

**FEATURING THE WINNERS OF
GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE**

new poetry by

**ALLISON BLEVINS, DON BOES,
HANNAH BONNER, JA'NET DANIELO,
TODD DAVIS, RYLER DUSTIN,
BRYCE EMLEY, KARIN GOTTSALL,
JESSICA GREENBAUM, BILL HOLLANDS,
BRYANA JOY, CHRISTEN NOEL
KAUFFMAN, THEO LEGRO,
SARAH LULLO, EMILY SCHULTEN,
CHRISTOPHER SHIPMAN**

fiction from

**JULES FITZ GERALD, TREVOR FULLER,
EVANGELINE JONES, A.J. NEWSOM,
EUNHEE SOH, ROBERT PAUL WESTON**

and nonfiction from

ALLISON BLEVINS, EMILY SCHULTEN

*"Today is cooler. Today
we are beginning the
search for the imperfect
body between us."*

— FROM EMILY SCHULTEN'S
"THE SHRIMP BOATS ARE IN"
**WINNER, GERI DIGIORNO
MULTI-GENRE PRIZE**



RALEIGH REVIEW

RALEIGH



REVIEW

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RALEIGH REVIEW

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FROM THE EDITOR

EVEN THOUGH MY HOUSE is filled with treasures (or junk, depending on who you ask), I wake up most Saturdays with the urge to eat a breakfast burrito and head to an antique store for something else I don't exactly need.

I blame my parents. It's convenient to blame your parents for most things, it turns out, but we'll stick with burritos and junk for now. Actually, we'll keep it to junk and leave the burritos for another day.

My parents are the ones that got me started with the storage-units-turned-flea market near our house where every Saturday morning, people would roll up the metal garage doors and start wheeling and dealing. Trays of rusty birthstone rings. Chipped crocks. Oily tools. Bantam roosters. Newly and clumsily made arrowheads. Sometimes there was a man there regionally known as a snake handler. For a small fee, you could take your picture with a python. I've always been scared of snakes, so I stuck near the rings, trying on rubies and sapphires and emeralds.

Even as I got a little older, old enough to spend Friday night at a friend's house, I'd often get up before anyone else and sneak to the phone to dial home. "Mom," I whispered into the receiver. "Come get me. I want to go with you to the flea market." I left a note on the kitchen table letting my friend's parents know where I'd gone. Then I waited outside on the damp driveway with my purple L.A. Gear duffel bag.

That was a long time ago now, but I guess you could say I'm maintaining the treasure hunting tradition. On a recent trip to an antique store, I bought a board game, a home-sewn crossbody holder for water bottles, and some guidebooks on drawing and playing the harmonica. I'm not a great artist, and I don't know how to play the

harmonica, but this is one of the things I like about junk stores—the *maybe I'll learn*, the possibility, the *never say never*.

But there was something else that I'm still thinking about. It was a small wooden box, maybe a little larger than a deck of cards. Glued on top of the box were all manner of doodads. Green plastic army men. Bobble heads of baseball players I didn't know. Bobs of broken jewelry. Dice. Barbie shoes. A penny.

I picked it up. The tag said, "spirit box."

I'd never seen anything quite like it. Probably I'm out of some cool loop. Maybe these things are more popular than I realize. I've lazily tried Googling it, and I mostly come up with that electronic box beloved by paranormal investigators, the device that claims to pick up frequencies, pained voices of ghosts.

Trying to describe this thing to other people, I've said it's something like an object collage. So far, people just sort of nod, maybe say "okay" in that polite questioning way that really means they'd like to end the conversation and go on about their business.

But I know there are people out there who will appreciate the magic of something as strange and imaginative as a homemade spirit box. Maybe you're one of them. I hope you are. And I think Geri Digiorno was.

Geri is the namesake for our multi-genre prize, and the artist behind many of our magazine covers over the years. A lot of Geri's art, like the work of our prize winners and finalists, is made of pieces of different things—photographs and magazine cuttings combined with original painting—and her aesthetic inspired our mission to create a unique contest in search of a kind of compilation of different genres. You're not likely to find another contest quite like ours.

In this issue, we are pleased to present the work of our Geri Digiorno Multi-Genre Prize Winner Emily Schulten. Emily's poems "Frozen Embryo Transfer" and "Capilla" as well as her creative nonfiction piece "The Shrimp Boats Are In" are captivating independently, but, when read together, they present a striking mosaic of hope, faith, and mercy rendered through the prism of deeply personal and carefully detailed experience. We are also proud to feature extraordinary work from our contest finalists Allison Blevins, Bryana Joy, and Christen Noel Kauffman.

I'm thinking now that the Geri Digiorno Multi-Genre Prize is its own kind of spirit box, an entity created to honor and conjure, to evoke and emote, to mystify and clarify, to capture, and perhaps to set free.

Back when I was a kid waking up at somebody else's house and sneaking to the kitchen to call my mom—sure, I wanted to go to the flea market. I wanted to try on rings and side-eye snakes. But on those dark mornings, I was lonely in a way I couldn't articulate, lonesome for my own bed, my house, my parents, the convenience store burritos we liked, and all the things we did that made us us.

I think we do most things so that we feel a little less alone and a little more ourselves. We make spirit boxes. We put pythons around our necks. We take time to appreciate art. We read really good writing.

You'll find a lot of that here in this issue. We hope you enjoy it.

Dear Reader, Thank you for letting me visit! I had fun! I called my mom. I'm safe. Don't worry. See you next time! ♦

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Houle', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Landon Houle, editor-in-chief

KARIN GOTTSHALL

PASSION

Who says there is no soul in the design
of modern urban hotels. Cities

in Canada are all so clean, you said—
it was not praise. You were holding

my hand, which might have felt
like intimacy. The season that had been

my favorite no longer excited me.
Lights over the reservoir reassured us.

I was reminded of the weather radar—
wanting to be outside myself—all that disturbed

air and distance. My mother had finished
her course of radiation. I thought,

how many more nights like this
are allotted me. It felt like need.

Even driving to meet you, I experienced
a kind of rage. The wide green fields.

THE TWELFTH CENTURY

I left myself asleep in a hotel room in Montréal,
a spacecraft bound for the edge of the galaxy.

Grainy film with burnt-out frames: the taste
of the monkey bars in third grade.

A feeling that everything good was denied you, except
what you were able to hold so quietly it was almost a form of theft.

