

# SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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**The Bridge** / Hedian Utarti

**CHANGING THE WORLD  
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

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## Open House at a Paper Mill

Jennifer Judge

I was embarrassed of it all then—  
the Hane's pocket t-shirts, the steel-toed boots  
that smelled of leather, sweat, and  
sickening sweet paper pulp.

My father's world was  
white and beige, dull steel  
of machinery, the color of gloom,  
miles of life walked away on concrete.

I saw it once, open house  
day, families crowded into lookout rooms,  
paper cups of orange  
drink and powdered-sugar donuts.

Outside, tractor trailers held  
their loads of trees, long pines,  
all their limbs removed, just  
waiting to feed these machines.

After 25 years, I try to wear  
his life like a badge, like  
his suffering has earned me  
an identity, working class status.

The dumb luck of prosperity:  
my grandmother writes to say she  
is so happy that we have what they  
could never get—the house of our dreams.

That's the hope of immigrant life—  
black lung and alcoholism,  
poverty and welfare checks—  
it ends up here: new cars, college degrees.

We can't surrender it all  
to future generations and smile.  
The shoulders we stand on  
ache with a knife-digging hurt.

## Drive

Jennifer Judge

1.

My daughters will never be babies again—  
the dresses long gone, the dolls mildewing in boxes.

I watch old videos—a younger self lifts the slight toddler heft  
to hip, spider legs cling instinctively as a closed fist.

Mommy, a apple, a apple, a apple, again and again and again,  
a kitchen we don't own anymore, a voice I don't recognize.

2.

In a dream, I am in our car. I am trying to steer,  
but the rain is so hard, washes the windshield to gray.

I cannot see, no matter how hard I peer into it.  
I am in the passenger seat.

I realize that my husband is in the car,  
wheel useless in his hands. I am forced to steer.

## Looking for Love: To-Do List of a Lake Monster

Marilee Dahlman

1. First things first, brush my matted hair. Braid a tadpole necklace and pin a frog behind one ear.

2. Float in marshy shallows and forget cold crash and white bite spray, drowned descent and forced rebirth from skin to scales, all in turbid shades of gray and green and waxen blue.

3. Scour lakebed for fossils. The diplodocus is almost complete! That missing rib, I'll find it yet, buried in sands from ages past. A beast's need for union is such a timeless quest.

4. Search sunken tin pan freighter for ruffled shirt with button cuffs. Lie in shoal and watch the cove, where a dirt path winds and soft-skinned stroll. Drift away, but sense the shore vibrations still: dancing violin, coupled laughter, clinks of glass.

5. Afternoon nap in western bog.

6. Find a mate. Cast a line or throw a net?

7. Twilight cruise near the beach, smell the flesh with every breath.

8. Lure a lady from the path . . . wail a siren call and spew a lentic scent! Spy her in starlight, moonlight, gaslight glow; she'll sense my soul, my other half. Listen now, it's safe to step! Tread through muddy cattails and spreading ferns, slip-slide slick lichen stones, and wade into wavy warmth . . .

9. Hooked you! Seaweed bound, lasso round. Grind your heels, kick up sand, through clouds of silt and salty tears I see you yet! Don't hide beneath an algae bloom or I'll drag you to a deeper gloom. We'll build a bed of snails and burn it bright. Be my slimy bride, in veil of rotted sail and clanking rusted anchor chains behind. Webbed feet, pointed teeth, cool blood reborn, another spiny savage with red heart pumping deep.

10. We'll tumble through splendid years, embraced in wet blissful paradise, until rough green gods with seismic squeeze mold our home to mountain. Perched on peak, caged by icy crystal ocean, we'll bet on bobbing arks while glaciers creep.

11. I'll spot an emerald spec as the floods recede, follow me, we'll flop on down. Finned creatures crawling, pine needles pricking, we'll find a pond and dive again, forever to swim a murky heaven and ride this world's smooth blue-green spin. Together.

## Miscellaneous

Samantha Schlemm

Every Monday, she wrote the list of spelling words, looping white cursive on the board as we spilled into the room, scrawling powdery white chalk across a sea of green as we copied them down cockeyed and tilting on ruled lines. By then, the Word of the Week—the extra credit word that made my grandma whistle and say, “That’s a doozie,” the five-dollar word that Miss Tighe posted the definition beneath to unlock its full power—was already pinned to the yellow paper-covered corkboard.

This is the room where I must have learned words like pedantic, ostentatious, or connotative. Miscellaneous. That’s the one I remember. The way it rolled off the tongue, each syllable dancing to the next. Miscellaneous. A word to describe the random, the indescribable which now could be named, to cover an entire category which had never been open to me before. Even though it was the longest word our fifth-grade class had come across, studying how each letter came together, memorizing how each sound kissed the next was easy. It tugged at me. It curled up in my lap, a nuzzling kitten that purred its syllables, single notes in a melodic song, and it hummed, a stir fry that sizzled on the stove, a harp that plucked a chorus of notes together in one miscellaneous jumble, a jumble that opened my childish eyes. A jumble that scared me because I wasn’t ready to grow up.

Lately, my days feel miscellaneous. Before the coronavirus shooed us all into quarantine, there was always wake up, go to work, come home, make dinner, go to bed. Now, there’s wake up, work at home, head to the kitchen to make tea, notice the dishes are still in the sink from the night before, unload the dishwasher, fill it back up, pour hot water through herbal tea leaves that smell like someone squeezed an orange into my mug, sit and work, resist looking at social media, more tea, work, give in and check Instagram, spread Nutella on toast for lunch, notice the laundry needs folding, answer the door for a package, get back to work, call and reschedule an upcoming wedding-related appointment, work, work, realize it’s after seven, make dinner,

watch TV, sleep. I think about how we're lucky, my fiancé and I, we're lucky to have jobs we can do from home, we're lucky to be healthy, we're lucky to have this time together before we get married—if we can get married this summer. I feel at ease. I feel stressed. I feel something I can't quite name. As the weeks at home drag on into the double digits, I think about Miss Tighe and how she knew the world wouldn't always be a place you could categorize, a place where every thought, every feeling, every experience had a name. Sometimes, things are just miscellaneous.

## Swimming Lessons

Virginia Watts

Of course, it was a privilege to take swimming lessons at the community center. I never had to swim alone there. Never a private lesson. Always a group lesson. Sixteen of us middle schoolers doing the same drills, attempting the same skills. I could never breathe right for him. That rotary breathing required for freestyle. I cheated. I had to. And he always caught me, even when he turned his back on my body slicing through the rippling, chlorinated waves churned by the moving arms and kicking legs. Even as he retraced his steps to the other side of the pool, something he did constantly throughout every thirty-minute session, he knew how I would react when he caught me again. Pacing the pool deck, pacing the pool deck, he kept catching me and catching me and catching me.

She was young, my daughter. An undergraduate. Inexperienced, yes, but so smart. I knew and I know how brilliant she is, how clever and funny, and how much does the average woman of nineteen, as she was at the time, how much does the average woman of such a new age possess in the column of life experience and how much self-determination can any person truthfully claim without more life experience than that?

I didn't like anything about the windowless women's locker room in the basement of the community center until I disliked the basement pool even more. Then I dreamed of climbing the ladder, grabbing my towel and scurrying back there, pool water dripped onto floors always colder than it feels inside the pool. The locker room, at first, made me gag. It reeked of bleach. Long, dark hair coiled in the shower drain. Coppery growth along the shower curtain hem like an old man who has dipped his white beard in beef stew unaware. A bright menstrual pad tossed carelessly into an open trashcan, no coat for her shoulders. Band aids reproducing, multiplying. One fleshy circle wiggling up between my toes.

Something made me think of my old swimming teacher as I soon as I saw that guy's bare chest, smooth and muscled, blood

cascading over a mountain of a shoulder. Adonis swathed in ebony ooze chiseled against a blurry backdrop. A black-and-white photograph from social media. He looked too good to be good. It was fake, the blood. A play or something. It doesn't matter at all. What matters is she met him in a class. It doesn't matter that this guy from my daughter's class had a name I had often used when writing fiction stories, but it was a tad creepy and I never use that name now. There were things he said to her in class before what happened, happened, that were dismantling and demeaning and as accurate as guided missiles launched to belittle her, to set her up, but that's all hindsight now.

The swimming pool was startlingly opulent for something erected underground beside the furnace room and janitorial supply closet. High ceilings. Pillars worthy of a Grecian temple, inlaid mosaic tiles and two enormous stained-glass windows high above the pool that delivered light to people jogging around a balcony track. Pounding steps and squeaking sneakers mostly drowned by the baritone boom of his voice, his shrill, silver whistle. The echoes that deafened and deafened and deafened. *Take your mark! Pull! Pull! Pull! Kick! You aren't kicking! KICK!*

There had been no previous lunches for my daughter with this guy from her class, no preliminary walks, cups of coffee, dinners out or movies. There had been nothing before and there would be nothing after that one time she was with him alone.

In rotary breathing, when you turn your head to the side, you are supposed to open your mouth and take in the air of the world. Then you close your mouth and put your whole face, and here I mean your whole face, back down in the water and blow your guts out. In a pool crowded with bodies that's a lot of carbon dioxide to ask a stagnant ditch to handle. Don't you think? And don't you think it's very logical to wonder whether when you roll your head to the side and open your mouth, you might miss the air completely and drag only water into your alveoli? I did try to master rotary breathing. I tried very hard. The harder I tried, the faster my heart beat. Vice grips descended and clamped around my ribs. His voice the dark charm that spun the crank tighter and tighter. Eventually, my lungs didn't want anything to do with air anymore. *Find some other way to oxygenate the blood you need.* I sputtered and spit. Gulped and choked. Halfway across I had to stop

swimming, tread and float. *LANE THREE! WATTS! MOVE! MOVE! MOVE! EVERY TIME!* Gasping, I'd start in again for the other side.

That guy tore my daughter. Ripped her. Multiple tears. Made her hurt and bleed for three days. I worried her heart would be unable to work the same way it had before that night. *Find some other way to oxygenate the blood you need.* But thankfully, there is goodness along with evil and that never came true. A promised car ride to a restaurant swapped last minute by him for an excursion to his apartment. Probably the moment right there she could have refused. Hindsight. In some ways, I wish she had been drunk so details would be blurry, but that's not how it went. The access to his apartment a narrow corridor, the inside modern, clear-surfaced, impersonal, as if the space had been leased furnished and decorated, and he never changed or added a thing. One abstract painting hung centered on the wall above the living room sofa. His bedsheets were black. And let me be clear. She let him, even though it wasn't what she wanted. She didn't know what would happen. She didn't know what to expect. She didn't know what to do. He was the size of a grizzly. When she didn't want to kiss him at first, she felt the shape of his fingers come up around her throat. What was he was capable of? Frozen in a slow-motion moment in time, she let it play out as he repeated this phrase in her ear: *I could do this all night.*

*WATTS! STOP SPUTTERING! WATTS! NO FULL BREATHS! NO BREATHING OUT! ONLY BREATHE IN! STOP! WATTS! WATTS! NO FULL BREATHS! ONLY IN! ONLY IN! WATTS! STOP!*

But I didn't stop. I kept coming back, trying to do what he wanted me to do as he yelled louder and louder, paced faster and faster. I skipped breakfasts and lunches, unable to chew, lost sleep the nights before, trembled in the back seats of station-wagon carpools. Mothers of friends asked, *Do you have a fever?* Never opened my mouth. Never told parents how terrified I was of / him / his echoing voice / his shocking whistle / his massive chest. Never told them I was terrified of swallowing so much water I'd die trying to do something I didn't want to do in the least. If I had told them, I am sure they would have allowed me to quit, but I felt too silly and irrational and smaller than a

little pink circle band aid, so I kept going back, the stained glass in the balcony like church windows with no choir of allies peering benevolently down. Those gemstones of color, sapphire blue, ruby red, emerald, and topaz waiting for me to launch myself back into the water. Brilliant birds perched on dark tree branches with green and yellow leaves, some of them just spreading their wings, ready to take flight.

My daughter sought medical treatment the following morning. Upon examining the ravaged condition of her vagina, the doctor in Montreal asked repeatedly if the incident had been consensual, urged her to have a discussion with the police “anyway,” tried to persuade her to see a therapist at the very least. My daughter refused. The doctor scheduled subsequent appointments to see her again, repeated these pleas, resorted to scheduling more and more appointments not entirely medically necessary. My daughter stopped going to see her, began ignoring her calls and her messages, desperate to gather distance from the incident and move on. She will always remember this fellow woman with eternal gratitude, her face, the sound of her voice, her kindness and compassion, how she tried everything she could think of to help her. Of course she should have listened to the advice. Hindsight.

I know what you are thinking now. These stories are starkly different. They are. My swimming coach wasn't really trying to drown me. My daughter's story is the opposite. But there is something excruciatingly the same about the young girl and the young woman. Both of them holding off too long, not believing enough in their own instincts, their own power. My daughter is the daughter I dreamed of and hoped for. I have been steadfastly proud of her in all the moments of her life. After that night, she grew stronger than before, as the life behind us does for all of us, and then, she went further. She is triumphant. She soars. Of course, she is the clear victor transcending the depth and dark sheets. She's not looking back. She has no reason to. Nor do I.



**Kitchen Closed / kerry rawlinson**



**Wooden Muse** / kerry rawlinson

## Unrequited by the Sun

Stella Hayes

I stare into the sun without protective eye gear,  
Gearing up for high risk

The doom taking me on a carpet ride      circling around loss's motion

It receives me in a half-hush,  
Like when you decided that love couldn't support air

The sun is as bright as the sun,  
Arriving at a close      an eye to shun the sun beneath a closing eyelid

What if we feed spoonfuls of sugar to each other under the stare of the sun?  
We would go to dig the fields, sowing our dreams for the next generation

The deflating atlas filling up with sun rays  
Children at play with decay,

If silence had a sound, it would sound like loss without a heartbeat  
A ghost moving in for good,

Time, a strand in travel

## Saguaros

Ann Howells

rule rock-strewn mountainsides,  
godfathers, *padrinos*,  
towering some fifty feet  
as they survey their domain.  
No sissy succulent could survive here  
where daytime temperatures  
reach 120 degrees.  
But saguaros flourish; May's flowers  
lead to June's red-fleshed fruit.  
Upstarts, young ones no taller  
than a hitching post, dot the terrain  
among scattered *cholla*, organ pipe,  
and *ocotillo*, like stumps  
after cutting saws thin the forest.

They must reach fifty years, you know,  
and some approach a hundred,  
before they sprout those stubby arms,  
pose like mugging victims, hands up –  
though some are one-armed,  
and a few wear ringed appendages  
like Elizabethan collars. Erect.  
Taciturn. Seemingly omniscient.  
Like Grandfather they are  
self-made and self-sufficient.  
Sharp spines and thick-ridged skin  
protect. Well-adapted to hardship,  
these crusty old hermits  
may even prefer it.

## Heat

Rayne Debski

You are thirty-five years old and you know better than to open the envelope that feels like a strip of hot metal in your hand. The return address is from the federal prison in Pensacola. You don't have to open it to know it's from Inmate 607439. You do know that if you read it, the letter will sear your heart. Just holding the envelope, you remember the cleft in his chin, the feel of his breath against your neck. If you read it, you will long for something you shouldn't, and you may risk everything you've achieved in the last eight years —career success, a fiancé who adores you, an upstanding reputation in the community.

