carefully
I wrapped it in my handkerchief,
and masked among the crowd
I passed without being recognized,
I headed west
to Green River,
which under the willows,
is serene.

I took the star of the cold night
and delicately
cast it on the waters.

And it didn't surprise me
that it got away
like an insoluble fish,
moving
her diamond body
in the night river.

Oda a una estrella

Pablo Neruda

Asomando a la noche
en la terraza
de un rascacielos altísimo y amargo
pude tocar la bóveda nocturna
y en un acto de amor extraordinario
me apoderé de una celeste estrella.

Negra estaba la noche
y yo me deslizaba
por la calle
con la estrella robada en el bolsillo.
De cristal tembloroso
parecía
y era
de pronto
como si llevara
un paquete de hielo
o una espada de arcángel en el cinto.

La guardé
temeroso
debajo de la cama
para que no la descubriera nadie,
pero su luz
atravesó
primero
la lana del colchón,
luego
las tejas,
el techo de mi casa.

Incómodos
se hicieron

para mí
los más privados menesteres.

Siempre con esa luz
de astral acetileno
que palpitaba como si quisiera
regresar a la noche,
yo no podía
preocuparme de todos
mis deberes
y así fue que olvidé pagar mis cuentas
y me quedé sin pan ni provisiones.
Mientras tanto, en la calle,
se amotinaban
transeúntes, mundanos
vendedores
atraídos sin duda
por el fulgor insólito
que veían salir de mi ventana.

Entonces
recogí
otra vez mi estrella,
con cuidado
la envolví en mi pañuelo
y enmascarado entre la muchedumbre
pude pasar sin ser reconocido.
Me dirigí al oeste,
al río Verde,
que allí bajo los sauces
es sereno.

Tomé la estrella de la noche fría
y suavemente
la eché sobre las aguas.

Y no me sorprendió
que se alejara

como un pez insoluble
moviendo
en la noche del río
su cuerpo de diamante.



Awakening Through Struggle / Surovi Akter



Peaceful Observation / Surovi Akter



Liberty of Soul / Surovi Akter

Balance Sheet

John Kaufmann

2055

Henry's diaper is full. Gus lifts him from the crib, holds him against himself and pats his back. *So tiny*, he thinks. Henry fusses as Gus untapes the old diaper, tosses it into the composter, wipes him off and snaps the clean diaper in place. Don't worry, big guy, Gus says. It gets better. Until it doesn't. Then, he wraps him again, picks him up, holds him against his chest like you would a cat, shifts from leg to leg, and shushes rhythmically.

Outside, it dark and silent except for the hum of the inverter and the glow-lights from the opposite bank. It is twenty-seven outside and moist, down from a high of forty-two. Nobody goes outside in the middle of the day in summer except for Vergil, and he is crazy. Gus' butt tickles and the legs of an armchair scrape the porch. He sits with his feet on the rails, cradling Henry, rocking back and forth. He thinks, I have never been to Canada, although it's right there. The lights on the far bank. You could shoot a rifle across. I can't remember the last time I left Saint Lawrence County.

When Henry was born, he said to Helga, Look—his arm is as big as my finger. That was two and a half months ago, and he is not much bigger now.

A mass of snot has begun to solidify in the valley of Henry's cleft palette, causing his breathing to make a faint grinding sound. Gus wipes it away and puts his finger inside Henry's right hand. Henry's eyes don't open, but his hand closes around the finger. Gus notices that Henry's second thumb can oppose both the first thumb and the other fingers. Maybe he will play the piano, Gus thinks. Or use chopsticks, or be a kickass gamer. The inverter switches off and then on again and purrs. The screen inside the kitchen says that it is 3:53. He is a sack of beans I will hold until the sun comes up, Gus thinks, a sack of beans that fusses and exudes spit, snot and other things. Maybe I can take a nap after lunch.

Inside, Helga dreams that she and Gus are in high school. She has a test she has not prepared for. She needs to find Gus, to tell him

the answers. The hallways are full of people but the doors to the classes where she looks for Gus are closed.

Around 4:30, Gus feels his own lids close and an erection coming on. He thinks of how he holds Helga's hands above her head in his own while he is on top of her. They don't kiss, but they breathe into each other's mouths. He thinks that the time he spends moving insider her does not count against his time on earth.

At six, Helga finds father and son asleep. Gus' feet are propped on top of the porch railing with his knees locked. Henry is sprawled on Gus' chest facedown with his arms spread-eagled and his eyes closed. I'm going, boys, she says. She is dressed in social worker chic—short black leggings, a black top, black sneakers and a light-blue blazer. When Gus stands, Henry starts to fuss. Gus holds Henry on his left hip, puts his right arm around Helga, and kisses her. The skin beneath her tights and underwear is warm in a way that makes him realize that his hand is cold on her butt. Her lips are soft and greasy with lip oil. She says, I love you, too, kisses him again, and closes the main door and storm door behind her.

The sun is already at nine o'clock and the temperature is up to thirty when Gus wheels Henry past the entrance sign to the park. An Agrestic Community, the sign flashes. *Worth a Visit, Worth a Lifetime. Find us Arpanet! No Social Credit Check!* The park is sandwiched between the Route 37 and the river, with homes laid out in a herringbone to maximize use of space. The newer homes sit on Hercules piles. Older homes sit on slabs and cinder blocks. Behind Gus, a barge ripples the surface of the river, which is otherwise glassy.

Gus once asked Vergil, Who sold the park to Agrestic? A guy named Curtis, Vergil said. He made twenty million. Back when twenty million meant something.

-Who sold it to Curtis?

-Guy named Korda.

-When they going to fill these potholes?

-When the Bills win.

I compartmentalize, Helga likes to say when she comes home—or, I try. Once, she told Gus that a woman had kept a girl in a shed for a year. She found kids who were covered with scabs, or who had not seen light for months. Some were kept in the system for the hundred fifty grand they came with. I couldn't imagine, Gus said,

although, of course, he didn't have to. Most of the time, Helga said, it's just people using the system as a way to settle scores. They'll drop a dime on someone they don't like, get their kids taken away from them. And you do that? said Gus. We have to follow up each claim that is made to us, Helga said. Even when we know it is bullshit.

A car passes. Look at that! Gus says to Henry. Boo, boo! Henry flexes his hands, exhales, and makes the face he makes when he takes a crap.

Vergil pulls up on an old IC tractor wearing wraparound shades that make him look mean. How's the boy, he asks.

Filling his diapers, Gus says.

-You got a lot of beauties in this park.

-Nice to see you, Mr. Gagnon.

Vergil says that he lived in the park back when. Pads were made out of gravel when I first moved here, he told Gus once. Your parents lived in one of those.

I wouldn't remember that, Gus said.

No, you wouldn't, Vergil said.

Some people said Vergil was a hundred forty years old. I don't think he is older than a hundred twenty, Helga told Gus once. Whatever. He's old. Vergil told Gus once that Korda would walk around the park and collect lot rent in cash. Cash? What's that, Gus asked. Heh, Vergil said. Vergil remembered when Korda instituted on-line payments. Back then the Arpanet was free and you could read whatever you wanted. Although nothing, you know—he told Gus—is really free.

At the bottom of the bluffs, Gus parks Henry and skips a stone. The water is the color of pot roast. When he dips his hand in it, he feels neither warmth nor cold. The entrance sign at his back tells him that it is almost eleven thirty. It will be past the wet bulb temperature soon. The sign will announce that, too, and the siren in the park and the sirens in town will go off. Once that happens, he will have to take Henry inside. The second rock he skips catches the surface of the water with its edge and sinks quickly. He looks to his right and his left. Nobody else is by the river. Helga has the car, so he can't take Henry into town. His pockets are empty except for a bank card with a grand on it. He does a quick accounting, the way he always does. They own their home outright. It's a single-wide but it has three rooms, so Henry

can have his own space when he gets older. There is even room for a second kid, if HCR okays it. Two grand for lot rent is a stretch on a social worker's salary, but government work is steady. He turns the cart toward the top of the bluff and starts to climb. He will spend nap time dozing and looking at Henry. A pot of chili and rice will be ready by the time Helga gets home. At night, they will sleep on their sides facing each other, he with his left hand on her hip and their foreheads touching, except for when Henry fusses. It is only a crappy manufactured home on rented land, but for them it is the whole world.

2029

Sometimes the social worker was a large White woman and sometimes it was a large Black woman. Once, it was a funny-looking young guy with a beard and glasses who kept dropping things. They would click their styluses and fiddle with their tablets. They would speak with Gus and Helga separately from the guardian together and then they would speak with them each alone. Usually, they would sit down or squat when they spoke with them. They always seemed more interested in their tablets than they were in them.

After they were six, the guardians kept them in separate rooms. Gus found that, if he pushed slowly, he could ease open the door without knocking the cans the guardian placed in front of them to keep him from sneaking into Helga's room over. They would lie in their underwear next to each other. You have bad breath, Helga told him the first time he did that. Your smells good, Gus said. He would rearrange the cans outside his door as best he could from the inside after he went back to his room, and pretend to knock them over minutes before the guardian awoke.

One guardian put them in the basement for a week. They set the futon mattress in the corner and lay in each other's arms for a hundred sixty-eight hours, undisturbed. When some light came in through the windows, Gus traced the lines in the fieldstone foundation above his field of vision as he rested his chin on the top of Helga's head, above the place where her scalp parted in the middle above a line of skin as white as the belly of a snake. He felt her armpits for hair, but could not find any.

They were put with separate guardians when they were twelve. Helga stayed in the same school district. Gus went to Potsdam.

When he was twelve and older, he would lie under the sheets and Line Helga, R U Up? The phone would brighten the space between his stomach and his knees. She would Line back,

-M.

-How is school?

-Cool.

-Can I send a pic?

-Don't.

At midnight on their eighteenth birthday, he Lined her, I'm coming to find you. She lined back,

-Where can we live?

-The park's still there.

2022

Sammy

When Mike called to tell him that Josh had ODeD, Korda thought, it's not the worst result. I need to get these lease options off the balance sheet. Of course, I am sorry that he died. I'm not a complete prick.

He had bumped into Josh a year before the incident when he was in the park. Josh and a blonde woman wearing aviator glasses were transferring two babies from Josh's home to his truck in twin car seats. Korda pointed at the pink car seat and said, What's this one? The woman smiled and said,

-Helga.

-And this one?

-Gus.

-How are they?

-Perfect.

Josh joked about sleep deprivation. You'll do well, Korda had told him. It's good that you're having kids at forty, instead of twenty. You have wisdom that you didn't have back then. Korda's own children were grown. They are a pain in the ass, he would tell people, but I would take a bullet for either. Josh nodded. You have the best-looking lot in the park, Korda continued. I wish I could clone you. Josh looked

at the blonde-haired woman, the two car seats, and the babies lying in them. We're trying, he said, and laughed. As he walked to his car, he thought, That's a nice younger couple—and they keep maintenance costs low.

He was surprised when Mike called, six months later, to tell him that Josh had sat on his steps, taken off all his clothes and had a seizure. He was hopeful when Mike said that Josh's mother had come up from Florida to keep an eye on the home while he went to rehab. He was disappointed when Mike called to say that his body had been found in his home three months after that.

-Who found it?

-People he was partying with.

-How?

-They came back the morning after and there he was.

-They called the cops?

-Yes.

-Is his body gone now?

-Yes.

Lease options are a park owner's nemesis, Korda liked to say. They have the expense of apartments, but they pay dick. I'm sorry about Josh, but. He asked Mike, Are the twins with their mother?

-Far as I know.

-Give Josh's mother her deposit back. I'm not a complete prick.

-That place is a mess.

-I am sure you have seen worse.

Mike

Korda lived down-state and only visited the park once a month. He would say things like, We need to upgrade that lot to two hundred amp or Let's bring in three more homes as if all anyone had to do was wave a magic wand to get shit done, but he took care of Mike. There were worse jobs.

The problem when Josh died was the druggie friends who came back. Two of them broke a window and moved into Josh's trailer the day after. Out! Mike shouted when he saw them. The boy was skinny and pale, with rectangular glasses and ear gauges. A receding hairline made him look like a yogi. The girl looked like she could be in

high school but she had a mouth on her, and a shaved head. They were lying on Josh's bed, asleep when he found them. *Both of you. Out!* The girl opened her eyes, tilted her head and said,

-We have permission to be here.

-*Out! Now!*

Assholes, Korda said, when Mike told him about it later. Did they get permission from a dead guy? Then he asked,

-What about the kids? Are they with their mother?

-I don't think she has them anymore.

-Are they twins?

-I believe so.

-Have you seen the mother?

-She came back for Josh's truck.

-I will pay you for the tools the junkies stole.

-The tools are what pisses me off the most.

-Fucken assholes.

Josh

When Josh moved in, Korda told him that he could rent the home he was in for five years. If he made all the payments, he could buy it for the money he put up as a deposit. My parents lived here once, Josh told him. Same as my grandparents. Korda lived downstate and looked it, with clean clothes, soft hands and a Tesla. Oh, really? he said.

-We moved out when I was little. We lived in the lot next to the old guy Vergil. My grandparents stayed after we left. Did you know them?

-I do not believe so. I bought the park last year.

The first thing Josh did was dig a perimeter around the home and fill it with gravel. That way, he could weed-whack without chewing up the skirting. He repaired the old shed that sat at the back of the lot. He planted an apple tree and a pear tree. He cleared out some of the land farthest from the road, put in tomato plants, and mulched around them. To keep out the deer, he built a fence made of four-by-fours and chicken wire.

In school, he had always felt that other kids were listening to music he couldn't hear. They danced to it. He couldn't dance. He couldn't even hear the music. When he was alone, he spoke with

himself. When he was with people, he found that he spoke more quickly than he should, and said *uh, um, and you know* too much. If he wasn't holding a shovel or a rake, he didn't know what to do with his hands. He would put them in his pockets, wave them around, or put them in front of him together, like a fig leaf.

His earliest memory was of a stepfather, twisting his lips. That scared him more than the actual slap or punch that followed, because it showed a big person in the grip of something stronger than him.

There were things he liked about landscaping and there were things he didn't. He didn't like the shitty pay, the way some customers' wives walked past him or the way the other guys spoke Spanish. He liked the way the shovel bit the dirt at the beginning of the day, the way the air felt on his skin in spring and early fall and the view of the far bank when he was on jobs near the river. When they installed sprinkler systems, he liked knowing where the pipes went after they were buried and hidden. And after he moved into his home, he liked to sit on his steps and look at the pear and apple blossoms in the spring. In late summer and fall, he liked to pick tomatoes in his back lot and eat them off the vine.

Jenny gave him lozenges for the first time. Put it between your cheek and gum, she said. Let it sit there and dissolve. Don't swallow and don't spit.

-How long do I hold it in my mouth for?

-As long as you can.

When he spat, what came out was thick, warm and purple. Lean back, she said. Enjoy. She had some EDM music playing on her phone and the lights were dim. Put a tee shirt over your eyes, she said. He dreamt he put his foot on the back of a spade that bit into dirt that was brown and grainy. The music was corn-colored, then blue, or maybe green. Kids from school were dancing and he joined in. When he reached down to touch his knee, it felt like somebody else's.

Jenny

Jenny had almost swiped left on Josh. He was five years older and had a pale, triangular face. In one of his pictures, he was wearing a ball cap and shades, holding a fish by the gills with his back to water and sun. When they met, the rest of him looked like his face—broad, a little

bottom-heavy, with dark hair going gray and pale skin and a ball cap that didn't come off. But his hands were strong, even though he didn't know where to put them when they spoke. He didn't come with kids. When he showed her where he lived, in the trailer park up on Route 37, she liked the tomato plants, the dog run, and the well-trimmed lawn. His home was clean, even though the fridge was bare. He paid his own bills and spoke well of an ex, who was living in Lowville.

She told him, I thought guys like you were hunted to extinction. Heh, he said.

What they liked the most, at first, was to lie next to each other after they took the lozenges, face up, shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip in the bedroom at the end of his trailer. She would put music on her phone and the spit bucket at the foot of the bed. At first, he couldn't hold it in his mouth for more than five minutes. The second time they did it, he touched his knee and hers half an hour into the trip. Afterwards, he told her, I couldn't tell which was whose.

Vergil

Vergil knew Josh was going bad when he started hanging out with the blond-haired girl who worked at Dollar General. She drove a red bug and smiled at every man she met. Stay away from her, he told him. Take it easy on her, Josh said. She's had it rough. Vergile said,

-I'm tellin' you.

-Heh.

He's hanging around with that girl Jenny, Vergil told Lynn. She was sitting in her recliner facing the TV, parallel to his. She said, Oh, lordy.

When Josh's grandmother had lived in the park, Vergil and Lynn had played cards with them on Sundays. After she had Josh and his brother, she went off the rails. He heard that she had dried out and was in Florida now, but God only knew what things were like for that boy. Even after Lisa took him out of the park, he would come over and mow Vergil's lawn on weekends. Despite it all, he seemed to have become a fine young man, even though forty was not young for most people. That's why Vergil hated seeing this happen. He said to Lynn,

-When do you think Korda will fix the water riser?

-All that man cares about is money.

-He's not that bad.

-Hm.

Lisa

Josh's little brother had punched holes in the wall, fought with his stepdad and stayed back a year in school, but Josh had not done any of that. He hadn't been a *good* kid, either. He didn't do sports. He didn't disrupt his classes, but the teachers sometimes told Lisa they thought he didn't listen. He wasn't a good or bad. He was just a kid.

Are you gay, she asked him once, when he was seventeen. They were sitting at the kitchen table in the apartment they were living in in Canton. It's OK if you are. It's just that your brother—

-*Mom!*

-Why don't you bring any girls around the house?

Josh looked at his hands. I dunno, he said. Then he turned red, so she dropped the subject. But you can imagine how happy she was twenty-two years later when he called her to tell he that he had a girlfriend.

-What's her name?

-We're getting married.

-Nobody gets married anymore.

-She is going to have twins.

-Oh, my lord.

Josh said that the twins were going to be one of each, a boy and a girl. Jenny wanted to name the boy Gus, after a Swedish king. The girl was going to be Helga. Lisa wondered how many alligators were in Lake Mann, and how dangerous they might be. She did not miss the Ogdensburg winters, but she had not gotten used to the Florida summers. She said,

-That's a strange name.

-Jenny likes it.

Jenny

When she met him, Jenny did not think that Josh was the kind of guy that would hit her. He liked dogs, he planted things and, after the kids arrived, he was good with them. He told her about how his mother had

ignored it when his step fathers had hit him. She told him how her ex had dented the siding in their home with the top of her head not a year ago. He said, You mean ... in the park out by Holcim road?

-Uh-huh.

-That place is a shithole.

When he told her about his stepfathers, she said, That's just like your mother. He didn't say anything when she said that, just turned a little red and looked at his hands. She knew that his mother referred to her as The Little Bitch, or TLB behind her back, and that Josh said She's okay Ma, when she said that but let her keep saying it all the same. So, she was *really* surprised when he pushed her hard enough to make her fall and crack her head against the kitchen counter while she was holding Helga. Fuck you, she said. You do that to a girl? He said, Sorry. You okay? When the twins had been born, Josh had gone around the home and babyproofed it. He had put stop latches on cabinet doors and padded sharp edges. The foam corner pieces he had put on the kitchen counter padded the impact with the back of her head a little. It did not break the skin, but it still hurt. When she stood up, she thought she would have a bruise the next day, but it would not be visible. She said, I'm taking my babies, grabbed the keys to Josh's truck, scooped up Gus and left the home with him on one hip and Helga on the other. Where you going, he asked. Fuck you, she said.

Lynn

When Vergil came back from mowing, his head looked like a bowling ball with wraparound shades under the ball cap. Why don't you just shave it and let me paint a smiley face on it, she had told him thirty years ago when he started to go bald. *Hah-hah*. Now, she told him, I called CPS today. That Jenny girl left their trailer with those two kids. She shifted her weight in her recliner as she spoke. When her knees and hips hurt these days, it was a long-lasting and deep pain, rather than something sharp. Moving from one side to another helped, briefly. Vergil said,

-That's a couple of beauties.

-I hope they find her.

-Anyplace would be better than there.

Josh

Before Jenny moved in, Josh sometimes felt like he would become disconnected from the ground and float away, like a trailer with broken tie-downs. His mother was far away. He couldn't understand the guys at work. He would stop to say hi to the old guy Vergil, but that was just chit-chat. Sometimes, he wondered, if I were to scream, who would hear me? Everyone in the park, he thought. And would they care? No. But that changed when Jenny came. It felt good to say *my wife, my kids, we* when he spoke with someone. It felt as if he belonged. But it didn't last, of course. He didn't mind nagging. If anything, he would have welcomed the ability to grant nagging rights. What bothered him was when she spoke as if this was a temporary thing. She didn't even have to say much. When that happened, it felt as if the ties were loosened and he floated off, out of orbit. That made him do what he had sworn he never would.

The rule he and Jenny had used was to always spit. He didn't do that that afternoon. He popped four lozenges instead of two and held them for an hour. When his cheeks were bursting and it looked like he was holding a baseball in his mouth, he swallowed the spit. Then, he lay back on the bed and it felt like it did when the doctor had put the mouthpiece over his face when he had his appendix out—that is, like when they cut to nothing at the end of a video.

Mike

After he got rid of the junkies, Mike found that the trailer was not as bad as some he had seen before. The kitchen counter, which was made of tongue-and-groove flooring and two-by-twos, had padded corners, but was pitched so that the top drawer of the cabinet didn't open. You can't fix stupid, he told Korda as he walked through. Oh yes, you can, Korda said. It just takes two generations. You ever read Darwin? Someone had punched a hole in one of the closet doors and a sheetrock wall. Anger management problems. Yep. The floor joists and subfloor were okay, the mechanicals worked and there were no visible signs of roof leakage. The fridge was almost empty, except for a carton of milk. There were syringes on the floor in the bedroom and the place smelled like cats' piss, but that was just garbage. Three-fifty, four grand tops,

he told Korda. All we need to do is clean it up and give it a coat of paint.

-Where's his mother?

-She told us to dump everything. She can't come up.

-Sell it outright once you're done. I am sick of lease options.

Get it off the balance sheet.

-I agree.

-Any news about the kids?

-They are not with Jenny any more.

-They don't have a chance.

-No, they don't.



Flowers of Confusion / Robin Young

My Friend Eliza

Sofia Sears

Eliza is wearing my face. Tonight, it's her turn to be the girl.

We make do with what we have. Melted and ancient makeup. Crusted-over skins. Eyelashes woven from cherry stems. Rouge made from the rust in the bathroom sink. Lips we've cut and glued on ourselves. Eliza has taken what I've offered and placed it neatly over her skull. A nose built out of glass shards, taken from a fogged vase I've smashed on the floor. I cut my hands picking each sliver up, so now, patched onto the flesh, they're tinged just slightly by blood, like kiss-smearred lipstick. No one will notice, I promise her. We're *soooo* good at this.

Eliza is practicing her smile. In our mirror, she adjusts one of the eyeballs—it's slippery, moist, a bit decayed, a bit too small, dripping down our cheeks and into our mouths every now and then, sour braids of mucus we have to wipe away—and presses her fingers against the brows, which I've sewn from the hair of that American Girl doll we recently burned, childhood detritus we're trying to outgrow.

We are not *pretty*, but that's besides the point. We are passable. We are personable.

Eliza looks better as me than I ever did. She preens, pursing those lips and posing like a teenager, love-hungry and wolfish. Let me be *your* girl, she seems to say, and I'd let her, really, if I could.

The first time Eliza bit me, I was twelve. Too old for night terrors, for creeping into my parents' room, for any of that cowardice, I'd decided. Besides, they'd taken me to a child psychiatrist, given me some mild sleeping pills by then, kept me good and docile. I slept oddly, the medication making me foggy and disoriented the next morning. There was never a sense of rest. The drugged sleep felt like mimicry, artificial, a meager facsimile of the real thing.

But I'd run out of pills that night. A school night. I didn't tell my mom because she would just sigh that exasperated sigh and shake her head at me, tell me to *be more responsible* and *stop letting her know*

this at the last minute when she couldn't do anything about it, goddamn it. I didn't have the stomach for more shame that night, for cowering under her hard look and sharp voice. I mean I was a coward, when it came to her, always apologizing even when I did nothing wrong, softening into a puddle of good daughterhood, mediating her outbursts, keeping tabs on her emotional temperature any time she walked into a room. So instead, I lay in bed reading under the covers even after I was supposed to be asleep. Reading, slipping in my earphones, turning on my pink iPod Nano and trying to fall asleep to whatever it shuffled, which never worked. I'd put on something calm, like Joni Mitchell or Fleetwood Mac and suddenly some bubbly-screaming One Direction or overexcited Taylor Swift would cut through any drowsiness at full volume. There were no *playlists* yet.

Through the music, I heard it: a rattling.

Familiar, awful. My heart a slippery fish air-drowning in my chest. *Please stop, please stop*, I whispered, over and over, trying to coax whatever was making that sound into sedation, trying to politely disengage. It did stop, eventually, for a moment, and I almost gave into relief, until, suddenly, the mattress seemed to tear open and I felt teeth digging into my thigh, teeth that felt far too sharp to be anything human, ripping through my sheets and pajamas, and I stifled a scream, instinctively smothering myself with my pillow, trying to keep quiet. I don't know how I knew to do that, but I did. Despite the pain and fear and all of it. I kept quiet.

Or try to. When I was a kid, I'd twist and tremble and cry silently throughout the night, till eventually I fell asleep, and the night terrors would start. Sleep paralysis, though I didn't know the name then. Every limb locked into place. I'd know I was awake. But my body would be stuck, trapped somewhere between here and sleep, between alive and not, lodged into that dimly-lit waterlogged hallway between worlds. I can't swim any which way, I'd think, desperate. I'd felt like prey not for anyone specific but for the night itself, for the dark to come in and swallow whole.