The house across the street is all lit up at midnight:
a shipping container, the raw material of plastic dolls.

Laws of dress. Laws of acceptable speech.
How many eyelashes awash in the ocean?

Climbing into a cabinet to rest, climbing into
the twelfth century, between convent walls.

The river is a girl playing solitaire—
blue ink on her sleeve.

PASTURE

Today I drive into the country, passing fields
of sheep and small houses made of stone.
To live inside stone—I always want to be
headed someplace like that, unshakable.
As for you—nothing about you ever suggested
any kind of arrival. Not your words or soft hands.
And your death a departure that pulled
every bird and pasture back through its opening.
If it were summer I would swim underwater,
floating between sky and the pond's pebbled floor.
My body has become itself only in relation
to your absence, the continuation of it all these years,
what you never saw coming. You were right there.
No, you were somewhere out in the weather and I was still
in that other, shimmering field. Holding my breath.



A.J. NEWSOM

BIG BIG LOVE

I'M A BIG GIRL and I need special, so Saturday morning the three of us pile into Grape Ape and spend all day riding around town hunting for sales.

“Je t’aime, ma poisson,” Mama says, waving her hands around. “And I hate to break it to you, but your *fesses*, it’s hanging out of your bathing suit. And you need jeans for school this fall. You are growing so fast, eh?”

Sissy already got her swimsuit from Ames. She gets brandy-new because Mama says Sissy is pee-teet and needs boring store-bought or else it won’t fit.

When we see a sign on a telephone pole, we turn. Mama curses when the sign is old and the sale is no more. I like when she swears, her words a machine-gun sputter of English mixed with Québécois.

“F’ing *Crisse*,” she yells and lays on the horn as we pass another empty lawn. I put my face close to the car window and copy her with no sound, watching my reflection-teeth brush against my lips as I mouth the F-word.

When we come upon a house with some stuff out front, Mama slows down. A piece of paper tacked to a stick at the edge of the yard reads “garage sale,” but the garage door is closed, the windows dark. This folding table heaped with junk is all there is.

“Get ready, Gracie,” Mama says.

My job is to scout out the goods. See if it’s worth it. Mama slows to a putter-putter-putt. I roll down the window. A woman’s kicked back in a lawn chair. She might be sleeping. Beside the table is a vacuum cleaner, a Big Wheel, a couple tires.

“Well?” Mama says. “There’s a kid’s bike, so they might have something your size.”

“I guess,” I say.

The woman sits up with one leg on either side of the chair. Her legs are spread and I can see right up her jean skirt all the way to the inside of her thighs, the color of peach crayon.

“Hot out, ain’t it?” the woman says.

“Umhmm,” says Mama and starts making a mess of things. She flings shirts one way, shorts another.

The woman stands and starts refolding. Her mouth is squinched up so tight I can’t see her lips. I can’t see her eyes either. Our reflections slide across mirrored sunglasses.

Mama picks up a bathing suit and snaps it in the air. The woman jerks her head backward.

“Jackpot!” Mama says. “I think this might be the one, poisson.” She puts the straps up against my shoulders. The suit is red, white, and blue like the American flag, but it has white maple leaves stacked in a row down the front like the Canadian flag. The leaves are almost like stars. There is a pinprick hole in one strap, but it’s still the best swimsuit I’ve ever seen, and I know I’ll be able to swim so fast when I wear it because it feels slippery like a fish between my fingers.

“How much?” Mama asks.

I don’t care how much it is. If Mama says no, I’ll volunteer to watch Sissy. I’ll take out the garbage. I’ll do whatever it takes to earn this suit.

“That your kid, too? Out in the car?” the woman asks.

“Well, it isn’t hers, now is it,” Mama says and points at me. She lets out a snort. “How much?” She is a flagpole, tall and thin, snapping the suit over her head toward the clouds.

“Fifty cents,” says the woman. “Everything on the table is fifty cents.”

“There’s a hole in it,” says Mama. “Take a quarter?”

The woman shrugs. “Okay.”

My tummy does cartwheels.

“Say, it’s kinda hot don’t you think? Too hot in the car, I mean, for your little one to be sitting in there.” The woman takes off her glasses and bends backward, hands on her hips. When she straightens, her eyes bounce around between Grape Ape and Mama and me and the sky.

“It’s not as if the door’s locked,” Mama says. “She’s smart enough to get out herself if she gets too warm.”

I pick up a naked Barbie. Her limbs are so long, I bet she could swim real good, except her legs are stiff and they don’t bend much. I make her sit on the edge of the table. Her tiny waist and wide chest remind me of a wasp. “Bzz bzz,” I say to her.

“Grace, put that down,” Mama says and flings some more clothes to the side.

“You can have that old Barbie if you want,” the woman whispers.

“No thank you,” Mama says. “My girls don’t play with such things.”

“I like your skirt,” the woman tells Mama.

“Merci,” Mama says and moves down the table.

“How old are you, anyway?” the woman asks.

I risk touching the Barbie again. Her skin is hard and soft at the same time, like a piece of frozen chicken. She’s got huge *tétons*, too. No nipples. Just hard, glossy plastic. I touch one boob.

“Enough, poisson,” Mama says. “Answer the lady.”

“Me?” I ask.

“Your girl, she okay?” the woman asks.

Mama lifts the front of the Big Wheel, pushes a peddle to make the wheel go, then tests the brakes. “Just shy. We only moved down here a month ago.”

“I’m not shy. I’m ten,” I say.

“Big for ten, ain’t you? My girl is twelve and she wore that same suit last year.”

“How much for this frying pan?” Mama asks.

I LOVE MY NEW SWIMSUIT. After Mama tucks me in and shuts the door to my room, I fling off my nightgown and try it on. I shove the window open. The night feels cool like water when it blows against my skin and I lie down on my bed and practice my strokes. I kick my legs and swoop my arms and slip and slide against my comforter.

When Sunday comes, Mama says, “Go get your suit, Grace, and I’ll drop you off at the rec center while Sissy and I go grocery shopping.”

I don’t have to go get it, though, because I’m already wearing it. I’ve been wearing my new suit for a week straight.

I kneel behind Sissy with the brush. She mostly ignores me and watches *Looney Tunes*, but I can tell she’s mad because every time I get to a knot she pulls away and says, “Gracie, don’t,” in a howling whine.

Mama pokes her head out of the bathroom. “Sissy, you need to get some clothes on,” she says. She has a towel twirled up on her head. Bare shoulders. “Gracie, go help your sister pick something out to wear.”