Your fiancé Marc doesn't object to the nights and weekends your career requires, makes excellent paella, and sends roses to your mother on her birthday. You nod your head at the litany of his virtues. Yes, yes, he is a good man. But his love wraps around you like a shroud. You check your phone. Marc will be home any minute.

Words sit like sparks on your tongue. You crave talking to someone about 607439, the same way you used to jones for his fingers snaking down your stomach. Maybe you should call Joy, your best friend, and tell her you've received this letter. She'll tell you to burn it and flush the ashes in the toilet. She'll remind you of the years of therapy, the money you spent on lawyers to clear your conscience and get a divorce. You won't remind her that she arranged the blind date with the man who became 607439, that she was the maid of honor at your wedding, and that she never told you about the deception that simmered behind his sea blue eyes.

You sneeze from the lemon polish your cleaning lady uses. You don't recall asking Alexa to play Bob Marley, but his voice fills your living space. Your hips sway slowly, and you're on your honeymoon in Jamaica, making love on the beach, so in love—or was it in heat—that you ignored the sand fleas and land crabs making their way along the shore. You swallow the longing for his arm around your waist, for trips to rain forests and mountain peaks. You remember how he sent you to shop in island bazaars with a wallet full of cash. A sweet

and generous gesture! And then you discovered he did this to keep you busy while he arranged drug drops on remote islands in the Keys. You laugh bitterly at your naivete.

Your phone dings. Marc will be late; the gym is crowded, and he wants to finish his routine. He says don't cook dinner, he'll bring home Thai. You tell Alexa to shut up.

You sit on the sunporch and hold the letter to your nose the same way you held 607439's shirts when he was in Columbia on business and, worried that he would meet a violent death, tried to breathe him into you. If you call your mother, she'll tell you to shred the letter. Whatever you do, she'll say, don't tell anyone about him, especially Marc. This has been her mantra since 607439 was imprisoned. She refuses to believe that you knew what 607439's import business entailed, and after a while you willingly participated in it. In an escalating voice she'll recite the sins of 607439: how he used you to transport cocaine; how he spent his nights away from you; how he blackened your eye when you flushed away his stash. She'll bring up her cousin, the state senator who arranged for a plea deal if you turned state's witness, and whose influence kept you out of the newspapers. She never hesitates to tell you any of this should the past inadvertently come up.

You've told Marc you were married to a man who was a deadbeat and disappeared after the divorce. Marc promises not to disappoint you. He listens to your opinions, introduces you to interesting people, and shares your love of foreign films. He is a competent, considerate lover. He believes the body is a temple that should never be tainted with anything stronger than alcohol. He says people who do drugs are idiotic for damaging their brains. You nod as if you agree with him. He works out, runs, drinks kale smoothies, and avoids desserts. You don't tell him that for several months the smoothies you drank were made with psilocybin mushrooms; the brownies you baked were seasoned with hash. Your mother is right. Don't tell anyone in your new life about your old one. What happened was years ago and has little bearing on who you are today. You repeat this to yourself whenever the hankering for excitement and adventure make you want to take a plane to South America and explore the Amazon.

Your phone dings again. Marc is almost home. You know the letter from 607439 is telling you he'll be released next month. For years you've listened to his voicemails about the things he made in woodshop, the books he's read, the stories he's written, the fights he's won. You've treated them like messages from the dead and never responded. But you know he's being released because you've kept a calendar and marked off the days of time served. You hold the letter tightly. No matter what happens in your new life, something inside you resists letting go of the old one.

The front door opens. Marc juggles the bags of food in one arm, and with the other pulls you to him. His muscles are taut, strong. The letter is folded in your pocket, a piece of lit charcoal pressed between you. You spoon the red curry duck into bowls. While Marc pours glasses of pinot gris, he talks about his day, his ebullience unshakable.

The heady scent of ginger and garlic unsettles your stomach. He tilts his head, his eyes soft. "Are you okay?" His concern rattles your heart. You want to tell him about the heat against your hip.

"You haven't tried the curry." He trails a finger down your back, igniting an unexpected shiver of desire.

You take a spoonful of food, inhale its tomatoey aroma, then let it sit on your tongue. His fingers travel along the waistband of your pants. The sweet and spicy flavors of the curry unfold. You swallow, surprised at how delicious it tastes.

**Burning**

Robin Bissett

burn the pink petals within the clouds as paws made of wood  
and velvet tongues lick whiskers on my face because all the  
future accidents of the world scratch the heavens as wooden  
demons made into cats destroy firehouses full of spirits  
looking at pianos full of scrunchies made of flesh from flowers  
burnt to a crisp just as pillows of heaven leave chests to  
become mist

## Tristness

Gabrielle Vachon

I am the brunch spread  
on this beachside restaurant in Florida.  
My mother spills syrup on my  
tongue and asks me why I am so sad. She  
laps up my nervous sweat with big  
delicious bites.  
She uses the word: triste.  
In French, it belongs to the  
mimes, and their frowning affectations  
*Tristness* smudges an upside-down  
smile on a clown's boorish red lips  
Old movies about the war are triste  
Painting a gazebo blue overlooking the sea  
is peak triste, it is the address on the mailbox  
My mother drinks me, a large pulpy glass of orange nectar,  
like she pressed me herself between the palms of her manicured hands

Like the Sun first pressed me into jet fuel  
when I stepped foot in the sunshine state  
I ran miles and miles on the beach  
with my bikini top falling down,  
but even the sand scratching my nipples could not convince  
me my breasts weren't gifts to this world  
I told the snowbird her husband was gay,  
and laughed so hard to match her wails that I could not believe  
my lungs never ran out of air  
Mania never runs out of air,  
like my spine never runs out of coconut sunscreen applied  
in the shape of a toothy grin between my shoulder blades

Alas,  
I watched one too many episodes of TLC's excellent programing in the  
hotel room,  
and the 6\$ minibar skittles weighed my tongue down  
till it was numb and sour.  
The sailor's rope in the lobby décor rung round and round my throat

like an untimely umbilical chord. I wept until the ocean spat me back out, and the  
foam carried me to the early bird special,  
where my mother rips into my ribs like bacon.  
I say to her, while she swirls my hipbones in gummy fruit jam,  
that I am not sad, but simply depressed.  
What's the difference, she asks, triste is triste.  
I cannot see her through the Aunt Jemima in my eyelashes.  
The waves of the ocean pounding onto the shore remind me I will never  
escape its currents

**l'étrangeté**

Alena Marvin

Who else could have glittered under the sun  
Like a diamond?  
Across the garden, among the browning roses,  
With those poor big eyes that burned.

His hair a web of cornsilk, he beckoned,  
So I followed.  
Into the orchard, where the shade and tall grass hid every sorrow,  
Silent, he pointed upwards.

I wondered then if it happened often.  
He shook his head.  
The sky like a bruise, the sun low in the valley, it was then  
That I saw what he cried for.

An oddity, only now visible.  
Our hearts, pounding.  
He shone like the stars, yet he was hidden from the world,  
But that was what he prayed for.

The tall steeple, beyond the green hill,  
The blue cornflowers.

When will I get my chance, I asked,  
To be a ghost like you?  
*I'm not a ghost, I'm from outer space.*  
I nodded, as if I'd known.

The pendulum rushed over the sea,  
Our eyes swung lazily,  
And my hand fumbled over his  
In the flickering shadow of the eclipsed sunset.

To see him cry was stranger than to see him at all.

## Discrete Infinity

Cassandra Moss

You wake up at 5:34am, rain dribbling down panes, the room shadowed by the dying of the night. *What am I?* is your first thought.

In the bathroom, the overhead bulb above, your face is caught in an elucidation of itself. You realize your features owe you nothing: your forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth and jaw are unwavering, but their wholeness is inadmissible in the examination of what the consistently reoccurring patterns of yourself are, or *if* they are at all.

Later, at work, in the midst of a complicated disciplinary hearing for an employee in the Distribution Department, you glimpse a look of mortification on a colleague, as if mere ontology appalls her. You don't know if it's intended for you or not, though you suspect it is. Why wouldn't it be? You feel that everyone susses you out eventually. It's your instinct to placate, to plead mutual humanity or, if not, leniency towards yourself for your lack of human qualifiers. At some point, you must have had the basics of a person, but over the years they dried up, calcified, and disintegrated. So, you smile at her now, thinking how you've heard she has a comatose brother who's been going on, hagiofied and inert, for nearly seven years. It has to be miserable for her. If you were her, you'd feel it's you, not him, who's been wronged for it's you, not him, who's aware of the pile of time stacking up behind you as the one in front declines. You picture her sitting by the fleshy slab reading out global events, commenting on the terrible turn of the world, pausing every so often to wonder how she and he came to be where they are, what precise alchemy was wrought to render these conditions of existence, at once astonishing and wholly explicable, only to be disturbed by the duty nurse on her rounds, inspecting for boils while stating *it's a shame there's not the budget for waterbeds for all, even the vegetables*. As you continue to smile, you hope the action is connecting to a quantifiably genuine feeling of sincerity inside yourself. But it's impossible to tell. *We're in the same boat*, you want the smile to say. *I may not have suffered a family tragedy and I may not have to waste the last days of my youth swallowing the instant*

*coffee of the high-dependency ward, but there is a sameness to you and me. We are alike in that we, along with everyone else, are sinking and unsure we ever learned how to swim.*

It's a shitshow for sure: too many people, yet also too few. This makes you feel agitated by the entire idea of company and spending your hours in it. How is it you're to behave? What is it you're to say to demonstrate your authentic self? Your valid nature? Making matters worse is the fact that there's not a single clean, flat surface to be found in these toilets. You're in a cubicle sweating slugs because you ran as you were already late for the gig after being surrounded by men in religious garb on a Central Line carriage. Their white robes and square hats were an affront to your duplicity: abiding secularity swaddling a tiny squirming spirituality when what right have you to either if you aren't willing to commit to anything? As the men's chatter softly commandeered the particles between and in amongst you and them, a harrowing began in your skull, spreading down along your spine, awakening the squatters in your nervous system who began to, yet again, demand a greater standard of living. You think of the endless intoxication of belief as you shove your housekey into the powder: to live the life of an ecstatic, reason sacrificed to intuition, whereas your reasonableness has you resorting to several key bumps to raise your expectations like a cretin hoping to be accepted into the normal household of a normal family, bug eyes masked, balding scalp wigged: an ad hoc disguise pulled from an embedded sense of ordinariness, the façade always about to fall even as the man and wife of the house are setting you up with the blondest son of their richest friends.

A man-child is at the back of the pop-up bar emitting something slow somewhere between a song and a rap, an unattended keyboard to the left of him providing backing and a vulgar fashionableness troubling the stage. It is precisely when this evening is just going to get on and start that is most on your mind as you're pressed into the back of a strange body by the toing and froing of various friendships behind you.

You notice your crowd in a corner, unaware of being observed. For a minute or two you watch them and wonder who they are without

you. Do they retain unmistakably unique, immutable traits for each and every interaction they're involved in? You know you yourself can be easily swayed by the moods and idioms of any given consortium. One person from this group could silently observe you with another group and not know if the person captured by their senses was the same as the one they'd conversed at length with, offered up secret thoughts and confessed terrible acts to, or if who they thought they'd known was an apparition with a similar face to the stranger they were currently staring at.

Ordering a pint, you tap your card on the wood, some splashback hitting your handbag, a vintage hand-me-down from an aunty who is neither sister nor friend of either of your parents, rather an antipodean passing through the northern hemisphere who you met in the carpark of a club and then went on to a party in a squat with. An easy bond was formed with the older woman as she told you that night: *I thought I chose not to have kids but maybe it was the other way around. Thinking about it, I would've liked to have been an aunt, but I've just never had the connections.*

A presence is felt to your right and your turn your head to see a guy you met once at a house party who was a friend of a friend of one of your flatmates. Neither of you were meant to be there. Your flatmate had no one else to go with and couldn't bear being seen alone so said if you had nothing else on you may as well come along. In the cramped kitchen, fixing yourself another vodka and soda, you were searching for a lime when he walked in with a bleeding finger due to a rogue shard of glass from the last get-together snuggled in the settee cushions. As blood ran out of the wound and onto the chrome sink, you imagined him liquidating in front of you. The blood could keep coming. He could faint, his life abandoning him. And all the while it would've been in your power to do something, but you chose inaction as you felt you were a spectator of a particular series of events that had to happen to maintain this version of the universe so that it was distinct from another one where you jumped in and saved his life.

But, as it happened, in yet another version of the universe that is the one you are currently living in, you did nothing *and* he didn't die. After applying some pressure, the bleeding ceased. *My girlfriend thinks I'm on a stag in Dublin,* he said. You asked him why he wasn't.

*Been a bit worried I was developing a stomach ulcer*, he replied. You waited for more detail. When none came, you didn't push but kept thinking you really should have as that would've been an intimacy that would've bound the two of you together forever. Instead, over the following couple of hours, your conversation stuck mainly to social generalizations, only now and then flirting with the intensely personal before giving way to glib carnality.

Now you don't know if he's seen you, and, if he has, if he's recognized you or not. That night was four years ago. To you it could've been last week due to your mental cognition seemingly being so out of sync with the officially documented passage of time: a year can take double or more to catch up with you in respect to your coming to terms with it, that is with its effects being fully integrated into your thoughts. That was a night which let you know you regret what doesn't happen, not what does. When you return to it now, it's the comforting buzz of the dimmed halogen lights as you undressed in a complete stranger's bedroom that you most clearly recall.

Ruminating on the idea of going over to the guy, who's definitely called Paul or Tom, to test your perception of the experience against his, you absently answer Jen and David, the friends standing next to you, that you think the music has so far been shite. Afterwards, when you're all out of the pop-up and on the way back to someone's rented accommodation, you question your choice of 'shite'. You could've used the generic 'shit'. It is perhaps because of these particular listeners' sensibilities that you went for the more regional option. As the night wears on in the form of another party, you fixate on if the words you say are in any way representative of who you feel you are at your core, if they could be argued to put forth the mulching of inner sensation, the coagulations that form what is taken for your unique entity, the one being, one body. Whilst you know 'shite', 'shit', 'wank', 'rubbish' and so on run along a continuum, you were urged to choose the more colloquial option to express a locality, an alignment with a specific tribe. You don't always do so. Yet with this group, it seems to matter. You don't want them to think of you as unspecific, nondescript. You want an identity that can exist in some minor way in the margins.