I'd hear this scratching. It seemed like it was coming from inside the mattress, like a million insects were squirming in there, trying to break out and seep through the pores of the bed. The thought

of bedbugs made me sick. I couldn't sleep, would crawl into my parents' bed—before the divorce—and they'd grumble for a minute before going back to sleep, me shivering between them, staring at the ceiling, afraid to breathe too loud. As if whatever lived in my mattress knew where I'd run off to. Knew how afraid I was. Like it could see me no matter where I hid—nowhere would ever be quite far enough.

I'd assumed that anything unknown must be violent, malevolent, a gaudy pissed-off cursed-doll situation, button eyes and demonic powers. I didn't know yet that Eliza wasn't *evil* or *good*. She was just so very hungry.

Sometimes we need a snack. So we grab one of those girls from the drama school and ask her for a performance and maybe a make-out. And we do make out, for a little while. Until we bite. And keep biting. Till her flesh hangs loose and ripe and red like a fresh strawberry picked from a field. Or wherever strawberries grow; who knows, not us.

I return to myself then. While Eliza eats, I slip back into my skin. Allow her to be her again. I like her best when she's eating. She's herself: irreducible and vile. She's all green and blue-black and slippery, and trying to touch her is like trying to cup a mountain between your hands. There's just no way to hold onto something quite so vast.

Eliza, wiping her mouths, smiling at me like a shark, eyes beady and teeth sharpened to their finest points. *I am very, very good at this role*, she seems to say. *Look at what I really am beneath your sluggish face. Look how talented I must be. My performance is just astonishing, really.*

Eliza beckons me over to the body. The girl on the ground is alive but wrecked, half torn open.

We never eat so much that the girls die. We aren't killers. We fill ourselves up and stitch the girls back together so that the only remnants of us are some small, incisor-shaped marks in their wrists and necks. Those markings look like papercuts, really, and we suspect they hurt from time to time, ache like a particularly nasty bruise, but we suspect that there's another sensation that these girls experience,

something much more difficult and discomfoting to name. In the spots where Eliza's bitten and fed, there's this glow—diffuse, red, radiant, toxic. Internal, but undeniable, a feverishness, and it's not altogether unpleasant.

We suspect this. I've felt what Eliza's bites can do. They sting and radiate with pain, yes, like a thousand wasps trapped beneath the skin, trying to escape, but also, there's that glowing, that flooding of new—or perhaps just unburied—vicious desire.

I take out my tools. Needles, sewing kit, alcohol wipes, wound spray. I clean the girl up, tidy her back into a recognizable shape.

Eliza is grinning, blood-smeared, delirious, watching me with what feels—almost, uncannily—like love.

White Curtains

Cordelia Shan Qing Ru

Editor's Prize

Eve's room is dark.

She curls under three layers of mismatched blankets, wearing her full navy pajama set. Her head turns to the right, where a pale watermark bleeds into the pillowcase. Then she turns her whole body to the right, curling tighter, before rolling back to the center. Saturn, her black cat, sits like a sentinel at the foot of the bed, unmoving.

There are no other human beings in the room. Only the sound of Eve and Saturn-the-cat snoring—low and steady, like an old steam engine beginning its night shift—and the occasional rustling of her blankets as she shifts.

Her mid-long dark hair fans out over the apple green pillowcase—thick, with natural curls that never quite behaved. Not the romantic kind of curl, but the heavy, stubborn waves that got her in trouble as a kid. By middle school in Beijing, it had become a problem. The school required her to submit a “natural curl approval form,” a ridiculous bureaucratic relic meant to weed out vanity. Her mother was furious. But in the end, Eve's mother went—Eve's father and grandfather too—bringing old photos and family ID documents to prove that Eve is a part of the family and the curls were genetic. Black, unruly, and real.

A quarter of Eve's hair has gone grey already. Not from age. From stress. She always jokes that her body ages twice as fast as her dreams, which makes both her friend James and Mary quiet.

In the dream, she is in a giant bookstore that smells like milk and sesame paste. She wears a hoodie three sizes too big, and she rides a dolphin through an aisle marked Translated Literature. Books fly above her head like birds. Every title is in a language she hasn't learned yet. She picks one out of the air. The pages open into a box of strawberry milk.

“Hehehe . . .” Eve laughs in her sleep.

A few minutes later, she dreams of food. Again. She sits in a hot spring filled with soup, eating grilled onigiri while snowflakes fall

from a skylight. Someone next to her, faceless, passes her a warm can of barley tea. The label says, in soft pink hiragana: You are not a burden.

“Big bowl of donburi . . . more eel . . . please . . .” she mumbles.

The sound of her own voice wakes her up, briefly. She blinks. Looks at the ceiling. Then turns over and goes back to sleep without checking the time.

Her belly rumbles under the blankets. She places her hands gently over it.

“Warm . . .” she whispers. “I need more rice.”

Eventually, the light begins to creep in. Not from the sun—but from the snow reflecting itself against her window. A flat, unearned glow. Still hours to go before she has to get up. She kicks the duvet off. Half of it slips to the floor. She rolls to the edge of the twin bed, then tugs the blanket back, groaning into the pillow.

Outside, the sound of a garbage truck rumbles past. Then a bike bell. Then the neighbor downstairs slams their window shut.

Five minutes before the alarm rings, Eve opens her eyes.

Victory. She has beaten the machine.

She lies there in silence. Then wipes the corner of her mouth. Then curls up tighter.

Just five more minutes, she thinks. Ten, if the cat lets her. The snow is still falling outside. Her room is dim with the white curtains. Her body is warm. Her phone, glowing faintly beside her, buzzes. She turns off the alarm and dives back under the covers.

Instagram, reels sent by James. Discord, memes from Mary. Event posts from Katie, WeChat, articles sent by her mother. Messages, greetings from Nichole.

Saturn jumps up beside her. Pats her forehead with one paw.

“Okay, okay . . . food soon.”

After feeding her laziness, she finally moves her body out of the three layers of duvets, but her body feels heavy. She misses the time when she was still at university. Even though it was hard, she never had enough money, was always alone, and worked three different part-time jobs while taking five courses. She could afford to wake up naturally and mess around with her phone or read the rest of the book she left the night before.

And now, after becoming a person who owns a permanent, full-time job, she has to wake up at the same time she was in high school. Eve laughs at the fact that she lived in the twenty-year-old's schedule while she is thirty-four years old already.

The time to go to work is approaching, she manages to release her body from the warm and cozy bed. Her coworker warned of the painful snowing morning echoes in her brain. But the snow was better than the endless rain back in Vancouver. And now in April, she is sure that the snow will end soon. Again, already April, almost May.

She laughs at her hair in the mirror, flicks on the coffee machine, and begins planning dinner: red bean toast and leftover grilled saba from yesterday. Maybe miso soup if she has time.

By 8:30 am, she is out the door. A scarf around her neck, tote over her shoulder. She debates, again, whether this will be the weekend she finally takes her bike to the repair shop. It has been almost a year after the accident she had, she thinks she is ready to give another try. Her boots crunch over snow. The streetcar on the Spadina passes, but she walks all the way from Front Street to St. George Street.

At 9:30 a.m., she is at her desk at the Faculty of Information. Thirty-seven unread emails.

Click. Click. Click.

Calendar invites. Requests.

She is excited to have lunch later.

An Excel sheet that has collapsed in formatting.

She is excited to get a chocolate cake and eat it after work and classes.

She fixes it manually. Quietly excellent, as always.

She is excited about the Music Station, Eve's favorite Japanese music show, recording from last Friday she is going to watch before going to bed.

No one in the office knows she has one blog about her life in Toronto and another one for book reviews.

No one knows she is saving to open a bookshop that only sells translated literature—books that have crossed borders, like she did.

At 11:30 a.m., she goes to lunch with two coworkers and a friend from the library where she used to work. They joke about office gossip, curse the weather, talk about a book one of them is reading about mushroom foraging and capitalism.

Eve eats slowly, thoughtfully. A veggie and fish wrap today. Extra Jalapeño.

"You always pick the weirdest fillings," the friend from library says.

"They make life less boring," Eve replies. A bite after another, she forgets all her unwillingness to go to work this morning.

At 6:00 p.m., she sits in her Master of Information class. She takes notes, asks one how-to question that makes the professor pause and smile. She doesn't like to perform. But she likes to be precise.

By 9:00 p.m., class starts. Her brain is soft with theory and acronyms. Her body is buzzing with that quiet pride of getting through another day.

Then it starts with a laugh.

Eve adjusts her scarf, looped twice around her neck, and breathes into the still-cold Toronto air.

"Spring in Canada is like a ghost," Eve's classmate jokes as they walk the shadowed path beside Hart House from the Medicine Since Building. "Everyone believes it's coming—no one's actually seen it."

Eve smiles, almost too tired to laugh, but does anyway.

"Maybe Toronto Spring is just afraid of commitment," Eve says.

They chuckle. It's that strange kind of late-semester exhaustion in March where everything, even the chill, feels slightly unreal. The path after the bell tower shimmer with a faint glaze, and the day holds a brightness that never quite becomes warmth. Eve's classmate waves goodbye at the edge of the Trinity College lawn, vanishing into a blur of students and wind.

Eve lingers. She's walked this path a hundred times. Passed through this courtyard, these archways. The bricks that remember her footsteps. But today, something feels off.

There's a vibration. Not a sound. Not a thought. More like a low, silent hum, as if some invisible thread inside her chest has been gently plucked. And the closer she walks toward the intersection—there, where Trinity meets Hoskin Avenue—the stronger it gets.

Not painful. Just . . . undeniable.

Then she sees him. Or thinks she does.

Across the street, just beyond the Trinity College Chapel's grey wall and wrought-iron gate: a figure.

Moving slowly.

Dark coat. Dark hair.

A kind of stillness, as if the world is moving around him, not with him. Eve blinks. A car passes. When her eyes open again, he's gone. Or rather, there's no one there. Just the shape of someone. Like breath just exhaled.

By 9:00 p.m., Eve is home.

She feeds Saturn. Cleans the litter. Takes a hot shower.

Then, in her oversized tee, she climbs into bed. Laptop open to watch the Music Station. Journal opened.

At 11:57 p.m., Eve falls asleep.

And in her dream, there is a boat.

Not a modern one, but an old ferry—peeling paint, wood worn smooth by time. The kind that carries people across foggy rivers at dawn. It floats on water the color of ink.

Eve moves with a crowd. A sea of people, all walking toward the boarding ramp. Shoulders brushing, breath mingling. The air looks like smoke, or metal.

Then, just ahead of her, someone stops.

A man, a figure blurred by fog and distance, holding a brown suitcase in one hand.

He doesn't step aside. He doesn't move forward.

Then he turns around.

Looks at her.

Not smiling.

Just . . . knowing.

The air shifts. A bell rings, distant and slow. The boat doesn't move yet. Neither does he.

He just stops—like a pause in time. Like he's been waiting. Like he's done this before. Like he knows she'll come in another life, if not this one.

7:45 am, Eve wakes up on time. The dream ends before it touches the ground.

But the feeling stays.

She jolts upright in bed. A pulse behind her ribs. Like the citrusy sweetness that follows sorrow. Like coconut and something else ancient on her tongue.

She looks at her own hands, confused.

White curtains move and Saturn's shape shows behind them.

Fracture

Ron Pullins

Chapter One

Beginning

Morgan wakes one morning and finds his world has stopped. It's cold inside, there's snow outside, and he senses a catastrophe in the air. Silence defines his room. He must have coffee. Morgan pulls the covers to his nose and stares at the tin ceiling, its intricate patterns, repeating squares, seams between the sheets of tin, a monotony of arrangements above his head. He pulls down the covers and pushes himself awake.

Or, perhaps it is not yet time. Perhaps nothing has to change.

The power's off. The clock has stopped. The possibility of first coffee is threatened.

How long has frost been crawling up the windows? How cold is it out there?

Morgan toggles the switch; the lamp by his bed doesn't work. He tries again; it fails again. The fridge downstairs is silent. The furnace in the basement, too, no longer clangs the pipes.

It has snowed for weeks, and now the snow hides everything. The streetlights are dark; the streets are dangerous. Has power failed everywhere?

The uncertainty feels threatening. Better not to move. Better to stay in his warm bed. Better to stay beneath the covers.

Power

Where does power come from? Morgan wonders. How is power made? How is it possible for power to travel through the wires? What has stopped the power from flowing here this morning? Why this morning of all mornings? What does it mean?

Morgan turns and looks away.

Perhaps something outside has entered this universe, corrupted the mechanism of how things work, disturbed the flow of now. Perhaps today will not begin. Perhaps there is no work, no need

to rise and go. There may be no where he can go. He needs to go to work. Can things stay the same forever? Must things change? Where does change come from? It's do much better if things remain the same. It's safer to go with what one knows.

He looks about the room, his eyes just above the cover's edge. No cars pass by his house. The wind has ceased. The sheet of clouds outside have nullified the sun. Courageously he pulls the quilt down to his nose.

His breath translates into fog the moment he breathes it out, a ghost exhaled. The room is very cold, but she is there beside him, his little heater, and they share each other's warmth.

There is nothing wrong with nothing happening. There is nothing wrong with how things are.

Yet daylight invites him from his dreams into the routine of the day. He must leave one world and enter in another. He pulls the quilt down to his lips.

What if nothing begins? How do things start anyway? He stares out the window as his breath turns into fog. If he shapes his lips and puffs, will his breath form rings of fog, like smoke forms rings of smoke when it's puffed out? He draws the quilt down from his lips and experiments. A short-lived ring of fog spins off.

He'd rather stay in bed beside his little heater and there rediscover what is left among the remnants of his dreams.

Tide

It has been freezing now for days. The river obeys the rules of gravity and flows down towards the ocean, bearing ice. The ice will smash into the tidal bore drawn upriver by the moon, and the ice will jam against the tide, and perhaps the collision will raise the river, so the river will overflow its banks, rise above the docks, come up and cross the street, perhaps flow beyond the houses that border on the river. Will the ice float to Morgan's house and grind away the foundation? Will his house collapse? Will the river rise as high as his second floor and drown him as he lies beside his little heater? Or will the moon fall at last, and allow the gravity of earth draw the river down?

Morgan hears the river ache. It snores. It sounds the same as sounds are made when dreams collide with waking, as the gurgling of death collides with breathing.

Dreams

She's next to him as she always is in the morning. That's the pattern. His little heater. Hiding under twisted blankets, her twisted sheets, on and under pillows. Bedding is her lover, and his as well. She sleeps and dreams. He wonders what she's dreaming. He wonders what dreams are. He wonders if dreamers can dream when they fall sleep in dreams. Are there dreams inside of dreams?

He turns away. His nose is cold. Time passes. What is the source of time? Where does it go when it's passed by?

Restoration

Oh, now the power's on. The power's been restored. The lights are on again. Heat will surely follow. Pipes will clang. That clang, clang, clang will be a comfort to him, the sound of sirens to egg him on. The cold, he thinks, is merely lack of heat. There is nothing here to fear. He lets the quilt slip to his neck as time rolls forward once again.

Movement

Throw off the covers then, he says. Housecoat. Slippers. Descend the stairs, he says. And Morgan does.

Grasp the rail, swing one foot forward, bend that knee, descend that foot, slowly, slowly, sink it to the lower step, then shift weight forward on that foot, then swing your other foot around to touch the riser just below, that's the ticket, then bend your knees and fall slightly forward once again upon that forward foot, falling just a bit, slowly, slowly, hold the rail, then rest your weight fully on that foot below, then stand erect on that, then swing that rear foot around, then let lower onto a further riser, slowly, slowly, bend the knee, descend, repeat it all again, and then again, until you have arrived and then the journey is complete.

Outside

Snow falls outside. He peeks through his Venetian blinds to see what snow has fallen and covered the blemished earth. Light glances off the frozen crust. The wind has calmed. There are no birds. It is as if this were a dream. Clang! Clang! Soon it will be warm.

The day ahead

He will dress himself. Work and the workplace lie ahead. It will be warm at work. It must be warm at work. Others will be at work as well and together they and he will warm themselves in work. The dread of day will pass them by.

Today, as always, as he arrives. He will find papers on his desk. They are papers and the work he's left undone. There will be calls from people who have needs. He will call people to express his needs. There will be visitors. There are always visitors, in and out, and in and out. There will be meetings, too. There will be bosses. Little bosses. Bigger bosses. There will be underlings. They will talk to him, and he will talk to them, and he and they will ruminate, and the bosses will teach him things to do and he will learn the order and the meaning of how things are to be, and then he will instruct the underlings on how things will be from this point on. Things will go on. There will be comings, there will be goings. There will be lunch, and they will do their daily dance in and among each other. They will run machines. There will be noise. There will be gaiety and celebration if things go well, or tears if not. Their daily efforts will change all things. Things will emerge from that. Then, if the day is righteous, money will appear from sources paying for what has been produced today, and yesterday. Then Morgan will return to where he started, home to his little heater, and the arc will be complete. Rest, then sleep, then perhaps to start again.

Coffee

He needs coffee first. He needs it now. Nothing begins without the coffee. It is his morning ritual. Fill the pot with water. Next comes filter, coffee, button. Then comes the waiting, watching. Time passes. Power arrives through copper wires, is resisted and in resistance

creates heat, so the water revolts into a gurgling, then grows scalding hot, then drains through grounds and sucks the essence out, and out it drips, day after day. Meanwhile he will smell the brew and relish all the promises.

Catastrophe

Each day begins a catastrophe. Each day entails a change. Each day Morgan requires a plan. A day takes shape. What will happen? What will change? What must be done to bring things back to harmony? Then there is the following the plan, a strategy for doing.

Or, perhaps today the plan will be overwhelmed by economics.

Or, perhaps today history will be lost, memories will be erased, and ice will grind all things to fragments.

Or, perhaps this is the day he hides amid the mumblings of the crowd and things go nowhere.

Or, perhaps someone will bring a gun and bring an end to things.

Or, perhaps today things just go on and on, and nothing ever ends.

Or, perhaps today sunshine is blocked out by clouds, power ends before his coffee's even brewed.

Or, perhaps the ending comes with a result as useless as used grounds.

Morgan tosses the coffee grounds in the trash and pours a cup of coffee. A bit of milk. The first is the best sip of the day, and now things dare begin.

Dressing

Morgan dresses for the day. He pauses to ask himself which shoes to wear. Old ones. New ones. Leather ones. Cloth ones. Blue ones. Brown ones. Should he wear any shoes at all? Why must a man wear shoes? What is the rule on shoes? Whose rule is it, if such a rule exists? Well, there's the weather to consider, too. Perhaps he should wear boots. High cut boots. Low cut boots. Or maybe today he wears those deck shoes in the mail. Sandals, too, might work. No, they won't. There is snow and ice. No time for thinking nonsense. Perhaps today is the day

to wear those pointy Italian things he bought when he married his little heater.

He finishes with a round black hat, a long black coat, and he takes up his case of papers, unfinished fruit of yesterday, done and yet to be. His case closes with a snap, and then he heads outside. Snow has drifted against the door. He plunges one leg before the other in the snow which has drifted on the walk. Then he pulls his back leg up just so, out of the drift behind, then shuts the door, then swings that leg around which lags behind so it is in front and steps into the snow, yet undisturbed. And on and on, and so he goes his way, foot follows foot, into the day's virginity towards where he's parked his car. His routine: step, shift, pull, step. Step, shift, pull, step.

Is the river creeping up its bank, he wonders, seeping up beneath the snow? Will water seep into his shoes? Will the river kiss his feet? What goes on below the crust of things? So much goes on he doesn't know.

Nostalgia

He stops, turns back, looks up. He sees that frost on his bedroom windows. Somewhere in there, behind the frost, if she rises, his little heater, when she rises, if she can rise, if she is warm, if she can be warm, if she is there, if she has not forgotten, if she has knowledge of descending stairs, if she can retain her heat in all this cold, if she has power for all that effort, if the power remains restored throughout the home, then she will find the coffee ready, will she not?, and warm, to be her reward from him for rising, and there and then, being so rewarded, she may remember him, imagine him, look out the window, sip her coffee, and after her second cup see his path, his recent history, before it could be erased in any coming storm.

Morgan's car

Snow has covered Morgan's car. Brush away the snow. Then break the door handle free of ice and enter. Get in the car. Get in it now. Sit and recollect, what is this and that, and how things work. Find the keys. Start the engine. Make the fire. Let the fire warm up the machine. Let the machine warm up the cabin. Let the fire warm up the driver

who sits safe inside, away from wind and cold. Shift into gear and make progress towards the workplace.

Can he make his way to work? Will he arrive? Is the geography beneath the ice and snow today the same as it was when it was bare? Turn slightly right and then around the rotary? Or has this changed, too? Can he discover his route to work along the obliterated road? Will he find the bridge he needs to cross? Will the bridge still be there when he arrives? Will the river bearing ice still pass beneath it? What might happen when the river ice collides with bridge? Will what survives still bear the weight of Morgan and his car? Will he then arrive to find himself at work alone? Will there be power for the lights at work? Will there be others at his work who suffer alongside him? Or will all his suffering today be suffered privately and done alone?

Another

Stopping at his driveway's end, Morgan sees the man who daily makes his way along this street—somewhere there must be street beneath the snow, one must believe—along the street scraped down to the ice. He is walking, perhaps to work, to catch the train, or to the store for food or warmth. He sees this man every morning, truth be known. This man sticks one foot out in front of him, then he swings his rearward foot around, then twists his waist around, swings his own valise around, he holds his hat and ducks his head into the wind and snow, then swings that rear foot about which he places carefully ahead, beware the ice, and so he goes to where it is he's going. This he repeats. Then he repeats it once again. And then again. And on and on. We call this 'walking carefully on the snow.' This man gives hope that today all things are possible.

We have seen others like him on their way to work. Or going home. Or buying food. Or with their dogs. We have seen others as they slide along on bicycles, small bells ringing from the handlebars. Or in vehicles with frosted windows, snow sliding off their roofs as they pass by. We hear the comfort of the tires squeeze down the snow. All must move. That is life.

Days like this. How things unfold.

Chapter Two

Work

Morgan builds his life on words, on paper, on marks on paper, in manuscripts, reports, in letters using words, in contracts, proposals, memos, evaluations, all of which will in time revert to pulp, will come to sleep in trash, or will be buried under snow, or will be stored in attics here and there, in cardboard boxes labelled this and that, or will it be left to crumble into mildew, food for fungus, or will burn, or will be recycled back to earth, to feed new trees that will be harvested again and ground to pulp, and shaped, and packaged, sold as paper, bought by others for some new use, new messages, a ream or two here and there which some new user will open, pull out a sheet and feed it to a printer, a sheet ready to receive the impressed of the letters, images and phrases, code, though which thoughts emerge, in words, or numbers, diary entrees, fragments of the story, snippets of this and that, some with meaning, some without.

Daily he arranges letters, words, phrases, fragments into patterns, glyphs and sound on paper, to conjure up in the reader's mind images of things, and actions, horrors and histories, to be acted on, or to be bought, or to be just admired. Until they are fixed on paper no assemblage will be final. He will revise the many glyphs and marks, reorder as he wants, a whim, a thought, a strategy, re-edit, rearrange, until he gets what he desires, as he improves the different patterns, makes them dance to different rules, to different tunes, on different pages, re-fed by pulses he feeds to his machines, thoughts that stretch across a page, on paper, and thus be seen and read, admired, despised, retained, destroyed, graded, to end up on a shelf somewhere, or in a file, or in the trash, or bound within the confines of a some final work where they become forever Morgan's conversations with the distant and the dead.

In such a way he will create a phantom world of work.

Arrival

The car is warm when he arrives. Frost has melted from the windshield.

Wrapped in his heavy coat, a cashmere thing, black, with arms that stretch through cashmere sleeves, a hat that's round and black and cashmere soft, a scarf of many colors, orange, let's say, and brown, a briefcase on the seat beside him, Morgan has driven himself to work and parked in the lot above the pond. He leaves his car and walks across the snow, down steps down to the path that leads across the dam as he heads towards a string of what once were mills but have been converted into offices. Morgan's office is on the third floor of one mill building, Number 3. He sees the window and the blinds and the dark behind the blinds.

The creek forms a pond above the dam and, when there's been rain, the water flows overflows and down the stream. The water aches to flow down this stream, to a tunnel beneath the town, and so on, meandering to the great river Merrimac, as it once did freely, unimpeded, pulled along as water is to earth, gravity grasping for the water, to draw it to the center of the earth, to refresh the thirsting ocean. The dam was built decades ago, diverting water down a trace and over wheels and gears and other things to turn them, starting with a bridge to cross the creek until the city became built above it. The water now runs buried beneath the street, threading some short way invisible.

How happy it must have been back then, young girls arriving here to work, freed from New Hampshire farms and cranky fathers, from the loneliness of New Hampshire winters, to these very mills, the great wheel turning in the water, gaily turning, turning shafts, that spun the cogs, that twisted gears and channeled power to other shafts inside these long brick mills where lathes were turned by belts, where things were made by the slight white hands of eager country girls. All this turning, turning, which, when applied to stuff, evolved some other stuff, and things emerged. Buggies. Hats. Gloves. Thread. Buttons. Beads. Cloth.

Where once, young girls made buttons, hats from the power of the water, now in this more orderly universe the paper flows towards some great ocean of understanding. Morgan crosses the icy bridge and plods carefully towards his office.

Where once in summer water flowed over this slight dam, it is frozen now, the surface frozen, but water still runs beneath the ice, is running now.

Morgan hears water run beneath the ice, even in the winter.
All hear who stop to listen.