“No fair,” says Sissy and pulls away again.

“Listen,” I say, “it’s not all bad. You get to pick out the cereal this week.”

“Hmmp,” Sissy says and kicks at a chair leg. “I wanna go swimming with you.”

“Remember what Mama said? You gotta at least be able to doggy paddle first.” I bend down and whisper in her ear, “Then she’ll let us go alone together.”

Sissy doesn’t say anything but she snuggles back into me and pops her thumb into her mouth. She smells like dirty hair and maple syrup.

“Come on, Sissy,” I say. “I’ll help you pick something out.”

MAMA DROPS ME OFF outside the rec center. Inside my backpack is a Hi-C juice box, an Archie comic, and a towel. After I climb out of the car, she calls me back. One arm sticks out the window. Two quarters press into the palm of my hand. She pulls away and I wave until Grape Ape putt-putts around the corner. Then I wave some more and kick at the curb.

The lobby is filled with kids. I don’t know any of them. Everyone is with a group of others. I want to go back outside and wait for Mama

and Sissy but then I smell the pool. Chlorine and wet concrete. I slide my hand under my shirt and pinch the suit. If I squeeze it real hard, I can feel all the threads that together make it special. Two girls stand side by side in front of me. They look back, smile, then put their heads together and whisper.

A teenager behind the counter takes our change, gives each person a locker key, and motions to the side. Girls go to the right. We all march through the swinging red doors. I think of Sissy and try to remember every detail so I can tell her all about it later.

In the locker room half a jillion people clang open lockers, peel off shirts and underwear and talk, talk, talk. Girls pull on bikinis, laughing and pushing at each other. They squeal when they exit out the back through a spray of water. A naked woman stalks past me on her tiptoes and steps into a shower. She rattles the curtain closed, and steam billows out into the room in warm waves, smelling like the road after it rains and coconut.

I take my towel out of my bag. The girls from the line are sitting one bench over.

"They give you towels outside, you know," one says. "You're not supposed to bring your own."

They giggle with their hands over their mouths.

The one with long hair nudges the other one. A bee circles once then lands. She freezes stiff as it crawls around on her arm.

"Ooh, Jeannette," she says. "Help! Get it off of me!"

"No way, Marie, I'm not getting stung," Jeannette says.

"You guys allergic or something?" I ask.

"No," Marie whispers, "but I don't want to get stung, either."

"You're bigger than a stupid old bee," I say. I snatch it off her arm and squeeze it dead. It feels like the tiniest bones crunching under my fingers. I drop it on the floor, but the bee leaves a smear of gook on my hand.

"Gross!" says Jeannette. She grabs Marie's arm, tugging her toward the door. They run outside together laughing and holding hands, their bare feet slapping the wet floor as they leave me behind.

This pool's not the best. We used to live by the ocean. Mama worked at the library then, and in the summer the three of us would walk down to the beach before dinner. Mama collected shells with Sissy while I practiced my moves.

“You keep that up, and it’s off to the Olympics,” Mama would yell, her hands like a megaphone around her mouth. “You got mad skills, ma petite poisson.”

Ocean swimming is the best swimming. I could swim forever, on and on until I met the clouds. Or at least till it got dark. Sometimes we’d pick periwinkles to go with supper. Sometimes we ate sandwiches on the beach. We took turns pushing Sissy in the stroller on our walk home, licking the salt off our lips, and when Mama tucked me in, I could still feel the waves pushing me around, like my bed was a boat. Those were my best days. This pool is no ocean, but it’s okay. At least now I have a new fast suit and not my old suit, which has Care Bears on it like a baby’s.

Marie and Jeannette don’t even swim. They lie back on beach chairs and watch everybody else. I see them whisper behind their hands. Sometimes they flip on their belly like they’re sleeping. Sometimes they put lotion on their legs.

I swim hard from one end of the pool to the other, doing my drills. On top, the water is warmer than the air, but it’s cool down by my toes. Some kids in the deep end ask to race me and I can’t be caught. Another kid wants in. I beat them, too. A line forms. They all swim their fastest, but I am undefeatable. Jeannette and Marie sit up and watch us, but they don’t come over. The kids in the pool say I’m the fastest swimmer they’ve ever seen, and I win the races again and again. Everyone in the pool cheers and laughs and pokes each other.

When I get out of the water and walk to the towel bucket, I am ten feet tall and floating.

Marie dips a toe in the water. Her nails are painted the color of a scallop shell on the beach.

“Oh, Jeannette,” she says, “it’s so cold!”

I towel off my hair and tilt my head to the side to get the water out of my ears. “It’s not bad once you get in.”

Jeannette walks close. She tilts her head to the side like a chicken looking at a bug. “Hey,” she says. “Come here, Marie. Isn’t that your suit?”

“No,” I say. “It’s mine. My Mama bought it for me, special.”

Jeannette says, “Marie, you remember when, on accident, I ripped your suit last year? I can see the hole right there.”

The other kids are standing around us now. Jeannette slides a finger under the edge of the strap and stretches it out so the hole gets bigger.

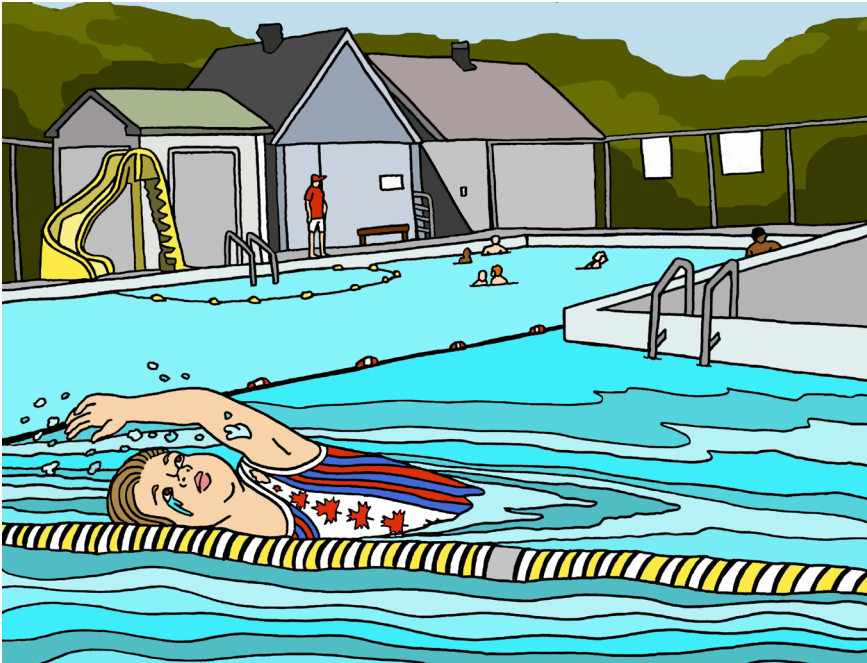
“No way,” says Marie. “I don’t believe it. Who wears someone else’s suit?”