But if your word choices are somewhat calculated rather than automated, then what does that make you? A calculated being is a

being after all as *I am myself* you say to yourself. But there's a division of one self into two: the acting and the directing. The subject 'I' is located in the director, whilst the reflexive 'myself,' the object, is an actor, well-studied, yet requiring constant reassurances from the director that the way her hands dangle by her sides accurately resemble real hands on a real person really dangling as said person goes about her existence unnoticed. The actor receives scripts from intermediaries, confers with the director and then sets about assessing their context and meaning, scrutinizing the dialogue, marking intonational rises and falls, writing out the subtext as text to ensure a thorough understanding of motivation, and then committing all to memory to give the sense of spontaneity, just as she was directed to do so, to hide the acting so that the performance is, ultimately, believable, which perhaps may prompt a critic to write 'X is unrecognizable as Y; every movement and gesture of X's as Y utterly convinces: X is Y,' which results in the actor being self-satisfied because audiences were persuaded that they were spending time with Y despite clearly looking at X's face and body. The actor, buoyed by her success, starts to feel like a pro, like she had it in her all along and hadn't ever needed the director's help. But the director observes more keenly than anyone on the outside and knows that X is not Y, that X is pretending, producing an imitation of Y as only Y is Y whilst X forever remains X. The director tells the actor she is complacent, warning her that one day she won't be so lucky: there will come a time when her techniques become visible and spectators will despise her for her failure to convince them that she really is a different person from the one she actually is. But all the director can do is watch as it happens. Consequently, as the savage notices mount up, the old actor will be replaced by another seemingly newer and more flexible one who is once more eager to take direction from the ever-same, irreplaceable director.

With the music accelerating, you abandon Laura and the conversation you were half-engaged in while perched on the arm of a multi-stained chair to get up and dance. Opposite you, David's zoned-out stare causes you to think of what your colleague's comatose brother's face must be like at this moment. Slack and infantile, you imagine. *Isn't life a pile of . . .* You question if you've ever used 'shite'

with your colleague. Has there been an occasion when you have had to dismiss something in her presence? Yes. What language would you have used? You would've wanted to sound professional. You would've wanted to sound like a person who has dialectical opinions rather than views copied straight from another source. You wouldn't have wanted your colleague to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, so you'd have followed her lead and only sworn if she'd sworn. And you don't recall her doing so. Instead, then, in order to convey criticism, you would've applied words such as 'terrible', 'awful', 'dismal' and perhaps 'rotten.' The last one especially seems a thing you'd never utter as it carries no aspirational properties for you, no markers of a class that you'd want to claim as your own. At least, that's how it sounds in your accent, or rather, the accent you adopt for matters conducted within the higher echelons of your job. In another, more glottal, iteration of your speech, 'rotten' is stripped of its nobility and can slum it like a child of industry moving out from rural placement into urban internment. If you said 'rotten' now, it'd be the urban mill child. But if you said it with your colleague, who you suspect comes from the sort of soft money that prioritizes a private education over intercontinental holidays, it'd be the child of the mill owner.

As one song shuffles into the next (a tune you can all joyously sing every word of), it occurs to you that an authentic self executes thought with an essential vocabulary. And when you conceive of authenticity, you can picture everyone except yourself as you are a perennial outlier. Yet at the very same time, you disregard any such notion of authenticity as essentialist nonsense, something for only the most fragile minds. Though also, in yet another concurrent stream of consideration, you question what you can really mean if you suggest there is no faithfulness, no truthfulness, no continuity in all of anyone's experience ever. Do you mean that the atomic and subatomic levels are constantly up for grabs at every moment of every single person's time alive?

You feel a rush up your spine as you move your limbs. Your skull, such a manageable lump of bone, rocks back and forth to the pulses from the speakers and the image of your auntie from Australia on the toilet floor in a gastro pub too upscale for vomit comes to your mind. She is leaning back against the door, her legs spread, pink Docs

peaking under the stall walls, and, though her makeup is smeared and some sick is loitering on her chin, her face is a picture of mature grace, of lessons well-learned. *I've seen that bloke behind the bar on Tinder. The fit one. How old do you think he is? We were a match, but he never got in touch and neither did I. But maybe I should've instead of going with all those bogens. Who knows what would've happened? We could've really hit it off. I could be staying here. I could have a whole life for myself here instead of moving on again. But, then, he's a fucking child, isn't he? Twenty-three, I reckon. That's my minimum age. My maximum's thirty-four because I'm just not going there with anyone older. Not to knock, but blokes my age and above are feisty as fuck.* From above, sitting on the toilet, you continued to listen to her calm explanation of her sexual preferences, and you watched her intensity, the focus and determination of her desires, and concluded that she was an absolutely fine human being. The image lingers, slowly fading into nothing as you dance, your heart pounding, a lukewarm can in your hand, drops of cheap, frothy beer falling sometimes onto your bare legs and sometimes onto the old camel lino.

Your head is a barely liftable weight when you step out of the basement flat and into the light of day. But it's also of zero mass and that contradiction equally delights and scares as you ogle the scum on the pavement by your foot. Both states cannot be true. Yet here you are experiencing the two of them at once. It is almost 11 a.m. You take one long, final drag on your vaporizer and begin the stumble to the bus stop. It's only thirty-five minutes at most and then a five-minute walk, but the thought of you managing the whole journey to eventually get back to your bed where you'll slip under the covers for the rest of the day and speak to no one makes you feel truly, truly heroic.

On the 393, several women are wearing bright floral patterns and matching hats. They are chatty and lively. You figure they're on their way back from worship at one of the small evangelical churches nestled in between chicken shops. You recall the men on the tube from last night. All these believers in transit. They have a destination and you don't. You want to ask these women what they prayed for this morning and to whom they prayed. However, you feel filthy. You're high. You're secreting all the dirt of the night out through your almost

translucent pores. *They must despair at the sight of me, you think. To observe your ungainly, dilated pupils and long, regulated, heavy breaths must be a sure sign to them that they've chosen the right path. Yes, but when I rest my forehead against the cool porcelain of the toilet later, sighing in relief, I will have purged all of my impurities.*

Then there is a sequence of days and nights, weeks and months in which you continue.

One evening, you are talking to your mother on the phone about the Alaskan moose you're planning to adopt for your father's sixtieth when, midway through the conversation, you come to be hyperaware of your language again. But, this time, you feel you have no idea how actual people speak, offering up only a poor, lifeless imitation. The actor's struggling to turn exposition into emotion. Listening at the monitor, the director's racking up the number of hours to be spent in the edit trying to salvage something even semi-relatable to an audience. Your words feel unfit. They are a lead nib in an infant's mouth. You recall such a classmate, Liam McNamara in the infants, forever sucking on a pencil, labelling the circumference of a rectangle. The teacher corrected him to perimeter, but he kept saying *Miss Epstein, the circumference of a rectangle is two by four centimeters*. He had the concept, you think, but not the lexis, and without that he couldn't legitimize his thoughts and that would not do in the world he was going out into. The one you are now fully in.

Your conversation is proceeding as follows:

- Mother: How do you know which moose you're getting?  
You: You select one from a group. They have profiles with statistics.  
Mother: Profiles?  
You: There's a picture and then it tells you their name, how old they are, who their parents were, what breed they are, their weight and height.  
Mother: And how do you know the one you've picked is the one you get?

- You: Why would they lie about that?  
 Mother: No, but you can't actually check, can you?  
 You: You can go to Alaska.  
 Mother: And would you be able to recognize the moose from the profile in person?  
 You: I mean . . . do *you* have any other ideas of what to get him?  
 Mother: Oh, he's a right so-and-so to buy for.  
 You: It's better than a book. And he likes nature. And he's sixty. And he doesn't want anything. What is there he could really want anymore?

You sound machine-like. A smart machine, but a machine nonetheless as your speech has been stripped of idioms and therefore of familiarity, of regionality, of nationality, of humanity. Instead, you have a series of sophisticated algorithms that can mimic human speech perfectly so long as language is accepted as essentially literal and disembodied, as an autonomous system of information transfer in which a lexical item is either a function of grammar or neatly corresponds to the thing it denotes. Then, you suppose, you are a passable person. Of course, if you really tried, you could throw in something figurative, something embodied. 'Swings and roundabouts': that's a thing that people say. Your mother has just said *Why don't you get him a book about moose to see what he makes of them? Mind you, he might be a bit underwhelmed by another book.* You could reply: *Swings and roundabouts, innit?* The crux of the metaphor, you reason, is that the equal pros and cons in the experience of two different amusement rides are the equal advantages and disadvantages in outcomes produced by two different choices. It strikes you to apply an individualizing variant:

- You: Rollercoasters and . . . Ferris wheels, right?  
 Mother: Yer what?

You sigh and say you may as well get the moose and the book on moose too, say goodbye, and hang up.

The possibility dawns on you that ‘roundabouts’ doesn’t refer to amusement rides, but to the things on the road that are driven around, in which case the metaphor must be about driving. But what are swings? Sharp turns? A car can swing left or right. So maybe if you’d said *Reverses and intersections, right?* your mother would’ve understood you to be using vernacular to convey that whatever you choose for your father’s birthday is of equally little consequence to him.

It sounds strange to you, it all sounds strange, and you think back to the playground of your primary school where there were swings and what everyone did actually call a roundabout which Liam McNamara used to push as hard as he could, the other children clinging to the rail in fear as it spun, until he stopped and let one foot drag against the ground to slow the wooden circle down.

The problem, you surmise, is with these scripts. The director can’t direct and the actor, no matter which one it is, can’t act without a decent set of lines. Where does this dialogue come from? Who is supplying it? How are you ever to know when to say what to whom?

You are in the middle of a dream about Paul or Tom in which the two of you are at a funeral. It’s a humanitarian service. The turnout is decent, indicating a well-loved person, though you don’t know who it is. Paul or Tom gets up to give a eulogy. He espouses all the virtues of the dead individual. You begin to feel anxious, like something’s not right, a thing that is concealed, yet very, very important. Now you are at the reception afterwards. The atmosphere is convivial enough and Paul or Tom is sitting next to you at the back of the room. You put your hand on his thigh and lean into his face. His expression becomes darker, his features rougher. He is scared. You attach your mouth to his and feel his fear, so strong it has a sickly scent that turns your stomach, and you continue not in spite of, but because of it.

As you wake, the dream is vanishing and a melody is emerging. It is from one of the manchild’s songs from that night at the pop-up bar. Over a 60-66 BPM, the refrain *the migration of our souls to home* plays over and over in your head. His nasal whine conquers like

an undercover agent of the state raiding a house of illegals, with ultimate purpose and scant sense of decency. Accompanying this invasion is an internal atmosphere of unease as if you've done something wrong that everyone will eventually find out about.

On checking your phone, you see there are ten minutes before your alarm. Looking up at the spears of light the blinds have let slide onto the ceiling, you think back to after the pop-up when you were talking to Laura as you were sitting on the arm and she the seat of the same multi-stained chair. *I was just thinking that there are some people you mostly like, but there's a little bit you despise. And it's so rare that you're with people you totally like, you know? And that's you people*, she said. *Yeah*, you replied whilst feeling inadequate for probably liking the people and things you like the most about sixty percent tops, and even though you knew Laura's words were hyperbolic, you felt hollow for being unable to apply the same rhetoric to your response. You felt Laura feel your hollowness. You wanted to express yourself, to represent the, at times, overwhelming feelings you have for the company you were in, but your technique was all wrong. The director was screaming at the actor, whose woodenness didn't even bother her anymore as she'd got all she could from the industry and would've rather been relaxing by the pool than faking conviction for someone else's vision.

Whilst the drugs had laid waste to Laura's barricades, it seems they forced yours to contract, raising unassailable walls around your most vulnerable part, which would never find escape, so you disengaged from the process of trying to verbalize what you felt as there was no way to say what comforts nor distresses you about the experience of loving people and needing them to believe that you do. At this moment, it makes you resentful. *Why does Laura get to feel things and express them?* you think as you watch the sunlight ripple from a passing double-decker rattling your windowpanes.

Leaving the house five minutes later than you should, you look up and see a middle-aged man in white briefs and a bowler hat standing in the gateway, turned to the hedge, with a lighter in his hand. With incredible calm and deliberation, he shifts and fixes his fleshy white gaze on your face. You are at a loss. There's a meeting at 9. You ask if he needs any help. He is silent. Gently pushing past him, you say *Excuse me* and make your way to the bus stop.

During the meeting, as a voice intones obstacles to overcome and aims to achieve, you wonder if the man was intending to set fire to your hedge and if he's succeeded or not. Under the table you search for news of fires in your neighborhood and see nothing. You search for sightings of a man in his underwear and a bowler hat and find nothing. In the group chat with your flatmates you start a message about your encounter then decide against it, unsure if you really saw a person or if he was a phenomenally convincing hallucination.

Before you can tune back into the voice, a picture of a moose comes through. The caption underneath reads: 'Alfred deep in thought.' The enormous brown animal, with its ludicrous head protrusions, is standing in a green and orange field. There is something in its stature and gaze that suggests an intense seriousness about its state of being. Either that, or sheer gormlessness is easily mistaken for solemnity. Since receiving his birthday present, your father keeps you regularly updated on the progress of Alfred. As opposed to contributing to the nihilism of his increasing years, as you had thought it might, the adopted moose has, conversely, brought about deep investment in the miracle of life. You imagine yourself at sixty: you have no head, torso or limbs, rather you're an abstraction of accumulated time whose potential has shrunk from a planet to a ball-bearing. What would a moose mean to you? And, perhaps more importantly, there is the unnerving question of who exactly you will know then who'll think to acquire a large North American mammal to lift your spirits.

In the afternoon, you have to get your colleague with the comatose brother to sign off on a report. Her desk is empty. The man on reception says that she had to leave early due to a family emergency. You wonder if her brother has woken up or died. The latter option leads you to imagine a painful smile ripping her mouth open like the ring-pull on a silky aluminum can of cava, only then for her grief and mortification at herself to stifle it until, inevitably, a new, sharper vision of the future can no longer be suppressed.

On the way home it takes you a while to realize the bus has barely moved in ages. You've been drawn into the center of your phone: news of wildfires, earthquakes and floods; a new insomnia cure recommending sleep suppositories; politicians' threats; TV shows you

have no idea how to watch; kittens; people without homes dying; recent definitions of longstanding sexualities; the latest tech; your friends' achievements; lists of anxiety symptoms devastating your life; outrage at a famous individual who expressed opinions even some serial killers would deride; more kittens; and a selection of men for you to scroll through, with you trying to remember as you swipe left and right that these appearances belong to people who are probably, much like yourself, stuck on their commute and distracting themselves from the twin terrors of not having a clue who they are and knowing exactly who they are.

Accidentally, you swipe right on a man posing with a tiger because your attention is taken by the glut of flashing blue lights up ahead. You assumed it was just traffic for traffic's sake, but there seems to have been an accident. The tiger guy was a match. You are disgusted. The next face staring back at you from your phone looks stricken. Even though there's a smile, it appears nervous, uncomfortable, apprehensive about the unstoppable thing that's just about to happen. You project a whole life with this man and play out the scene when, after many years, after your friends' kids have left their homes, he reproaches you for ruining him so you finally say that you've never trusted him, that when he smiles it's like he's acknowledging past collaboration with an alien evil that's coming back to terminate all life on Earth. To that he simply appraises you from head to toe, tuts disapprovingly, and walks out of the door.

Looking up again, you catch sight of figures in high-res vests huddled around the same spot. The passenger beside you coughs, hacking something up and snorting it back down. He's probably sixteen or seventeen. You doubt your existence will have registered for him as you're just someone older. It's thirteen years since you were his age. Thirteen years since you were at Helen Kerr's house party standing in the kitchen concocting a drink from gin, rum and brandy with Chris Jones, Mark Johnson and Sean Scanlon. There were brownies on offer. You ate a whole one, unaware of how strong it was. Right when it started to hit, Liam McNamara came into view in the hallway. He'd gone to a different secondary school and you hadn't seen him since the juniors.