Mills

These days the old mill buildings have evolved into pizza shops, and ATMs, and offices. Morgan's office sits on the top floor of Old Mill, Number 3. Outside looking up there is a line of windows to the offices inside, enclosures from where workers glance out from time to time and dream of being somewhere else. Deeper inside behind those walls the open space is divided into mere cubicles, not offices, no doors to close, no access to the outside, no windows to frame the dreams of being somewhere else, dividers only high enough so when those inside those cubicles stand in his—or her—cell then his—or her—head and shoulders might be seen by others who might be standing, too, and, as one of the workers wanders through the maze, it is to onlookers as if he—or she—is seeking cheese, let's say, like a rat might seek a cheese, until he—or she—pops down again and suddenly disappears like a rat down a chute to hell. A receptionist sits at her desk and guards the entryway to this.

Morgan pauses in the snow. The light in his office has been turned on and a figure peers out from behind Venetian blinds. Is someone waiting there for him? And, if so, why? Has he been missed? Is he late for work? Is this figure even seeing Morgan in the snow, a dark figure trodding towards the mill? The figure beckons him, a hand, a finger, the other hand holds back the blinds. 'Come to me,' it says to him. 'Come to me.'

Silence. Water running under ice.

Clown

Then Morgan sees a clown outside the Half Moon Grill, someone dressed like a clown, someone who wears a yellow slicker, red rimmed glasses, floppy rubbers. It's young Robbie, isn't it, whose reddish cheeks are damasked by freezing fog, wearing dark glasses rimmed in red who points Morgan towards a frozen object inside the shrubs that line the Half Moon Grill.

"Yo!" Robbie says as he points that way.

Every morning Morgan sees Robbie as he rides his bike to the complex of offices and shops on this side of the river. Robbie works here for his father, beside the creek, along the pond—sweeping the hallways of buildings his father owns, mopping bathrooms here and there, cleaning office suites, or in the Half Moon Grill wiping down the tables, taking out the trash, or delivering kegs of beer stored there, kept cool, to Rose’s Bar on the first floor of her Home for Transients just up the path along the creek a bit, or raking leaves along the sidewalks if it’s fall, or spraying dandelions if it’s spring—dandelions will thrive here in this ground which has been poisoned from a hundred years of waste, of tannin residue from making leather, or from spills from vats of dyes for wool and cotton, or acids, salts or oil, or human waste, but it’s neither spring, nor summer, it’s winter, and it’s morning, and snow hides those hundred years of sins buried in the soil of these old mills. Robbie in his yellow slicker and dark glasses stands ankle deep in snow outside the Half Moon Grill, pointing into the tangled shrubs, hollering something Morgan doesn’t understand. He stops and stares. Robbie rings the metal bell screwed onto the handlebars of his bike, the same bell Morgan hears, every morning, ringing, ringing, as Robbie pedals his way to work.

“Yo!” Robbie yells again from the far end of the bridge. He looks at Morgan who has paused midway in indecision, but fails otherwise to respond.

“Hey,” Morgan says, feeling the need to somehow answer ‘yo.’ To recognize the clown.

Red frames, dark glasses, yellow slicker, green floppy boots, Robbie holds his bicycle with one hand, waves with the other, and rings his bicycle bell. Again. And then again. Robbie beckons once again and points towards the shrubs, into the shrubs, under the snow that caps the shrubs and bends them down, and looks again, and then again. And then Morgan sees what seems to be some unmoving human form inside the shrubs, long and dark, that hangs from a tree that has grown there tall and unintended.

“Yo!” Robbie waves. And, “Yo!” again. What is the cry? For help? For attention from a stranger? For an answer? Robbie pokes the air towards the shrubs that grow against the Half Moon Grill, loaded now with snow that has slid down from the roof.

Morgan pauses. What if he hollers back? What if Robbie's mad? How does one stay unattached from someone else's nightmare? After all, he's on his way to work. That's his routine.

Robbie points again. "Yo!" and again he hollers out. These are the first words Morgan hears this morning, and the first words Morgan has ever heard from Robbie. It is startling, this young clown's crisp cry for help, sharpened by the cold, softened by the snow. What does one dare to do? Is there someone dead inside?

Snow has bent the shrubs, has split them into clumps, and in between two clumps an object hangs from this wild tree. Is this object frozen? It must be frozen if has been there long enough to freeze. Is it a thing at all? It casts a shadow, it must be something. Or is that thing a ghost? Or has this unintended tree within these shrubs become deformed by snow so some branch burdened with the snow and obscured by morning shadows has taken on a human shape? And then has this accident of shrub and snow taken on the gestalt of some dark fate in Morgan's imagination.

A thin rope is wrapped around the object's neck, and gravity has drawn the object down. Is it some human hanging there, cold and motionless. If not, then what draws down the rope, one end of which points to the sky, the other to the center of the earth.

Morgan walks closer. It is a man. He sees this now. The man's legs bend at his knees, and his knees hover just above the ground, as if he has willingly given himself to gravity. His neck is slightly crooked, bent where the rope wraps around the neck. His eyes are open, as if he sees, at last, the sadness of finality. Morgan steps closer to get a better look. A tip of tongue extrudes between the teeth and lips. He wears a dark coat, just like Morgan's coat. A hat like Morgan's hat lies on the ground near him. And shoes, toes in the snow, black and polished, much like Morgan's shoes, the ones he chose this morning. This once was someone, Morgan thinks, both familiar, yet a stranger. Where has that someone gone, the rest of him, all his history and knowledge, his skills, his thoughts, who's left behind this frozen lump inside a heavy coat so much like his?

Has he thus stumbled by some accident upon the catastrophe he has suspected since his first moment of his awakening?

Identity

“Who is it?” Morgan asks, as if clowns like Robbie might have answers.

But when he looks to Robbie he finds that Robbie has disappeared. The door to the Half Moon Grill closes. Snow slides off the roof, pulled down by greedy gravity, and crashes to the newly shoveled walk.

The other

The dead man’s hands are blue. His frozen lips are blue. If he is dead, Morgan wonders, can we say his hands are his? What can the dead possess? What have they given up? And what was it he was about to say? Were his last words: ‘Sorry?’ Or a request to have things otherwise? Here is a man who know how to tie his shoes. How to don a coat. He once wore a hat so we can say his hat has fallen off his head. Where in death does such knowledge go? To button coats. To brush one’s teeth. To tie a tie. To knot a rope. What other arts of being did this man know? What secrets did he know of ropes and gravity? Where now does his imagination now reside? Where are all the many parts of him that breathed for all those years? The knowledge of how he was to grow from egg to man?

This dead man doesn’t move. This dead man doesn’t answer. This dead man tells no secrets of where he’s been. His life has seeped away to entropy.

Morgan walks closer to the Half Moon Cafe. He dares to part the shrubs to get a better look. He brushes snow off the dead man’s head to see the many details of his face. He picks up the dead man’s hat and places it on the dead man’s head, albeit awkwardly, as if to cap the man inside. He looks a bit more lively, if still a power blue. The head is slightly askew, his shoulders sag from the weight of his long arms, frozen now in such a way one might know they once had power. Ice hangs from the dead man’s nose.

The cause

Suicide, he wonders has perhaps been his undoing. Who hasn't thought of it, or wish to be undone? Or murder. Who doesn't fear? Or perhaps all this is the sad result of some impossible accident. Say, this man now hanging in a shrub was climbing on the roof while it was snowing, and had a rope around his waist for safety's sake, and say it was last night, and it was dark, perhaps the man was shoveling snow to clear the roof, like people in snow crises do, unaware of how easily he might slip and slide, for there is unseen ice beneath the snow, especially on a roof, and say a heavy burst of storm came on, and so he slipped, and he lost his uncertain footing, and he was unaware of how easily this rope around his waist might somehow, however impossible, because truth is never rational, his safety rope proved loosely held, slipped up his waist, up his chest, and then around his throat, and caught there, the jaw a hook for hanging, so the man fell between the tree and bricks of the Two Moon until the dark dear gravity brought a sudden end to everything. There is a story, a possibility.

Or perhaps this all was simple suicide. He hooked the rope around his neck and fell far enough to do the trick.

Morgan backs out from all those frozen shrubs like some old lobster seeking shelter in an open ocean.

Chapter Three

Rose

A woman happens by. This is Rose. She has taken her dog out for a morning stroll. Or the dog has taken her out for a morning stroll, so in intents they are intertwined, bound by a leash, the woman moving forward as she walks, the dog circling, circling, in some mad cycloid of forward motion. Morgan often sees this Rose with her dog strolling along this path this time of day on his way to work. The dog sniffs its way along the walk, from spot to spot, seeking the yellow stains of this dog's tribe, tugging in the direction it wishes them to go. Rose follows most obediently, as far from one side to the other as the shoveled path allows, but now she stops to see what Morgan sees inside those shrubs.

Rose wears a heavy red coat which hangs down to her shins. Her shoes have turned dark red, wet from walking in the snow. Her feet must be cold. As she stands and looks, she lifts one foot slightly, then steps down in place, then lifts the other, then repeats that movement, time and time again the same back and forth between the feet, swaying, most likely to warm her feet as she stands and studies at the spectacle before her. She almost seems to march in place, to swing like a pendulum upside down as it weaves through passing moments.

We see her breath as it turns to fog.

Her dog

Her dog pulls at its leash. Its claws scrape the ice in eagerness to follow its desires, and then dog slips and falls, then slides again about the sidewalk and looks to see what Morgan sees as the dog hops through the snow and in the shrubs.

"Yo," Morgan says, to Rose, echoing Robbie's primal call. "There's a man in there," as if he's asking what to do.

"I see that now," Rose says. "He looks dead. What did you do to him?" She looks closer. "I know him."

"I was merely passing by," Morgan says. He swallows. Indignation. "I'm on my way to work. I pass by here every day. But then I found him here. He looks frozen." Morgan is reluctant to say more. He stands accused. "I haven't touched him," Morgan adds. "Except to put his hat back on his head. Otherwise he is just the way he was when I came upon him here. I think he's dead. Is he a friend?"

Morgan tells himself he is innocent, and he wants to say to her, stranger that she is, but who can know what people think, or would think of what another says? Who knows what conversations others carry on inside their minds? What she is thinking now. She knows him. He is a stranger. Things are out of place. She would put them back again. That's what she would think, if he were her, Morgan thinks.

There is no end to the possibilities. The hanging thing is frozen. People will want answers, and they will have their stories, even if they are required to piece some story together from what fragments they can find.

"So you are saying he is the way he was," Rose says.

"Except he's dead."

"He wasn't always dead," she says. "He somehow got from where he lived to where he died."

"That was before. But this is now. And here he is. And now he's dead." He pauses. "I'm sorry if you knew him well."

Morgan doesn't know this woman except in passing by when she and her dog some mornings were taking a walk as Morgan made his way to work. She looks somewhat old and frail today, out here, in red against the snow, as if she wouldn't hurt a flea, as if she wouldn't want to hurt a flea, why would this woman hurt a flea, but then her dog strains at its leash and seems all too eager to attack Morgan himself, or jump up on him and lick, or something. The dog is barking. He seems eager to bark at Morgan. Then he barks at the object in the shrubs, someone Rose has known. The leash seems a tenuous tool to restrain the dog in all his eagerness. The woman in the red coat hardly seems to have the strength to do so.

A roomer

"I know this man," Rose says at last. The dog calms down and explores the world of scent from other creatures, both here and those recently here and gone. "He is my lodger. He rents a room from me. I think I was in love with him."

She wears red gloves, a red not quite as dark as the coat and hat she wears. She points somewhere behind her, across the pond and up the stream towards a large two-story house of stone with a sitting porch that wraps around, now richly decked with snow.

"He's dead," Morgan says.

"You must know my home," she says. "If you work around at all. I cater to many gentlemen who pass through. It is a home for them as well."

A long, thin sign hangs from an eave: "Two Oaks. Rooms for Transients." The sign swings in the cold wind. If they were closer, they might hear it creak. Of course Morgan knows the place. The city parking lot abuts it. But Morgan's never been inside. And, yes, he's wondered what goes on in there, what kind of place it is, who are these transients she hosts, where the oaks grow from which it's named for.

She also owns the public bar attached to it. Morgan's never been in there. It's a local place. Men play pool and dominoes and sometimes when the local teams do well a shout goes up that one can hear as one walks by.

By now the dog has grown indifferent to the hanged man in the shrubs. He focuses on Morgan and strains against the leash. The dog runs to one side of the sidewalk, then crosses to the other side, then swings like a pendulum on the leash, then he runs back again to the side where he ran to first, then back again as if he were a bob at the end of a swinging pendulum, as if he might find freedom by performing such a frenzy. Rose steps in and out of the circling lease to avoid it binding her and falling. Ice slides from the roof of the Half Moon Bar Cafe and crashes to the sidewalk.

Familiarity

"So," Morgan says, "you know this man?"

"His name is Pemberton," she says. "He has roomed with me for quite some time. Weeks have given way to months, and months to years. He works day and night upstairs in the room he rents from me. Or sometimes in the bar. He especially works late into the night, in his room after the bar is closed. His room is above where I sit night after night and hear him working his machine, pounding, pounding, pounding, the result of which is letters flow from god knows where to god knows where. I can't believe he's out here in the cold now and frozen, dead. He dined with us just last night. Dinner is included in the rent for all my lodgers. You pay for dinner whether you eat or not. Breakfast, too, but I don't cook for breakfast. Just rolls and coffee. Most people don't care for some big affair so early in the morning. Rolls and coffee. Something to wake them up and to ease the pain of hunger. I didn't know the man well," she says, pointing in the shrubs. "Not really. I make a point to not know my dear residents. It makes it difficult to collect the rent. Small talk at dinner is passed about. A certain civility at dinner helps with the digestion. No one talks at breakfast."

"How can anyone know someone else?" Morgan asks.

"I made gestures," Rose continues. "But I'm pleased they took me nowhere."

“And what is there to say to someone else? By that I mean, really say. Thank goodness there are so many words the mean so little when we use them. How hard it is to pick and choose among your friends. But one stranger to another, impossible.”

Morgan’s feet are cold. He gently lets the shrubs swing back to be as erect as they once were before the snow, before he arrived, before they half hid the man who hangs there now.

“He had his distance,” Rose continues, not moving any closer to the man. “And now he’s frozen. I put clean sheets on his bed just this morning. Once a week my roomers are entitled to fresh sheets. It’s in their rent. And this morning as I walked my dog along I saw him here with you. His rent’s paid up for all this month. I have a last month’s deposit, too. What am I to do with that? So it’s suicide, you think, this climate change and, snow, and ice?”

“I think it is the catastrophe I sensed when I woke up. It embraced me like a fog until I found him here like this. I haven’t time to think what it means, what’s been the cause, and what’s to be done. I’ve had no time for anything. I was on my way to work. I didn’t do this thing. I just came upon it.”

“You sure he’s dead?”

“He’s frozen stiff,” Morgan says. He looks at the body in the shrubs as if to make certain of that fact. He starts to touch him, but then he stops. “We mustn’t touch a thing. We must call the authorities. Someone who’s job it is to deal with death and fear.”

“Indeed,” she says. “We must.”

Rose tilts her head to one side as she examines the body hanging in the shrubs. Morgan parts the branches to make it easier for her to see the whole catastrophe.

“Yes, it’s Mr. Pemberton,” she continues, this time with greater certainty. She nods her head slightly. “We should tell someone, that’s for sure. It’s not our business, no. But this needs to be resolved. I had nothing to do with this, myself. Be sure to tell them that. He only rents a room from me. That deposit can be refunded if someone wants. The rest of it is not my business. No.”

The dog again

She adjusts her hat, adjusts her coat. The dog has lost interest in anything near by and tugs for her to go. The dog thinks there should be ducks swimming in the pond. What's winter to a dog? What's time, in fact? Can a dog have hope that summer will come soon? But even a dog no doubt remembers summertime and ducks. Ducks swam here in this pond then, but sometimes they got out and waddled about the grounds, begging passers-by for bread or other food, or pecked each other, or just quacked, forever quacking, such unhappiness, but when they were out of the water they might be caught by dogs and this is what the dog remembers, thinking how he might catch them, and wanting to.

And yet the dog finds that things change. This morning there are no ducks, not in the water nor out of it. It has to do with ice and snow. This much a dog might know. Still the dog barks. There is always the memory of ducks to create a cause for barking. As if ducks were not important, only chasing them.

Rose doesn't move.

The dog tugs on its leash again, then stops and barks at Morgan, then barks at the object in the shrubs, seeing the stranger hanging there. All strangers deserve a good barking at, and this one, tall and stiff, frozen in the shrubs, seems as worthy as any other, and less threatening, only something unusual. Do dogs know death? The dog has never known anyone to have been there before, hanging from the shrubs like that.

The frozen man lacks any scent, except the smell of ice. A refreshing coolness. The dog fails to recognize it as a resident of the Two Oaks Inn for Transients where both man and dog reside. The dog strains on its leash, then turns to bark at Morgan, then turns back again to bark at everything, more eager than before, driven by the imaginary dream of delicious ducks, and of catching lingering strangers, and of things unusual, and it greeting to the others dogs who have greeted him by leaving yellow stains along the sidewalk.

Synchronicity

Rose steps towards the shrubs, then stops, then turns away, then turns back to take another look, then eyes Morgan carefully, from shoes to hat, then back to dog, then back again to the dead man in the shrubs. Pemberton, that is. She knows his name.

"The law will want to know what's gone on here," Rose says. "They will look for causes among these effects. We need to get our stories straight."

"I didn't do a thing. I was walking by," Morgan says.

"That's good. Say that. I'll say that, too," Rose says. "We must sort out these events. We must sort out what we know. What we remember must be exactly the same memories. Our stories must resonate. The images we've seen must be the same. How the events were ordered in time must be the same for you as me. Your events. My events. The time of day for each event. The context of each moment. Our stories will be our alibis. It's from such things that authorities infer the truth, how according to their laws terrible things have come to be. That is to say, they seek the motive for the event, and then they seek an opportunity from any who's about. From that then they can affix the blame for what's gone wrong. They must. It's how things are. But it should not fall on us."

"Are we to blame?"

"They may find out I loved him, an unrequited thing, and isn't that a danger to us all," she says. "All things must have a cause or they never come to be, and nothing is as dangerous as unrequitedness. You want and you expect and nothing happens. Something's happened here. You've seen it for yourself. And someone will be wanted for the blame. It has to be. Authorities find it difficult to live without a climax to their efforts, so they dig and dig until a story emerges that will purge them of ineptitude."

Our story

Morgan looks about as if to absorb the context of the moment, the objects, the noises, the temperature, the dog. His car. His office. The path. Why Rose showed up just when she did. Why he showed up just

when he did. How all this happened. What came before. The authorities need to fit this all together or it's like it never happened.

"We'll say this is the place where something happened, then," he says. "We'll say this man was your lodger . . ."

"Don't forget the blinding whiteness of the snow," Rose says. "Details such as that lend credence to a story. It locks the story into a place and time that they can understand. They find a story without a landscape and a history is nonsense. Those buildings over there, how they stand in contrast to the snow, remember that, how they blend in, snow muting the bitter redness of the brick. And there's the water, too. Flowing as it does, beneath the ice, like time, and then the sound of water, too. A muted gurgling, let's call it. If we could in some way bring the water back which flows beneath the ice, back to the way the whole thing started, back to the beginning of the flow, back to the fountainhead, and even back before where things begin to flow, now there's a puzzle, then it's likely we could show them how all this came to be, how things have moved along since then and why, and what consequences will ensue as a result. In such a way we could construct some rationality as to why this man is dead. Sure, the flowing water is but one thread in how things are, but everything is woven into a story, and one thread's pretty much like any other. They all are just other threads. If we just unravel one thread all the way, then the story—indeed all history—will be revealed, in fragments if not the whole, and we might peer into the future, know our destiny, know how all things hang on even such a little hook, and here is a protocol for sorting. Things don't just happen as they do. Oh, no. There is the force of mechanics in the universe, and time which drives particles around according to their fates. There is a certain code that determines how things happen. A certain pattern." Rose pauses. "And that's so within the law. How much of this our local enforcers might know or care about, I don't know, or if such things are even in their jurisdiction."

"So we'll say that," Morgan says. It's some relief to him that he will not be blamed for this. Alone he would have never thought about how things might work against him, and how the guilt of dark results, however destined, will endure as memories, to be eased out piece by piece in dreams and restlessness.

"If that's our story and we both hold to it firmly now, my friend, we have nothing then to worry us."

Rose says that with such a certain firmness that even the dog has calmed a bit. Even the dog has been reassured by the creation of possibility encapsulated in a story. Still, from time to time, the story shows teeth, a fleeting paean to the disappearing ducks.

Happenstance

“And what about the dead man?” Morgan asks.

“Let’s let that be his story, too,” she says. “And anyway, his story is what we make it. He’s in no position to refute any facts we choose to cite. So, we were walking by . . .”

“I was walking by. You were walking by . . .”

“We were each walking by in our own way,” Rose says. “And his rent’s paid up, so my rooming house is not involved in this at all, remember that, nor us, nor either of us, in murder.”

“We just found him,” Morgan says. Then, “Do you think that he was murdered?”

“Who knows?” Rose says. “We have our story now. We found him. That’s our story. If we stick with that, we’re golden,” she says. “Time to bring in the authorities and let them apply the law to this. He might have been murdered. It might have been an accident, he slipped and fell, that sort of thing. Or he himself might have done him in. It happens.”

“Yes, it’s time to call someone in. Once they know we’ve found a man who’s dead, things will begin to happen. Things will liven up.”

“As each of us were walking by . . .”

Authorities

The authorities arrive, and there are questions. Morgan awaits his turn to be their guest and do his interview. He has brushed the snow off the concrete bench outside the Half Moon Grill and sits on its cold and icy surface. He has become absorbed in the wonder of events. Who was this stranger, after all? What does it mean that he was transient? What was this stranger doing here? Why these particular coordinates? What was the structure of this incident? What was the cause? What moved things to this point? What will emerge from it? Why was he, Morgan, and this woman Rose the ones who happened

to have discovered him? Why not someone else? Who is in charge of things like that? Not to mention the force of unrequited love.

He waits. Waiting is oppressive. Silence is oppressive, too. A dead person is oppressive for those who acknowledge they have found a dead man in the shrubs. The solid grey sky overhead oppresses, too. So much oppressive stuff on this oppressive day.

Not far off, Morgan hears water as it wends its way along beneath the ice, beneath the city, to the ocean. But then the sky breaks free of clouds and what was the gray overhead is fractured. Blue sky emerges from between the broken clouds, and leaves that deep, rich blue such as one only sees in wintertime.

Inquisition

“So, you two found him,” the copper says. He is fat, but also tall. Even if he wasn’t wearing that blue uniform of authority, he would intimidate. He has a notebook in his hand. He flips a page or two. Then he poises his pencil ready to write and waits for one of them to answer.

“I was walking my dog,” Rose says. “I was walking by. But this man was here,” and she points to Morgan. “He made me stop. And so I stopped. And look at that,” she says, pointing into the shrubbery. “Something was not right, I thought. And something isn’t, is it?”

The Copper looks to where she points, but he has seen such things before. Morgan looks, too, to see what has changed, if anything. Nothing’s changed.

The copper looks back to the two of them, then down at his pad and writes a few things down.

“I was walking to work,” Morgan says. “Then there was that Robbie,” as if that were an explanation. “He wears that yellow slicker.”

“So, a yellow slicker, huh?”

“A yellow slicker.”

The copper writes that down, then looks at him, then looks down at his pad and writes down another note or two. His pencil is a stub, and it wants a sharpening. It appears the copper is making a list. He rolls his tongue about his mouth so his cheeks change shape.

“It was a chance encounter,” Morgan says. “That’s all I know. What can I say? He’s here. I walk by. It is a certain time of day. Robbie pops out. Voila. That’s our story.”

Morgan stands and finds his warm butt has left a dark spot on the bench where ice has melted. He pulls his cashmere coat down to hide his impropriety.

"Is that all?" Morgan asks.

"That's everything for the moment." The copper snaps his notebook shut. "But there will be other moments, let me assure you, before this story is done."

To the inn

Rose and Morgan linger for a while to see what the other coppers do. Several have arrived. Medics cut the body down and cart it off. They say nothing to the press. Other people who walk by this time of day come by, and stop, but then walk on again. No one quite knows everything.

Rose locks her arm in Morgan's and leads him to her Inn. The dog weaves back and forth across the path ahead of them, from one side of the sidewalk to the other, then back again, as if the sum of curiosity will lead it to some answer.

The dog pulls them both across the bridge, her by the force of the leash, and Morgan locked in her arm, the dog's paws sliding on the walk. He is eager to get on, forgetting ducks, encouraged by his memories of the warm awaiting in the Home for Transients, the cans of something that smells of meat that arrive from time to time in a plate he's claimed as his.

"Don't leave town," the copper hurls after them. "Someone's dead. We will have answers."

"Come see his room," Rose says, as she locks her arm around Morgan's elbow. He follows her along the path plowed of snow, treacherous with ice.

"I'd like that," Morgan says. "I'd like that very much. I'd like to get to know this man and seemed to love, now that his life has come to its completion. At last we have the total set of facts that we can work with to come up with his life. That would be very good. There's so much catching up that one must do to truly know someone, to nail them down, especially when they are forever changing, adding things, and doing what's often unexpected. Also, the dead should never die

unacknowledged which you and I can do, now that his work is finished.”

The dog pulls them both along, tugging on his leash, stopping, sniffing, bounding on. The dog’s claws slide on ice. His toenails want a clipping.

“I feel I know him, but I’d like to know him more,” Morgan says. “More than just an encounter in the shrubs. Why, that’s the sort of unsatisfying bit you could get in some photograph.”

It’s odd how things can change a day. Even a stranger’s death can change a day, and that change then creates a change in everything, for once change comes all things must then adjust, and all vents in every day are nothing more than that, adjustments to some original catastrophe.