“A scumbag, that’s who,” says Jeannette.

“Do you know what that means? Scumbag?” asks Marie. Her breath smells like ham. She grabs a strap then lets it go with a loud thwack.

I think, *Don’t you cry, Gracie. Don’t you cry.* But I feel my traitor eyes burning with tears.

Jeannette gives me her chicken look again, and then she laughs. A real loud fake hee-haw. Marie laughs, too. They all laugh. And then everyone scatters away, and I am alone.



OUR DOWNSTAIRS NEIGHBOR, Mrs. Withers, is outside checking her mail when we get home. “Your Ma tells me you’re practicing for the Olympics,” she says.

"I guess," I say and run upstairs to our apartment. I throw my suit in the hamper. Bury it deep.

"Gracie," Mama hollers from the kitchen. "Come help with these groceries."

I look in the bathroom mirror at my black hair, short like Mama's. My rounded belly. I put a white towel over my head and let it drape down my back. I can almost see what I would look like with long blond hair like Marie. I suck in my gut. Push out my flat chest.

"Grace?" Mama calls again.

MAMA AND SISSY are teeny-tiny. Pee-teet. But I am tall and the biggest. So Mama sits on the floor and hands cans to Sissy, and Sissy passes them to me. I stand on the countertop and put them away. Peas. Corn. Carrots. I stack them neat on the top shelf.

"Ho, ho, ho," I say. "I'm the Green Giant!"

Sissy laughs but Mama rolls her eyes.

"Mama," I say, "when can we move back home?"

"Ah, poisson, we are home."

"You know what I mean. I don't like it here."

"I like this place," says Sissy. "We got a swing out back. We never had a swing before."

"What's so bad about it?" Mama says. "You wait till school starts up. The school here is big, not like back home. C'est bon. Better for you and Sissy."

"I don't know anyone."

"You will. Give it time. What about the rec center? Didn't you say you had a race today? Did you make new friends?"

"I don't think they liked me much."

"Are you going to tell me about it, poisson?" she asks. Sissy is all ears.

I can feel them both behind me, staring up at my back. I run a finger over Campbell's Tomato. Cream of Mushroom. I swap the cans around so they're alphabetical. I bet Mama could sit there all day, cross-legged on the kitchen floor, waiting for me to talk.

"Mama, what's a scumbag?" I ask, and the whole thing spills out. Mama leans back, her palms flat against the floor. She listens and nods. Barely blinks.

“Gracie,” she says, “some people don’t know how to be anything but mean. But you’re bigger than they are. Bigger in here.” She thumps her chest with a fist. “And Sissy and me, we’ve got big love for you. Powerful big love.”

When we finish with groceries, she puts on Herb Alpert, which is her favorite record, and we take turns dancing in our socks with Sissy, twirling and sliding on the linoleum. We dance all afternoon. We flip the album again and again. We dance until way past dinner time. Then we eat crackers and cheese for dinner and no baths.

I WAKE UP to Mama on the edge of my bed. “Rise and shine, poisson,” she whispers. The light is off but it’s gray outside. Early.

“Mama, it’s not time yet,” I say and scootch down deeper.

“Come, Gracie,” she says and hands me jeans, a sweatshirt.

We are bumbling down the road when I realize we’ve forgotten Sissy.

“Shh,” Mama says. “We’ll be back before she’s up. And Mrs. Withers is right downstairs.”

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“A secret mission,” she says. “I hope it will work.” Mama sits on a pillow and hunches forward over the steering wheel as Grape Ape putt-putts us down the road. We rumble and shake at stop signs putta putta putta putta. Mama’s orange hat is pulled low on her small beanie head. She wears it all the time, even when it’s hot, because she gets cold easy.

We pull onto a street that looks familiar. She turns the car around so it faces the other way. Stop. Mama reaches behind her seat and pulls out a Shop N Save bag.

“Mama, what are we doing?”

She holds a finger up in front of her lips and winks. Her dark eyes are smiley. She gets out of the car, closes the door soft and beckons over her shoulder for me to follow.

I recognize the house. It’s the garage sale place. The place I got my suit. Everyone is sleeping still. No lights on inside. In the driveway there’s an old station wagon and Mama hunches over and runs up behind it, waving for me to follow. She scoots to the back bumper.

I look around but there’s no one to see us. The road dead ends at the town garage. I can see a dump truck and a backhoe, both empty and

quiet. This house has no neighbors. When I catch up to Mama, she hands me something paper, neon pink. She has something bright green in her fist. She holds her finger up to her lips again.

She waves the thing in the air. Party horns. The loud ones Mama keeps in the junk drawer and pulls out on birthdays and New Year's. She sticks hers in the tailpipe of the station wagon, then nods at me. I shake my head no.

Mama reaches over and takes my hand with the horn in it. She closes her fingers tight around mine. Her black eyes fill her pointy face. This is serious. She pulls my hand toward the pipe and forces me to stuff the horn in. Strips of plastic hang limp out the end of the exhaust.

I help her shove in more.

"Pack those pitons in tight so they don't fall out," she whispers. When we finish, Mama peeks around the bumper then puts her lips against my ear.

"They're up," she says. "Be so very quiet now, *ma poisson*." She pulls back, puts one hand on each side of my face then pulls our foreheads together. Her breath smells like coffee.

"Unless you want to get arrested," she whispers.

All the air in me disappears and my heart goes KaBLAM, KaBLAM, KaBLAM. I think I might throw up. Then she sticks out her tongue and crosses her eyes. Hand in hand we run hunched in half back toward Grape Ape.

Safe back in the car, Mama and I sink low in the seat. It's not cold, but cool enough to wish we had the heat on, and our breath steams up the window. Mama hands me a paper bag.

"Wipe off your window," she says.