Not recognizing you, he approached and started speaking to Mark Johnson. Their dialogue seemed to exist separately from your reality, which had its own clammy microclimate, creating a humid haze, landmarks obscured. *Spoons was shite mate, no one there* you heard him say before he realized who you were, surprised at what had become of the child he'd known, stunned even. You weren't really sure if the sounds you made were words that fit into sentences that could be understood, but it appeared the both of you had become engaged in conversation. *Back in the day* he kept saying, implying your childhood had taken place in another era when everything was different. *It was only five years ago* you said and he replied *yeah, fucking years ago*. And maybe he was right: that was then.

Concentrating on that/then on the bus, you try to see your past self as someone else entirely. You try to picture your layers of experience as shed skins hanging up in the wardrobe as you're off galivanting in a brand-new epidermal sheath, flitting from scene to scene as a changed being, a different creature from the ones who've come before. But you don't feel changed. What you feel, as far as can be discerned, is like the skins aren't shed, rather they keep accumulating on the same set of bones, getting heavier and heavier yet further and further away from your skeleton so that although you're constantly carrying around their weight, they're also at a remove from the mainframe of you now. Because as much as the stoned person talking to Liam McNamara and the impressed person listening to your Australian auntie and the detached person watching Paul or Tom bleed into the kitchen sink and the unimpressed person in a pop-up bar are united as one by a lack of progress towards any point of life, to that thing that drives others to mold their desires to it, causing them to let go of the attitudes and activities they used to have and do, to move on to their legacies, surrendering to an urge to pass themselves on in genes and values, as much as this is the case, it is also true that when you revisit a memory of yourself you fail to conjure anything more than a one-dimensional avatar who's incapable of complex emotional states: you know that as you were talking to Liam McNamara you were freaking out due to the brownie, wanting him to like you but super anxious about all the eyes on you, about speaking at an inappropriate volume on some delicate matter like Helen Kerr's dad's

academic papers on sterilization, but, other than that, of your quotidian inner-life from that period you have absolutely no insight now, so that it can be stated that you're the proverbial goldfish, swimming round and round its bowl, whose basic integrity never alters despite being caught in a continuous act of forgetting.

Going back to your phone, you search for Liam McNamara. He's remained in a ten-mile radius of your primary school. In his profile picture he's clutching two small children, their cone-like heads a familial identifier. On his face, a beard and three deep lines above his brow make him appear like you never knew him, as this is an adult and not a child nor an adolescent. The boy next to you hacks up and swallows again. The noise emitting from his headphones is as though a group of captive particles is manically scratching through its container in a futile bid for freedom. You focus on his youth: there are mild acne patches and a developing jaw line, but, mainly, there's a total unawareness of what awaits him all over his nonchalant confidence. Knowing that he will age, just like Liam McNamara, and most probably succumb to the forces of change elusive to you, feels utterly devastating.

Notification of a series of messages from Jen slides down from the top bar. You open them and read:

- Not gonna make it tonight
- My job is the worst!
- Sorry!
- Claudia's insisting everyone stay late even though she's gone home
- Fracking knot
- \*fucking knob
- Still on for Friday tho
- Gonna get fucked up
- CANNOT WAIT

Following the last message is an emoji of a round yellow face with lopsided eyebrows, the left eye significantly narrower than the right, its mouth an oscillating squiggle turned up into a crescent-like hook

poking the patch of red on its right cheek. To reply you use a round yellow face in the throes of laughter with tears coming out of both eyes. After that, you send a GIF from Eisenstein's *Strike* of Tsarist police shooting workers, to which Jen responds with three laughing faces rolling on the floor.

The bus lurches forward, providing a fuller view of the accident. Behind the crouched high-res vests there's a mangled bicycle halfway under the front wheel of another bus. In front of them, an ambulance. Your movement is halted again. At this moment, the melody of the manchild's song comes back into your head, though his words have been replaced with *the circumference of a rectangle*, which, as you don't know the rest of the song, has no alternative but to continuously loop, its minor to major shift irritating and inescapable.

You look back down to the round yellow faces on your phone and consider if they represent one individual experiencing a range of emotions or if they're separate individuals defined by the one emotion. The regularity of their face shape and color suggests a consistent wholeness, the same person's features transformed in correspondence with their inner state. But how do you know there is internal consistency between each one? You don't have any evidence proving a base set of reoccurrences ensuring that the inebriated emoji is essentially the same self as the one rolling on the floor laughing. Except for color and shape, there might be no unifying factor between them. In a way, you think it's more manageable if they are separate beings with one feeling each as the alternative has a kind of seediness to it like a raw, naked creature has been laid out for you to drool over, devouring all of their moods, attitudes and reactions, any notion of privacy robbed from them, a savage violation of subjective solitude.

Movement within your peripheral vision causes you to turn your head to see a woman lying on the road, her neck twisted to the right, her blonde hair bloodied. Within no more than three or four seconds she is covered with a blue blanket. Those eyes that were staring directly into yours, you realize, were a dead body's.

Towards the end of Helen Kerr's house party, you and Liam McNamara locked yourselves in one of the bathrooms for twenty-five minutes. Before you left, he told you that his next-door neighbor, a childminder, had just been convicted for the manslaughter of a three-

year-old. It hadn't surprised him because when he was little and looked after there a baby had died from cot death. He remembered his neighbor carrying the tiny body down the stairs, panicking, and then the mother arriving and beginning to wail, the sonic resonance of which lodging itself in his four-year-old psyche in such a strident manner that, in times of stress, he could still hear it now. You very clearly recall thinking of this moment in the toilet stall with your Australian auntie as behind her was a mosaic of graffiti, within which was written *What is existence if you're not desired?*, and you were taken back to exiting the bathroom with Liam McNamara and the contrast between the weight of what he'd just said and the weight of being seen by Claire Walsh and Susan Evans and this feeling of being desired and having others know it. These two weights seemed perfectly, if precariously, balanced, in that as horrifying as knowledge of death and its certainty was, the pleasure of reciprocal passion observed turned living into resistance.

An image of the fleshy, white man in his underwear and bowler hat comes back to you, his facial features of eyes and mouth forming an isosceles triangle. There was nothing readable about him, no clue as to the why, what and how of him and his situation. You wonder if he has any other expressions or if he is defined by one state: blankness. He has perhaps gone from one event to the next in the same unthinking, unfeeling fugue, unable to do or be anything different. You try to see multitudes in him, all the possible permutations of a lived life on the various contortions of his face. *There is a person throughout, a constant singularity* you tell yourself, yet remain unconvinced as every instance of the man as anything other than blankness plays like a contrivance, a fake.

The bus pushes through the last blockage and moves forwards to complete its journey as normal. Locked deep in the interior of the dead woman's eyes it seems to you there was one last enduring thought. After her heart had stopped beating, as her brain's electrical activity was ceasing and as the awareness of no return was fading, she was left with the final, unanswerable, horrifying question: *What am I?*

You push the button for your stop and get up, staggering as the bus judders and stumble down the top steps into the young man in front. Before you can remove your hands from his shoulders and

apologize, he says sorry, so you have to repeat the words twice for it to have effect. He blinks and turns away. On your palms there remains the phantom sensation of possession, the spectral pressure of contact with another physical object. Stepping out into the early spring evening, you succumb and sing along: *the circumference of a rectangle, the circumference of a rectangle . . . .*



**Villainy 04** / Nicole Foran



**Villainy 09** / Nicole Foran

## Trevor in Tenby

Penny Jackson

He could only get one job, and that was calling the Bingo every Friday night. That Welsh winter in Tenby was so cold that the air cracked with rebellion every time he tried to breathe. The memory of Jamaica drifted warmly over his skin like a ray of sun. The Bingo Hall was a roller rink during the day, the scent of teenage sweat still sour it was only women at the Bingo, smoking unfiltered cigarettes, leaving ashy smudges on his cards. They treated Trevor like a celebrity – no one colored had ever been in their town. The women told him if you touched a “wog” it brought good luck. Their fingers felt like fat rolls of pastry. Some even pinched his arm so hard that it left a blue bruise. A few even touched his ass. One old woman, no teeth, spit spraying from her lips: “Come on love, let me grab you again.” They winked at Trevor, rolled their eyes, and wriggled hips forever ruined by children. He could never remember the numbers called. If someone called BINGO he wouldn’t bother to check. He remembered their words: *If you touched a wog the night was magic.*

In his bedsit Trevor could not scrub hard enough. The water was cold. The soap left a thick white veil over his skin. To feel all the women’s fingers all over again. As if his blackness would turn silver into their palms.

**Salvage**

Mickie Kennedy

A stay of leaves,  
a coherence of tree and path.  
Splice of salt among a stumble of stone.  
The thrash of doors unhinging at the rust.  
At the pry of youth a proxy of fruit.  
The wound of absence proceeded  
by the constellation of touch.

The slender killing of a deer.  
Horsehair plaster succumbing to a century of leaks.  
The disregard of hand-cut nails.  
The punctuality of a porch dissembling at dawn,  
the memory of one plank at a time.  
The blue orchard rounded to the nearest acre.  
Burn barrels along the rows to smoke out the blight.

A larder of bustle reduced to a rounded fist.  
A bottle of the half-turned wine.  
A summoning of cardinals.  
An eclipse of reds and grays.  
The dialogue of months  
against a scatter of squirrel and moss.  
What catches in the throat?



**Quilted Landscape** / Christina Klein

## The Tower Bells

Alli Parrett

Doctor Cate comes into my room to sit with me like she does every night before she goes home. She tells me not to use her last name—too formal for friends, she says. I'm delighted that she calls me her friend though she's only known me a few months.

Awful business being stuck in a bed all day. Not long ago I used to have these talks with Doctor Cat while she walked me around the church next to the hospital. Same one I got married in forty-six years ago, then buried my husband in forty-two years after that. He wore blue both times. Dying isn't a pretty business, no matter how hard we try. I miss him but am thankful he can't see me this way.

The tower bells ring calling the end of Doctor Cate's shift. She squeezes my hand gently between her own and says she'll see me tomorrow. Though I'd never tell her, it hope it's the last time I hear those church bells.

The tower bells go off at the church. An end of the day for some. For me, another reminder that I've missed the visiting hours at my mother's hospital. I steal a look out the window evading notice from my boss and wonder how she's doing. She is hearing the same chimes. It won't be like this forever, I tell myself. My heart twinges.

I am still at my desk staring at the same report carrying out new tasks at my boss's request. My mother is still in her bed with nothing new on television, still complaining to the nurses. At least she has Doctor Cate. She says she likes her. Sometimes, when there weren't a lot of people, Doctor Cate took her inside. It was where she and my father got married, where they baptized me, where they went to church every Sunday even after I stopped going with them. Where she buried my father three years ago. She stopped going after that.

Tomorrow I will have time.

The morning is still dark. The hospital's number displays itself across my phone. Doctor Cate gives me news I both hoped and dreaded for months. My chest twists like a dish rag being rung.

## A Life in Four Operations

Kim Waters

### I Addition

It begins  
in the classroom heat  
of a late August afternoon,  
a lead pencil lagging  
on your tongue  
as the numbers squelch  
under your squint  
because at that age  
you're growing flesh,  
gathering  
what's around you  
and trying to make sense  
of a Cuisenaire box set  
of Panglossian colored columns.

### II Subtraction

No longer satisfied  
with what's presented  
on the paper before you,  
rebellion  
kicks its heels in  
and like an unhung handset  
in a public telephone booth  
you're an adolescent  
hovering in space,  
counting backwards  
in a minor chord,  
thinking you know best,  
even though  
what you're left with

is less than before.

### III Multiplication

With two x chromosomes  
you're going to need  
a bigger house,  
more garage tools  
and kitchen utensils  
for the children  
who have begun  
to appear  
in your own image  
and suddenly life  
becomes a tic tac toe,  
a cross-stitch  
with your family name  
embroidered  
in the hallway.

### IV Division

Finally,  
it comes down to this,  
time reversing  
in on itself,  
downsizing  
to a nursing home,  
belongings gone,  
a morse code  
of dots and dashes,  
the SOS of death  
until you're gone  
and an obelus appears  
in the partition  
of your estate.

## The Man Who Misspelled God

Mekiya Walters

I'd never heard Paganino Paganini raise his voice before the day that Gabiano's letter came. Alessandro, his only son, had taken over the printing business years before I came onboard, but Master Paganino still involved himself when his health permitted, reviewing accounts and editorial decisions, sometimes touring the workroom, reprimanding a man or two for shoddy work or laziness; but he never spent his passions on us. He had a jagged face and a rigid spine and more commitment to the ideal of mediocrity than any patrician, breaking fast each morning with the same dry crust, the same handful of olives as a poor man, unmoved by the mercantile world's vicissitudes.

And yet his voice rose now behind Alessandro's study door, and fell, and rose again, and all motion on the press floor slowed as the sound of unfamiliar fury drew us from our work—all but Lorenzo, the *battitore*, who continued swabbing ink onto the block of type that he and I had just maneuvered onto our press's carriage, his rhythm stoic and unbroken, for he was hard of hearing.

It was a humid day in spring, a few weeks after the Feast of the Ascension, when we and every other printer in Venice had set up open-air booths in St. Mark's Square. Meager profits, but that was how the fair went every year. Since then, things had been looking up. In the front room, elaborately clad men perused the catalog by the window and the second-hand books in the shop's northwest corner, some looking over the unbound volumes heaped along the walls and on the outdoor tables, shielded by an alabaster awning from the sun. A breeze fingered the unbound pages, mixing the smells of Mercerie Street—perfume and sewage and flowers and sea—and bearing them back to us in the workroom, through the cracked-open door, along with the customers' voices. We had our own damp miasma on the work floor—sweat and moist paper and the mineral-sharp bite of tincture—as did the slave quarters at the back of the shop: spice, shit, cooking oil, and whatever garbage had been dumped in the alley the night before. Alessandro's study and the servants' rooms were on the ground floor,

too. The Paganinis lived above us, and only with permission did any of us ascend the stairs. I imagined that they kept their windows open.

Through the door to the front room, I could see Pietro, the compositor, doing his best to maintain his composure, running a delicate finger down the ledger as a gray-voiced man I couldn't see struck him with question after question, quick as a jousting knight, not waiting for an answer to each one before delivering the next: "How much will the binding cost?" and, "How many days?" and, "You know, the prices aren't as good here as what I've seen in Bavaria."

This was Pietro's first time behind the counter. Alessandro had pulled him from the work floor while he and his father retreated to the study to look the letter over. This had never happened before.

My attention was still on Pietro when a thud came from the study. I turned. A savage yell, and then the heavy walnut door crashed open and disgorged Alessandro, who stumbled into the nearest press—mine—and jolted loose the paper I'd been securing to the gauge pins. A slash of crimson above his eye. He raised an arm to deflect a second projectile: a bone-sharp crack, and something rattled across the floor. Alessandro clutched his arm. Enough flesh, I couldn't help thinking, to protect him from everything but a bruise. Over the years his robust appetite and taste for wine had stripped him of his father's visage, softened his edges. He reminded me of a sea urchin I'd once found as a boy washed up on the Ifriqiyan shore, so thoroughly encrusted in algae that its spikes were nearly hidden. Even then, I'd known better than to pick it up.