“We’ll talk later,” the copper yells after them. Morgan turns to look and acknowledge him, someone he has almost totally forgotten. “I still have questions,” the copper says.

The copper’s voice grows more distant with every step they take until it seems of little consequence and is muffled in the cold. Morgan turns and sees the copper’s words emerge from the copper’s face as if it were the morning fog.

“I’m far, so far, from satisfied,” the copper says, which is that last thing Morgan understood him to say.

Chapter Four

Things

Rose and Morgan stand in front of Rose’s Two Oaks Home for Transients. She holds her dog by its leash as the dog barks at the Home. Then the dog bounds up the wooden stairs until the leash grows taut and pulls him back. The dog slips on the icy stairs and returns where it began.

Rose holds the handrail as she leads Morgan up the steps. The man they found was Mr. Pemberton. He lived upstairs.

“I’m eager to see his room,” Morgan says. He follows Rose. “I guess I said that once before, but I’m still eager.”

"I understand," Rose says. "You know a person best when you see the things they own. What are we but the same total of our accumulations? Life is nothing but gathering of stuff."

They climb the steps to the porch. Morgan opens the huge front door for Rose. It is as tall as she is plus then half her height again, and it is windowed with beveled frosted glass, so one can almost see inside, at least shadows say, or furry images and movement, if not what and where. Through such glass all things are but a distortion of themselves.

Once the door is open, Morgan sees how dark the place is kept inside. The entryway has high ceilings. Red carpets nailed to the floor and frayed at the edges that run the length of the entry way. On the left a door leads to the dim-lighted pool hall attached to the rooming house Rose operates where men come day and night to play their games, and drink their beer. Morgan sees through the open door how smoke hangs in layers in the air, and the room reeks of the stale beer. A soft muttering comes the talking men do there, saying nothing of importance, a murmur of camaraderie.

Men play dominoes or pool beneath low hanging fluorescent lights or sit at the bar where the bartender polishes the wood. Round and round the bartender moves his rag as he polishes his way up and down the counter. A few men sit on stools, mugs of beer in front of them in various phases of timelessness. Customers may have come early that morning, or from homes somewhere, or from the rooms in Rose's Home. Perhaps some never leave the bar at all.

A television on a shelf behind the bar conveys nothing of importance—wars and deaths and kidnappings, a blur of news. The television flickers. Beside it on the wall hang a multitude of beer signs including the lighted picture of General Custer and all his men about to die at the hands of fearsome savages.

"I've never seen in this place before," Morgan says. "I've walked by it every day I go to work. But I've never been inside. I've never seen anyone come or go. I've often wondered where men gathered." "His room is where he kept his things," Rose says. She doffs her coat, and hangs it up. They are inside now, in a sitting room for her and guests. "What we wear, for instance. His hat, let's say. Or his coffee cup. Or even his dead body. Live your life, I say, but what you

leave behind for others to discover is what they'll understand the sum of you to be."

"I also like to see the arrangement people make of all the stuff they have," Morgan says. "The patterns they make with things. Some people write a story, let's say, and arrange the pages 1, 2, 3 Others opt for randomness as in 3, 1, 2 That makes a person more than just the things they have accumulated. There is also the shape. Insight into them clearly comes from both their patterns and their stuff. But ever better is to see the way they've changed those patterns over time."

Pool hall

There is much to see inside. A short hallway leads to the pool hall Rose operates where men come day and night to play their games, and drink their beer. A soft muttering comes from the sum of all the talking men do there, saying nothing of importance, a murmur of camaraderie. When the bartender isn't wiping down his bar he is washing glasses, polishing them and arranging them on a shelf. A few men sit on stools, mugs of beer in front of them in various states of emptiness. It is morning outside, yes. But inside there is no time. These customers may have come earlier that morning, from home somewhere, or from the rooms they rent above, or perhaps they never left the bar the night before. A television on a shelf behind the bar conveys nothing of importance—wars and deaths and kidnappings, a blur of news. The television flickers. Beside it on the wall hang a multitude of beer signs including the lighted picture of General Custer and all his men about to die at the hands of fearsome savages.

Tea

Before Rose led Morgan up the stairs, she wanted to tell him how one needs to know the things around a thing before one can understand a thing at all. That is," she continued, "you need to know the context a thing is in."

At that she took off her coat, and gloves, and, lending him a hand, helped Morgan take off his coat and hat. He really had no choice. He did not deny her invitation, even though he was in a bit of a hurry to get to the room, see what was to be seen, and go on. There was a

day's work ahead of him, and they would expect him to be at work on time. He was a cog, of course, in their machine.

She smiled, and paused, and said she had to go now, put on the tea. How could he refuse a thing that was so well begun. Rose has led Morgan to the sitting room for visitors to the Home. It looked warm and comfortable. He had been cold all morning, and now, he started to think, things were going to change. But things always change, he thought. You just cannot stop it, even when you are used to it.

"We have so much to discuss, so much for me to tell, so much for me to learn—of love, and life, and happenstance—before we go upstairs," Rose says. "An English breakfast tea, something brisk to change the course of things."

Morgan agrees. Work seems distant now, almost as if that part of him was not a part of him so much as a life led by someone else. He and Rose will share a thing or two That would be nice. She'll show him how things were.

The tea made, the milk poured, Rose settles down to tell her story.

"It began last week," she says.

"Ah," Morgan says. He straightens up, sits polite, and listens, sips his tea with one hand while he holds his hat in the other.

"Every night for hours, you see, he'd be upstairs doing typing," Rose continues. She looks about, and above at the ceiling where they are sitting now. "You know how that can be. Up there. The clack, clack, clack of that machine. For hours and hours, clack, clack, clack."

"I've done the same myself," Morgan says. Immediately he regrets interrupting her. The way she looks at him. She has a story to tell, and he listens to her carefully. He sips his tea and silently swears to speak no more.

Sayers

She resumes. "But then one night a few days ago the clacking stopped. It always did from time to time. It would be silent then for a while, like it is now, no sounds coming from the second floor. But this time the silence seemed unique." She pauses as she juggles memories. "The machine stopped its clumsy progress, and so, as always, I waited for him to go on, always wanting him to go on, and I worried, until I heard

the sound resume. I rarely had to sit for long in the middle of such silence, in a pause where nothing happened, when Mr. Pemberton had discontinued work.”

Rose looks at Morgan now to see if he looks back, and he does, and nods, and understands.

“When the work resumed, relief washed over me,” Rose says. “Clack, clack, clack. It was as if time itself had awoken once again and moved along its way.

“And so it went, night after night, I downstairs in this room, attending to my tea. No doubt I read a book, as I often do of night. Almost every night I read an English mystery. Dorothy Sayers, if I’ve found a volume of her work I had read so long ago, I had forgotten how it evolved, how it ended, so once again I could take delight in confronting some new mystery and watching as it worked its way to a resolution. How well the English write such things. I think it has to do with how closely they are aligned these last few centuries with the Scots. Then one evening not so long ago—I’m thinking it was shortly after supper—I had served my guests chicken, mashed potatoes, always mashed potatoes, gravy, peas. Cherry cobbler for dessert. Mr. Pemberton was absent as he often was from time to time, and, while eating, I began to long to hear his voice again, and I felt close to it, that clack, clack, clack, a feeling that has evolved in me since the first time I had heard him typing.

“Mr. Pemberton was upstairs writing. We could hear him down here all though dinner. I don’t know how that man goes on so long without his meals. Still, we had set a place for him. We always set a place for him. He pays his rent on time, after all, and dinner is included in the rent. As I have said, there was chicken that night, and potatoes, a favorite for all my guests. But things went on without him.

“From the typing I had been hearing, I know that he was up there. After dinner, I was sitting in my sitting room, as I am now, looking up and listening to his fingers dancing rhythmically on his machine, and I suffered on until at last I could no longer deny myself what I was feeling. In my mind I saw his fingers on the keyboard, those heavy thumbs from time to time drumming on the space bar, and on and on. I asked myself, that night as I had so often earlier, what is Mr. Pemberton is saying? And was he saying things to me. I decided then

to climb the stairs, knock on his door and see if I could not see him there at work, see the code as well as hear it through the ceiling.

"I sipped my tea, a mystery book in my lap that night, Dorothy Sayers, I remember, *The Documents in the Case*, I think it was, and at the point where they find the body, what's a mystery without a body and its death? All good stories are merely a good catastrophe that ends with someone dying, if nothing else. I let the book fall to the floor, which laid there open to the very page I had been reading.

"I paused and listened to more typing, and the rhythm seemed to resolve itself into words, much like music strains to speak."

Pause

"Day had lapsed into the evening," Rose continues. "The way it always does. Sunlight fell across the rug, across my lap, crawled up the wall behind me, and for a moment the flowers on my sofa disappeared the way things disappear when the light's too dim to fracture all the colors into patterns. I realized it was twilight. I had been listening quite some time for the sound of Mr. Pemberton, for answers to questions I always yearn to ask, waiting for more of his messages to come to me. Shadows faded, things merged into the darkness.

"There were offices across the pond. Lights from there reflected along the ice and snow in wintertime and at night they entered through the blinds, then struck the wall behind me, light sliced and cast across my eyes, my face, my head, and then against a wall where they made a silhouette of me, so I myself became defined by my very absence. This absence, this shadow, moved as I moved, as if what wasn't was what was. My silhouette drank from a shadow teacup at the same time I sipped tea.

"I was on pause. I waited for him to go on."

Arousal

Rose sat waiting now as she had waited that day some days before for Pemberton to resume. Morgan's face shows no emotion. It is a stone, a page of numbers.

"It was night outside now," Rose begins again at last. "And lights that lined the walk along the pond came on, shown through my

window and again revealed the flowers that decorate the sofa. The pattern of the sofa is one of tiny flowers which in the faint light split into even smaller flowers.”

“Like on your dress,” Morgan says.

“Yes, like on my dress,” Rose continues. It takes a moment for her story that has unravelled with that interruption to ravel itself together back into her story. Then she continues. “I was reading in the gloom, a small light on that lit the pages, waiting there to see the patterns begin again in all the letters on the page. Waiting for Mr. Pemberton to type as he did almost every night. I looked forward to it. Then he started. But then he stopped, and, it’s when he stopped, I worried. I wanted to hear the keys strike paper which I found to be a comfort.

“I’ve mentioned once before how I had such feelings for Mr. Pemberton. If not, then know I do, since that fateful dinner—chicken, potatoes, peas—at which he was not there and I felt love’s first arousal.”

Code

“As things went on a bit that evening, I began to imagine what Mr. Pemberton must have thought of me. I believed, you see, he meant to send these messages to me, cloaked in some exotic code which he presumed I could translate. Did I presume too much, I wonder. Sometimes I’d come to think his codes were based on the rhythms of his day, of his waking and his sleeping, or of his day and night, or of the moon’s constant circling of the earth, or the periodic bursting forth of plumes from deep inside the sun as occurs from time to time, or was he thinking he was playing drums in some distant forest, or had he based the code on the rhythm of dripping water? Were his messages driven by the same force by which seeds burst into flowers, then shrivel as they die, but then their seeds grow back again to flowers, which go to their own seeds, then die, that is, in codes that made a thing which made a story, and on and on? Patterns, you see. Sometimes the codes were not swept along by time, of course. It’s a mistake to think that time is the only thing that can be swept down by some sort of stream in, then through the cosmos. There is also space, and gravity, and they give shape to events, express themselves in

different codes, all bits of code in the great stew of space, time and gravity, creating things, creating things that move and shake, that spin, grow and collapse inside their hidden geometries, and in so doing arranging stuff like dust that settles on the window sill, or like light that bends around a star, or determines the etching of the ice that crawls up a frozen pane of glass, which if we can decode gives us the secrets of how things are.”

Again Rose pauses, and Morgan pauses, too, to place these thoughts somewhere in memory so, when he finds the leisure, he might amuse himself with them. Rose pours another cup of tea.

“The quickness of the tapping of the keys against the roller in his machine and the deftness of his fingers, had become music to my ears. These were his messages to me. Soft strikes which followed hard ones as the sequence moved along. Hesitant patterns created longer, less familiar words. Short, snappy ones the short and usual, words like ‘the,’ three quick slaps against the paper—tap, tap, tap—just so, can’t you hear it, made faster and with more confidence than, say, a word like ‘sky’—the thought, then the hesitation, then the yearning. Then there is the period which is one hard stroke followed by a bit of silence to seal in the end to things. A quick space separates one group of letters from another, followed by a thud of thumb as it falls upon the space bar. But mostly the carriage chugs along, then rings a bell, then comes the harsh, bitter slash of return, so the message can resume. All is the code which reveals itself to those who’ve learned to listen.”

Rose sips her tea and sighs, not mindful that her tea has grown cold.

“I’ve deciphered enough to learn that Pemberton spoke of love as well as of his hard life. What else would drive such effort in a person?”

“I grew confident I heard exactly what I heard. Then, as the night grew deep, and I sat and stared into the dark corners of my room, I wondered what I should do with knowing his messages were for me. They drew me to him. Who could resist?”

“Then that evening he stopped for a longer time than normal, for longer than he might need to attend to any duty, for relief, to eat, to drink. I sat without moving and only resumed my breathing when I heard the code begin again shivering through his floor, my ceiling, then to me.”

Machines

“This is the age of the machine,” Rose says. “Mr. Pemberton once did all his work in pencils. When he first arrived here at the rooming house, everything he did was scratching pencils across rough paper. Now all his work is machined. Moreover, recently Mr. Pemberton has talked of obtaining a computer. I feared his passion would be muffled by such a thing. A computer is too gentle, too easy going. He would need a printer, too, and I feared a printer would cut out all the love, burn out all the feeling.”

Chapter Five

Reply

“So, some few days ago, that last time I heard him work, I could not help but climb the stairs. I’ve done that before. I do it too often. I don’t know if he hears me. But I long to get close to him, my ear against his door. I want to find some way to reply.

I remember that night shadows from the light shone through the newels, fell across the risers, then crawled up the walls, as if the light itself was making me a prisoner.

“The typing stopped. He was afraid he heard me. I felt suddenly all alone.

“Other gentlemen were in their rooms watching television. The hour was late. Their televisions droned on and on while they learned back in the cushions of their chairs and slept. Or other gentlemen perhaps had retired to the adjacent pool hall. There was no one in the hall.

Pemberton’s door was closed. I hesitated. No sound came from inside. Not even the heaviness of breathing. If he were alive, I would have expected noise of one kind or the other, of one sort or another, the chair scooting across the floor, tapping on the desk, a snore, some certain sign of life.”

Introduction

“I know you are in there, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said.

“I knocked lightly, then pressed my cheek against the wood.

“‘I heard you typing in there, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said. ‘I can hear you breathing, too. Are you alive? Are you okay?’

I meant to be solicitous and kind in all of this. We had been sharing a precious intimacy of space, you see, by which I mean we were a group, the two of us, a combination, with no distance in between. We were an entity. Yet he was a boarder, too, so, although he paid me rent each month, his room belonged to me. That was the force which kept us apart while binding us together.

“It remained quiet inside his room as I stood outside the door. I grew worried, waiting for his response to my light knocking, or for his typing to resume to tell me he was still alive and messaging. The messages he was writing to me, of course, were of his love. And his love for me. Who else was there to hear him? And what else was there worth saying?

“But there was no typing then. Only silence.”

Question

“I pressed my ear against the door.

“‘Who is it?’ Mr. Pemberton finally said from inside.

“‘I was downstairs, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said. ‘I heard you typing. Then you stopped.’

“There was more silence for a time. Then, with my ear against the door I heard the sound of his imperfect breathing.

“‘I have a question,’ I said.

“‘So sorry, Rose. But I am busy. Can’t you hear that I’m at work?’

“‘I hear you when you’re typing, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said. ‘But you’re not typing now.’

“‘No, I’m not typing now, but I’ll be typing soon,’ he said. ‘I have been typing earlier, and, soon enough, I’ll be typing once again.’

“‘I have a question,’ I asked softly towards the door. I knew that he was waiting for me to go on.

"Inside his room the silence stretched out. He had halted his stream of letters and his messages. I felt so lonely.

"I am waiting for your question, Rose," he finally said.

"I loved the patience in this man. Can you imagine, he who has so much to say had stopped for me?"

'J'

"I hear you downstairs when you're writing, Mr. Pemberton," I said. I tried the doorknob to his room and found the door unlocked. All doors in my home are always kept unlocked. I allow no locks to any room I rent. I can go in any room if I so dare, but I wasn't daring just that moment.

"I have not stopped writing," he said from behind the door. "I haven't finished what I've started. I hope to finish soon. Right now I am deciding on the next letter in my work. In fact I had been contemplating the letter 'j' when you came and interrupted."

"How exciting, Mr. Pemberton," I said, and I felt a rush of feeling my anticipation brought. Only he and I might guess what his next choice would be.

"There were other rooms upstairs, and other roomers, other doors, but whatever sounds the others made, they were buried in the bubble of their televisions."

The letter 'j'

"But Mr. Pemberton was silent. Then, after some long pause, he asked, 'What do you want, Rose?'"

"I don't mean to interrupt the flow of what you're writing. A 'j' is a good letter to get one started. Go with the lovely 'j'. I'll just stay here until you're finished."

"A 'j'," he said. "Before you interrupted I was also contemplating it should be followed by a rounded letter, like an 'o' or 'e'. Still, a dotted letter like a 'j' holds much interest in itself, don't you think? And 'j's are such rare finds these days, so little used. But then an 'i' is dotted, too, so if a dotted letter is what is wanted, an 'i' would do as well as any 'j'. But even so, 'j's are far more interesting than the very common 'i's, don't you imagine?"

“‘And then what’s next?’ I asked.

“‘Lately I had become so deadily tired of all the flowing vowels and consonants that require the use of lips,’ he said. ‘Let the teeth do more work. I think the future will see more of that.’

“I leaned against the door. This was better than a dream. I not only heard his words, and decoded them, but now I was becoming privy to his thoughts. To know such things would be useful in translating all that clacking into messages next time.

“‘I didn’t mean to interrupt,’ I said.”

Questions

“I rested my cheek against the door, feeling as if I pressed against the door I might enter through it, like a ghost.

“‘But, you do,’ he said inside his room. ‘You do interrupt me, Rose.’ There was no sound of typing behind the door. ‘Every interaction between one person and another is an interruption in one’s own thoughts.’

“‘I have some questions,’ I said to him.

“‘You have questions every night, Rose,’ he said. ‘You come up those steps, sneak up to my door, you lean against my door, press your ear against my door, and you listen to what I’m doing. The pattern never changes. Wanting to know is the question you always ask.’

“I had forgotten how often I had done this very thing. That evening coming up to hear him seemed so unique, so awesome, no other time, however much it might have been the same, seemed to matter in that moment. All else faded and was forgotten. But he knew, and he remembered. There was a pause. He had never said such things to me. And, yes, I’d listened at his door before, to him when he was at his work. And, yes, I did desire to know.

“Then he told me, ‘Go to bed.’

“I tested the knob again and found it unlocked, as I insisted it always be. If he saw the handle twist, I thought, or heard a rattle in the handle, then he would know the extent of my desire. But I didn’t open the door. There are rules here, and parameters, even for the one who owns the house. I must be seeking his permission.

"Your typing makes me think,' I said, my cheek against the door.

"I paused.

"Don't stop your work on my account,' I let on. 'I like to hear you as you work. I like your writing, too. If sometime soon you'd like to read your work to me, I'd like to hear it.'

"There was silence from the other side."

Sheets

"Do you mind if I change your sheets?' I said after a polite pause, awaiting a response from somewhere inside the room. 'Clean sheets,' as if I would bring him any but the cleanest.

"What can I do with clean sheets, Rose, that I cannot do with the sheets I have?"

"It's just a question, Mr. Pemberton. It's time to change the sheets. It is included in your rent, as you well know. I'll change them now, if you don't mind.'

"I had opened up a cabinet in the hallway and retrieved a set of freshly laundered sheets.

"I have no time for all these questions, Rose. Don't you see that? I cannot answer others' questions while I'm seeking answers to my own.' There was silence. 'I despair there are no answers,' he said. No time to find them. I fear my typing is merely filling up the silence.'

"No, Mr. Pemberton,' I said. 'I know you have no time. You have your work to do,' as if he thought, even though his door was closed, I wouldn't know he had to face the work he had before him."

"I had given Mr. Pemberton the best room in the Two Oaks Inn for Transients. It had a window with a view. It looked out to the pond and to the creek that fed it, out to the trace where water once powered work into something useful. It's also true after dinner I often sat downstairs and read my books. That night as many others I was reading Dorothy Sayers, as I have said before, and I had just gotten to where they began to investigate the cause of death. I listened then to the sounds of his machine as he resumed his work. I enjoyed that very much, imagining for a time that Mr. Pemberton and I were there together, once again, separated only by the skin of ceiling, he in the stream of all that clacking and I lost in my book, but bound by his

sound clacking like music binds us in experience and tells a story in something beyond words. I felt one with him, if that is possible. I would have liked to watch him as he worked, to hear him read his words as he creates them, and not to be down here sitting, left alone to decode his encrypted love. And that was why that night, again, I had gone to him and knocked.

“You are entitled to clean sheets,’ I said. ‘Every week you get clean sheets, Mr. Pemberton. It’s the way I treat my boarders.’

“I know,’ Mr. Pemberton said, as if anyone could doubt it.”

Pemberton

“I imagined him, then, sitting in his room as he talked to me. He would be staring at his machine. He would be pondering the next letter he would create. He would be holding a word in mind before I came knocking at his door, a word he had been turning this way and that to imagine how it might fit in the flow of things, or even contemplating certain letters, the first letter, then the next, that might constitute the right word to follow all the thoughts that now lay naked on his work. It would be a good word in his hands, no doubt about it. All his words are lovely. A ‘j’ word, if he is to be believed, would be like no other ‘j’ word ever written, the special sound it makes as the right hand’s index finger slips aside to strike that key. It would fit perfectly into the flow of all his other letters, all the words, line after line, both pulling thoughts along and preparing us for all the words to follow, a word that would make sense of all his efforts heretofore, the same of all his days, each word a pin that stitched his thoughts together in a pattern, all his dreams put into code for all the ages, each word promising a further ease to suffering, in him, in us. Now I know he paused because he forgot the other letters of the word he had in mind beginning with the ‘j,’ a word which he had thought would be the keystone on which his life could rest. A word once written would fix his queasy, unbound thoughts firmly in a place and time, a pattern there on paper, clacking in the air. I know I was to blame for all that loss.

“He had focused on the ‘j’. He has wrestled with the letter. Heaven knows there are enough ‘j’ words about, but no other ‘j’ word can replace of the ‘j’ word that had escaped him. Type up any ‘j’ word, then move on, that would be the easy thing to do, if it were me. But

there was no pushing Mr. Pemberton this way or that. It was his work, after all. The ‘j’ word had escaped him. If he went on and used just any ‘j’ word, which some lesser one might do were they not Mr. Pemberton, he could finish for the evening, and he and I could go and have a beer, or sit downstairs for tea and talk about the stuff that men and women talk about . But that would never work for him. Mr. Pemberton would not have sacrificed the thought of the perfect thought that had been thought just to end the thing and put his mind at ease.

“I saw him there this morning, hanging there, and I wonder myself what the ‘j’ word might have been that’s now forever lost.”

Permission

“‘I need to finish, Rose, before I lose my voice,’ Mr. Pemberton said, as if he knew or had deluded himself into thinking he could finish this work soon. Maybe tonight, he might tell himself, it will be done. If he could not hope he might be finished soon, why would he go on?”

“‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Of course. I know I’m such a bother. But your flowers need watering, Mr. Pemberton. Then I will leave. I’ll be quiet as I water I’ll leave you to your work. Except perhaps your bed needs making, too, and I could make it.’”

“I knew he was in there, you see, lost in a tangle of possibilities he hoped would take him forward to a resting place.

“‘You watered all the flowers just yesterday,’ he said.

“I waited, pretending for a moment I didn’t hear him, pretending for a moment he hadn’t understood my reasons for interrupting or my needs. I took a moment to renew my thoughts, to find new words. I pressed my temple against the wooden door as if, had I had certain powers, I could transport myself to be inside with him.

“‘I owe you sheets,’ I said. ‘Clean sheets. I wouldn’t be able to sleep, Mr. Pemberton, if I can’t give you what you’re due.’”

“And then, as he often did, Mr. Pemberton said, ‘Oh, come on in, then, Rose. Come on in. Come in. Come change the sheets. Come water all the flowers. It’s a waste of sheets. And water, too. And certainly a waste of time. But do come in.’”

Chapter Six

Entrance

“I felt relieved,” Rose says. “I opened his door.

“His small desk sat across the room below the window where he looked out, if and when he ever looked out, and he could see the pond, the creek, the ducks, the snow, the sun rising, the sun setting, the sun hanging in the sky, the seasons as they change, or me as I walked my dog along the icy paths each morning, or me alone without my dog on my way here or there, or he might just look outside and see nothing at all, his mind sorting through the possibilities of what letters might tumble out of his machine what words they might make for him, where they were going, where they had been.

“He rolled his chair across the floor and opened the door for me, then he rolled back to slouch again against the machine he used for work.

“A lamp with a dark green shade sat beside him on his desk. His machine sat under a cone of light. His brown machine had green keys. It was fitted with letters of lead in such a way that if and when a key was pushed, inside the machine an arm flew up and smashed against a ribbon, scarring the paper rolled tightly in the carriage with ink. From time to time on some rare visits I saw this happen as I stood and watched, a frightful sight, let me tell you, and of course it was the sound I heard it in the room below.

“The paper with all its scars was otherwise as white as bone. And dry.”

Greetings

“‘I cannot work when you stand there asking questions,’ Mr. Pemberton said to me.

“I had clean sheets draped over my arm.