"Now what?" I ask.

"We wait."

And we do, for what feels like hours. I worry about Sissy. More lights come on in the house. The sun comes up, a smear of orange and red like the devil's paintbrush that dot the roadside. People drive by on their way to the town garage. I wonder what we are waiting for, but when I try to ask, Mama shakes her head and holds up one pointer finger.

I'm almost asleep when Mama gives me a nudge and points toward the house. The woman from the sale comes down the front steps. She turns, says something behind her. Marie comes out next, her long blond

hair iron-straight and shiny in the morning sun. They get in the car. Mama wouldn't hurt a bug, but can party horns make a car catch fire? I don't know.

The car starts and the horns screech and squeal. So loud! They unroll straight out. Plastic strips flutter around the tailpipe of the car. Red, blue, green, pink, purple. I feel the giggles coming on. I hold back until my eyes start to water. Then Mama lets out a wheezy, "tah ha ha," and I have to bury my mouth in my arm to keep from laughing.

The woman turns her car off. Starts it again. The horns squeal and squeal. Again, the woman turns off the car, then turns it back on. Strips of pink and green flash out behind the station wagon. Trumpeting like a wounded elephant.

Mama and I let loose at the same time. We laugh and laugh until tears roll down our faces. The woman turns off the car, opens her door. She looks under the hood. Marie gets out, goes around to the driver side, and starts the car.

"Screee hzzzzzz," wail the horns. The woman's hand waves out from behind the hood and Marie turns the car off. The woman walks toward the back of her car. When she gets to the trunk and hunkers down, Mama starts our car and floors it. She beeps the horn then hangs one arm out the window extending her middle finger. I climb up on my knees and watch out the back. I see the purple curve of our rear hood and above that, getting smaller the further away we get, the woman with her hands on her hips.

"Mama, what happens if they catch us?"

"Pffft, did we hurt anyone?"

"No."

"Qu'est-ce que c'est, poisson? Are you worried they'll call the cops? And what would they say? Hmm?"

I watch the telephone poles go by. One, two, three.

"Gracie, look at me." Mama pulls the car over.

"Look at me ma petite poisson. Don't let anyone, ever, steal your power. Do you know what I mean?"

I rest my forehead on the glass and puff out a bit of steam. In it, I write NO in big letters. Mama shakes my shoulder and I turn to face her.

"You love swimming, right?"

I nod.

“And you’re good at it, right? Yes. Of course. You know this.”

She has a scar that runs through one eyebrow, a jagged line of shiny skin. I wonder where it came from, but she won’t say, ever. She hates it. I think it makes her look fierce.

“You love to swim, and you know you are good at it, poisson. That’s your special power. Don’t you ever let anyone take that away from you.” Mama puts the car in gear. “You know they’re jealous. You understand that, right?”

I don’t. Not at all.

I wonder what her special power might be, but then I look at those dark eyes below the orange brim of her hat, and my rib cage feels full and tight. Like when I’ve dropped too far down in the deep end of the pool. And I’m so full up with love for her, I’ve run out of air. ♦

TREVOR FULLER

CHILDREN

SLEEP WELL

I WATCHED A MOVIE by myself last night online after I got home from work. I like to do something to wind down before I go to bed. The movie created a peculiar effect on me. I tried to tell Danielle, my wife, about it the next day while she sat in our home office working. I walked up behind her at her computer and stood there, waiting to be noticed, then said, without preface or introduction, “Hey, you know how I like to watch movies sometimes at night before I go to bed?”

“What?” Danielle said, eyes fixed on her laptop. “Sorry, I’m working,” she added.

I took the very act of a response as approval to continue. “It’s just I watched this movie last night, and it reminded me of when I was done with high school and I knew I was going to leave home to go to college and that summer every landmark I saw when I drove somewhere—the pizza place, the lake, the baseball fields—all these places took on this

weird sort of glamour, and I was going around almost always on the verge of tears because—because I think I realized my childhood was over, I guess. Anyway I mean the film captured that feeling. A film did that. It's been a while since a film's done that for me."

Danielle hadn't stopped typing and studying her laptop's screen. "I'm sorry, Taylor, I really have to get this done," she said.

I didn't get angry at her for not hearing me. I apologized and let her get back to work. Danielle worked as a web developer at a small business magazine. She contained a store of inside jokes about HTML that were beyond me. It was a bad habit of mine that I would often have a thought strike me, then try to talk to her about it with the expectation she'd break off everything she was doing to listen to me. I sometimes wondered why she had married a market research analyst. I also considered her better looking than me by several degrees. She was trim and possessed a classically beautiful nose. When I looked at myself, I saw a dumpy guy who if you passed him on the street would probably leave the mental impression of purified water.

I went to bed that night thinking about the movie but didn't get much sleep. That wasn't surprising: I hadn't been sleeping well recently. Or for a while. Ongoing problems are forever recent problems, I guess. But I've always had issues sleeping, ever since college. I spent my entire senior year sleeping on a futon my mom convinced me to buy because of its low cost—she didn't see the point in paying for a frame and mattress I wasn't going to keep. Two support bars ran the length of the futon, and they made a firm, irreversible impression on my back every night. My roommate the previous year had been a formidable adenoidal snorer. His snoring exerted a bodily, shake-the-walls kind of presence, like a nearby passing train. I didn't get much sleep then either. All of that was seven years ago, but my problems had followed me, had by now almost persuaded me into thinking of them as natural bodily functions, like breathing or digestion.

A thought: Maybe sleep troubles are learned behavior?

I ran into Brian, a co-worker and friend of mine, in the break room the following Monday at work, and I said to him first thing, "I really wish I could sleep like I did when I was a child."

Brian poured himself a cup of coffee. He was a small guy, but obsessively muscled, which gave him this odd cubic shape that made

him appear as if he had just walked out of a geometry textbook. Usually when I saw him, I told him he looked good. His gym fetish struck me as an insecurity.

"I used to sleep for days as a kid," Brian said. "Not healthy. How I became overweight. But burned it all off in college. Self-esteem went through the roof. No regrets." Brian took a sip of his coffee, then asked, "Up for lunch today?"

We liked to go to Taco Bell every now and then for lunch. Their headquarters lay right across the street, a thirty-story commercial building made of blue glass. The restaurant on the first floor housed a gray-carpeted dining room the size of a hotel lobby with a weirdly hushed ambience about it. You could choose a deeply cornered table and put some distance between yourself and the rest of humanity there while you ate flavor-tested burritos off the dollar menu.