Master Paganino stood in the doorway, emotion sewing up his silver brows and rutted cheeks, looking like nothing so much as a wooden pillar eaten through by termites, about the crumble. Had the breeze from the street not abated, I'd have feared it would disperse him. On again, off again since 1509, he had been ill, as if the defeat at Agnadello, the loss of so much land from the Republic, had effected in him an equivalent diminishment of spirits—but I'd never seen him look so frail as he did then. Perhaps he knew, as animals do, that he would be dead within the year. Or perhaps fury had blasted all thoughts, even those of mortality, from his brain.

"You've ruined us," he said.

"For God's sake," Alessandro hissed, "not here."

Even Lorenzo had turned to watch the drama, quick, dark eyes following our employers' lips, an ink-stained leather paddle forgotten in each hand.

"Why not here?" Master Paganino demanded. "These men, Alessandro—" and with a twitch of his arm, he brought us all into the fold, "—till their contracts expire, they're your flesh and blood."

Alessandro, terse, resentful, nursed his arm.

"You can lie to your betters," Master Paganino pressed on, "hide from your peers, but don't think you'll deceive your servants. They feed on secrets as we feed on bread."

I glanced at Alessandro, expecting indignation—he thought well of himself as a man of the people: what could his father tell him of the working class?—but his pride had been shattered. I could see it in the slump of his shoulders. I didn't like witnessing this confrontation, though I'd developed no great affection for either of the Paganinis while in their employ. Like Master Paganino, my father had been a frugal man, and pious as Abraham, and because decades had passed since we'd parted, and his face had faded in my mind, it was the elder Paganini's that came before me sometimes when I tried to call it up. Alessandro's impudence irritated me as it irritates me to see a man toss a perfectly good crust in the gutter—a precious paternal resource squandered.

"My son," Master Paganino declared, raising his voice to make us all his audience, "knows nothing of prudence. How many times, Alessandro, how many times did I tell you—that book—that goddamned book—"

Only a fool would have to guess which of our books he was referring to.

It was only then that I noticed Caterina in the doorway to the slaves' quarters. A tall girl, sinewy, but something less than sturdy-looking, and a few shades darker yet again than me. She'd once been attractive, I imagined, or nearly so, but now her cheeks bore pockmarks, and her hair had grown prematurely gray. She'd been with the Paganinis longer than any of us, traveling with Master Paganino when he visited Venice or Isola del Garda while his wife Christina stayed behind in Toscolano to oversee the paper mill. Caterina was the only woman in the house this year, for Alessandro's Daria, too, had

stayed in Toscolano to look after the mill and her mother-in-law. Were it not for Caterina's childlessness, she would most likely have been ejected from the household long ago. As it was, Christina tolerated her.

Master Paganino looked about to lay hands on his son again. Then he swayed, barely managing to catch hold of the doorframe. He'd forgotten his silver-tipped cane.

In an instant, Caterina was at Master Paganino's side, ducking under his arm and taking his weight with a grimace.

"You've gambled away these men's bread," Master Paganino said, hardly aware, it seemed, of the woman supporting him. His eyes never left Alessandro's. "When they starve, who do you think they'll turn on?"

I felt as if, halfway through stepping into a boat, a wave had come along and set it rocking beneath me.

Caterina leaned her weight into her charge, and like a horse guided by a skillful rider, he acquiesced and shuffled toward the stairs. I'd once overheard her trying to convince him to take a room on the ground floor, but he'd refused. The ground floor was for servants, he'd insisted, and Jews. Even Alessandro's friend, the polyglot Jew with the lazy eye who came to stay with us last autumn, had slept on a bedroll next to mine, despite the precious service he was rendering at no cost but room and board. No exceptions to the household rules.

Caterina had relented, had not brought it up again.

We all watched them climb the stairs, Caterina's whole frame angling to bear Master Paganino's weight. Only when they'd reached the first-floor landing did Alessandro turn to us.

"Well?" he demanded. As if we were the ones obliged to explain ourselves. A tremulous note rang in his voice. "His mind is going," he said. "I can assure you, it's not as bad as he thinks. He sees mountains, I only see small stones. He hasn't got the energy—but do I look worried? No. You shouldn't be, either." His hand fluttered to his forehead absently. He glanced at his fingers as if distracted, then wiped the blood on the pleat of his *giornea*. "We only go hungry if we stop the presses. Let's not let that happen."

He retreated into his study and shut the door.

Lorenzo's eyes met mine across the bed of type. The sheet of paper that I'd let slip had folded over onto the inky bed. It would have

to be discarded. I removed it gingerly, carried it to the short stack of rejects in the corner, and returned with a fresh one.

“What the hell’s going on back here?” Pietro’s head poked in from the front room. He eyed the study door. “Is he in there?”

Nods all around the work floor.

“Master Alessandro!” Pietro called. When no answer came, he crossed to the door and rapped hard on the walnut with his knuckles, ignoring the knocker in the shape of the Paganini family seal. “A customer wants to speak to you, sir. He’s asking about prices. What should I tell him?”

Lorenzo caught my eye and gave his head a little shake, as if to dislodge water from his ear. I shot back something that would have liked to be a smile.

“I haven’t got a clue where anything is,” Pietro muttered, to us, it seemed, “or how much he’s asking for it. And I can’t read his handwriting.” He glanced at the door as if hoping to find instructions scrawled there in a legible hand. “If he doesn’t come out, we might as well close the shop.”

“Should we shut the presses down, too?” This from Matteo, the second *tiratore*.

“No,” I said.

There was no clear chain of command in the printing house beneath the Paganinis. Normally in their absence, authority fell to whomever they explicitly left in charge. As a journeyman and first *tiratore*, though, I thought I had a fairly strong claim to seniority. And my gut told me that shutting down the presses would mean more than half a day of lost profits—would mean acknowledging that something had begun to shift beneath our feet, something none of us could control. That our livelihoods here at the press were in jeopardy.

“You heard Alessandro,” I added. “Do you want to go hungry?”

Pietro jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “Do *you* want to get out there and manage the mob?”

“Close up the front, then,” I said. “We’ll keep the presses running.”

Sometimes men want nothing more than to be given clear instructions. This was one of those occasions, evidently.

The creak of wood, the scrape of paper, the squalling of ungreased screws resumed. Lorenzo and I folded down the frisket and the tympan, rolled the carriage under the till, and I took hold of the iron bar and heaved to turn the screw and drive the platen down so that the ink would kiss the paper. In the background, Pietro attempted to maneuver confused customers out of the shop, announcing that the backroom had flooded, that we would need a day to clean up, maybe two.

He returned a few minutes later, looking a bit calmer, though no less haggard, and took a seat on the edge of the nearest workbench. “What do you think he’s gone and done now?” he asked, his voice low enough that it wouldn’t reach the study.

“God only knows,” said Giorgio, Matteo’s *battitore*.

Lorenzo made the sign of the cross, eyed me sardonically, and stuck out his tongue. I stuck mine out, too.

“Something’s gone wrong with the Koran,” Matteo said. “It’s got to be.”

I did my best to look as if I hadn’t heard, but anyone could have seen the hairs on my neck standing.

Pietro, sardonically: “And what could possibly have gone wrong with that?”

From the beginning, Master Paganino had disapproved of Alessandro’s ambition to print the Qur’an—never mind that it was Paganino’s friend Gregori’s *Kitab Salat al-Sarwa’i* that had inspired the enterprise, and that Gregori’s Arabic typeface had served as Alessandro’s first model. Gregori had been the first printer in Venice—in the world, as far as any of us knew—to solve the principal problem in printing Arabic, that of joining up the ligatures. Alessandro had always fancied himself a visionary, ready to shatter all the staid conventions to which his father cleaved—also a cosmopolitan, at ease with Jews and Muslim, sheikhs and slaves—and Arabic printing was the sort of thing he would have liked to put his name on. It galled him that someone else had gotten there first. But Gregori only intended to sell the book of hours that he’d printed to Arab Christians in the East—a niche market. Alessandro had hatched a grander plan.

Since I’d entered his employ, Alessandro had developed a habit of pulling me aside at odd hours—sometimes after the work was finished, sometimes in the middle of a print run—and interrogating

me about my upbringing in Ifriquiya, trawling for exotic details with which to enrich his vision of the world. He liked extracting stories from travelers, too, and from his many business connections, and from all this, he'd gathered that most Muslim households couldn't afford a Qur'an and depended on the copy available at the local mosque. He understood that the book could not be printed except by hand, and that this was an expensive undertaking, and he'd probably assumed that this owed solely to the technical challenges of joining ligatures and juggling a multitude of contextual letterforms. Maybe I should have corrected him. But I was only a machinist. This wasn't my job. And anyhow, it had seemed possible at the time that I might be mistaken. The Christians, after all, saw no sin in mass-producing holy books, and besides, I'd come from the countryside, an olive farm on the outskirts of Tunis. I knew little of the Eastern cities. Maybe Ottoman buyers *would* take interest in a printed Qur'an.

Master Paganino didn't trust Saracens, wanted nothing to do with them. He'd already handed the reigns to his son, though, and went months sometimes without leaving his bed. He'd had no choice but to trust Alessandro. I'd done the same.

And so Alessandro had hunted down Gregori's typeface and bought it off him in 1515. But he hadn't been satisfied. The following year, the Genoese Giustiniani published a polyglot Bible, partly in Arabic, using a different typeface, which Alessandro had also moved to purchase; but this one, too, had failed to meet with his approval. In the end, he'd gone and engraved his own elaborate set of punches and matrices, spending a small fortune on lead, steel, and copper, smelting and chiseling all through the dawn and midnight hours, stomping around the workshop in a short-tempered haze while discarded prototypes piled up in waste bins. What flaws a man who read no Arabic could have found in the first two sets, I'd never fathomed, but at a certain point, one learned not to question Alessandro.

"He's always been a gambler," Matteo said. "And his father can go on about prudence all day, but they caught him minting counterfeit coins once." He took a sheet of paper from the workbench and set about securing it to his press. "In my opinion, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

“That’s only a rumor,” Pietro said. “And Mamádo’s right. Let’s finish the run, at least. No point speculating.”

Alessandro had always refused to call me by the Tuscan name I’d received from my first and only master, an apothecary, years ago. When he hired me, he’d insisted that I tell him my given name, Mamdouh. He hadn’t much appreciated my attempts to correct his pronunciation, though. And so, I’d become Mamádo.

A second passed, and then another, and I realized that at the mention of my name, uncomfortable stillness had descended on the workroom. Nobody was looking at me.

“Once we’ve got something done,” Pietro said, “we can close up shop, even if it’s a bit early. I could use a drink.”

My authority seemed to have slipped away as easily as it had come, yielding to an unspoken agreement that I should be excluded from any further discussion of the Qur’an.

Work resumed. I understood my colleagues’ desire to mull things over privately without having to guard their tongues, but that did not dampen my frustration. In all my years as a *tiratore*, I’d spoken of my faith to no one except Alessandro, and then only under duress. I had not held myself apart, even when the other men tossed back drinks or mumbled prayers, though I hadn’t partaken, either. Most days, my fellow printers treated me no differently than any other *tiratore*. Still, they knew I wasn’t Christian.

“Should we be wasting our money on wine?” I heard Matteo murmur to Giorgio at the other press. “If our salary’s in question?”

“Have you got something better to spend it on?” Giorgio shot back.

“I have, as a matter of fact. I’ve got my family to feed.”

I tried to focus on the rhythm of the work, the resistance in the bar. I felt a kinship with both, and neither. I agreed that wine seemed foolish, but I had no family to feed. Which was to say that I no longer knew if I had a family, or if they needed feeding. Which was to say that I’d had a family, once, that I’d once fed them, and that as a consequence, I was here. No idea if they’d survived the droughts or the Hafsids’ ousting, stayed in Tunis or sought shelter among the Amizaghs in the hills. Sometimes I wondered. Sometimes—but what kind of workingman has time for such thoughts? Wasn’t I stockpiling

coins in my mattress, just in case? And wouldn't I send that money back to them if ever an opportunity came? Did any day contain enough hours to do anything more? How many thousands of times had I thrown my weight against the bar? How many tens of thousands of times had I raised the platen, rolled back the carriage, extracted the glistening, neatly printed sheets, and carried them to the workbench to stack atop their fellows? How many millions of pages had the workbench borne? On a good day, we could average three thousand, the evidence of our labor piling up around us. This day, though, was not a good one.

For the first time in years, I began wondering how many more pages I would have to secure. I'd grown adept at ignoring the ache in my shoulders, but I couldn't prevent my mind from flitting to and fro, alighting on discomfort first, then curiosity, and then unease. I would have food and shelter that night, and perhaps the next, but for how many more thereafter?

Quite some time had passed since Caterina had helped Master Paganino up the stairs, and no one had come back down. To distract myself, I resumed a familiar habit: entertaining suspicions and dismissing them. Some women never could bear children, after all, no matter what was done to them, and Master Paganino would be an unusual man indeed if he'd never taken advantage of what was his. Yet I found I had little difficulty believing that he was, indeed, an unusual man. There was something about the sheer indifference that he showed her, unmarred by any trace of embarrassment or contradiction—this from a man who'd built his reputation on Christian books and narrow scruples. A Cypriot who used to serve the Paganinis had told me once how he'd entered Master Paganino's room and found him stretched on the bed and Caterina at the bottom of the bedroll, his feet in her hands, working over the callouses with her strange, stubby thumbs as he'd stared heavenward, utterly distracted by nothing at all, his face blanker than paper. Caterina, for her part, never showed any outward sign of love or hatred, disgust or affection: just a sort of ritualistic devotion, not unlike that of old women in prayer, arthritic limbs creaking with the effort of prostration, unaware that not everyone endured this pain.

It would have been different with Alessandro as head of household—Alessandro, who never missed an opportunity to get his hands dirty. More than once, I'd watched him strike up conversations with riffraff and beggar-men, servants and slaves, pursuing one-sided discourses with half-savage domestics ignorant of his language and indifferent to his company, and, when the objects of his interest ignored or rebuffed him, becoming impatient and venting his anger on them, or on whatever other unlucky man happened to be standing nearby, with blows. I found so many of his habits irritating, and so little in his nature to redeem him, and yet as night began to fall, my thoughts returned to him like blackbirds circling back toward a chimney. Whatever had gone wrong with the Qur'an would land on both of us, after all, and such circumstances have been known to effect bonds between men where none would otherwise exist. It was such a bond, such a concern, that I felt forming then.

We finished the run just as the lamplighters came along Mercerie Street, nimbly wielding their unruly poles. A Tartar boy, a new slave whose name I didn't know, came around the work floor, scaling stools and benches to reach the lamps and light them. Lorenzo and Giorgio took their beaters into the alley behind the shop to clean them, while Pietro set about disassembling the type that he'd set that morning, removing the sorts one by one and rinsing them in a pan.

As *tiratore*, my responsibilities included ensuring that my press was properly greased and readied for the next day's labor, but I struggled to concentrate on these tasks, my attention hovering by Alessandro's study door, which had remained shut all afternoon, silence piling up behind it like dark clouds on the horizon.