“‘Oh, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said, greeting him as if I had not seen him for quite some time.

“He sat at his table in a rolling desk chair. He confronted his brown machine, as if he had pitted himself against it in some contest of life and death, a worthy foe. They was at odds, this man and his machine. There was paper in the carriage, and some markings on the

paper I could not see. His bed had not been slept in since I had made it last time.

“‘It’s good to see you writing once again,’ I said, as I carefully change his sheets which I hoped would change everything.

“‘I never stop the writing,’ Mr. Pemberton said. ‘Not even when I stop writing do I stop writing. The work continues in my head. My fingers twitch, even when there is no machine with which to express my choices. Some also say they have seen my lips move as I tell a silent story.’

“‘I changed his sheets, stretching them tight, patting down the pillows, smoothing out the blankets.

“‘Perhaps there is a machine inside my head,’ Mr. Pemberton continued. ‘A machine that lets me type inside my head even when I don’t type on my machine. The stories come, and when I am prepared, my mind reduces them to letters, certain twitches create the voice, the machine creates them for the world. It’s easier to work that way than it is to sit and work, to begin a thread of story, a thought from wherever thoughts begin. Better to always be at work and never stop, and when fortune lies beside me and I have a machine like this to translate these voices in my head, these wisps of dreams through this machine. When there’s no machine to nail such things down, they are forgotten not long after they’ve been imagined. If I don’t fix it right then, they’re lost, and I am haunted more by what I’ve forgotten than what I’ve not. Things last much longer when they’re on paper.’

“‘I don’t mind it when you write,’ I said. ‘It’s when you stop, I worry.’

Looks

“‘I pulled the curtains open. Light from the string of lights along the pond came in. The first of the two oaks for which my Inn was named grew just outside his window. Its leaves were yellow in the fall, but the limbs were bare in winter.

“‘You’re looking good, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said, not looking at him. ‘Of course you always do. But now you look even better. I hope you feel better, too. It’s better to look better than to simply feel that way. It’s best to feel that way and not worry how you look. What’s the point of looking good if you don’t feel as good as well?’

“‘I feel fine,’ he said, but he stared at the paper in the roller of his machine with such devotion, I knew he’d rather be working than talking here with me. He was no doubt writing in his head but was unable to consummate the words that floated by. I would rather see him happily at work than chatting here with me. But I did so love him chatting here with me. I did not mean to stop him. I would have liked it most of all if he would read to me. Still, his story seemed lost inside his head and no doubt disappearing by the moment.

“I finished watering the plants. Now that the bed was made and the curtains opened, there was no more work for me to do, no more excuses why I was there, why he was stopped in his flow of things. I dared not tidy up his precious papers, not even the papers in the trash, not even the scraps of papers torn up and tossed beneath his desk.

“‘I know it’s late, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said.

“Now Mr. Pemberton no longer looked at me. He looked at his typewriter, fingered the keys. “‘i’ or ‘j’?” he asked himself. ‘No other letters have a dot. How interesting. For instance, a ‘q’ is quite an interesting letter, too, but it doesn’t have a dot.’”

Rules

“‘We had dinner downstairs earlier,’ I told him. ‘I know you were up here working and couldn’t join us, but I saved a plate for you. We had chicken, Mr. Pemberton. Tonight was chicken. I know how you love chicken. When you first came, we ate chicken all the time, do you remember? You seemed so happy then. With chicken. Potatoes, too. Peas. And gravy. Everything.’

“I bundled up his used sheets to carry off.

“‘Come downstairs if you want,’ I said. ‘I will open up the kitchen. I will heat the chicken up if you want. We will have some wine as well. Or you can bring your whiskey. I know you like your whiskey. Writers must live by their own rules, god knows.’”

“He turned to face me,” Rose continued, “as if somehow the story he was writing had ended suddenly, fallen victim to the indecision of the ‘j’ or the ‘i’.

“‘What rules are those?’ he asked.

I suspect he meant the rule by which he lives. And how was I to know?

"I stopped, you see, my arms burdened with dirty sheets, and turned, but I had no answer to his question.

"What do I know of rules?" I said. "And what rules can there be for a man who only lives by rules he makes himself?"

Choices

"What are you writing, Mr. Pemberton?" I asked.

"Right now, just letters," he said. "I have rows and rows of letters I've clustered into words. I'm not sure what I get at in them."

"I put the broom, the dustpan, the dusty rags out in the hallway. I piled the dirty sheets outside the door. Right now the moment belonged to Mr. Pemberton who, with his answer to my question, like some flower, had opened up to me.

"Is this a story you're writing, Mr. Pemberton? I love a story. Or a poem, perhaps? Poems are nice, too, and can be read out loud and are often quite revealing."

"So far it's all a string of letters, line after line. One letter after another, from time to time, clusters of letters separated by spaces," Mr. Pemberton said. "They are the start of bigger things. The whole form will surely follow process here. If the form has not been seen before, we'll bless it with a title. Nature will provide a peculiar shape, and sound adheres to the aggregate of words, and that will be its name. For the moment I wanted to follow what has come before with a dotted letter to give the word a universal force. I am certain this instance requires a letter with a dot."

"Interesting," I said, privileged to have been trusted with the secrets of his process.

"It starts so easy," Mr. Pemberton said. "I start to write, say, 'The rain has come up suddenly.'"

"Or,

'Then I was born.'

"Or,

'Now she is lost.'

"Or,

'A prince came riding by one day, not knowing he's a prince.'

"But where does a thing like that go? I was feeling a 'j' coming on when you knocked on the door. Now I'm not so sure. An 'i' might

do as well, or even better. Choices are such a curse. I would that we could return to those lost days of just one noun, say 'I,' which is propelled along by just one verb, say 'am.'"

Jocasta

"I sat on the edge of his bed. Pemberton was talking more to his machine and to the paper in the roller than to me. But that was no matter. We were entwined in this moment, as lovers often are, too involved to see the whole imbroglio for the imbroglio in was. Yet that moment was enough for me.

"After a short silence, I asked, 'Who is she?'

"Who is who?' Mr. Pemberton asked.

"In your story,' I said. 'The one who was so lost.'

"He looked at the paper in his machine as if seeing there a page never ravished by such a question. He lifted the page up gently to read what had been pressed into it. For a moment he looked as if the very reading of the letters had caused all the nonsense that he had felt become arranged and rational.

"Jocasta, perhaps,' he said.

"Just as he seemed at the point of choosing the next key to strike, he hesitated.

"But, if it was Jocasta, then what comes next?' he asked himself. 'Beginnings are so easy. Endings are the killers. But especially, until the whole thing's done, until we stamp the final dot at the bottom of the page, the middle's all a muddle.'

"At that moment I thought he sounded so very sad."

Usage

"Downstairs when I heard you typing I imagined you spoke to me," I said, as if that might cheer him up. I would like to be this Jocasta in his story and find my life fulfilled in a myth of he and I, as if the point to all that writing, all that code, was to make another cry.

"Downstairs on the couch as I was reading Dorothy Sayers I heard you here,' Rose continued, 'and I wondered what you were saying.'

"I sat on his bed and crossed my legs.

“Do you know that?” I continued. “Do you think about me when you are writing? Did you think for just one moment you are saying things to me?”

“Mr. Pemberton rubbed his face as he stared at the paper in his machine. ‘I use some letters more than I use others,’ he continued. ‘That’s the way things are. Sometimes I use some letters for some things more than I use other letters for other things. Not to mention how times change and fashion. We have to be flexible in our use of letters. There’s a pattern beneath it all for us to discover, if there is a pattern there to find.’ He turned and looked at me. ‘Do you suppose, even if no one finds it, a pattern still exists? Like numbers, say, that have their own eternity? And, if so, what effect do these unseen patterns have? Might one see patterns where no patterns were intended? That is to say, can patterns emerge from chaos and live a quiet life alone?’

“I smiled. I imagined how those very words might sound if he were typing them in silence and sending me the code.

“‘The chicken is still warm,’ I said. ‘If you are hungry, I can heat it up.’”

Passion

“‘Patterns,’ he said. ‘Nothing in a pattern is truly out of order. If we cannot see the pattern, it drives us mad. The world without a pattern seems in error and very dirty. We humbly must then presuppose a god who understands these things. Someone who makes the patterns.’

“‘I’ll make tea, Mr. Pemberton, if you’d like. We’ll have some chicken and some tea and you can read what you have written. We’ll try some Earl Grey. Everyone likes Earl Gray. I like to think that Dorothy Sayers drinks Earl Gray the same as me. That’s the way the English are. Then you can read to me what you have written, and I’ll laugh as you read your work, if it’s funny. Or, if it’s not funny, then I’ll cry. Whatever you intended as you wrote it, that’s what I’m sure I’ll do.’

“‘A’s,’ for instance,’ Pemberton said. ‘In some places I use too many a’s, especially when a simple fricative would do.’

“I felt my eyes begin to water. ‘Such passion, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said. ‘Such passion.’”

Purpose

“Mr. Pemberton erased some letters he had typed.

“‘I’ve been holding back on t’s,’ he said, but he said that to himself and not to me. He was repeating what he had learned of the natural order of his work. I think he learned of his natural order after great bouts of suffering. ‘If you write enough, you need the ‘t’s to say what ‘t’s are meant to say. But, too many ‘t’s, too many anything, and you don’t see them anymore.’

“‘It’s good to have things where you want them,’ I said. ‘It’s good to live with things so fresh and clean their very purpose is unmistakable.’

“I sat on the edge of the bed. My right hand held my left. Then my left hand held my right.

“‘Ah, purpose,’ he said.”

So fresh and clean

“‘Your bed is nice now. So fresh and clean, Mr. Pemberton. Don’t you love the smell of clean sheets on your skin, Mr. Pemberton? When I crawl in between two fresh sheets and close my eyes, I love the feel of them on my body. I could crawl in there now, Mr. Pemberton, if you would like. Would you like that?’

“He looked out the window. There was no moon just yet, but there was the glow of a moon about to rise. The night was cold. The bare oak branches stood stark against the promise of a coming bathing of the moon. The streetlight made a path along the ice from the light of each of them.”

Consonants

“‘My life has come to be nothing but a pile of consonants,’ Mr. Pemberton said. ‘I fear I’ve lost the round, soft vowels of youth.’

“‘Sheets against your naked body, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said, as if he might begin feel the sheets against him as I did.

“‘Words once flowed through me the same as time. There is no such flow these days. I’m full of words that won’t pass on.’

“If we were to go outside,’ I said, ‘go to the pond, we could walk together on the path that circles around the ice. That was the pond when it was summer, but not it’s buried under ice. There are no flowers now. Everything is frozen. But the night is quiet, the air is clean. Remember how it once was, Mr. Pemberton, when there were flowers by the river? Do you remember that? They grew outside my door, close to my body when I stepped outside. Do you ever think about flowers, Mr. Pemberton? Really think about flowers? About stamens. And pistils. Pollen. And petals. Tell me, Mr. Pemberton, what is a flower all about? Can you imagine?’

“I could tell his thoughts are with the light from a moon about to rise.

“There are no thoughts without words,’ he said. ‘Certainly there is nothing without nouns. Without nouns everything is but a blur.’

“I was undaunted. He was listening to me. I had great feelings.”

The porch

“We can sit on the porch, Mr. Pemberton. Even in the cold. Even in the dark. There is a swing on my front porch where we can sit. Or we can sit by the river and watch the moon climb into the night, as it always does. At least it would that night.’

“But nouns are the easy part,’ Mr. Pemberton said. ‘Verbs, now, they are the words that are so difficult. To be things, they must move. Nouns never need to change. But what might cause a noun to move? And is a noun a noun until it is brought into being by a verb? And which comes first? Not to mention the will to be the mover. Where’s that come from?’

“I went to his window and closed the blinds.”

Verb

“The streetlights are on, Mr. Pemberton,’ I said, looking out to where some blocks away cars were driving by. ‘People are walking along the pond. They leave a trail behind in snow. If we were on the porch, and if the porch lights were on, and if the shrubs were not so burdened

with the snow, and they looked up, they would see us on the porch and wave. That's how things are. We'd see them. We'd wave back. It could be summer say, or afternoon. We are nouns that are sitting on the porch. We wave, or swing, or do some things in verbs. Things can be very pleasant in the afternoon in a place like that, that time of year. It could be pleasant even in the winter. In the winter you could warm my hands in yours, Mr. Pemberton. 'Warm' would be our verb.'

"Mr. Pemberton was not typing. He stared at the paper in the roller.

Refusal

"One must sort things out,' he said. 'Letters must fall into a pattern. But whose pattern do we arrive at so we know the work is over?'

"Remember when you first arrived? It was summer when I first asked you to sit with me on my front porch. You asked me if I wanted a little whiskey. I said, 'No,' remember? 'But thank you. That wouldn't do,' I said that because that's what a lady said those days. I was your landlord, too. Was I wrong, Mr. Pemberton, to refuse your whiskey so early on? Should we have started then and been then same, then grown different, rather than coming together at last but already different, hoping to grow the same, or have we lost our chance to create such memories?'

"Mr. Pemberton turned to his desk and resumed his typing."

Strangers

"Some letters are used infrequently, you see,' he said. 'Should I seek out words that fully exploit all the alphabet? Or is it best to let dog eat dog, so letting a few letters carry all the weight of what is said and let the least used letters be strangers in our work?'

"He expressed his code so smooth with every click.

"Do you see that I have changed, Mr. Pemberton, over time? I said. 'Do you see how you and I can let things go and let them fall into their natural pattern?'

"But consonants . . . , and here he paused. 'They are the heart of things. They shape the path the vowels can take. A road's a road, but the mountains and the valley shape the road. Take the dotted 'j,'

for example. You can slice bread with the letter ‘j,’ but the ‘a’s and ‘e’s are the butter one spreads on it. And in a word like ‘jelly,’ or ‘justice,’ ‘j’ starts the word with a force to arouse one’s hunger to take the bait. The ‘j’ in ‘joy,’ for example, can hook the heart and let’s you catch the thing.’

“With that he processed work again, and he clacked on with a passion.

“‘I’ll turn down your bed,’ I said. ‘Soon you must rest. Let the letters sort themselves out in dreams.’

“More typing followed. I closed the door. I heard my footsteps descend the stairs. He finished this round of work somewhat later in the night and when he finished he left no sound at all and so, for some brief moment it felt as though the silence swelled to be all there was of universe.”

They had some cookies with their tea and Morgan was quiet as he processed the story. Then Rose says, “I’ll take you up,” Rose says. Morgan follows her. It is warm inside the Inn, and musty.

Chapter Seven

Ascension

From the entryway a broad wooden stairway leads to the second floor. Morgan sees the scars where candles and fireplaces that once had given heat to the Home for Transients but have since given way to coal and gas, and then later to electrical lights and steam, and then at last to baseboard heat and fluorescence. Slow turning fans hang from the ceiling in the hallway and from the top of every room, but they do not seem to stir the air.

Rose has already climbed some stairs, but stops and turns and motions for Morgan to follow. “We’ll see his room. It’s where he’d hammer on that machine night after night. Whack, whack, whack! Not to complain,” she says. “I got used to him. I had feelings.”

“What happens to one’s work when one is dead, do you suppose?” Morgan asks. He has no answer.

They mount the stairs, she leads the way, one step and then another, her cane hooked over her left arm, her right arm on the

railing. Morgan holds her forearm on which Rose has draped her cane. Once she is firmly on a step, she lifts a leg, shifts it slightly forward, leans forward into it, shifting the center of her gravity, then she lifts the rear leg up as well, then straightens up the leg she has out front, and thus rises one step further, then swings her hind leg forward and sets it down on the next and higher step, then adjusts herself to her new height, then slides her arm up the rail a bit, then repeats all this again, and then again, and soon enough they both find they have arrived on that new level.

“Such was the way he took to home,” she says.

Morgan looks down at the dusty hall, the dusty carpets, the dust hanging in the air.

“His home was the first door to the left,” Rose says. “He had the room with a view out front as well as along the stream.”

Doors

The second-floor hallway stretches down a carpet like a long dark cave, and it smells of must like a cave, and of mold and of the agony of waiting. A gritty carpet stretches its length, ending where a door leads outside to a fire escape. The doors to the renters’ rooms line both sides, four doors on each, and two more doors further on open to shared bathrooms. The place smells of old men who have nowhere else to go.

Morgan hears televisions playing softly inside a few rooms. Most doors are not quite shut, but they are not so open as to invite anyone in. Morgan imagines any inhabitants inside would be listening to the news, or to game shows, or to old movies in black and white, although, he thinks they may have left their televisions to drone on as they went somewhere else, as if that confused slow snowy noise of television created the cozy aura of even a vacant home, and a beacon by which the residents might find their way back.

The door to Pemberton’s room is ajar. Rose nods, and Morgan knocks. The door swings open on its own.

Pieces

Small pieces of paper are scattered about Pemberton’s room, on the floor, near the window, on the sill, on the desk, under the bed, inside

the little closet. No clothes hang in his closet now, and the dresser drawers have been left open and are empty. The bed is nicely made, tucked up as a professional might tuck it up, say someone from a Hilton or a well-paid maid would do the tucking in service to her mistress in some high-rise along a beach. The rug is worn in spots to bare warps and wefts. Thick Venetian blinds hang with shades half open, the sun high in the morning sky as it shines through and highlights dust motes that glide casually through the light, and never seem to land.

There are pencils on the floor and paper clips, paper wadded up, torn into pieces and tossed aside, more pieces on the desk, more pieces in the trash, several on a machine that sits on a desk, all with letters impressed on them. Morgan picks one up and then another, inspecting them, then placing them back where he found them, careful not to disturb the pattern in which the fragments have been left, as if perhaps Pemberton himself will bring some order along, intuit some pattern there, reveal a truth. Some letters spell out phrases, some begin something new, it seems, some are endings with periods, all pieces mere impressions, half-thought thoughts, pieces, more pieces, still more pieces.

“He used letters to do his work,” Morgan says. “He must have grouped his letters into words, and then ran the words in lines across a page as far as they could go, then stacked these lines, line below line, in some semblance of flow. One line follows another with stops and starts inside each line, spaces and marks to train the eye, until they reached the bottom and complete the page. I’ve used the same technique myself. It’s a universally agreed on game with rules that have evolved over time from wet clay and stones to paper and electrons. But he has disassembled all these thoughts.”

Morgan inspects pieces to read and tries to place them in some order. He shuffles them about to see if Pemberton’s work emerges. Different arrangements, though, take Morgan to different places.

“He’s left this place in quite a mess,” he says.

“Did he finished or did he quit?” Roe asks.

“It’s difficult to know” Morgan says. “There’s something here.”

Morgan gathers up the pieces. “Perhaps I can assemble it again, find its original. This randomness hardly seems a fitting end.”

Pigs

“He used to come downstairs to read pages from time to time,” Rose says. “I’m not sure what his work means now, what joy he found there in it, in all these pieces, and without the man himself to come to tea to read to me. Anyone could arrange these pieces in some order, but that would make the work theirs, then, not his.”

“I’d like to know what he was getting at.” Morgan says. “We can try to order them in the order that he meant them. It seems fitting we try to find the man, his voice, inside these scraps. Then I could read to you as best I could and perhaps in that there would be some echo of this Pemberton. After all, one never gets this far along, with all these letters, words, and pages, without a purpose somewhere in one’s heart, some purpose we all might find worthy of a search.”

Morgan mumbles something as he reads from a small set of pieces he’s arranged, his first arrangement, his first attempt to find something in this chaos.

“Men are pigs. Pigs with guns.”

“Almost everything Mr. Pemberton had in this room is gone, except the machine he used, night after night,” Rose says, pointing at the thing that’s sitting on his desk. “And all these paper fragments. The men,” she says. “The boys, you know. When someone leaves, or dies like that, or some such thing occurs, if a lodger wanders off, or goes missing for a while, or fails to dine with us night after night, the other men feel free to come into his room and take what the absent one has left behind. But not everyone would find a use for a machine like that. And certainly few would be undaunted by all these fragments.”

“We would do well to remember it’s all here, just for the moment undiscovered,” Morgan says, letting paper fragments flutter from his fingers to the floor. “This looks to be the totality of his creation, everything he’s done, his every thought, the places that he’s been, the things he’s left unsaid except to himself. Does death bear such grudge to against a life?”

Coziness

For all the clutter, Morgan finds this a very cozy room. He could live here. He could spend his time sitting in that chair, the lamp on just

behind him, a book opened on his lap. This man's machine sits on the desk beside the papers. A blank page is ready, rolled in the carriage, ready to be struck time and time again to advance some purpose. Any purpose. The machine a slave to someone's purpose. Morgan thinks about this space and that machine and all those pieces strewn about and thinks, 'I could be here.'

"It would be pleasant to have such a place as this, a place to come, a place where I could hide," he says, "and be alone, and take my meals downstairs day after day, or not eat at all, as one desires, living as one wishes every moment of the day, to have a beer downstairs from time to time in the midst of many others drinking beer and yet be quiet with my thoughts, if I so choose, alone, or have a window where I could sit and see across the way the endless stream and lights in windows where others go to work, perhaps to sit here and watch them as they come and go, or have the time to strike these keys and form one's thoughts with letters, to speak one's own thoughts to this machine, letter after letter, see them collect themselves into words, and watch the words form snake down on page and so flow on endlessly, an incarnation of one's dreams take shape, page after page, until a story's complete," Morgan says. "To be the maker of a story, now there's a life. I envy him having had such a machine, this place and all the time to dream, and to assemble things that otherwise might seem so disparate."

The window looks out over the creek which flows into the pond when it's not frozen. Pigeons dart across the crusted snow. What's winter to a pigeon? What do they imagine is happening when snow covers all the world they know? What do they tell themselves when they wake up and find their world so changed?

"He sat up here night after night, reading books and writing things on pages," Rose says. "It was always work with Mr. Pemberton. He couldn't stop."

"Although you should have heard the noise I had to bear," Rose says. "The agony of all that noise without the joy of him to speak the words he made. His messages incomplete and muffled, if pounded out. Just pounding, pounding, thump, thump, thump, in code. From time to time he came downstairs or he went to the bar to have a beer. But he never talked with anyone. Not much. Just me. He never played dominoes with the others. He sat hunched over a glass of beer like

some old clam in the mud at the bottom of the ocean, to dip his finger in his beer and wave his finger on the bar as if he was preparing for his work when he returned upstairs. But other times, in better times, he might stop to have some tea with me. He'd see me in the sitting room. He'd bring in pages." Rose pauses, then goes on. Her eyes began to water. This phase of life has come to an end and now she mourns. "And sometimes, rarely, he would read what he had written. He'd ask me to forgive him if I found his work puzzling. 'Perhaps it's incomplete,' he'd say. 'Where should I go with this?' He wanted me to say. Like we were partners in the work, he reading, me the listener. He'd ask about an ending. 'Where does this take you?' he'd ask me. Or, if he had an ending, he would say, 'How does this sit with you?' He was a peculiar man," Rose says. "Quite peculiar in his ways."

Himself

"I see," Morgan says. He eyes the machine on which this Pemberton typed out his thoughts. Perhaps he, too, should type out what passes through his mind, not like at work type out what others want to hear, answers to their questions, what they should buy and why, how products should be shaped, what's best for you—a stranger—what is not.

It occurs to him that this machine is like a hammer, that thoughts are like a nail, that one can hammer thoughts to fix them on a page. He would hit the keys to reflect the shape of thought, letters would appear, one letter, then another, and then he, too, would be a creator of such things, and he then, too, would have work to read to Rose as they sip tea downstairs. He would need paper for such a venture. He would need ribbons to formalize the impressions. From time to time he could lie down on the bed to rest his mind. That would be nice. Then, too, he would have chicken for his dinner from time to time which would also be quite nice.

Until that time, these scraps could give him practice in arranging things, and giving shape to them, and seeing, if he was able, how others expressed their thoughts.

He could live here and do this. He would not have to drive to work if this room were his room. He would walk across the dam in the morning, even if the river froze and overflowed its banks, even if the

ice collapsed the bridge, even if the power failed. He could feed the ducks in the summer. He could read his work to Rose.

But he would miss his little heater. She seems to hold him to the earth.

Collection

A cheap reading light stands between the bed and an upholstered chair with round wood legs and worn armrests. Here is where Pemberton sat, no doubt, for days and nights until the stuffing of his chair assumed the inverse of his shape so they fit like pieces in a puzzle. The curves and wear define his ghost, like a letter emerges when lead strikes paper, leaving not itself, but the inverse of itself.

"I'd like to collect these fragments," Morgan says. "I'm sure I can find some quiet time at home, my feet near to the fire, my little heater by my side, and there I'll puzzle through them all, see if I can find the order Mr. Pemberton intended. I'll infer who this man was from all the words he wrote, the stories he left for others. I think if I got that, I'd be all the better."

"As you wish," Rose says. "Take all you want," as if she's free to give away the things she doesn't own. "He's put so much on paper, and isn't that a way of amusing others? But dead, he's less amusing. And his work torn up in pieces makes less sense. Take that infernal machine, as well," she continues, pointing to the machine on Mr. Pemberton's desk. "I wouldn't want one of the transients to discover it, then sit up here, night after night, and pound away. I put up with Mr. Pemberton," she says. "I felt some love for him, in fact, so much I allowed him to go on with his hammering. It even got so I encouraged him. But now he's gone, and I amend my rule: No pets and no machines, not after dinner."

A gathering

Morgan picks up as many pieces as he can find around the room, on the desk, or in the trash, all torn so that even the largest shards carry little more than sentences, the smallest sometimes a few letters. There are surely answers in this, he thinks, who this man was, why he died, and how, why he even lived. Indeed, the hat he wore was just the same

as Morgan's hat. They may be similar in other ways. Their coats were just the same. Their shoes. It would be too coincidental—this morning's onset of catastrophe and this man's death at that same time—to let such synchronicity go unexamined, but he also knew he should prepare himself for the onslaught that might follow revelations of who this man was, why was he up here doing this if the results were so fragile and reduced so easily to fragment. If he can put the pieces back in some order in which they were created, what a story he'd have to tell.