I told him yeah, and we went to Taco Bell at noon. While we ate at our table, I asked him if he had seen any movies recently. He said he had, the same one I'd seen, but that he hadn't really cared one way or the other about it.

"Too slow, I thought," he said. "Pacing's important. Can't be too fast, can't be too slow. Like lifting weights."

I'd never heard the pacing of a film compared to weightlifting before, but that's why I liked getting Brian's take on things. He was an analogist.

"What about the ending?" I asked him. "Did you not like the ending?" The ending had most affected me—a montage of the main character's hometown as she drove through it one last time.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I remember thinking the music had been well chosen. Music is important for a montage, like in *Rocky*. Best montage in movie history, hands down."

Brian's reaction puzzled me. It didn't seem possible someone could have gone unmoved by the movie's closing montage. Then again, I hadn't thought about the music playing over it. I struggled to recall the exact instrumentation and melody. The feelings were what had remained with me. Even most of the images from the montage occurred to me as a blur when I tried to remember them. I could conjure up a yellow house and a bridge, but nothing else.

Danielle and I went to the mall together the following weekend. She liked to do her Christmas shopping four months early, a habit she owed

to her mother. I tailed her through the outlets, holding the shopping bags of purchases past along my forearms.

We entered an Abercrombie & Fitch, and I asked, “Should we stop by the pharmacy before we head home?”

“Why?” Danielle asked. She had immediately gone over to the nearest rack and pulled out a blue-gray plaid shirt for inspection. “Uncle Dave would like this, I think,” she said.

“I told you, I haven’t been sleeping well,” I said.

“You need to exercise, not take pills,” Danielle said, searching the shirt for a price tag. “Go run around the lake or something.”

“I hate running,” I said, which was the truth. “I never needed to run when I was younger to sleep well.”

“No, of course not, you took sleeping pills instead.” She took us to another rack, this one hung with solid collared shirts spanning the entire spectrum of light. “Ten-year-old Taylor on Ambien. A picture of health.”

I could see she thought my idea stupid. Danielle often communicated her contempt through sarcasm, but she didn’t mean it personally. Anyway, I understood the reason for her resistance in this case. Danielle distrusted doctors and medicine; she preferred to manage illnesses naturally, through healthy living. This was contrary to my upbringing. My parents liked to gag me with four aspirin whenever I mentioned having the slightest headache.

“I guess I did play soccer,” I said. “And basketball.”

“Uncle Eric needs a large,” Danielle said to herself, quickly going through the rack’s shirts one by one as if searching a drawer of folders.

“Life was easier back then too,” I said. “Less pressure.”

“You lived it, not me,” said Danielle, somehow having already made her way to the other side of the rack. I reattached myself to her. Watching Danielle shop was like observing a world class contortionist. It left me in awe but also frightened. What’s more, she hated doing it.

I thought back to when I was a child and the conditions of my sleep. My parents never allowed me to close my door before I went to bed at night. My mom liked to keep all the doors open—I assume so she could move through the house unobstructed in case of emergency. This was important because my parents also liked to leave the hallway light outside my room on till around eleven o’clock, my dad’s bedtime. He

was the one who would come turn it off. The light acted as a source of comfort for me as a child, a kind of firewall to my dreams. I've always possessed an overactive imagination. Even now, as an adult, I sometimes wake up from a fitful sleep and see the bulky shadow of a dresser or a shelf in the dark and mistake it for a poised serial killer or psychopath. I also had a ceiling fan in my bedroom as a child that gave off a continuous pulsating hum. Its circular rhythm merry-go-rounded me into befogged dreams of jungle gyms and empty sandlots. Danielle, whom I shared a bed with, preferred sleeping in the absence of ambient noise; we had no ceiling fan in our room. I had given up trying to convince her to let me have one installed long ago.

The following day, while I was mowing the front lawn, our next-door neighbor Valerie came over and asked me if I had seen any films recently I would recommend because she and Lou, her husband, were looking for something to watch while their two boys attended science camp the next week. I told her about the movie I had seen not too long ago and really liked, but she shook her head and told me she had already seen it and not liked it. I asked her why, stunned to find someone so quickly after Brian who also disliked the movie. The question gave her pause; she shifted her weight onto her back leg and made a visor of her hand over her eyes as she said, "It was the scene before she left home, I think. You know where she's driving around and she's all sad because it's the last time she's going to see everything? I just thought it was so—I just didn't buy it. That's not how it was for me when I went off to college. I was excited to get out of my hometown. I just thought it was all really phony. But I'm glad you liked it."

I joked that I was glad I liked it too, but Valerie didn't find it funny. I preferred talking to her husband. She was a devout Christian and carried a suspicion of the world around with her that asked she treat every joke as a possible insult to her character or faith. Talking to her felt like going to trial for a crime you didn't commit.

Valerie went back into her house after I revealed I hadn't seen anything else recently, but her comment about the movie followed me the rest of the day. I recognized its implication—anyone who had allowed the movie's phony ending to affect them was a fool. A question of authenticity seemed to reside at the heart of her criticism, and it forced me to reexamine the memories that had caused my reaction to the movie.

Did I not feel the feelings I felt when I left home? Did I not long for a childhood I could no longer return to? As the day progressed, I grew increasingly doubtful my reaction to the movie had not been a trick of the editing, some cinematic sleight of hand.

Danielle and I drove out to visit her parents in San Bernardino the next weekend. The trip took about an hour, and we listened to talk radio along the way without saying much to each other. It was Danielle's father's fifty-ninth birthday. Danielle held a gift bag in her lap containing a white polo shirt she had picked out several months ago for him.

Danielle's parents, Ken and Jo, had golf on the TV when we got there. I took a seat on the couch directly in front of the television, Danielle next to me. Ken sat in the recliner to our right while Jo made Bloody Marys for everyone in the kitchen. Ken, Danielle, and I all stared at the TV as a visored and polo-shirted white man standing in a sand trap hit a chip shot that overshot the green. The color commentators quietly diagnosed the shot as "devastating." The man held up his nine-iron for inspection as if it were at fault.

"Your mom and I talked to the Hansens the other day, Danny," Ken said after the program cut away from the confused golfer.

"Really?" Danielle said. "How are they?"

As Ken prepared to answer, I leaned over and whispered to Danielle, "The Hansens?"