I scoured the workroom, peering under benches until I came upon the object that Master Paganino had thrown at his son: an oversized leaden sort, slightly deformed, but clearly an attempt at the medial form of ba'. Unlike the rest of the rejects, which Alessandro had relegated to the waste bin, this one had been promoted to paperweight.

I carried the ba' to Alessandro's study and knocked, and when no answer came, I pushed the door and found it yielding. I went in.

Alessandro sat with his legs stretched out beneath his desk, a hand over his mouth and chin, gazing into the middle distance. He might have been sitting there for days or decades, a statue carved to

capture every facet of despair. The darkness in the room was nearly absolute. An unlit lamp sat near at hand.

“Sir,” I said, placing the ba’ on the desk and taking a seat across from him, “if I may ask, in the event that there’s a problem—that the press—” I couldn’t decide how to phrase the question. After a long hesitation, I asked, “What will happen to my contract?”

Alessandro looked at me as if the act of recalling my name would have taken more effort than remained to him. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know what will happen to any of us.”

This uncertainty, the cracks branching out through the floors of the future—it occurred to me that this was more or less what Caterina had been living with for years. Since 1509, at least, and probably much longer. I couldn’t quite imagine Master Paganino ever putting her up for sale, certainly not unless he fell into a truly desperate situation, and yet I also understood, as every slave understands, that this is the one way in which our masters can deceive us. And themselves.

Perhaps I could consult her. Learn how she readied herself each day for the unknown future. But no. She was one of those slaves who’d made an art of bondage, who let slip nothing that the masters wouldn’t want to hear, whether or not they were listening. Even if I approached her as a fellow who’d once worn chains, I knew that I would get no more from her than I could from a cobblestone.

“This mountain,” I said to Alessandro, “that you say is merely stones. What is it really?”

Alessandro rubbed his mouth and drew his hand down to his chin. I couldn’t tell whether he was looking at me or into some abyss. “Gabiano’s man’s been taken into custody,” he said. “The Sultan wants his head. They’ve scheduled him for execution. And his ship’s been scuttled. All the type and printed copies, all at the bottom of Constantinople’s harbor.”

I shouldn’t have had to ask the next question. I should have known. But the longer I’d lived in this city of Christians, the muddier things had become. I’d been a free man and a slave in Tunis and in Venice, a farmer and a merchant, a treacherous domestic and a loyal apprentice and, finally, a trusted journeyman, and I’d encountered so many peculiarities along the way that I no longer felt capable of either

surprise or intuition regarding what was right or natural for men. These days, I needed things spelled out for me.

Besides, if I didn't ask, my silence might arouse Alessandro's suspicions.

I heard my voice in the darkness: "Why?"

"For blasphemy," he said.

A weight settled on me, then—as if I'd lain down between the platen and the paper. My mouth grew dry, and all through my body, an ache struck up its steady drum, part hunger, part fear, part weariness.

"The envoy's Gabiano's cousin," Alessandro said. "He intends to lobby for his release. He's demanding that we send a thousand ducats."

"A *thousand!*" Surely, any man worth such a sum should never have been sent behind enemy lines. But perhaps not every coin was meant for Constantinople.

Alessandro nodded, grave.

A thousand ducats would ruin the press. A great deal had already been spent on printing Holy Book. In addition to purchasing the two sets of type and engraving a third, Alessandro had sunk a truly magnificent sum into setting up a branch of his printing house in Constantinople—without, as far as I knew, ever securing permission from the Sultan or any other authority. Now the raw materials for that enterprise lay at the bottom of a Levantine harbor.

At the very least, I thought, he'd saved money on proofreaders.

"Mamádo," Alessandro said, sitting forward suddenly, hope lighting up his face, "Mamádo—these Turks. You're familiar with them, aren't you? They're more or less your countrymen. Perhaps you could draft a letter on my behalf, and Gabiano's. Surely you could reason with them more effectively than a Christian."

I shook my head. "I know nothing of the Turks, sir. Their homeland's nearer yours than mine."

"But you're from Ifriqiya, aren't you? They own Tunis."

"They took it four years ago," I said. "I've been here for more than twice that."

"No matter." Alessandro waved away the minor inconveniences of time and geography as if swatting at fruit flies. "You

worship the same God. Perhaps you can make them understand that we meant no offense. Smooth things over.”

“I know nothing of the arts of persuasion,” I said. “I’m just a *tiratore*.”

In truth, I had no desire to get mixed up in these negotiations. Far from lending weight to my words, I suspected that my being a Muslim would invite the wrath that only a traitor can earn. I knew, after all, or should have known that even if every line of type was rendered perfectly—a standard that very few composers had ever achieved—God’s word still deserved better: the painstaking, hands-on, years-long labor of hunch-backed scribes and rubricators, the enduring human touch, the dedication and the sacrifice. And yet I’d given my labor to the Paganinis and, for room and board and a handful of ducats every month, sanctioned their irreverent undertaking.

The Sultan probably wouldn’t bother sending agents as far west as Venice in pursuit of a *tiratore*’s head. Probably. But it wasn’t impossible.

“Please, Mamádo,” Alessandro said. “I shouldn’t have to remind you what this means for all of us. If the press goes under, your contract’s void. I can’t help that. But maybe you can.”

His fears, of course, were rational—more rational than mine. The future of the press was the immediate thing. All else was hypothetical. But another, awful thought had squeezed into my mind: that at any moment, Alessandro, possessed by fear and by the thought that I might save him, would leap up and bolt the door, light the lamp, place pen and stationery before me, and demand that I compose a letter to the Sultan. And I would not know what to do.

I’d never told him outright that I read or wrote classical Arabic—never lied. But neither had I corrected him. I’d learned the alphabet, of course, as a child, cross-legged on the floor of the kuttab with the rest of the boys from the outskirts of Tunis, filling our tablets with copied-out letterforms, but I’d been a poor student, always tired, mind occupied by matters of soil and sun and how to pack as many olives onto a cart as possible without any escaping. My father had shown me how to keep accounts and records, and I felt certain that if Alessandro were to set an invoice or an order form before me, all these years later, I could have completed it with ease. But there’d been no

treatises on my father's shelves, no poetry. In Venice, years after leaving his drought-ravaged farm, I'd acquired a passing familiarity with the Latin script, but upon gaining freedom from the Tuscan apothecary, I'd sought apprenticeship with a printer not because I'd considered myself a man of letters, but only because their elaborate machines, replete with bars and central screws, had looked, to me, like olive presses.

When I'd learned, soon after Alessandro hired me, that he had designs on printing the Holy Qur'an, it had dawned on me that he might have brought me on specifically to help with this project. If I proved useless, I might soon find myself back on the streets, replaced by some more knowledgeable man. And so I'd suppressed my unease, though deep down I'd sensed the disaster that mishandling the words of God might bring. Alessandro's friend, the Jew he'd picked up from the ghetto who claimed to speak fifteen languages, though he begged most days for food, had stayed with us during the Qur'an's production, standing over Pietro's shoulder as he'd arranged the Arabic type in mimicry of the hand-printed manuscript that Alessandro had obtained at auction, occasionally making corrections, pointing out subtle distinctions between the letterforms. Once the first copy of each page was done, it had been passed to me, and at Alessandro's orders, I'd run my eyes from top to bottom, right to left, and, only half comprehending the intricate script, declared their work sound.

It came to me then that I, not Alessandro, was responsible for our situation.

"I wish he were dead," said Alessandro. I could no longer see his face in the darkness. "He could've had the decency to pass before the letter came," he added, "but no. He's hung on for years just so he could see me run the press into the ground. He knows I've got more vision in my little finger than he could ever dream of. He never could stand it. He's always wanted to see me fail. I bet he's up there working over a speech right now, dreaming of putting me in my place when I go up to see him. Well—I won't go. He can rot there!"

Quick as an insect, Alessandro flung the ba' I'd recovered so hard that stone chips from the wall behind me stung my neck and arm.

I flinched. "God will hear you."

“God can hear my thoughts, and his. He’ll decide who’s the bigger prick.”

I imagined my own thoughts running into God’s ear alongside Alessandro’s and his father’s—languages mixing, a muddied stream, a Muslim prayer wafting up from this Christian city like a lone white dove amid a flock of sparrows—and it was as if a stopper had been removed and all the Venetian words had gone swirling from my mind and down a long, dark drain. I opened my mouth, and darkness, thick and bitter as tar, flowed in. Never before had I been so evacuated by language, so full of night, as I was then. A single thought blossomed at the center of my mind: that I must remove myself from the study as quickly as possible, before I was called upon to speak.

But my limbs refused to answer.

Perhaps if I held my breath, Alessandro would simply go on talking, requiring nothing but that I listen. Perhaps he would even forget that I sat there, hidden by darkness, my presence increasingly irrelevant to his soliloquy. I knew I’d already faded into the background as images of his father swam before him. Then again, he never really saw anything but his own reflection.

I lost the sense his words as my mind twisted around itself, a serpent snapping at its own tail. I could no longer hear anything but my own echo.

When the lean season had come, when my father had realized that our debts had swollen too large and that we would not turn a profit that year or the next, an agreement had been reached between us, and we’d made a journey to the slave market in Tunis, a journey from which only he’d returned. That morning has faded, dispersed like dust, but I remember the night before with vivid clarity. In my mind, it’s the same night that we reached our resolution, though in truth, a week or so probably passed. I still recall the way he watched me without turning to face me as we sat side by side against the earthen wall of the family room, a dinner tray on the floor between us, our fingers still glistening, trading a few words now and then, sounds that meant less than the silence between them, both of us knowing that we were equals, finally, men. I’ve always felt certain that no matter how desperate our family became, he would not have forced me into bondage had I not agreed. I couldn’t explain where this certainty came

from. Perhaps from the look in his eye, the set of his jaw, half in shadow as the lamplight flickered on him—but the eyes, the jaw, the silver brows and ruttled cheeks, are Master Paganino's.

I'd entered Venice on a slave ship, knowing that my family would live for months on the sum I'd fetched, and that all in all, I was lucky: we'd done business with Venetian merchants back in Tunis, and I could survive with their tongue. From there I'd fallen into the hands of the apothecary, who'd done me a great service without knowing it by concocting illicit substances, which he'd peddled in the alleys. I'd reported his activities to the authorities, and the city had rewarded me with manumission.

But with liberty had come a new disease. As long as I'd labored in bondage, I'd found it possible to put thoughts of my family from my mind. Of course I missed them, but it was a simple, selfish yearning. I'd already sold my flesh that they might eat: I owed them nothing more. But once I apprenticed myself to a printer and started ferreting liras away, a strange and unexpected feeling—guilt, or one of its toothy cousins—had begun to gnaw. All through the days and restless nights, I'd told myself conflicting things. That as soon as I had a few hours to spare, I would go to the harbor and find a traveler willing to carry a message to Tunis. That I would wait until I'd saved enough to purchase property, then mount my own expedition. That resenting my family for what they'd done, hoping the Turks had enslaved them, or maybe just run them off into the hills, could not be excused, and so must be atoned for. That no matter how I felt or what I did, we'd parted ways till heaven.

Yet as my years in the lands of the Christians piled up, as my own faith grew ever more confused, as I forgot which way was East, as I forgot my father's face—my mother's, brothers', sister's, too—as the Traverse shrank before me, even the prospect of posthumous reunion grew dim. I recalled the mendicant Sufis who used to shun the mosques and preach instead in city squares, proclaiming that no coin compared to the treasure of God. My father used to echo them whenever his children complained of hunger. But the droughts had lengthened, and God's treasure couldn't purchase poultry in the markets, and a false note had crept into his voice, a fearful one. Eventually, I would hear the selfsame tremor in my own. I'd never felt

myself to be a greedy man, but as years passed, I began to fear that, somehow, I'd gone astray, thinking of olives when I should have been studying, sewing man's coins, not God's, into my bedroll. On both sides of the sea, I heard men talk of poverty as if the purse weighs leaden on the soul, and the only way to Heaven is to cut them free. On this point, it seems, if on no other, Christians and Muslims can agree. And yet time and again, despite this consensus among holy men, I'd seen want lead only to baseness and misery.

But perhaps the fault lay with the men and not the principle: my father, who'd sold his flesh and blood; Master Paganino, ready at any minute to humiliate his son; and myself, of course, with my excuses.

Then and there, in Alessandro's study, I resolved that I would correct the error of my ways. I would go in search of a religious teacher. There were other Muslims in the Republic, after all. I would find them. I would find out how they got along, would start to pray again, would make a ritual of attending the public debates between the monks and Sufis. I would educate myself until I could scour every page of the Qur'an and understand where I'd gone wrong—if not to secure my place in Heaven, then at least to ensure that my punishment would not be in vain. I would bury myself in scripture until I could debate the most respected *'ulamas*, the most learned imams—until I could write my own eternal sentence in Arabic if need be.

Then a knock came at the study door.

Alessandro raised his head.

Ochre light fell on the limestone floor around the shadow of a woman as the door creaked open. "Master Alessandro," Caterina said. "Master Paganino wants you."

I couldn't see her face because the light was behind her. I doubt that I could have deduced much from it even if I had.

"Tell him he can have his business if that's what he wants," Alessandro said. "I'm not going up there."

"He's weak," Caterina said. "He spent too much of his strength today. He wants to see his only son before he sleeps. He'll wake tomorrow, God willing."

A muscle worked in Alessandro's jaw. He looked about to cry.

“I should go,” I said, rising from the chair. The heel of my sandal hit something on the floor—the ba’—and sent it rattling into the shadows.

“Mamádo,” Alessandro said, leaning forward, elbows on his desk, “Mamádo—” but then he stopped, as if he’d spoken without knowing what he meant to say.

I felt drawn, as if by a powerful ocean current, toward Caterina and the door, but I held myself there for a moment, suspended between opposing forces, waiting for Alessandro’s command.

“Go,” he said, and put his head in his hands.

I left the study, slipped past Caterina, and went to my room.

Had someone asked me then, I could not have explained what I was doing. I moved as if God Himself had taken hold of my limbs, steering me to the corner and guiding the blade as I slit open the bedroll and pulled out handfuls of coins without bothering to count them, enough that despite my clumsy clutching, they ran through my fingers. I went back out onto the empty work floor. Stacks of black paper lay on the workbenches alongside beaters and sorts left out to dry on rough gray cloths. Caterina had just shut Alessandro’s door. She looked like a tree growing up through the limestone, ancient and lightning-struck. I closed the distance between us so swiftly that her eyes widened and she seemed to shrink from me. I tried to press the coins into her hands.

She wouldn’t take them. She looked down at them, then up at me, her eyes two blunted iron nubs. A hint of a curl crept along her lip.

I pushed the coins against her breast so hard that she staggered half a step. A few of them clattered to the floor. She caught my hands and accepted the rest, for the sake of silence, I think, eyes flicking to the study, to the stairs, then back to me. For a few seconds we stood like that. I could feel a vein in her cold wrist pulsing. Then she turned and vanished into the slaves’ quarters.

I stood in the deserted workroom. A terrible exhaustion swept down on me and stole the strength from my limbs. The flickering lamplight breathed life into the grain of Alessandro’s door and set it writhing.