"They are only scraps of paper," Rose says. "I don't expect he was up here typing answers to this and that. No. Maybe he was asking a question, from time to time. I'm sure, if you can reconstruct this mess, you will find a story or two in there to suit almost any mood you have. If you do, I hope you'll share it. I will miss those moments of his writing that he shared with me, the code that came so clearly through the ceiling. You may, of course, not find answers to anything worth knowing. Not answers really to anything. As if anything has answers."

Love

They leave Pemberton's room. Morgan carries the thousand thousand fragments in his valise, having pillaged the shards of what the hanged man has left behind. He wonders if he can reconstruct them into something meaningful. No scrap alone makes any sense.

"I'll come back later for that machine," he says to Rose. He looks back at the room and relishes all the possibilities, wondering if the story exists outside of the container.

"I think I loved him," Rose says. Rose leads the way down the stairs. She opens the door for Morgan. "I miss him, whatever love absence might bring."

Chapter Eight

Comedy

Morgan thanks Rose for tea, the anecdotes, the story of love and loss, and then he leaves. He is late for work, but it is not work that concerns

him as he makes his way along the pond, careful not to slip on ice. His thoughts are with the fragments.

With his valise half open, from time to time Morgan reaches in and stirs the shards with a finger. He likes the way they feel. There are more paper scraps in his pockets. He hopes he has collected them all from Pemberton's room. Now he yearns to study them. He plans to lay these pieces out and see if they reveal their original intent. He wants to examine each fragment, read the words they bear and wonder what impelled their creation. He wants to examine the letters that created each word, the phrases that have been captured there, all of which would do much to explain the life of their creator, why he died and how, what he was after as night after night he pressed letter after letter.

He regrets the scavengers of all his remaining things, those hounds of death who share the second floor of Rose's Home, have entered Pemberton's room to steal everything of value and destroy the rest, deconstructing Mr. Pemberton's testimony. But Morgan has faith that he can rescue something from it.

He will organize these pieces once he gets to work. He will lay them out, all of them, and let the totality of them wash over him, enlighten him, take him places he has never gone, arrange them into a story with some beginning, middle, end, hear the thoughts that someone else has thought, someone so like him, and he will drown himself in some other's dreams, immerse himself, become invisible, become someone other than he is, if for only just a moment, be so absorbed in some new vision that Morgan himself might well create some new version of himself.

He is anxious. He hurries along the walk. He wants to be in some private place, his office, the door shut, alone, where he can unscramble all these pieces, fit them together, discover their old order, read what they portend, all that, and not spend another day at work, not sit at a desk which anyone could do, not do work anyone could do, not do what everyone else is doing, day after day.

One scrap has somehow found its way to Morgan's hat and, when a gust of wind comes up, the scrap lifts off and flutters to the snow, lands on the icy sidewalk. Morgan bends to catch it and reads,

"It is morning then."

Well, that is something Morgan thinks, like a piece of something bigger, something desired but unexpected. It is a story that heralds a new beginning, a note of hope and wonder. So that is what is promised in all these words. Answers to questions he has often asked. Will time then heal the fractures of the day? Will healing leave some scars behind? Beneath it all, has some purpose been there lurking, waiting for the proper moment to be revealed? And if so, whose purpose is it in the first place? Will we still hear voices in the end? Or will it end with only the dull, dumb hum of more machines? Will the morning end in disappointment as so many mornings do?

Another set of fragments escape his pocket and flutter to the ground. They land together so they read,

“The storm came up so suddenly.”

and he has to chase them as they blow across the crust. He must hurry to get inside, warm where these things can gather in an environment not so dangerously cold and windy.

Then, putting fragments back in his pocket, other fragments fly out,

“Can I hit him? Can I hit him? Then he hits him.”

which he again chases across the snow. He looks around but sees no lurkers. But then, a fistful of pieces in his hand takes shape and reads,

“It is a sunny day. A man comes down the lane and sees a woe-man. And she socks him in the eye. And we find that funny.”

fragments which have escaped to be blown against a snowbank. He feels all the pain and sadness there is in comedy.

“Help me.”

which is the last escaping fragment before Morgan reaches work. All have been safely returned to his valise which he closes so no more can escape. There is so much to be discovered here. He barely contains himself. He hurries upstairs to his office with his prizes.

Fragments

He shuts the door and walls the world out and unpacks the fragments he has recovered from Pemberton's room and lays them across his desk and hopes by chance they fall into an order. Then, when that fails, it does, and all seems lost, he arranges them again, again, then again, again, fragments from the work of Mr. Pemberton. He arranges groups of fragments, then new groups in new arrangements, then he resorts the fragments into new arrays, then stirs the fragments once again to see what might possibly come of that.

He spreads out fragments of the dead man's work across his desk. Morgan hopes some order will emerge to connect him to their creator, or attached him to himself, or somehow fuse himself with Pemberton, as in a deck of playing cards every jack comes with two heads, both equal, both required, no up, no down, one pointed left, the other right, and turned upside down identical, so both at once.

Afternoon

The afternoon drags by. Morgan sits in his office with his door closed. He is alone. He wants to be alone. He almost always is alone.

He then tries many different arrangements for the scraps. Linear arrays, or patterns shaped like stars, circles, many horizontal rows, then bars up and down the surface of his desk, then in groups perhaps to fit some mood, or in anxious groups, some upside down, some others in piles, or sorted in groups to be read in a fashion he has yet to discover, in a voice that arises from the silence of the collection. He organizes the fragments in geometrical shapes, then in the shape of animals, then shapes of plants, then some fragments here and there in random fashion, in various layers, some below to be read up to the surface, some to read by diving in, some read from side to side, some upside down, all assuming somewhere in the beginning of these fragments, in their creation, some correct way was intended, among the many wrongs, a right side and a left, an up and down, hoping in sorting and resorting to find some secret hiding inside all those possible propinquities.

And there is, late afternoon. The office quiets. The door opening and shutting as workers leave, one by one.

Presentation

Before he quits the office and heads for home, Morgan yearns to create from these fragments something he might share with his little heater that very evening, some message. Then he can say to her, 'See, this is how I spend my time. What do you think, my little heater?', 'What does it mean to you?', or 'Have I sorted them so they seem sorted, or should I go on?', or 'Should I stir the lot again and keep on looking?'

What will she say? She will have a better take on things than he would.

Yes, he will sit in his leather chair at home. He will place his feet on a hassock with the fringe. They will have a fire. His little heater will be knitting if not listening to her Bach. She will find no answers there. There are no answers there in Bach, only the puzzles made by fugues to bring order to the madness. A book by Dorothy Sayers is by her side. She knits. She has been working on a sweater, fearful that the earth is moving irreparably towards a freeze where more sweaters will be needed.

Morgan will have arranged the papers on a tray. "Here's this," he will say, and then he reads to her,

"A gentleman rides his bicycle
through the city. He wears a hat."

"There," he will say. "That's something."

She will say nothing. She often reacts by saying nothing. Saying little is one of their commonalities.

"That really gives you something you can chew on," he will continue.

Morgan will think about that passage. "So, there is a gentleman on a bicycle with a hat," he will say. "He must be an accountant, don't you think? That seems so obvious. It fits with all the facts we have so far, how much a gentleman he is, and what the gentleman is wearing which is what accountants wear these days, the essential gentility of the man, his very nature, then, too, which is the character of accountants, don't you think, upon a bicycle, beneath a hat. I can see from this small piece how he imagines the time of day, the deserted city. It has to be deserted. This accountant must be going somewhere, don't you conclude? but there's nothing on the page about

his destination. Nothing there at all. Not a hint. How this little bit drags us on.”

Where he goes, then, must not be important, Morgan will think, or perhaps where he is going is so normal as to be invisible. There are many places in the city you can go for which no one cares a whit, and thus you go unnoticed. It's the going that's the thing. The fact that he is going, that's the fact. Going is the verb that gives this meaning, he will think.

Then another will appear, as if by chance,

“It is quiet at night. You can almost hear the silence as it fractures.”

“Yes,” Morgan will say. He will wave the set of fragments in the air to show them to his little heater. “It makes you think. It's all so true, so true.”

His little heater will say nothing as is usual. The clicking of her knitting will be her small retort.

“I'll try another arrangement,” he will say. “Another disposition.” And he will shuffle through his papers until something new arises.

“A man comes home from work at last and hangs his hat upon a rack, but there is no rack and his hat falls to the floor.”

Morgan will chuckle softly at such a thing. This world is so interesting, he will think.

“From what I can tell this business with the hat is central to the work,” Morgan will say. He will relate closely to the hat because he has a hat like that. Then he will say, “The man comes home and it's easy to believe he has a hat. Then we see his hat fall to the floor. There is no rack! Of course, so the rack is central to the story, but a rack that is not there, which gives the story a twist. The rack must exist in his imagination. It's just a word this fellow used. It's not anything else at all. It exists, you see, but then again it doesn't. Anyone reading this will see that and say, ‘I see it now!’” Morgan will say. His little heater pauses, then resumes her knitting. “When in fact there is nothing there to see at all.”

Ominosity

And then there's this last assortment, emerging almost as if the fragments on the tray drawn themselves together,

“‘Can I hit him?’ Piggy asks. ‘Can I hit the man? Can I? Can I?’ Then, before he gets an answer, Piggy hits him. His hat falls off.”

“Again, a hat,” Morgan says, thinking even more now how significant that hat must be to the story of Pemberton the man. We are our hats. Our hats contain us. Yes, he thinks, although the world has lost its taste in hats. Perhaps that is the message, then, or part of it; that we would be a hatless lot but there are no racks to put them on.

For quite some, when he should be working, Morgan will be thinking thoughts like this. He will hardly be able to contain himself all day, anxious to go home and share his discovery. But he will not be home just yet. He will sit in his office and feel he's at home, he will wish he were home, and he will wish a fire were roaring in the fireplace and his little heater sat somewhere nearby, marking time with her knitting of a sweater. In his thoughts it is almost as if he's there, with his little heater, the fire a-blazing, and that and everything suggested by the fragments happening around him.

But, no. Instead, the afternoon drags on.

Puzzles

Something's missing. Morgan cannot work. He sits at his desk, and he cannot think. He cannot bring himself to focus on the pieces of a story that lie before him.

His door is closed. Little fragments of paper are all around. He orders and reorders them into columns, rows, patterns, some obvious and common, but then others in unusual places. He should have been more careful when he collected these fragments from Pemberton's room. He should have preserved the order in which he found them. Perhaps Pemberton left meaning in that order. Maybe then, spread out by Mr. Pemberton himself, the meanings in the words were obvious. It's too late now, of course, to reconstruct that old arrangement.

But a fragment here and there which fits with others by the shape of ragged edges implies a plan.

Morgan's lays the fragments on his desk, some on his lap, others on his shelves with other books and papers, others lie on the floor, some sticking to the door, or taped to his office window, a few stuck on his shoes, the Italian shoes he chose to wear this day, still wet and no doubt ruined from walking in the snow. The fragments have been placed on all the surfaces of his office, wall to wall, some but—not that many—stuck on the ceiling. He has had to stand on his desk to reach the ceiling. He has also laid them in a spiral, too, around his office rug, but no revelations come from that arrangement either.

Everything is on hold until some truth emerges, until he finds an order, or the promise of some order, or some clue for passage through the fragments, around the room this way and that. Pemberton's work must say something about something Morgan wants to know. He is obsessed with it. How else could he endure?

A phrase emerges,

“The rain has stopped.”

which leads to much decipherment. There is the rain. There was the rain. Now it has stopped. It must have started. When was that? It was drier then than before the rain. Things are wetter now. There is some physics going on here. There is, of course, also the force of gravity, earth crying down for water. Something else will happen, now that the rain has stopped. Water flows. Etcetera.

The door opens and the breeze blows all the carefully arranged fragments about. Some even stick to the walls. A few flutter from the ceiling. For Morgan, it is as if the floor has fallen out from beneath him. He drops into unknowingness. He must start again, finding new phrases in new arrangements. Here, is one,

“I was tending my tomatoes.”

There are tomatoes, but what do they mean?

Oh, yes, someone came to his office and looked in through the door and left. He hardly noticed.

Chapter Nine

Elevator

Morgan leaves the office early. He puts on his cashmere coat, a heavy black thing, and then he tugs on his leather gloves which he keeps in his pockets, wraps his scarf—a long orange thing—around his neck, and takes his hat off the rack to place it on his head, careful to sit it straight, its round bottom fitting softly around his pate, comfortably defining his own head and, he likes to think, keeping his consciousness intact. He pauses for a moment and thinks how grateful he is, how blessed, to have a hat and a rack to hang it on.

And now, having collected all the fragments from his experiment, having placed them carefully in his valise, he walks through the outer office without glancing left or right, straight down the hallway on the third floor of one old mill—we have covered this before. Access to his office is gained both by a set of stairs or a cozy elevator as narrow as any coffin, room inside this capsule for humans wishing to be shot up or down through this closely fitting tube, fitting three or four humans at the most, and, please, a maximum five hundred pounds, to go up or down, to any of three floors, or to the ground. A button's pressed, a door opens, a dim fluorescent light comes on. Morgan steps inside, and the door closes quietly behind him. Morgan pushes other buttons, and he descends, then out the door and into winter's later afternoon.

Office

Lights glow from the offices where Morgan works. The offices look warm and comforting. Would that he could go back and start the day anew, and that he might find things today as normal as he had found them yesterday, his work the same as his work had always been, with no puzzle haunting him as it does now, its thousand thousand pieces in his valise.

Behind him a light goes on inside his office window. Someone suddenly appears, looking out his window, through his Venetian blinds, a silhouette of someone, perhaps staring at Morgan by the bridge. Morgan feels the guilt of leaving work. Morgan must appear to him as some dark figure in the snow, a dark blotch in the late grey

day, who wears a cashmere coat and it is like Morgan himself is standing in the window, a bowler hat, and a valise, and he looks out the office window at someone standing on the bridge looking back at him to see the watcher who is standing in front of his own office window, as he has often stood looking out through that very frame, wondering who is out there, how long have they been there, where are they going?

The figure in the window parts the Venetian slats with the fingers of one hand. Is it me in there who's looking out, Morgan wonders, at me here on the icy sidewalk? Indeed, does time travel back and forth across our lives etched flat as on a page? Is this stranger in my office some replica of me, a shadow of me, or hopes of me, or dreams of me? Or is he guilt, let's say, or the sum of all regrets, that stands there looking out wishing things were other than they are? Does the watcher there feel the same things Morgan feels, the sense of being in his office even when he's not, or outside even when he is still locked inside his office feeling the non-endingness of work, the pointlessness it would be to leave one place for another? Is he dead up there? Is he a ghost? Is he the shadow of all memory?

He feels lonely out here above the ice and frozen earth. Perhaps, he thinks, there is a normal life somewhere he can go, perhaps to Rose's pool hall that earlier looked so inviting, warm and honest. Perhaps there he might share some pleasantries with the men in there before he heads on home, perhaps have a beer, or play a game of pool, and join in the general laughter that must abide in such a place.

Morgan hears the water flowing under ice, and turns and goes his way. Will this water someday fill the ocean until we drown? Or will the freeze go further down tonight until the water no longer moves?

On one glance back he sees the man inside the office on the third floor twist the rod and close the blinds. Morgan turns away. Winter is so gray. It's good to keep one's eyes down on the sidewalk and beware one doesn't fall.

Pool hall

After all, Morgan thinks, as he pauses in front of Rose's bar, Pemberton spent time there. He will go, as Pemberton went in from

time to time, sit where Pemberton sat, hear what Pemberton heard, feel what Pemberton felt, drink what Pemberton drank, eat what Pemberton ate, all to facilitate to get a closer feeling of Pemberton himself, to come to a better understanding of what has been lost. Surely such a study of the man can help provide a sense of how the fragments he created once fit together, what sense Pemberton had made of things.

There are two entrances to the Two Oaks bar. One opens from inside Rose's Home for Transients. The other is by a door off the street. Morgan takes that door. It has frosted glass, etched with acid in an ornate pattern of gentle flowers and curls. He has admired it often as he passed by, but he has never dared to go inside. He sighs and shrugs. A small bell hangs above the door. It tinkles as he enters.

Inside the bar it suddenly grows quiet. The dozen men there turn to look at Morgan. Old and tired, they wear coveralls or khakis, and they play dominoes, placing ivory tiles in spider patterns across the table top. Some hover behind and watch. Others look as if they have retired. Some have come from work. Some live upstairs and have come down to the pool hall to play a bit of pool or dominoes, to enjoy the company of others, and drink a beer or two or so. Some look as though they have never left this place, and in fact have lingered here forever as they wait for things to end.

All around the room, schooners sit empty. The games of dominoes resume.

The bartender, Slats, moves back and forth as he polishes his bar. Smoke hangs horizontal in the air above a pool table that sits beneath low hanging lights. Two pool players pause and stare at Morgan, the intruder, then turn to resume their game. Ivory clicks against ivory, balls roll smooth across the felt and, from time to time, one drops softly into a leather pocket.

"Slats! We need a rack back here!" one says.

"I'm coming, boys," Slats says.

Slats waves and wipes his hands, then hurries back to do their bidding. Slats empties every pocket around the table, corrals the pool balls in a wooden frame which he sweeps across the felt and leaves them perfectly arranged. He takes two quarters for his effort.

"And two beers, Slats, when you get time."

"The beer's run out," Slats hollers back. "The keg's empty. It's down to foam. But the boy is coming soon, and we'll have beer."

They stand and wait. The boy is coming soon.

General Custer

Two men sit at the bar. Their butts hang over the bar stools. They rest their elbows on the bar and stare down at empty mugs. One is fat; the other's not. They glance up when Morgan enters, then back at their empty schooners. A print of Custer's Last Stand hangs above the bar, a source of endless fascination here, spur to many discussions as if time has paused for a moment before doom overtakes the Seventh Calvary, more discussion of how it might otherwise have been, and who was right and wrong there.

Morgan takes off his bowler and holds it carefully in both hands as he steps up to the bar.

"You want a beer?" Slats asks him. "If you do, you'll have to wait. We're out of beer. The kid's coming with a new keg. He ought to be here soon." He kicks the keg beneath the bar, and it makes a hollow sound. "All you'd get here is foam."

Slats is slight, narrow along the head, with his head curved like the new moon curves to ladle up the night. A thin towel is wrapped around his waist, stained with dirty water where he leans against the sink and washes glasses, then wipes them so they'll shine.

Morgan sees the anticipation from all the empty schooners around the room. Everyone waits patiently for beer.

"We don't like no foam," the thin one at the bar says.

"No, we don't," his fat friend beside him says.

Neither of them looks up when they talk.

Bar

The pool hall smells of yesterday's stale beer, old urine from the toilet in the back, from the smoke of a thousand thousand cigarettes from walls and floors that mingles with the smoke left from earlier today. A few here smoke cigarettes. Some smoke cigars. They all flick ashes to the floor, which is worn, and dark and soft with years of accretions. A couple of men chew and spit into their paper cups. They all mumble

conversations in a soft code, of things, of mood, of the halted progress of the games, the absence of the beer. They do not speak to strangers, but they keep watch.

In the back, the pool cues are silent. The game is paused. There is no click of ivory against ivory. No ivory rolling over soft felt. No sound of pool balls dropping into leather pockets. No one complains. Beer has been promised. The boy will come. Meanwhile time has stopped. Above the bar Custer awaits the massacre.

"I'd like to sit where my friend Mr. Pemberton sat," Morgan says.

Slats grabs a clean schooner and pulls the tap to show Morgan that there is no beer to pour. "We got nothing for the moment but this foam."

The faucet spits a bit of foam.

"Old Pemberton," Slats continues. "He's not been in today. But when he comes, he sits right there," he says, pointing to the far end of the bar where it curves back from the front window, a niche from where the sitter there can see all, inside and out, yet not be in the way. "He sits there and nurses a beer and writes things down," he says. "Not like you or I might write things down, but with his finger dipped in beer. Writes it on the bar." Slats nods like that is something. Really something. "He's very strange," Slats says. He shakes his head. "A thing like that don't keep for long. He leaves and then I got to wipe it up," like Slats is polishing the bar just then, to show Morgan how that works. "Sad to say," Slats continues, "I don't know what he wrote at all. It gets wiped up. A waste of beer, I'd think, but I just sell the beer. I don't tell the folks to drink it."

"I'll sit there, then, a while," Morgan says. "If you don't mind."

He takes a seat where the bar bends round. From there he sees all that's going on in Rose's Two Oaks Bar and Grill, and outside, too, along the streets and sidewalks.

"That's fine with me," Slats says. "But Mr. Pemberton comes in, you'll probably have to move. He rather owns that spot."

The others in the bar are looking on. They don't say anything, but faintly nod agreement.

"You almost look like you belong, sitting on that stool," Slats says. "I'll draw a beer when I can. But if you dip a finger in and write

it on the bar, just know that when you leave I've got to wipe it down. I like to keep my bar all polished nice."

"That's fine," Morgan says. "I like a polished bar."

"But unless you're in a hurry for a beer, you'll have to wait," Slat says, polishing the surface of the long wood bar. The two men sitting there hold their mugs while Slat passes by. "The kid'll be here soon. He'll bring a keg."

Polish sausages

"It may be presumptuous of me," Morgan says, "but I'd like a bite to eat. Perhaps a sandwich would be nice," he says.

Morgan is not hungry, but he thinks he ought to buy something while he passes time, a courtesy for use of this round stool. He'd get a beer if they had beer. They don't. And Morgan doesn't know how time works in a place like this or how long that's going to be.

Slat pauses. "A sandwich would be nice," he says. "I'd happily get you sandwich, sir, but we don't serve no food here anymore," Slat says. "We got chips," he says. "And peanuts. That's all we got."

"Your sign outside says, 'Bar and Grill'. That neon thing. It's always on. I'm thinking of ham and cheese."

"You want a bag of chips?" Slat asks.

Morgan spies a jar midway down the bar. "What's that?" he asks.

Dark objects float in yellow liquid. He points at that.

"Pickled eggs," Slat says. "Them eggs float in that pickle juice. That's the last of them you'll see. I've had them eggs for quite some time. You want a pickled egg? I'm anxious to get rid of them. They been here I don't know how long. The only person who ever ate those things was your friend, Mr. Pemberton. When the last of them are gone, I'm ordering some of those little Polish sausages you see around so much these days. You go in most places, and there they are, pickled like those eggs, but meat. And folks like meat. And when they are in pickled juice like that, they don't grow old. I can't sell things here that expire or rot. Those pickled eggs are good forever. But I fear the days of pickled eggs is over. People go for Polish sausages anymore, or so I hear," he says. "I'd take a dollar for the bunch."

"Polish sausage sure sounds good," Morgan says. He looks around. There is little light in there. Towards the back fluorescent lights hang above the pool tables. Some little light seeps in the front window, but it's a winter dusk. There are a few lights above the bar, including a small light set to shine on Custer's pending massacre.

"But you won't see Polish sausages in here for quite some time," the fat man says who sits on the long side of the bar, next to his skinny friend, his arms folded on the bar, his head looking to his schooner. "Not for a year or two, I'd bet. That Pemberton ate one or two from time to time. But look," he says. He tips his empty schooner. "That's about how long I been waiting for a beer. If it takes that long to get a beer, I doubt if I'll live long enough to see Slat's get in those Polish sausages he always talks about."

"Boy's coming with the beer, if you want a beer," Slat's tells the fat man. He looks out the front window. "He'll be here any minute now."

"No one here wants pickled eggs, except that Mr. Pemberton," the thin man says. He sits beside the fat one. "He's the only one who ate them. All us regulars are waiting for Polish sausages."

"It'll be a while," Slat's says

"Everyone is waiting," the fat man says.

"That's the truth," the thin man says.

They neither look up from their beer.

The outside entrance to the bar empties out into the street. Cars pass by from time to time. A gust of wind whips up a bit of snow and dances it across the bricks.

Pickled Eggs

"You ever get to know the man who sat here all the time?" Morgan asks the two gentlemen also sitting at the bar. "His name was Pemberton. He had a room upstairs. He came down here from time to time, Rose says. I'd like to know what you might know of him."

"Nobody here knows no one," the fat man says, and he returns to stare into his empty glass.

"You mean the guy who dipped his fingers in his beer?" the thin one says. "The one who wrote stuff on the bar?" He does not look up. He shakes his head at the very memory of that.

There is a chuckle of general agreement from here and there. Everyone in Rose's Two Oaks Bar and Grill listens to everything that's said. There are no secrets here.

There's silence now.

"I'll take a pickled egg," Morgan says. "That dark one there that's floating in the middle. Then I'll be going home."

Morgan would stay, but no one here knows anyone, and he's sat where Pemberton's sat, talked to whom Pemberton talked, learned more of Pemberton's methods, and even what Pemberton ate. But there was nothing left here of Pemberton himself. The words that he wrote here have all been wiped away.

Morgan worries about the snow, the darkness, whether his car will start or not, ice on the roads he takes to cross the bridge, other drivers coming at him, and other dangers of making his way home. He has the fragments in his valise. He looks forward to arranging them at home into some form that might reveal some more of Pemberton.

"Which egg you want?" Slat asks.

"I'll take them all," Morgan says to end negotiations. "I'll eat them on my way home. I'm late, and I must go."

Slat spoons the last remaining eggs out from the yellow brine and wraps them in a napkin. "A dollar's all I'll charge you," Slat says. "No tax. I'm glad to see them go. You want the jar?"

Morgan says no, then pays. The thin man and the fat one stare at the empty jar, no doubt dreaming of the Polish sausages soon to be swimming there.