"I was friends with their daughter in elementary and junior high school," she whispered quickly back.

"Sophie's getting married," Ken said. "Guy's a dentist, I think."

"No, he's an optometrist," Jo shouted from the kitchen.

"An optometrist," Ken repeated. Ken's indifference to details made him a reliable source for unintentional humor. I think he found it funny himself.

"Wow, good for her," Danielle said. "How many years has it been since I talked to her? I can't even remember."

Jo finally came back from the kitchen loaded with Bloody Marys. As she passed out the drinks, she said, "You should call her. You two were so close."

Danielle took her Bloody Mary but didn't drink from it, her mother's suggestion having surprised her. "We weren't that close," she said.

"You two used to play that card game with the fairy animals right here in this living room all the time," Jo said, having taken her seat in the recliner to our left, a fifth of her Bloody Mary already gone.

"Pokémon?" I asked.

"I remember spending more time with Candice and Anna," Danielle said. These were all names from Danielle's past that meant nothing to me. "We hung out at school all the time."

"You and Sophie were best friends," Jo said. "You don't remember because you chose to stop being friends with her in the eighth grade." Jo had her eyes on the TV, issuing her declarations with unconcerned confidence.

"What are you talking about?" Danielle asked. "I didn't choose to stop being friends with her. She joined the Theater Club and started hanging out with those guys. She chose to stop being friends with me."

I looked over at Ken, sipping on his Bloody Mary, watching his wife and daughter with an inscrutable expression on his face. He seemed to be enjoying the rising pitch of the room. The consequences of caring, I imagined him thinking to himself.

"Sophie's mom told me the whole thing," Jo said. "She told me Sophie spent a week crying in her room because you told her to stop following her around."

Danielle became a picture of incredulous outrage. "That's total bullshit," she said. "I never told her to stop following me. She started hanging out with the theater kids. I didn't want to hang out with the theater kids. So we stopped hanging out."

"I guess Sophie's a liar then," Jo said.

"You said her mom told you," Danielle pointed out.

"Well, who do you think she got it from?" Jo said, finally turning to look at her daughter, a suggestion of impatience in her bearing.

Danielle's outrage cooled beneath her mom's irritated display, their old authoritative parent-child relationship reasserting itself. For a moment, I could almost see Danielle as a little girl next to me, subdued, chastised, turning inwards, seeking protection from the psychological threat of loving a parent who was angry with her. But then she returned to herself and told her mother, "Whatever you say, Mom."

Jo turned back to the TV, her authority ostensibly confirmed.

Conversation continued in a strained fashion for thirty minutes. When Ken finished his Bloody Mary, he started to get up to go make himself another one, but Jo motioned him down and said she would do it. The tension followed her out of the room, and when she came back with Ken's second Bloody Mary, it didn't return with her. I asked Ken about his garden he kept out in the backyard and Jo about her scrapbooking. I asked them about Cornhuskers football and how they thought the season had gone. Even though the tension had dissipated, I could still sense Danielle's preoccupation with her mother's strange accusations in her hunched bearing. I didn't blame her, but I also didn't want it to continue to affect Ken's birthday celebration.

We left Danielle's parents' at around seven, after we got back from dinner at the restaurant. We'd all shared two pitchers of strawberry margaritas (Jo's preference), but Danielle had had only a single glass, leaving the drinking up to her parents and me. She was the one who drove us all back to her parents', and she was the one who got behind the wheel as she and I began our drive back home. I possessed the constitution of a man half my size—two margaritas and my feet became enemies to themselves.

Still, I wasn't so far gone that I couldn't recognize Danielle's lingering withdrawal. She wore a severe expression, left brow a little angled, jaw taut, lips slightly in-turned. I had encountered this Danielle enough in our five years together to have formed contingency plans for her appearance, first and foremost of which: keeping to myself. So I leaned back and silently stared out the passenger window.

As we pulled out onto the main street from Danielle's parents', she said, "Have I ever shown you my junior high?"

I shook my head. "Nope," I said. "Just your high school."

She didn't respond. She took the next right, which removed us from the street we normally followed to get onto the offramp for the freeway.

We eventually pulled into an empty gated parking lot with a stone sign out front engraved with the words "La Paz Junior High School." Danielle parked the car but didn't take the keys out of the ignition. In front of us, lit partially by the car's headlights, sat a collection of one and two-story rectangular buildings, completely unremarkable.

"This is it," Danielle said.

I listened to the car's gentle idling. As I studied the area, I began to picture a twelve- and thirteen-year-old Danielle walking toward, among, and inside the buildings, sitting in the classrooms, eating lunch with abstractly featured friends in the quad, running up the stairs. I tried to summon her past to myself and imbue the school with a familiar significance.

"You want to go walk around?" I asked eventually, sensing I should say something.

She shook her head. "No, I'd rather not." She stared out the windshield at her old haunt. I had to imagine her past, but she could animate the buildings with her memories, give them a more accurate color.

She sighed and said, "I can't remember what happened with Sophie. Or I mean I can, I remember one day how she just never showed up to where we all would meet for lunch and how I saw her hanging out with the theater kids later that afternoon. I mean I remember all that, but now I just—I don't know if what I remember is actually true. Or maybe what I remember is true, but I've also forgotten other things that make what I remember not true really." She paused here, but it wasn't an invitation for me to speak. She was deliberating over a problem. "We must have done something," she said. "I must have done something. I must have pushed Sophie away."

Danielle's self-doubt echoed my newfound feelings toward the movie I had been preoccupied with the last few weeks and the divergent reactions of everyone I had spoken to about it. I searched my past and tried to find an unaltered moment that would validate my response to the final scene, confirm my memory of leaving home as a teenager. But instead I found my ego everywhere, editing, cutting, crafting my childhood into a more pleasing shape, the same way Danielle's seemed to be doing, a shape dwarfing the present, beckoning me backwards, toward a past I had lived only in my mind. "Your mom could be wrong," I said, knowing Danielle wanted me to say it.

"Maybe," Danielle replied, but she didn't seem like she believed in the possibility. Neither did I. She took a deep breath and reaffirmed her grip on the wheel. "I'm sorry. Thanks for letting me come here. It was stupid."

"No, it wasn't," I said, hoping to communicate to her through the

steadiness of my voice that she had a person who understood her crisis sitting next to her. “I like seeing the places in your past.”