I went back to my room, lay on my back, and shut my eyes, but I couldn’t sleep. Pious, tempestuous thoughts assailed me. I

shivered from head to toe, though the night was warm, shot through with a strange and zealous fury, certain that it would stay with me for years to come, sustaining me—that soon I would neither eat nor drink, that I would grow hard and lean and certain where I had always been opportunistic and not quite generous enough, and not quite kind. I would reform myself so that no disaster like this would ever again have reason to befall me. Any other end to this turbulent day seemed impossible.

How easily we deceive ourselves.

In the years to come, I would not find a religious teacher. Nor, I must admit, would I devote myself in earnest to the search for one. I would move from press to press—the Paganinis', in fact, did fold—and here and there, when I found time between mechanical duties, I would pray. But the passion that seized me that evening would dissipate as quickly as it had come—as if it had been necessary for one thing and one thing only, and, with the completion of that task, it was allowed to fade.

Except that if my short-lived revelation really achieved its purpose, then how to square it with what happened a few days later, when I retired to my room and found my bedroll stuffed again with coins?

For a few brief hours, I let myself imagine a miracle. My good deed had been acknowledged and paid back in kind. The treasures of man and those of God were not so different after all. So I told myself. So I believed. But after some time, my mind began to clear, and I saw myself, and Caterina, and the world once again for what we were. My assaulting her with coins began to seem a very Alessandro thing to do.

To this day, I can't explain why she returned the money. Perhaps, all along, she was more a slave in spirit than in body. Or perhaps her faith was simply stronger than mine.

Three months later, the elder Paganini died. Word reached me that he'd willed Caterina to one of his associates. I would never see her again after leaving the press. I do not know if she was ever freed.

On Alessandro's orders, all the Qur'ans not sent to the East were burned except for two galleys. I don't know what happened to those. Nor do I know what befell Alessandro's Arabic punches and matrices. Countless men would have paid no small sum for them,

perhaps even enough to let the press limp along for a few more years, but I doubt that they ever went to auction. Alessandro was an all-or-nothing sort of man. He never printed another book. His father's will named him sole heir to the estate in Toscolano, but as no rumor of disaster there has found its way back to me, I can only imagine that Daria runs the mill now.

Hour by hour, day by day, I train myself to do the work before me as I did those first few months in Venice: to finish tasks and take my pay with no thought squandered on the past or future. I know only what is in my hands, beneath my nose, or on my tongue. To quiet my thoughts, I count the pages, count the pages, count the pages passing through my hands, but morning after morning I toss the last day's numbers out like swill from a chamber pot and start anew. Morning after morning, day after day, the world shrinks a little more, a little less space in the mind for burdens. My employers are pleased, but their pleasure means nothing to me. I know that what I'm striving for is possible, for I did achieve it once, though under different circumstances: chains around my body, swaddling clothes around my mind, serenity in knowing that I could neither owe nor be owed.

A free man, but I'm learning, day by day, to be a slave again.

Once in a while, though, something happens—a wanton thought, a careless word, an odor wafting on the street—that catches at my memory as rough-hewn brick might catch at a thread from an old wool coat. Like the last thing Alessandro said to me, the day he ordered the back stock burned, servants flowing like ants around us, bearing equipment and stacks of black paper, dismantling our lives. He leaned on one of the presses as I'd once seen his father lean on Caterina. His eyes alighted on me as I passed and followed me until I hesitated, turned.

I, for one, have never learned to expect the tactlessness that misery brings out in men. Somehow, I always imagine that pain will conjure decency, not spread itself like plague.

For my simplicity, I have no excuses.

"You're lucky," Alessandro told me, "not to have a father." Then he turned and vanished into his study, pulling the door behind him.

### **Single Word Contest 2020**

For *Sunspot's* 2020 edition of the Single Word contest, authors and artists were asked to select the single word they found most important to the world. A number of responses focused on large issues like the global COVID-19 virus and racial inequality. Other entries turned to faith and cultural elements that impact community and, by extension, our world. We're honored to present a number of finalists, the runners-up, and the winner of this year's contest.

## Aloha

Stephanie Launiu

Single Word Contest 2020 Finalist

'Live *Aloha*' is a common phrase seen all over Hawaii. It's on t-shirts, bumper stickers, posters, in store windows, and in many public and private places. It's an important reminder that *Aloha* doesn't just mean 'hello', 'goodbye' or 'love'. It is a universal principle that is meant to be lived. *Aloha* is the single word that is most important in today's world, and if each of us were to 'Live *Aloha*', the world would be transformed.

The indigenous people of Hawaii, the *kanaka maoli* or Native Hawaiians, had no written language. All of their knowledge was passed down orally from generation to generation for thousands of years. When the Christian missionaries arrived in Hawaii in 1820, they worked closely with the natives to put their oral language into writing. Even with the best of intentions, a written language designed by foreigners will never completely capture the intimacies and emotions of a society's history, religion and culture that are entwined into a language. And so it was with *'olelo Hawai'i* – the Hawaiian language.

Ancient Hawaiians used the word *Aloha* whenever they greeted someone and when they parted company. So, the missionaries thought that it was a way to say hello and goodbye. The Hawaiians also used *Aloha* when they presented gifts and when they became emotionally close to someone. So, the missionaries thought that *Aloha* also meant Love. What exactly does *Aloha* mean? And why is it so important in the 21st century?

The word *Aloha* is a combination of two words – *alo* and *hā*. *Alo* means 'face', 'front' or 'presence'. *Hā* is the breath of life that the ancient ones believed came only from *Akua* or the Creator. When a baby is born, it is the divine *hā* that brings that soul to life and leaves a portion of divinity within each of us alive today. There are no English words that can properly translate *Aloha*, but the closest meaning perhaps is that you and I are in the presence of God. In the word *Aloha*, we meet each other humbly as equals.

So, what would the world be like if we all knew and believed that the Creator was present and watching us? I think most of us would become the best versions of ourselves.

What would the world be like if we could recognize the spark of divinity in even the rudest person on the subway? Or the homeless woman with the shopping cart clogging up the sidewalk? Or the rude driver who just missed hitting your car while cutting in front of you on the highway?

If there were more *Aloha*, national leaders would think twice about declaring war in the world. Decisions about war are made behind closed doors, and not with the humbleness that *Aloha* requires. *Aloha* is a partner of diversity, because when equals come together, prejudice and discrimination fly out the window. If we knew the Creator was present and watching us, how often would violence of any kind really occur? Domestic violence, random shootings, and small inhumane acts like purse-snatchings. Don't you think *Aloha* would make these acts rarer than they are today? They're often so common they don't even make headlines anymore. The cruelty of social media can be erased with *Aloha*, so that cyber and in-person bullying are conquered by kinder days while keeping the miracle of technology. The political and racial divides that have come to characterize the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be tamed with more *Aloha* in the world, while those who struggle for human and civil rights could experience more victories with *Aloha* beside them. If *Aloha* were widely recognized as a universal principle, the Me Too movement would not be needed.

*Aloha* is about the dignity and equality of being human in an imperfect world. *Akua* may be watching us, but he's not controlling us. So those 'Live *Aloha*' signs that I see everyday in Hawaii remind me that we are in charge of our futures. Living one day at a time, with *Aloha* . . . .

**You're Mine You**

Velyntina Grenier

Single Word Contest 2020 Finalist

A person of many solitudes  
they give valediction  
they give from instinct infinitesimal selves  
they keep pained expressions out of the household  
they disregard infinitesimal selves

Unceasingly they aren't public  
unending under unending another not subconsciously  
They aren't alike parallel to some center  
They aren't unlike from some surface equality

*They stay*

They unberth haters w/ difficulty  
They wake apart/ untethered/ boundless  
They forget waking apart and then they begin  
They make w/ infinitesimal selves

They aren't stable tethered  
They aren't wild apart  
They are revealed  
*They yes longer* possessionless

Equanimity became a nest  
they created

## Burning

Olga Gonzalez Latapi

Single Word Contest 2020 Finalist

She was always burning, especially in the evening, when the sun began to set and her thoughts refused to slow.

We walked down to the lake, sat on the edge of the dock, and dipped our feet into the still water. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to me. She shivered, goosebumps sprouting along the edges of her round arms. This time was, at least, more peaceful than the others.

Once, she had held me at gunpoint and demanded I take off my mask. At first, I had laughed along with her, then cried, then screamed, saying over and over. *Baby, I'm not wearing a mask.* After language failed us, I finally grabbed my blue pocket knife and sliced open the right side of my forehead. *Do you see now?*

Later, facing the mirror, I applied Neosporin and dabbed at my thin wound with a damp paper towel. She came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my stomach. Head wounds may bleed profusely, and those of the heart seldom heal without leaving behind a scar.

Another time, she had come into my office, demanding I stop working on my laptop and listen to her interpretation of her most recent dream. I had nodded, eyes flickering between my computer screen and her violet-tinted face. She threw her bottle of water at me. It splashed all over my keyboard and the artificial life that sat atop my lap sparked one last time and died.

Now, I see her, running head on into the flames that threaten to swallow her whole. If I could take the pain away from her, absorb it into my own body, swallow the harvested toxins and clog up my bloodstream, believe me, I would. But, I cannot, so instead I let her rest her head against my right shoulder as we watch the light, a warm egg yolk, fall into the lake.

For now, me and the setting crimson sun, we stay beside her,  
thankful for the breaths of fresh air we catch in the midst of the  
brightest burns.



A hearty crock of onion and cumin chili  
Let them never claim me as their own  
We are not well, and have been infectious all along

## The ה Meanings

Omer Wissman

Single Word Contest 2020 Finalist

The above written fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet presents several facets which make it uniquely important, now more than ever. These include its use as greeting, then in questioning, as defining/honorific, in laughs and breaths, the latter related to the biblical function, which in turn is linked to its most zeitgeist context, which I term the meaning equation. This letter is pronounced as a letter “hey”, the standard greeting of our times. In Hebrew it is written identical to a command to be. In critical theory, Althusser put forth his concept of interpellation, turning and saying something to some other which positions him in a particular role within the systems of society. Althusser used the example of a police officer turning to a citizen, bringing him within a law & order mentality. The hey greeting, as common in my native Israel as it is in English speaking countries, has dethroned, symbolic of globalization and global turns to the right wing, our Shalom (peace) greeting. To me, if not for Althusser, any *hey* greeting in Israel turns the interpellated subject as well as his interpellator into objects in globalized hyper-subjectivity, whose parts greet mainly to maintain their place in national-global Wittgensteinian language game, saying in subtext we care nothing for each other but are linked as similarly essential to the hyper-subject of society. This unspoken edict tempts me to contrast it, discussing utilities of this letter in questioning, wherein it is put at beginnings of sentences to present a question polite yet emphatic. The sound of such phrasings calls to mind the very current mood communication modality of passive-aggressiveness. But I suggest we disrupt this rote play to call upon the role of this letter as our “The”, in order to question everything we think believe and take for granted. In English, this might be expressed as a move from “I am depressed” to “The I is depressed” through “The I is the Depressed” and finally “The I is the depressed?” Thus achieving a critical distance which allows one to doubt if it is really he who feels depressed, or a more global I role

which has become the depressed part of subjects such as him. In this same position of our “the,” I’d like to explore a rather new Israeli Hebrew turn of phrase, translating as “This is one the best X if not \*The\*.” Such a colloquialism goes so far as to eventually omit the X object which was set out to be defined in honor, and leaves merely our need to restore aura to the singular instances, in a world of digital reproduction and the love of swiping. This leads me to the letter as put into play in a “Ha Ha Ha,” an exaggerated non-laughter rebelling flagrantly against the cultural need to always be amused. On the other end of this spectrum stands this letter as pure breath, of meditation, relaxation, of deep being beyond quotidian, and of course also as exhaled cigarette smoke. This letter of deliberate conscious breath is more than a concentrated pause of our rat race. It is the first and final utterance of crystallized living language, before and after all words, in birth as at death. What letter then more suited to denote in the Old Testament, the Hebraic holy bible, a name of god? But god uses a nifty trick, attaching to the letter an apostrophe, calling upon the believer to say not ha or hey but something quite different, “My Lord”. This is what I call a meaning equation. It started out in this sacred religious text as a way of saying to the faithful, you can never know the one true name of god, and more than this, you can never grasp with human faculties the full nature of this god who grasps and encompasses all being, the way a breath allows all language wings. This line of thought sheds an interesting light on the meaning equation  $X=X'$ , or verbally a variable which is equal to that variable modified, something of the same but a bit different nature. In the light of the above interpretation of the divine meaning equation, our more earthly and even atheist concern with a search for meaning seems to become, in my eyes at least, exposed as a lost cause, a chain of signifier variables which leads one nowhere, or rather, to his start as lonely, non-apostrophe x. People still are trying to make sense of existence utilizing such equations, Stating I am me the lover of Y, or I am me the father of Z. But all these attempts at redefinition of terms appears to me doomed to fail, as requiring to be replaced with an identity question,  $I=?$ . As long as subject X has not consciously found out his identity separate from the varying roles of this or that X', he cannot take on any social-subject positioning with authenticity and unshakeable core knowledge of

thymself, leading to all manner of friction, tension, explosion even. An I has to use his question to find out who he really feels himself to be, in order for him to not take on things he does not really want and therefore will struggle to bear, choosing in its stead to make a life true to the admittedly partial understanding of his own identity, not interpellated by society into a function equation too large or narrow for his authentic identity. In such a way we may do away with a zeitgeist of imposter syndrome, endless YA moratorium, broken/cracked homes, toxic polyamor, depersonalization-derealization, and a general malaise of feeling, meaning lost in the everything-is-not-what-it-seems way of X' problematics, solved superficially by identifying with variable fictional characters, more than with real & dear as a self-determined, true-to-self solution of I equaling constant Y. So, ask not where in the world is Waldo, but why is Waldo's I there, and more importantly, should \*The\* Waldo I be the There?



**Viral** / Claire Lawrence  
Single Word Contest 2020 Runner-Up

## Ubuntu

Ethel Maqeda

Single Word Contest 2020 Runner-Up

*Ubuntu* is a Nguni<sup>1</sup> word derived from the philosophy “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (a person is only a person through and because of other people). In other words, we can only be fully human when we acknowledge, accept, appreciate and nurture other people’s humanity. In practice, *Ubuntu* fosters group solidarity, compassion and respect for others and encourages and enables individuals to continually expand their circle of humanity to embrace and celebrate diversity.

Growing up in a township in a small Zimbabwean city, I was content that my humanness was complete and affirmed by my friends, family and the community around me, although my world didn’t extend beyond a thirty-kilometer radius until I was nine. *Ubuntu* for me then meant respecting everyone, especially my elders, and sharing food, home and clothing with the less fortunate. The Shona saying *Avirirwa*<sup>2</sup> (dusk has surprised him/her) was one I heard often then. It meant that strangers could knock on any door on an evening and ask for shelter for the night before carrying on with their journeys. They then became an aunt/uncle, a relative for life. *Ubuntu* also meant you weren’t to stare or point at people that looked any different to you or make them feel different. We played netball with a feminine boy we called *mainini*, a term of endearment meaning “mother’s young sister,” and didn’t think anything of it. It has apparently become unacceptable

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<sup>1</sup> Nguni people are the Zulu, Ndebele, Xhosa, Sotho, Swati, Phuthi, Nlhangwini, Lala and Ngoni speaking peoples of Southern Africa who share a similar culture, traditions and beliefs.