Beer

The quiet is broken by the tinkling of the bell above the door. The front door opens as a kid comes in. It's Robbie in his yellow slicker, pushing his butt against the front door to open it. He pulls in a two-wheel cart loaded with a barrel. The beer has come at last. All heads turn that way. The whole room breathes again, as if waking from a dream. Some swallow hard, as if the very presence of Robbie and the beer already can quench the thirst they've held in waiting.

"At last," the fat man says, he licks his lips, and that is followed by a dozen sighs from around the room.

Robbie weaves through the tables, chairs, around the room, and to the bar where Slat is waiting. He unhooks the empty keg and rolls it out so when the boy tips the new barrel off his cart it can be pushed into the waiting space, both being the same brand and size Slat always serves, then taps and tests it. A little foam comes out. Then beer at last.

"And here," Slat says, offering the boy the foam laced with a bit of beer, a gift in gratitude as offered to the gods.

The kid sips the foam. Meanwhile a dozen schooners sit on the bar which Slat fills, one by one, as Robbie, too young to drink the beer, licks at his offering.

Now life resumes a natural path. The game of pool begins again. One watches while the other player leans against the table, pulls back his cue with great intent, contemplates the geometry of force and space, then strokes the whitest ivory ball, so ivory clicks on ivory once again, so ever soft, and thus brings order in the universe to the much-anticipated chaos. Entropy begins again its long slow crawl to darkness. Disorder rules, reason overwhelms, and chance puts all in doubt.

A player at dominoes taps the table with a tile, then plays, then others take their turns to unfold the ivory legs of spider dominoes that creep across the surface.

The golden-haired boy, foam on his upper lip, pulls up the hood on his yellow slicker, then lifts the empty barrel on his cart and pushes his way out, around the tables and the chairs, through men and smoke, and out the door. Again, the bell, as if to signal the return of what is normal here.

Morgan fits his bowler firmly on his head as if to lock his mind in place. He feels he knows this Pemberton better, his loves, his work, the things that fall between the two, which has been his reward for coming here and sitting among this crowd. He knows that what he has collected from the room, the scattered fragments that remain of Pemberton's thoughts, that these are all left with which to reconstruct the man. The rest has been lost forever.

Slat polishes the bar. In his other hand Morgan gathers up the napkin and the eggs. He smiles. He nods and tips his hat. He leaves a dollar and a dime, the dime a tip, for all that has been rendered.

Eggs

Outside the streets are empty. Sidewalks, too. The stores along the street are lit inside, although there is no one inside to be seen. The innards of the pool hall are also dim but Slats and all the others have come up close against the window, and they press their faces against the glass as they look out, rows of faces, the fat man, thin man, players, their cheeks and noses pressed white against the glass, as if Morgan's departure has been some grand event, a stranger has come to visit, and now the stranger's gone. Clocks are free to move again. The indigenous who have paused before the slaughter will soon move history forward. New beer has just been tapped, cause inside for much rejoicing.

It is all darkness outside, the emptiness that comes before the winter's night. Snowplows come by and plow the snow against the curb, piling snow on snow as if to cover the leavings of the afternoon. The streetlights come on early, like the dusk, and shine down on the snow, and it begins to snow again, if we can call it snowing when wind blows snow from left to right, defying gravity, blowing snow about but it's so cold the snowflake fail to stick. The snow falls through the cones of light along the street, lands on the dirty street, cap everything with a whiteness so that soon it will seem as if there's nothing beneath the blinding white of now. There will be no sense of history there, but endless snow and the smear of failing light.

Perhaps, he thinks, he might go back to Two Oaks Bar and Grill some time, perhaps tomorrow on his way to work, or afterwards, if there is work tomorrow, indeed if tomorrow happens, and he will see if those Polish sausages are in. He'd like to taste one of those Polish sausages he has heard so much about.

Morgan reaches in the pocket of his coat for one of the pickled eggs he has wrapped so carefully in napkins. He peels the shell, then bites into its body, leaving half a boiled egg uneaten, revealing something like half a sun inside a bright white universe. There is one egg in one shell, one yolk inside the whiteness, and somehow Morgan feels in the yoke he's found the man found dead earlier that morning, and now he knows where the death has taken him.

Red sweater

He takes the fragments home with him, as well as the remaining eggs.

Home is on a low street along the river. Somewhere upriver the ice is freezing over. The river has risen since that morning, yes, but not over the banks and up to Morgan's house. It has not even risen to flood the street as was the threat that morning. Other houses closer to the river have been spared the ravages of ice and flood. Things may return to normal in some normal way. There is hope there will be an infinitude of time to work with all these fragments.

His little heater knits a red sweater. She has set the promised fire to blazing. He doffs his hat and coat, fixes a drink—sweet Tennessee and ice—and one for her as well. He rests his feet on a hassock, toasting near the flames. Moisture rises from his socks as his stockinged feet face towards the flame. It is time to pull out all the fragments, all the pieces and begin to sort them on his lap.

Morgan sits before the fire and arranges the fragments this way and that hoping a picture will emerge, some version of Pemberton's own thoughts, his history, his story, his answers, or at least what he was yearning to express. Morgan will sort them and resort them into different shapes and sizes, new arrangements, new patterns, using many methods, rational and not, in the hopes they help him reimagine what Pemberton imagined. The process will prove both endless and entertaining. He is certain that it will. Days will now have a purpose, something new, as will the many evenings after work. He will come home night after night and reach into his valise to grab another group to lay out in a new kaleidoscope of possibilities. Every effort will bring discovery. Even if there are no final answers, there will be an infinity of new and interesting arrangements.

The clown

This is the living room. The curtains are open to what outside is winter's evening. A man trudges along the street, a dark shadow who plods through the whiteness as the night turns grey to black. We have seen this man before. He must be returning home from work, or, if he works the night shift close into town, he may be on his way to work. One foot and then another, in the familiar lifting, swinging, falling in

what we might call 'walking carefully on the ice'. The street's been plowed recently again and so spots have been scraped down to the brick. The snow barely covers the soles of this walker's shoes. He's wearing a cashmere coat. He also wears a hat. He could be walking home from death. So Morgan thinks. He looks down on the fragments on his lap. He gets no clue.

A bicycle also comes along and slides about, the bell ringing from the handlebar. Robbie thus makes his way across this landscape as is usual, his clear crisp bell *b-bbr-r-ring-g, b-bbr-r-ring-g*, from the handlebars. A second ring and unseen dogs begin to bark along his route. Their anxiety at his intrusion across this perfect winter scene follows him, dog after dog, into progressively more distant barking.

Whiskey

Nearby Morgan's glass of whiskey sits on his table, and another glass of whiskey sits by his little heater, and time passes for them both, as little noticed as the ghosts who dance as flames within the fire. Ice in the whiskey melts. The night comes on. The alcohol breeds warmth, sip by sip. Tomorrow will bring its own and new catastrophe. Days are a string of such. They always follow. And constructions of the words in Morgan's lap will fail and fail again, pieces will crumble off the pad and fall in Morgan's lap, and warm his thighs, give an order fantastical to his unordered dreams, then he will stir the deck again, the words will be reordered, reconsidered and reedited again, and in those dreams he will feel hope.

And then he will sleep again with his little heater, until another day begins, and a new catastrophe is manifest.

Web

She is near him, his little heater, listening as he does, too, to their Bach, pattern after pattern in the sounds, and from time to time she will knit, feed strings of wool into what will become a sweater, because she knows the fire will never be enough to keep us warm, that the time will never be when we are warm enough again, that the time will come when snow will overwhelm us, and our feet will dwell in icy water, we'll hear the heaving of the ice, and there will be a need for sweaters,

and woolen socks, and caps, and other things she knits. Or, if the world fails to freeze, if the fire escapes the fireplace, say, and consumes us all in some torrid climate, if hell arises from the earth and seeks to overwhelm us in heat and flame, then with our sweaters we will weep to know we have failed to foresee the form of our destruction, although we tried to do all we could do to prepare for our finality.

The red sweater eats the long red thread and grows like a web from the body of a spider, a web, a story the spider tells.

We stir the pile of fragments.

In This Version, Jonah Wins

Hannah J. Russell

Solar Flare 2025 Finalist

And like Jonah, we ran. Ravaged olive flesh. Purple pits
ground with parsley. Too gloomy. Finger fish hooking a
mouth. Jonah fucked all us Ninevite girls before the city's fall.
Fleshy underbelly. Filter us and plankton through the debris.
Do olives grow up with seaweed. Who sculpts the staghorn
and mushroom coral. Before leviathans crush them under-fin.
Us pagan girls think we get it. Destruction. Ruining.
Regeneration. Fertilizing ash. Salt and fish and citrus-bright
sea. Jonah slaughtered every fish monger. Severed heads
displayed among carp. Salmon. Catfish. Ice crusting gummy
eyes. His grin reflected off hail-fire. You and I think YHWH
should have spared us. We have gone long cold.



Oshun Rising / Y'vonna Stewart (BlackMedu\$a)

Solar Flare 2025 Finalist



Heading Home – Kerala Backwaters 2015 /
William Lewis Winston
Solar Flare 2025 Finalist

Ripe

J.C. Henderson

Solar Flare 2025 Finalist

violet
moon
paints nude
cicadas

crimson
sun
fills
my bowl.



Sense & System / Lizzy Brooks

Solar Flare 2025 Finalist

Waiting

William Lewis Winston

Solar Flare 2025 Finalist

More than suffering, it is the sweep hand,
not so much in summer as a soft sun in winter,
which is not the same as rain. I can hear it, but outside is
gray and expected, because I have been thinking of leaving,
not leaving behind but for, and therefore free.
That is the idea of keeping time, to know when confinement
is a vicious bite and needs adjustment if it is to be kept.
Something about fractions that cannot be set aside
for later, when later is now
and waiting is over.

Baby in a Sink

David Martin Anderson

Solar Flare 2025, Best of Fiction

The first time I ever seen cadavers laid out in our family funeral home in Milledgeville, Georgia, was a month after our parents died in a car crash. That's when my brother, Henry, woke me up in the middle of the night, shoved me down the stairs into our morgue, and forced me to help him.

In those days, a family funeral home morgue got stuck in the basement. And at age ten, our embalming table stood as tall as me, its stainless steel cold and slick under fluorescents. That particular night, a young woman lay naked on the slab, maybe nineteen at the most—Henry's age. She was pregnant with a swollen belly and heavy, droopy breasts. "She's fresh," Henry announced. "Shot in the forehead by her old man four hours ago. He didn't want no baby. Got himself drunk, and got his wish."

I climbed a stool to get a better looksee. The woman's eyes were closed. She looked more alive than dead. I touched the small hole in her head, just above the brow. My finger fit clean inside. "She don't look dead," I said.

"Oh, she's dead, alright," Henry said.

I spotted a slug resting on the tray. "That from her?"

"Pulled it out myself. Sheriff needs as evidence for the hanging."

"Then what do you need me for?"

"To take out the baby."

Before I could say anything else, Henry picked up a scalpel and unzipped that poor woman. Sternum to pubic bone, smooth as butchering a deer. He cut through the skin, fat, muscle, and all the way down through the placenta. Her insides parted like pages of a book, and there you were, curled inside her, still warm.

Henry looked at me. "Lift it out. I'll cut the cord."

I reached in and cradled you in my palms. Maybe four pounds, tops. Quiet. Slack-jawed.

Henry's face changed. "I knew her," he said. "She went to school with me. Sweet girl. Always came to class with bruises. Her pa was jealous and mean. Once, I walked her home. He saw us together and dragged her inside and slammed the door. I should've killed him then."

He stared at me, then said it plain: "He raped her. His own daughter. Just remember this: Good people deserve to live. Bad ones? Don't."

I looked down at you and didn't say a word. Henry wiped his eyes and told me, "Put it in the sink and wash it off."

I didn't like Henry calling you 'It.' "It is a boy," I said, "and he's got a name."

Henry looked up. "What name?"

"Isaac," I said. "Like Pa."

Henry nodded, just once.

I set you down in the porcelain basin and turned on the tap. The water warmed over your lifeless skin while Henry turned away.

That was the night I knew I'd never stay in Milledgeville. Never be no undertaker.

As far as that sort of work? Hell. It weren't ever for me.



Miray Glowing – Istanbul 2011 / William Lewis Winston
Solar Flare 2025, Best of Photography

Tugboat

Joseph Howse

Solar Flare 2025, Best of Novel

At 1 a.m., the weather was Christmas misery. Igor moored the tug at the Podol Embankment and urged his three crewmates to go while he performed final checks. Contrary to his girlfriend Rimma's understanding, he was the mate, not the captain, yet the latter was drunk and had to be carried home between the stuffy engineer and benumbed deckhand.

Igor would have rather tugged alone. A solo was possible, just. During the summer, he had begun to borrow the boat to go upriver and snatch souvenirs. Two years into the meltdown's aftermath, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone afforded solitude amidst tens of thousands of abandoned flats and cottages. The scrapyards and storehouses seemed inexhaustible. Barrels of diesel were keeping quite well, so refueling was no trouble. Sometimes, he met other wanderers or even squatters. One was a pseudo-fisherman who had scavenged a lifetime supply of grenades and, whenever he ran short of smoked fillets, he blasted a fresh supply from the River Pripyat. He knew life on the water, had a tattoo to prove it, and hitched rides with Igor in exchange for services as a stevedore and swabby. Yashka, a laddish nickname, was all he told. Where did this greying recluse go in Kiev? No matter. As steersman, Igor offered moonshine and blabbed about the bakery where he got it and the doughy lasses (chiefly Rimma) who teased him with samples of wedding cakes.

Always, Igor feared he was talking stupidly. Bashfulness fed his desire to be alone—alone with the boat or a girl like Rimma but to what end? Should he load them with treasure? Treasure meant salvage. Salvage meant an extra pair of hands and more trips upriver as the weather turned cold.

Whenever the blast fisherman was scarce, Igor fell back to a more familiar helper: a foul-mouthed old-timer who frequented a lunch spot at the Kiev River Terminal. There, the industrial-art frescoes—longships, seagulls, men in overalls—calmed this pensioned, bellicose soul as much as anything did. He was as quick as he was coarse.

Hoisting cargo aboard, he would never miss a breath between his complaints against the morals of women in his family and his boasts of having killed Germans, Finns, and English alike when he had served in the Arctic: Murmansk.

This veteran added, "I'm too old to catch cancer but I pity you."

Pity. The word had stuck. Igor felt that everything was indeed pitiful and that Rimma's infatuation might end in grief.

He left the padlock off the galley door, in case Yashka might come in search of shelter and a Christmas nibble. Then Yashka would see a dot on the calendar under the date of the next salvage run and, if he wanted to come, he would leave a second dot, as faint as the stars of Cancer the Crab.

No stars tonight. The Kievite sky was blotted brown and white, very like a crab, as Igor trudged home to dream of seeing Rimma in the morning.

If It is Mourning, Where is the Light

Jordan Green

Solar Flare 2025, Best of Poetry

My students pretend not to see him. My father thin and oily.
I have brought him into my class
on days where we discuss rhythm and breath,
the word tobacco reminds me of tomorrow. Tomorrow I will
see my father,
inhaling in the back of class.
When I stand before the students, shoelaces double-knotted, I
question them

If it is mourning, where is the light?

I wait for an answer. father raises left hand, the other hand,
over his sweet face.
he says he is afraid of youth, of children
raging in the smoking garden that was his mind. He fears the
light
at the end of his cigarette,
a strange light only I can see, but he feels its warmth

I tell him the light is smothered, cupped by a brass lid, his heart



Humanoid No. 1 / Kara Beth Rasure

Solar Flare 2025 Winner



Untitled, from the **Organic Matters 2025 Series**
/ Rebekah Burgess

Goldilocks Zone 2025 Finalist

Pulmonary Trunk or The Light Box

Frederick Speers

Goldilocks Zone 2025 Finalist

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Artificial Retrograde / Robin Young

Goldilocks Zone 2025 Finalist

The Last Fair

Emily Stedje

Goldilocks Zone 2025, Best of CNF

Where I lived in Ohio, it was so flat that when the sun set I could watch it touch the horizon, watch it disappear entirely, sliver by sliver. Some roads seemed to stretch on and on forever, and for a second, I could convince myself I could see the edge of the Earth. The fairgrounds sat on a road like that, one lined with farmland, broken up only by housing developments built in the last twenty or so years. The fairgrounds stood empty until the last week of August when the roads backed up with fair traffic, cars and trucks waiting to be fed into one of the big, grassy parking lots south of the entrance.

This was the biggest county fair in Ohio, with people traveling from all over to judge livestock and crops and art and home goods, watch tractor pulls and country music concerts. The Fair was a tradition for everyone in town, but especially us high schoolers who flaunted our newfound independence by wandering through the Fair without adult supervision. For my group of friends, no parents meant freedom of expression more than it meant freedom to do illicit things like drink alcohol or smoke weed. No one telling us to be smaller or talk softer.

My friends and I gathered at the Fair the week before we started our senior year—the last fair we’d all be together, though most of them didn’t know it yet.

We talked as if we would come back here every summer, but most of us wouldn’t. I already knew I wouldn’t. Just a few days before the Fair, my parents announced they’d be moving back to Philadelphia after I left for college. After four years of trying to make Ohio my home, trying to accept it for all its conservative flaws and related shortcomings, my family was leaving again. I was supposed to be happy because it was their choice this time, not the bad luck of a national financial crisis and layoffs. It wasn’t supposed to matter as much because I was leaving for college anyway, but it did matter to me. I just didn’t know why it hurt to leave a place I never liked very much.

I knew the importance of this outing at the Fair, yet I spent most of the morning and early afternoon dreading leaving my house. It was a hell of a summer, one I could feel slipping like water in my hands. I was seventeen years old and struggling to find a name for the way I felt, fearful of letting anyone know that most days I felt like I was dying. Or that some days, I didn't just feel like I was dying—I wanted to disappear entirely.

I cried while curling my hair before I left to pick up my friends, unsure why just the thought of leaving the house made me feel so upset. I took a deep breath before popping one of the painkillers I found in my parents' medicine cabinet into my mouth. I swallowed with just spit and even though it wasn't the first time, I felt a knot in my stomach as I examined my face in the mirror. The first time was in a desperation to sleep after a slew of restless nights fueled by never-ending loops of worries about the future. This time, scowling at myself in the mirror, it felt more like something that could become a problem.

My friends and I spent the evening eating our way through rows of food trucks and played carnival games as the sun painted everything around us. As usual, I was able to fall back into rhythm with them once we were all together, once I felt my limbs calm and mind mellow. We shot water at targets to make plastic race horses travel across the board as bells and whistles went off, but none of us won. We licked our fingers after sharing a giant cinnamon roll from a local bakery, steamy on its greasy paper plate. We stumbled upon our other friends while they stood in a long line for kettle corn, the air around us sticky and sweet with sugar. We took up the entire side of the swinging Viking ship ride, sailing back and forth through the air as the crowd waiting their turn blurred in our peripheral vision. We climbed through the fun house, pausing to look at our unfamiliar bodies in warped mirrors. I stood in front of one of them for a moment, morphed into a figure tall and slender, as if I was stretched out like taffy.

I was still enjoying a low-level numbness that buoyed me through the evening. I could be a more present friend this way, without the weight of my dread clinging to my shoulders. I could laugh along with them and have it sound like something real. I thought if I could keep clinging to who I knew myself to be, maybe I'd stop feeling like I was watching my life unfold from afar, separated from everyone I loved by this desire to no longer exist.

Now it was dark, and we were among the pandemonium of lights and screams from carnival rides, stomping through the grassy dirt. Nate was the first of us to stop walking, slowing his pace in a row of booths promising extraordinary sights. A bearded woman, a talking frog. A woman who could swallow fire, a fish that could tell us the future. The rest of us stood on either side of Nate, following his gaze to the sign that said "\$10 for your future." We were in front of the booth with the prophetic fish, with its unremarkable wooden stairs and painted-black exterior. There was nothing magical about it, but I was ready to believe.

"You know these are all scams, right?" one of our friends said, catching the glimmer in Nate's eyes before it could take off into the land of unwise ideas.

The booths themselves certainly seemed too small to contain the things they promised, but the allure was immense. Tucked away in a far corner of the Fairgrounds, perhaps we had found something new, something other people hadn't seen. Perhaps I could find some answers in this mysterious fish.

"What if . . ." Nate said, dragging out the thought as if waiting for everyone's attention before continuing. "What if it's not a scam?"

Behind the booth sat a large, white pickup truck, which undoubtedly hauled the whole setup from somewhere hours away. In some other world, the man in a leather jacket and pants waiting to take our money at the entrance wasn't the keeper of a fortunetelling fish but a regular person. The chances of there being a fish were slim. My rational mind knew this, but there was a kernel of hope somewhere that kept me hanging onto Nate's words. He must have sensed it because he looked at me, begging for me to join him. I felt around in my purse for my wallet.

"I mean, there's no way to know for sure if it's fake," I said, raising my eyebrows.

"It's a waste of your money," another friend said.

"But what if it *isn't*?" Nate said, giggling.

I couldn't help but laugh as I opened my wallet and glimpsed inside at the remains of my cash. Crumpled ones shoved haphazardly into the fabric-lined faux leather. There were ten of them, and then there was no excuse. I had the money, I had to go in.

I nodded at Nate and we marched forward, ignoring the protests from our friends. We approached the tattooed man at the entrance of the booth, arms outstretched with palms of bills. He took our offering and pulled the curtain slightly open, just enough for us to squeak inside the small room on the other side.

We found ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder under a bright fluorescent light. In front of us was a black wall with a place to peer through, the words *LOOK HERE* painted above the eye-shaped cutout covered in thick, cloudy glass. I pushed Nate to go first, apprehensive about putting my face so close to the peephole when I didn't know what was on the other side. He peered through the hole in the wall and he chuckled furiously, covering his mouth with his hands. He waved for me to move closer and I leaned forward to see.

Through the glass, there was an old television, small-screened and bulky like the one my grandmother had in her kitchen when I was a kid. On the screen, a video played with a woman sitting on a black metal stool in front of a light blue backdrop. She had a long, teal wig that wrapped around her arms and waist. On her lower half, she wore a mermaid tail made of threadbare, glittery fabric. She smiled, all of her teeth showing, and waved at me. I pulled away and then looked again. She was still waving, but said nothing. Even if she spoke, I don't think we would have been able to hear anything through the glass.

I couldn't understand my disappointment, but I felt it deep in my sternum. This woman didn't know any more about the future than I did. I knew there wasn't going to be a real fish, especially not one that could tell the future, but to fall for a scam, I had to believe in it just a little, right? The truth is, I would have given much more than ten dollars to know if I was going to be okay. I would have scraped together whatever I needed to—money, valuables, my soul—if it meant I could get a glimpse at who I would eventually become. I wanted to hear it from someone who didn't have to say it to me, someone who would say it and mean it and know it was written in the stars, or something like that.

In hindsight, if the fortune I received was good, I still probably wouldn't have believed it.

I stood in the booth beside Nate, imagining the woman waving on the screen all night, never telling a single fortune. The tape probably played on a loop, waiting for the next fools to walk in and

take a look. I felt the warm sting of tears behind my eyes and willed them to stay there. The tattooed man opened the curtain, telling us our time was up. We emerged from the booth, and our friends flocked to us with questions. The flashing lights from games and rides shined bright in our eyes as we all looked at each other, our faces washed in red and purple and blue. I felt pumped full of lead, like I might drop to my knees and sink through the earth.

"We can't tell you what we saw," Nate said. He wanted to hang onto their suspense, play with the fact he knew something they didn't. If I wanted everyone to think I was fine, I'd have to find it in me to laugh at the whole thing, too.

"Emily, tell us," they said, turning to me, grabbing at me in the way excited friends do, like puppies nipping at sock-covered heels.

Across the way, a group of boys played Whack-A-Mole, the thumps of mallets echoing through the air. In the distance, people screeched from the swings and the drop tower and the Viking ship. In an hour or two, the fair would close, and we'd file out to our cars. We'd say our goodbyes as we parted ways in the grassy field, and my carload of friends would go to the gas station for fountain sodas before I dropped them off at their houses.

I could have told them a lot of things I foresaw that they probably didn't. So many things would end in the next few months and all the adults would remind us to celebrate how exciting the future was while we plastered smiles on our faces because we should be *so happy*. I knew what it was like to feel excited anticipation and deep sorrow at the same time—the confusing concoction of both hope and despair that comes along with starting over. I could already feel it humming like the air before a thunderstorm. I could taste loss on my lips alongside the sugary sweetness of cotton candy, and I wondered if anyone else could taste it, too.

Or maybe it was just me, the only one of us who had moved before—twice—who would move again, disappearing from this life and starting another.

What I didn't realize yet I was already halfway gone. The Disappearing Girl would vanish for two weeks just after the start of the school year, doing time in an outpatient program for teens with anxiety and depression. I would disappear from my friends' texts and calls. I would disappear after graduation, never visiting Ohio much

after my parents moved back to Pennsylvania. I would disappear into various addictions in college, various methods of trying to outrun the pain I didn't think I'd suffered enough to deserve having.

"I think you'd have to see it for yourselves," I finally said. I smiled as if playing coy. Our friends rolled their eyes. I swallowed hard, pushing down my disappointment to eke out a laugh.

There are some truths we carry for the people we love, not passing along the pits in our stomachs or the worries that flutter through our minds because we inherently understand innocence and how it feels to lose it. Yes, these last sips of summer were ripe with what would be some of our last memories of everything being exactly the same. It might not break their hearts as we clasped our diplomas, but maybe it would one day.

It was already breaking mine.

Sapling

Helen Vidrine

Goldilocks Zone 2025, Best of Fiction

He has the beach to himself. Long gone are the tourists, the college students visiting for spring break, even the locals. Ahead, the gray-blue water churns out white foam like spittle on the mouths of rabid dogs. The tide is low. White gulls soar low overhead, sensing the danger in the wispy clouds. What must they think of this man?

He's spent too many days on this beach. There were other days, years really, he remembers baking beneath the yolky sun on this same stretch of sand. The days he'd watched his daughter sprint back and forth from water to land. Her black hair splayed every which way across her face, as wild as she was. Her pink goggles, prized possessions she'd pleaded with him for, even though her old gray ones were still good. At home, after the outdoor shower had tamed her salty locks and flushed the gritty sand from her skin, she'd have red imprints beneath her eyes for hours.

"You look like a frog," he'd tell her. It was unkind, though he never meant it that way. Truthfully, she reminded him less of the tree frogs he'd seen on television and more of the old cherry-eyed hound he'd had as a boy. Exhausted by the life inside and around him, weighed down by the importance of his role in the family of things.

But she'd laugh, his daughter. A squealing cackle, like a witch. One day she might adopt something sweeter. A giggle like a tinkling bell or the silent shake of her strong swimmer's shoulders. While life was still sweet, and her father was the meanest thing she'd have to encounter though, the witchy laugh stuck around.

It's time to head home. In the next few hours, the sea and the land will wage battle on the same stretch of sand he's occupying now. Anything that isn't tied down will be gone.

Julia, they're calling it. He's never understood why they've all got women's names. Sandy. Katrina. Helene. In his (admittedly limited) experience, it's the men who are storms. Destruction is not a woman's game, though his daughter would probably tell him that wasn't very progressive of him.

He's never been progressive. He *does* think we should go back to the old ways. Fifty years ago he'd watch neighbors fish off their piers for dinner, beckon him over to join them from over their fences with a 'c'mon' gesture and a wide yellow smile. Fifty years ago there'd been a seafood shack, an ice cream stand, and two bars that never competed for customers because they catered to different people. Kids played in the cul-de-sac and everyone, it seemed like, fed their table scraps to the stray dogs who loped throughout the neighborhood.

Now it all looks different. Neighbors he doesn't recognize and who never beckon him over for supper. Ice cream shops and cafes with pink flamingo wallpaper made to be posted to Instagram. Fifteen seafood shacks all trying to look retro and old-fashioned when all the locals knew they'd all put the original place out of business years ago. Cell phones in every kid's hands instead of fishing rods. Women joining the navy, even though it was a man's job.

He should have seen it coming. Her head stuck in the water every chance she'd gotten. That black hair plastered to her freckled, salty skin. Some days he wondered if she'd actually come from the ocean, and some part of her longed to return. Maybe those months on that horrible gray boat felt like a homecoming to her. Amphibious Assault Ship is what they'd been called. Amphibious like her, sprinting back and forth between her father and the ocean her whole life.

Then of course he'd wanted to scream at her that he'd been right when the call came. No pinewood box for her, she'd been lost to the depths.

"She was the greatest swimmer we had," her captain told him. "I'm very sorry."

A rescue. She'd been dropped in by helicopter to retrieve a downed F-16 pilot. The waves were rough, the winds even worse. The helicopter was buffeted this way and that in the storm and still, she'd held on to the dead man's body.

"She wanted to be sure his family could bury him," the captain said.

He believed it, her father. She'd been noble and brave and stubborn and stupid like that. Of course she'd wanted to save someone already past saving. Had it ever occurred to her that maybe *her* people might like something of her to bury?

The helicopter pilot refused to leave her until he too fell into the sea. Maybe it was this selfless act, the same refusal to leave anyone behind his daughter had, that damned her to the violent depths. Maybe the blades split her open before she sank. Maybe the heavy aircraft pushed her down further and further until the pressure grew so painful she drowned. Maybe she held on to this pilot, both of them haunted but comforted by their choices, until the cold water claimed the life from their bodies and they sank, arm in arm. Maybe it was none of these things. Her father will never know.

He makes his way home. Down three blocks of graying sidewalks, a right at the gas station, past the old white house where the owner's chickens have taken over the overgrown yard, and a left to the little blue house the man has called home for forty-odd years.

Probably, he should join some sort of support group. The VA must have one, for families of deceased service members. He could try a therapist, or medication, or anything other than sitting on this beach, waiting for his daughter to emerge from the sea, kelp-covered, waterlogged, and home at last.

Inside, he brews a pot of coffee. Then he counts the gallons of water, lined up in the hallway like ducklings in a row. Three orange buckets stacked inside one another await their assignments, catching leaks in the roof when the winds pick off the shingles with curled, cool fingers. No generator. He's got a fireplace and blankets, a pile of books to reread, and a battery-powered DVD player beside a stack of Stephen Spielberg's finest, purchased at a discount from the thrift store two years prior and never before opened. At least one of them, surely, must work. He hopes it is *Jaws*, or *Indiana Jones*. He does not want to watch *Saving Private Ryan*. He does not want anyone to be miraculously saved if it is not his daughter.

He'll stay in the living room for the next few days. There are towels stuffed beneath the bedroom doors and the entrance to the laundry room. Less to contain, to manage, if he stays here. Easier to let the rest go to ruin, if the storm insists on taking something from him.

They say Hurricane Julia could go on for a week. A plastic tub on his left is filled with peanut butter jars, cans of green beans, trail mix, and blue sleeves of plastic-wrapped tuna.

In truth, this is not such a departure from his usual life. He goes to the grocery store, sits at the bars, and paints his fence when

the color wears away, but it is a pretense for the benefit of those who've known him longest. When he'd retired, there was only his daughter to give him purpose. Without his daughter, there is only the cypress in his backyard.

She didn't care for trees much. Too rooted for her liking, he assumes. Her father did not mean to purchase a tree in her memory. In his worst nightmares, he never thought he'd be purchasing anything in her memory. Certainly, he never imagined a memory would be all he had left. Even so, he likes the tree. It's spindle-limbed and resilient like her. On sale in the back of the garden section of his local Home Depot after too many passersby rubbed its twigs between their fingers and stripped the soft branches raw of all spiny needles.

Suppose it's a bald cypress now, he'd thought. It'd been his daughter's thought, really. His mind does that sometimes, speaking in her voice like she is beside him, still. But the joke brought a smile to his face and that made his muscles ache because it'd been years since he'd had occasion to use them for this particular expression. He'd loaded the tree into his cart and dug a hole beside his fence, facing the sea.

He knew the cypress didn't care where it was planted but somewhere between the gardening department and his driveway it'd become imbued with the spirit of his daughter and if he'd had something of her to bury in the soft earth he'd have made sure it was a place she wouldn't mind being for a while.

The cypress has doubled in size since then. Where neighbors' plants turned to desiccated husks in the recent drought, his daughter's cypress is content with less, and less, and less. She subsists on her father's careful ministrations and the whipping winds coming off the waves.

It is not until the third day trapped inside that the eye of the storm arrives and the wind dies down enough for the man to chance a visit outside. His fence is in shreds. Talons of violent wind have ripped much of the wood away so that he does not need to open the gate to see the destruction down the street, only has to peer through the broken pieces of his hard work to glimpse the mutilated remains of the neighboring homes.

Since most were abandoned before Julia's arrival, no one prepared the houses themselves for the hurricane's merciless cruelty.

Once shining silver grills have made their way down the street or into the middle of the road, their propane tanks dragging behind, still hooked to a hose, like disobedient dogs stubbornly resisting a walk. Shards of window panes stick up from flooded green lawns. A tree older than the man's memory of this town has relinquished its lowest limbs to the crumbling roof of the pink house below.

In front of the man's house, the cypress stands strong. Still supple and soft enough to bow in the wind and not break. Headstrong and tough, like his daughter.

Maybe it is foolish of him to glance around at his neighborhood, razed by the storm he insists on withstanding, knowing he will not change his mind. He is not a propane tank or a reinforced roof and this tree is not his daughter but it is *something* and he will not abandon it.

The deluge is resuming now. The rain starts slow but it gathers steam quickly. Soon the cold, heavy drops have soaked through his clothes and he knows he must return inside. He gives the cypress sapling one last look and tugs on the green straps he's fastened to stakes deep in the ground to assure himself of its security. Then back inside.

He slides *E.T.* into the DVD player and adds a log to the fire while it loads. He recounts the water jugs and consolidates the collected rain from the orange drip buckets into the bathtub, just in case. He slathers peanut butter onto two pieces of soft white bread and eats a bag of trail mix, saving all the chocolate pieces for last.

When he wakes up, the credits are rolling on the movie and the DVD player flashes a warning about low battery life. The fire burns steadily in the hearth. Sheets of rain slap hard against his windows, the roof. The worst of Hurricane Julia is here.

It is loud. Like a plane taking off or a train passing close by. The wind is a screeching howl. Through the torrents of rain against his kitchen window, he can see that matters have gotten worse. The sky is a purplish bruise pressing down upon them. Waves crest higher and higher on the horizon, reaching new heights every second.

He sees the flash of green only seconds before it crashes through his window. Glass shatters into the sink, adding its high-pitched crunch to the din of the storm's music. The man looks for the

culprit. A nearby branch, he thinks, or palm frond. Maybe a lawn decoration or a barbecue flipper.

He finds the stake tucked tight against the kitchen baseboards, hiding guiltily under the cabinets. Clumps of mud still cling to the metal. The cypress. His sapling. His daughter.

It is only when he's burst through the door and back outside into the worst of the storm that he can understand it. The choice that she made to stay, not to abandon the dead pilot in the unforgiving cold waters. Is it any different than his own? To rush into the storm and save someone already long gone?

Another stake is ripped from the ground seconds before he pushes through the fence. Wind snaps its jaws around the sapling, bending it almost parallel to the ground. The soft spiny leaves have all but disappeared. The man wraps his strong, thick arms around the narrow trunk of the cypress and pulls, pulls with all of his might against the indomitable winds fighting to take it, take her, from him again. He will not yield.

Water rises around his feet. He does not let go. Icy raindrops pepper his skin. He presses his back foot against the last remaining stake holding the sapling to the earth and bellows, bellows for all the sorrow in his heart and the strain in his muscles and the cold seeping into his bones. Screams his daughter's name into the wind knowing she can hear him, she must hear him. She must be proud of him. Aren't they just the same? Isn't she here too?

She is running towards him from the beach, her pink goggles pressing hard into the skin around her eyes. She is wrapping her arms around her father and the tree both, and baring her crooked teeth to the pain it brings. Her wet black hair is plastered to her face and when he presses his lips to her forehead she tastes of salt. And when, eventually, she proffers her slender hand to guide him towards the sea, it doesn't feel like drowning. It feels like breathing. It feels like coming home.



Testa di Lupo (Wolf Head) / Alessia Lupo Cecchet
Goldilocks Zone 2025, Best of Art

El Cumbanchero

Carlos Echeverria

Goldilocks Zone 2025 Winner

1

Little boy, hard winters make hard men. Madre danced away
the frost.

The creek for which we were vilified, crucified; crystallized.

Carrying a burden of my father and his forefathers before. A
fate best fit for a disciple, no? Wood splintered into the grain
of a pale twisted spine, frost seeping in, pore after pore.

A timid fireplace would only fuel pitiful gruel for so long.
Homesteaders like us must do what we do best. Ambitious
eyes only go so far, and ambition leads to praise. I have to
praise you like I should.

The ordained, the oil-clad, the inquisitors sent from the chosen
hand of God himself tread through the slush of peasantry. A
glory box couldn't stand in the way of the acclaim.

2

Madre survived many hard winters; she had become what
father couldn't muster. Shakedown, ignited by vocal protests,
stripped us of all we had. What was left of the family was
confined and bounded into a cold, dark cellar.

A rendered tallow, flexed and plowed for our gruel dinners,
washed over us. Religious ecstasy had shorted the family by
one. Urges to squirm and scream poisoned the air in the room.

So tired. Too tired. It went against everything human instinct
went for. Silence enveloped the space.

3

In a crusted haze, there was still life left. Snow packed high like hay bales. Reality, harsh and lurking, to see what would come of this. A beleaguered spark of flint, in twisted and bruised hands sent flames upward.

Cornered like a wild animal. Breathing reduced to a shallow whimper. Finally, sweet primal warmth.

A deep swirling black smoke reached just as the flames did. A patchwork of ash danced to a shoulder's length as flame grew unbearable.

Immolated, immaculate, Madre, my Madre, knew such a hard winter would forge a strong man.

At the Intersection of Lala & Jones (Part I)

Kendra Pearce

Inception 2025 Finalist

“First Love and Other Mistakes”

The first time Lala fell in love—real, obsessive, compulsive, got to have it, think-about-it-every-moment-of-every-day-kinda-love was with Boones Farm Strawberry Hill wine. Years later at dinner parties with unreasonably priced booze she'd say, “My first love? Varsity baseball star, Tony Cooper. Let me tell ya.” Closing her eyes, tipping her head back, “Blond hair, great ass, a wicked right arm,” fingertips caressing her mouth, “And lips like velvet.” But that was just one of the lies she told those nights while sipping and refilling cut crystal.

She used to shoulder-tap outside 7-Eleven with her girlfriends. They smoked clove cigarettes with the filters snapped off, wearing t-shirts they had cut the collars out of. The stretched cotton slouched down one arm or the other, warping the faces of rock stars while exposing sharp collar bones and the tops of high, tight tits. They rolled the waistbands of cutoff jeans, lace-edged panties from Sears just hidden by frayed denim when standing, but when bending forward, stretching tanned thighs and calves, their round, unblemished asses hung out the bottom. The girls repeated the motions—standing, bending, stretching until the right kind of man came around.

Gunnar

Danny Crytser

Inception 2025, Best of Historical Fiction Novel

Prologue

The scribe is young, thin, hardly speaks his own tongue, to say nothing of mine. He should copy my words, but mainly he listens. He sleeps. Yet I tell.

The candle yields pale light. Reek of tallow. It has burned before, shaped again, a second or third time, as men are formed from the muck. Sometimes I cup my hands around its tiny flame, warming fingers have frozen in place, stopped like ice. Then my little scribe complains, he cannot see the page. I release the bright leaf of fire. The abbot says a fire cannot be laid until more wood is brought up.

Monks celebrate Yule, singing, praying their hours. Lighting one candle, another, another, until their chapel flares like northern lights. Praying to the Messiah, a picture showing him feeble, sick, a man whose herd has faltered. They sing to the picture until their throats rasp and close. Scribe goes about with a silver wand, killing the candles. Monks from the chapel, each as thin and pale as smoke.

Dark days. My hosts permit one candle each night. My thin scribe asks if my countrymen live in caves, like bears or devils. Such a lie, I tell him, is mere shadow cast by the spark of truth. Father's second house, before the burning, was dug from the ground, sheets of turf joined by men knowing the art. Here all is cold stone, no sheep to curl against. There is only rock. And words.



A Hero / Talon

Inception 2025, Best of Collage

A Fascinating Man

Lisa Perrault

Inception 2025, Best of Novelette

I met him at a wine tasting party that I attended with my friend, Harvey. I wore a stunning, low-cut, deep-purple cocktail dress. A little over the top for a house party—and for a redhead maybe—but an outfit I hoped would make the breakthrough from friendship to romance with Harvey. I'd been working on this for a while without significant progress.

I really liked Harvey. He was a good conversationalist, fun, and he had a nice family. He was also very attractive in a long, lean way; his intelligent face wore glasses well and was topped off by a mop of dark curls that a woman like me would die for. But I was afraid Harvey had a heart of stone—literally. Harvey was a geoscientist in love with his work and the amazingness of rocks and landforms from shorelines to mountain tops. Though we had spent many an outing (that I wistfully called “dates”) in those realms, any tender moments had been centered around a geological discovery—a tiny crystal or fossil, the shape of a hill that told its history.

I wasn't altogether sure that Harvey saw *me* and I wanted him to. Hence the purple dress.

That night I was flirty with Harvey and animated with the eclectic group of guests gathered for the evening. But my laughter trailed off when Harvey drifted away to the other side of the living room to study a marble table top . . .



Splintered Boat / Maureen Alsop

Inception 2025, Best of Art

We Are All Still Dying

Kendra Pearce

Inception 2025 Winner

“Churchlands”

Here driving transports you from one world to another. A few hours west: ocean. Flat gray sand rippled with rock, littered with driftwood and debris from Japan. The water, land, and sky become one, the land dove, the others gunmetal but all gray. The beaches lay largely abandoned, nothing but wind and blooms of *Velella* and upwelled jellyfish, or the empty shells of crustaceans, victim to seabirds and seasonal fishing. The sands are segmented into ours and theirs: tribal, refuge, and those the public are allowed on. Battered metal signs sunk into dunes denote where you are, where you shouldn't be, and when you shouldn't be there.

The hordes come seasonally, summer yes, but in droves in the depths of winter for a few hours of a few days, when the waves are opaque, and the wind hurls sand like buckshot. They come in trucks, vans, and trailers, lined up at an invisible starting gate on the hard sands. They come and sit, waiting for low tide. They come with permits tucked into chest pockets bought for a few dollars at Bi-Mart to harvest the sand, armed with shovels and cylindrical, aluminum clam guns, 5-gallon buckets. The poor families stand out. They bring their children, nieces, nephews, their neighbor's kids; children under 15 don't require a permit. They carry toddlers on their hips, babies at the breast, all worth a limit as long as they're present while digging. We were one of those families.

Contributors

Surovi Akter is a Bangladeshi visual artist who creates evocative portraits that blend realism with dreamlike elements. A BFA graduate specializing in drawing and painting with a focus on portraiture, her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. Inspired by Japanese aesthetics and human stories, she also illustrates children's books and studies Japanese language to deepen her cross-cultural artistic dialogue.

Maureen Alsop, PhD is the author of seven poetry collections and a debut novel, *Today Yesterday After My Death*. Her visual art has appeared in a range of venues including *Umbrella Studio*, *Mezzo Cammin Journal*, *Drunken Boat, ctrl + v*, and *The New River: Journal of Electronic Literature and Digital Art* (forthcoming), among others.

David Martin Anderson's work has appeared in *The McNeese Review*, *Pangyrus Literary Magazine*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *OxMag*, and many others since his graduation from the University of Iowa's Creative Writing Program in 2023. Anderson is also a past winner of the Faulkner-Wisdom Literary Prize.

Lizzy Brooks is a photographer, technologist and social practice artist based in San Francisco. Working in community, she merges personal and political narratives to trace the nuanced boundaries of the self as it bleeds into cultural identity, the city and the land, and technology.

Rebekah Burgess received a PhD in Photo History and has worked in Photography, Drawings, Prints, and Maps collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *Life Magazine*, and the New York City Department of Parks. With decades of hands-on work with some of the world's finest prints, Rebekah brings a thoughtful and enthusiastic eye to her own photographic work.

Alessia Lupo Cecchet is an interdisciplinary conceptual artist who works at the intersection of studio and media arts and whose work explores matters of decay, abjection, empathy, human exceptionalism, and temporality. Lupo grew up in the Dolomite Mountains of Northern Italy and is now based in Los Angeles, CA.

Danny Crytser is an alum of the writing workshop CRIT. Crytser lives in Burlington, Vermont, where he teaches mathematics and computer science.

Carlos Echeverria, born in 2005, found writing distasteful for most of his life, until his late teens, where he began to drown in the excess of his mind.

He now writes from the wounds of what he once buried, exploring identity, memory, and existential grief.

Leanne Grabel is a writer, illustrator and performer. In love with mixing genres, Grabel has written and produced numerous multimedia shows, and her graphic memoir, *Brontosaurus Illustrated*, was published by The Opiate Books in 2022. *My Husband's Eyebrows*, illustrated prose poems, was published by the Poetry Box in 2022. She is the 2020 recipient of the Bread & Roses Award for contributions to women's literature in the Pacific Northwest.

Jordan Green is from Monroe, Louisiana where the summers are hot and the winters are surprisingly warm. Green has pursued a bachelor's and master's degree in English and creative writing from the University of Louisiana Monroe, and recently obtained an MFA from Miami University in Oxford Ohio and completed one year as an English instructor at the University of Louisiana Monroe. Green aspires to work as an editor for a publisher.

J.C. Henderson is an artist and poet. She has published visual art and poetry in numerous art and literary magazines such as *Sunspot Lit*, *The Clackamas Review*, *SLANT*, *Poetry East*, *The Freshwater Review*, and *Ignation*.

Joseph Howse is a novelist, poet, and computer scientist. His debut novel, *The Girl in the Water*, won the 2023 Independent Press Award for Literary Fiction and 2023 IAN Awards for Outstanding Multicultural Fiction. He lives in a Canadian fishing village where he raises cats, honeybees, and hardy fruit trees.

John Kaufmann is an attorney and mobile-home park owner who lives in southern New York State. His writing has appeared in *The Washington Square Review*, *Off Assignment*, *Epiphany*, *Pleides*, *Channel Magazine*, *The Journal of the Taxation of Financial Products*, *The Journal of Taxation of Investments*, and *Tax Notes*. Kaufmann blogs at DirtLease.com.

Pablo Neruda (born July 12, 1904, Parral, Chile—died September 23, 1973, Santiago) was a Chilean poet, diplomat, and politician who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. He is perhaps the most important Latin American poet of the 20th century.

Kendra Pearce is a Pacific Northwest local who works as an Environmental and Agriculture Educator in a small Southwest Washington town. She has been a contributing writer for *Snowboarder*, *Northbank*, and *Urban Farm*, had her story "Lookout" published in *Typishly*, and was a 2018 Fishtrap fellowship finalist. She is currently completing *At the Intersection of Lala and Jones: Part 2*.

After winning first place in a playwriting contest, **Lisa Perrault** veered off into a career in forestry while continuing to write. She uses her experiences in the natural world as the foundation for her stories, and likes to craft a sense of mystery whenever she sees a chance.

Ron Pullins is a writer working in Tucson AZ. His works have been published in *Typishly*, *Southwest Review*, *Shenandoah*, and others. Pullins won the 2022 Malcolm Lowry award for *Dollartorium*, a satirical novel forthcoming from Unsolicited Press February 10, 2026. The first chapter for his unpublished novella *Fracture* was a finalist in *Sunspot's* 2023 Inception contest.

Kara Beth Rasure is a multimedia artist based in Bloomington, Indiana. Their work explores material process, intuition, and existential themes. They teach Comprehensive Design at Indiana University, focusing on design thinking and design across multiple scales.

Hannah J. Russell is a poet and essayist. She holds a Masters in Poetry from Texas Tech University and now lives in Fort Worth, TX. She is found frequenting breweries with her partner and a dog named Honey.

Sofia Sears is a writer from Los Angeles whose cross-genre work has been featured in publications such as *Waxwing*, the *Sonora Review*, and the *LA Times*. They're currently based in Chicago and at work on a debut novel about girlhood and Mojave desert monsters. You can find them at SofSears.com.

Cordelia Shan Qing Ru is a writer and translator based in Toronto. Her work often reflects on migration and identity, though she's only recently noticed how frequently Vancouver sneaks into her stories. You can find more of her work at portfolio-shanqingru.format.com.

Frederick Speers (he/him) is the author of *So Far Afield* (Nomadic Press), a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award. His chapbook *In the Year of Our Making and Unmaking* was selected by Carl Phillips for the Frontier Poetry award in 2020. Fred's poems have appeared in *AGNI*, *Crab Creek*, *Diode*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *Impossible Archetype*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Portland Review*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. FrederickSpeers.com

Emily Stedje is a writer living and working in Pittsburgh, PA, but she's also called Philadelphia and Youngstown home. Her essays appear in *South Dakota Review*, *Touchstone Literary Magazine*, and *Litro Magazine*.

Y'vonna Stewart adapted the artistic persona **BlackMedu\$**a in the winter of 2023. Utilizing mixed media and expressionism, her art emphasizes

appreciation of personal identity, centering around the cultural relevance of strength and spirituality.

JeFF Stumpo is at work on a manuscript of poems dedicated to hip-hop artists, each in a different form, from traditional to experimental. He's husband to a PhD chemist, father to an amazing trans child, and reads regularly at Slam Free or Die in Manchester, NH.

Wally Swift's new books include *Aperture* (Kelsay Books), poems regarding caregiving his wife through Alzheimer's; and *If You're the Dreamer, I'm the Dream: Selected Translations from Rilke's Book of Hours* (Finishing Line Press). He was a finalist for the Stephen Mitchell Translation. His work has appeared in *Chicago Quarterly*, *Commonweal*, *Healing Muse*, *Montreal Review*, *North American Review*, *Poetry London*, *Other Journal*, and *Rattle*. *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012) was cowinner for the 2011 Crab Orchard Open Poetry Competition.

Talon is a queer, Korean transracial, transnational adoptee and emerging found poetry collage artist. At the intersection of identity, ancestry, adoptee sovereignty, and abolition, she uses collage as a form of resistance to disrupt the adoption narrative.

Jes Tyler (he/they) is a Pushcart Prize-nominated writer and reader from Emporia (KS). His work has been published in *105 Meadowlark Reader*, *Abundance Literary Mag*, *NEBO*, among others. He is writing his first novel.

High school English teacher and fourth generation educator **Helen Vidrine** has previously seen work published in Austin-area literary magazine *Kindred Characters* and was awarded a place in the 2024 *Bluegrass Writer's Collection*.

William Lewis Winston lives in Oakland, California, where he taught English and history for four decades. His poems appear in literary journals nationally. His short story *The Sound of Snow Not Falling* was featured in the Philadelphia InterAct Theatre's 2005-06 Writing Aloud series (Adrift), then published in *Litro* in 2023.

Artist **Robin Young** works in mixed media focusing on collage and contemporary art. Her focus is on collage using magazine clippings, masking tape, wallpaper, jewelry, feathers, foil, and etc. to develop whimsical and intuitive compositions. Robin's keen eye guides her viewers into her own semi-readymade world.

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