<sup>2</sup> “*Avirirwa*” and “*mainini*” are Shona words. Many Zimbabwean children grow up in multilingual households.

The Shona people of Zimbabwe share a similar worldview to that of Nguni-speaking people and other African cultures.

as the boy became an adult and someone decided that his femininity made him subhuman.

Nobody is born with *ubuntu* . . . these are communally accepted and desirable ethical standards that a person acquires throughout his/her life, and therefore education also plays a very important role in transferring the African philosophy of life.<sup>3</sup> Family, community and school education all played a role in the development of my *ubuntu*. Just before the end of the War of Liberation from colonial rule in 1979, I turned seven and the tips of my fingers could finally reach my ear over my head. This meant I could start school. This extended my understanding of my circle of humanity to include children from other villages and communities, from the mining communities around the city whose families were usually migrant laborers from Malawi and Zambia. I became aware that the world was a much bigger place, not just peopled by black people and white Rhodesians; that there were other Christianities, other religions, other ways of thinking and being. I began to understand that people from the same clan could support different political parties, that not all black people were agreed on what independence from colonial rule meant. I learned that some black people had fought on the side of the Rhodesians. *Ubuntu* is about accepting such painful truths.

In the following year or two after I started school, an uncle, who I hadn't been aware existed until then, came home from exile, a place I didn't know existed either, and brought me a beautifully bound and illustrated copy of *The Arabian Nights*. As I gradually to read, I became enthralled by the tales of peoples in far-flung places, who in so many ways were so alien yet in so many other ways were also familiar. By the time I reached secondary school, the insatiable appetite to explore as many different ways of being as there are in the world had so taken over my life that I had read everything I could lay my hands on. I also learned about the importance of being a good listener.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Letseka, "African philosophy and educational discourse," in, P. Higgs, N.C.G. Vakalisa, T.V. Mda & N.T. Assie-Lumumba (Eds), *African voices in education* (Juta: Lansdowne, 2000), p 186.

At twenty, when I travelled beyond the thirty-kilometer radius and went to university, my understanding of humanness was further enriched by meeting people from other parts of the country and the world. I lost my first family member to HIV/AIDS, moving it from my science textbook to real life, and I fell in love with a Japanese boy called Ken. I also continued to be interested in literature, geography, history and politics, and to feed my appetite by reading, travelling and meeting new people at every opportunity. My education not only broadened my view of what it means to be human, but also allowed me to embrace my Africanness with pride, to appreciate and celebrate human diversity and to negotiate my way through encounters with people who hold on to differences and make them the basis of their relationship with other people. I have been called a monkey a few times.

In today's world, ridden with war, displacement, poverty, and disease which put our *Ubuntu* to test, it will do all of us good to remember to be kind, considerate, and compassionate. *Ubuntu* is about the common good of society, with humanness as an essential element of human growth.<sup>4</sup> By deduction, anything that puts the life and wellbeing of others in jeopardy is anti-human. It means, in these challenging times, not hoarding food, toilet roll or soap, and not disregarding calls to practice social distancing or self-isolation.

*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu!*

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<sup>4</sup> Elza Venter, "The Notion of Ubuntu and Communalism in African Educational Discourse," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 23. 2-3 (2004), 149-160 (p. 149).

## The Meaning of Free

Hannah van Didden

Single Word Contest 2020 Winner

An exploration of the word in a selection of its nuances.

### Definition\* of “free”

a. [chemistry]  
uncombined, unpaired.

a. excluded.

a. gratis.

a. [of trade] open.

a. liberal (not miserly).

a. void of something,  
usually undesirable.

v. to be rid of  
something.

a. permitted to take a  
specific action.

a. without direct cost to  
the recipient.

### Sample sentence

New research is finding that free radicals may actually be good for you.

Rich in polyphenols, fair trade dark chocolate can be enjoyed guilt-free when eaten in moderation.

The child’s meal comes with a free toy.

The free market is often touted as a benefit of capitalism.

The businessman’s free nature extends only to his mates.

The despot is free of moral burden.

In crossing the border, they thought they would be free of any further threat of attack.

Because it appeared to be within the letter of the law, the decisionmakers believed they were free to act without considering broader humanitarian and ethical obligations.

The center offers free meals, entertainment, and accommodation.

**Definition\* of “free”****Sample sentence**

a. wild.

Flitting from branch to branch, the tiny bird was free.

a. able to act with liberty.

The woman fled from her home so that she might be free.

*and easy*

a. unrestrained.

A sad longing accompanied the recollection of her grandmother’s free and easy hand when it came to butter on fresh-baked bread.

a. able to act in accordance with one’s own will.

While they were, in principle, free to look for work, the community prevented them from having safe and meaningful employment.

a. [of speech] frank; fairspoken.

The commentators continued to cast insults and slurs, arguing they had a right to free speech.

v. to liberate.

The medical professionals sought to free the man from conditions that adversely impacted his health.

a. liberated; not limited or controlled.

The woman wants her child to know what it is to be free.

v. to make available for a particular purpose.

The man frees the rope from the post for a use known to no one but him.

a. [of nations] not subject to foreign rule or despotism.

The girl longed to be accepted into a free country, not knowing that in such a place she would still be unable to leave the house alone without being held accountable for what might befall her.

a. no longer confined or imprisoned.

Far across the ocean, a grieving mother says, “Finally, he is free.”

**Definition\* of “free”**

a. noble; joyful.

**Sample sentence**

The woman’s free spirit sees her greet each day with smiling hope.

\*Definitions based on information from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, with revisions and addenda, 1966), the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, [Oxford Living Dictionaries](#), [Etymonline](#), [National Center for Biotechnology Information](#).

## Contributors

**Robin Bissett** received her Bachelor of Arts in English and Minor in Creative Writing from Trinity University in May 2020.

A fourth generation West Coaster, **C.W. Buckley** lives and works in Seattle with his family. He writes about precious things, and what their loss means for us all. His writing explores geek culture, conscience, faith, and fatherhood. His work is forthcoming in the anthology *Undeniable: Writers Respond to Climate Change*. He is a contributor to *Washington Poetic Routes*, and appeared most recently in *Dappled Things*, *Timberline Review*, *Camas*, *Image Journal*, and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. He is the author of *BLUING*, a chapbook from Finishing Line Press. You can follow him as @chris\_buckley on Twitter.

**Marilee Dahlman** grew up in the Midwest and currently lives in Washington, DC. Her other stories have appeared in *Clever*, *The Colored Lens*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Metaphorosis*, *Timeworn Literary Fiction*, and online at The Saturday Evening Post.

**Rayne Debski's** stories have appeared in national and international publications including *Mslexia*, *The Summerset Review*, *Fifty Word Stories*, *REAL*, *Blue Earth Review*, and *Necessary Fiction*, and have been selected by Liars League NYC and other professional theatre groups for public readings. She is the editor of two anthologies published by Main Street Rag Press.

**Nicole Foran** (MFA, University of Cincinnati) is a mixed-media artist and educator based out of Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Her work investigates memory, moral reasoning, and identity. Nicole's work is exhibited internationally, and she has upcoming solo exhibitions in Wyoming and Michigan. Several of her pieces are to be included in small group shows in California and Wisconsin. When she is not in the studio, Nicole is snuggling her two Boston Terriers or going on hikes with her family.

**Olga Gonzalez Latapi** is a poet and MFA candidate in Writing at California College of the Arts. Although her writing journey started in journalism, she is now pursuing her true passion: exploring the world of poetry with a mighty pen in hand. Her work has been published in *Teen Voices*, *Sonder Midwest*, *BARNHOUSE* (Box of Parrots), [iaam.com](http://iaam.com) and *The Nasiona* magazine. Originally from Mexico City, she currently lives in San Francisco.

**Valyntina Grenier** is a multi-genre artist living in Tucson, Arizona. Her visual art and poetry have appeared in *Lana Turner*, *High Shelf Press*, *JuxtaProse*, *Sunspot Lit*, *Bat City Review*, and *The Impossible Beast: Poems of*

*Queer Eroticism*, Damaged Goods Press. Her double debut poetry chapbook *Fever Dream / Take Heart*, Cathexis Northwest Press, 2020, features paintings from her LGBTQIA+ series Cloudshow | Utopia. Find her at [valyntinagrenier.com](http://valyntinagrenier.com) or Insta @valyntinagrenier.

Russian-American poet **Stella Hayes** is the author of *One Strange Country* (What Books Press, forthcoming in 2020). She grew up in an agricultural town outside of Kiev, Ukraine and Los Angeles. She earned a creative writing degree at University of Southern California. Her work has appeared in *Prelude*, *The Indianapolis Review* and *Spillway*, among others.

**Ann Howells** edited *Illya's Honey* journal from 1999 to 2017. Publications include *Under a Lone Star* (Village Books Press), *So Long As We Speak Their Names* (Kelsay Books), *Painting the Pinwheel Sky* (Assure Press), *Black Crow in Flight* (Editor's Choice, Main Street Rag), and *Softly Beating Wings*, winner of the William D. Barney Contest (Blackbead Books). Her poems have recently appeared in *Chiron Review*, *Slant*, and *San Pedro River Review*.

**Penny Jackson's** work has been published in *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Croton Review*, *The Gideon Poetry Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Real Fiction*, and others. Honors include a MacDowell Colony Fellowship, The Elizabeth Janeway Prize in Fiction from Barnard College, and a Pushcart Prize. She is also a playwright and a film writer.

**Jennifer Judge's** work has been published in *Rhino*, *Literary Mama*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Blueline*, *Mothers Always Write*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Every Pigeon*, *Drunk in a Midnight Choir*, *Rockvale Review*, *Juniper*, *Under the Gum Tree*, and *The Comstock Review*, among others. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best New Poets 2018, and Best of the Net 2018. Her work was also selected to appear in a Jenny Holzer art installation in the Comcast Technology Center in Philadelphia. Her first collection of poetry is due out in early 2021 from Propertius Press.

**Mickie Kennedy** is an American poet who resides in Baltimore County, Maryland with his family and two feuding cats. He enjoys British science fiction and the idea of long hikes in nature. His work has appeared in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Artword Magazine*, *Conduit*, *Portland Review*, *Rockhurst Review*, and *Wisconsin Review*. He earned an MFA from George Mason University.

**Christina Klein** received a Fullbright Fellowship in 2018. She received her MFA from Florida State University in 2017.

**Stephanie Launiu** is a Native Hawaiian lifestyle and cultural writer who lives and writes on the Big Island of Hawaii. At the age of sixty, she went to college and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Hawaiian Pacific Studies from the University of Hawaii. She loves nothing more than to write about these islands.

**Claire Lawrence** is a storyteller and visual artist living in British Columbia, Canada. She has been published internationally, and her work has been performed on BBC radio. Her stories have appeared in numerous publications, including *Geist*, *Litro*, *Ravensperch*, and *Brilliant Flash Fiction*. She was nominated for the 2016 Pushcart Prize. Her artwork has appeared in *Wired*, *A3 Review*, *Sunspot*, *Esthetic Apostle*, *Haunted*, *Fractured Nuance*, and more. Her goal is to write and publish in all genres, and not inhale too many fumes.

**Ethel Maqeda** is a writer originally from Zimbabwe, now resident in Sheffield. Her work is inspired by the experiences of African women at home and in the diaspora. Her work has been published in various issues of *Route 57*, the *University of Sheffield's* creative writing journal, *Verse Matters* (Valley Press, 2017), *Wretched Strangers* (Boiler House Press, 2018), and *Chains: Unheard Voices* (Margo Collective, 2018).

**Alena Marvin** is a young woman seeking the spark to light her imaginative fire. The twenty-year-old aspiring author is just about due for a quarter-life crisis, and she uses that chaos to fuel her creativity.

**Cassandra Moss** was born in Manchester and grew up just outside the city. She studied English with Film at King's College, London, and subsequently worked in the film industry for Sister Films, Working Title, and Vertigo. Since 2009, she has been an EFL teacher. After moving to Ireland, she recently completed an MPhil in Linguistics at Trinity College, Dublin. Her short fiction has been published in *Succour*, *3am Magazine*, *Cricket Online Review*, *Squawk Back*, *And/Or*, *The Passage Between*, and *Posit*.

**Alli Parrett** is a prose writer and holds a Masters in Creative Writing from University of Glasgow. Though she was born in Illinois, she's spent much of her adult life in the Pacific Northwest and Scotland. She lives in Seattle with her husband and two dogs. Her work has appeared in Issue 42 and Issue 43 of *From Glasgow to Saturn*, *The Write Launch*, and *Crab Fat Magazine*.

Decades ago, autodidact & bloody-minded optimist **kerry rawlinson** gravitated from sunny Zambian skies to solid Canadian soil. Fast-forward: she follows Literature & Art's Muses around the Okanagan, still barefoot, her patient husband ensuring she's fed. She's cracked some contests (e.g. Cago;

Fish Poetry Prize) and features lately in *Synchronized Chaos*, *Spelk*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Across the Margin*, *Yes Poetry*, *Pedestal*, *Reflex Fiction*, *Riddled With Arrows*, *ArcPoetry*; among others. [kerryrawlinson.tumblr.com](http://kerryrawlinson.tumblr.com) @kerryrawli

**Samantha Schlemm** is an emerging writer and graduate student in the MA in Writing Creative Nonfiction program at Johns Hopkins University.

**Hediana Utarti** is a sixty-year-old API immigrant who came to the US in 1986 to study political science. Although she graduated, she felt her life had more purpose in her current work at San Francisco Asian Women's Shelter ([sfaws.org](http://sfaws.org)).

**Gabrielle Vachon** is a fulltime hair and makeup artist in Montreal and Toronto, as well as part-time writer to soothe her soul (just kidding, her anxiety is Submittable's whipping boy). She has been published in *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Maudlin House*, and *Corvus Review*, and has been an invited reader at Slackline Series. She holds an Honors English Literature degree from Concordia University, and lives with her beloved husband Justin and puppy Lola in Montreal.

**Hannah van Didden** writes where the story takes her—usually somewhere dark but truthful; often beautiful. You will find pieces of her scattered around the world, in places such as *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Crannóg*, *Southerly*, *Breach*, *Atticus Review*, and *Southword Journal*.

**Mekiya Walters** is a recent graduate of the University of Arkansas's MFA program and lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

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**Virginia Watts** is the author of poetry and stories found or upcoming in *Illuminations*, *The Florida Review*, *The Blue Mountain Review*, *The Moon City Review*, *Permafrost Magazine*, *Palooka Magazine*, and *Streetlight Magazine*, among others. A finalist in 2020 Philadelphia Stories Sandy Crimmins Poetry Contest, winner of the 2019 Florida Review Meek Award in nonfiction, and nominee for Best of the Net 2019 in nonfiction, Virginia resides near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**Omer Wissman**; a serialized CNF; thirty-six-year-old multidisciplinary artist; degrees in psychology and music; published in most Israeli magazines. Born someplace where people go for sickness unto death, Rescued away to

the nearest town, where he developed such neat capacities as object permanence, crying out every drop of vodka he'd drink, and the art of loving and hating a person at the same time. A few years ago, fell in love with writing, and the rest remains to be.



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