She smiled and leaned over and pulled me into a hug. I held her. After she withdrew, she put the car into drive, and we pulled out of the parking lot. Danielle turned on the radio and put on the '90s station as we made our way back onto the main street that would get us to our usual offramp. We passed a montage of landmarks from Danielle's childhood. She didn't point any of them out to me—she had already done as much years ago, the first or second or third time she brought me here. Neither of us spoke the entire way home; the outdated music scored the silence. When we got back, we fell into our usual pre-sleep routines, putting on our pajamas, washing our faces, brushing our teeth, then finally entered bed to watch reruns of syndicated shows that had long been canceled. Danielle turned off the TV at eleven, and we tried to go to sleep, but as was the case for me recently, I struggled to reach anything more restful than a doze. ◆

SARAH LULLO

THAT'S ALL FOLKS!

Spring will run out of things to say.
Two terns over the reservoir.
If I wanted to, I could take them both in my hands.
The mist rises off the water, invasive honeysuckle,
Some lilac wandering.
I lick the roof of my mouth and remember
How different tongues can taste. One after another,
Cars on the overpass sound like the breeze.
For the first time, I can hear the yellow hue
Of his voice. The yellow hue of John's hair when
I lived in that apartment off Green Street in Illinois.
It's not that different after all. A child skins her knee.
I remember to ignore *one impulse, then another*—
Maybe I'm worried about the wrong thing.
The little lemons of desire and ignorance ripen inside
Our dreams. We're about as flexible as two statues.
I tell him how I feel about him and it doesn't bother me after.
Sometimes the answer can be found where it doesn't exist.
Déjame en paz, the robin whispers in my ear once more.
Mostly a daydream, cerulean sky from last week.

CHRISTOPHER SHIPMAN

RESPIRE

—for Peyton

Under forgiving sun
in the backyard the dead
poison ivy snaking up the elms
is yawning back to life.
Two houses down
someone's mouth is pressed
to a trumpet. A few notes
blown among the birds.
Summers's last crickets. Dogs
pawing fences. That ghost-
noise of unseen cars.
I'm nursing a hangover with ice
in the coffee my wife
didn't drink before we left
on our hike down neighborhood
trails with the friends
we're visiting in Richmond.
I take a sip and imagine myself
as the baby snake
we saw before the last path
returned us to pavement.
I too just want to get across—
yawn my small yawn

JESSICA GREENBAUM

427 MARSHALL STREET, 1980

What remains with perfect clarity is the hibachi grill—
a black grid the length of a legal pad—

set down in the side yard of that house in the Montrose
under the two-story tree whose papery orange flowers brushed

like a snare drum across my top floor windows. To fill in
I'll add that my three anti-social housemates

comprised a mini Winesburg, Ohio; one installed a lock
outside of his bedroom door, and another bought a bushel of apples

he survived on for a month. It was that era
when a house phone hung on the kitchen wall

and if tired after work I might answer "Brazos Bookstore"
and also John Lennon died and there was no one to grieve with

and one hot night you came over with your best friend
who had suggested we cook a duck—which I didn't know possible;

the unpackaged bird seemed like a chicken made into a pillow
then filled with rubber cement, and I have never forgotten

roasting it on the grill, draining cups of fat
like I was bailing out a boat, and by the end it was so

diminished I wouldn't have recognized it, and I have no memory
of how it tasted, or if your friend addressed

one single question to me those overheated years. And the tree—
the only player I care about here—I wonder if

it still cheers the breeze that feeds someone, someone as hungry as I was.

DON BOES

OLD MOVIE

All of my kind who lost their deposits
and rode side-saddle and dropped cakes
out of windows for my amusement
are now out of the money and out of the loop.
Nothing like a tub of popcorn. Nothing
like learning a lesson at a weekday matinee.
Sunflowers and a cherry tree once inhabited
my backyard, according to a stranger
who rang my doorbell. His modest plan
was to recollect how he started who knows what.
I pointed to the collapsed playset
and a bed of ornamental hopes,
my effort at cultivation, I stay
for the credits. I open the lobby door
to the street, crazy hot and stupendously loud.

EVANGELINE JONES

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

THE FIRST DAY I saw the coyotes, Mason advised me to take a gun. “What kind of gun?” I wanted to know. Not that I knew anything about guns, beyond a vague understanding of the differences between a handgun, a rifle, and an AK-47. My personal experience of wielding a weapon was limited to the time I’d played paintball as a teenager, fumbling from behind odd-shaped barriers to aim—mostly inaccurately—at my opponents. Oh, and then there was the one time I’d played the arcade game where you shoot lasers at dinosaurs; I hadn’t been particularly successful at that one, either. Mason nodded his stubbly chin toward a rifle in the corner, leaning up against the cedar-framed door. I eyed its long barrel with skepticism.

“There are lots of wild animals out there,” he warned, shifting his hefty weight from side to side. Mason had diabetes, and it was only since I’d arrived at his northern Idaho property two weeks earlier that he’d started eating better. I was there as part of a work-exchange program, helping him start seedlings for his garden, but it would be months before the butter lettuce flourished, and in the meantime, I refused to subsist on frozen steak and potatoes. I made grocery lists and dispatched him to Walmart; he returned laden with tomatoes, peppers, onions, carrots, and other healthier provisions. Like a good, much younger pseudo-wife, I prepared three meals a day and cleaned the three-story house we shared with our two cats. Diet wasn’t the only area in which we didn’t see eye-to-eye; when he’d spent too long in his room, working himself up over YouTube videos and slumping into the kitchen to lament the dangers of the Mandela Effect, I’d brew him peppermint tea and assure him that the world was less antagonistic than it appeared. He’d narrow his eyes at me in suspicion—the very same way, in fact, that I was now regarding his rifle.

“I’m pretty sure that if I took that thing with me, I’d be in more danger than any animal,” I said. Mason shook his head, heavy with disappointment. He knew that there were wolves out there, traversing his forty acres of forests and ponds. He knew there were coyotes—heck, everyone knew it. After all, they’d been killing the two-month-old broiler chickens that the caretaker family—a conservative Christian couple with a teenage daughter and three adopted youngsters—were raising down below the house. Those chickens, encased in barbed wire and income expectations, were not easy to protect; the other day, the family’d shot down a razor-beaked osprey. And who knew what else was out there roaming around in the forest. Bears? Unhinged forest-dwellers escaping the apocalypse? Yetis?

Regardless, I left the house unarmed, making my way up the dirt road that carved its way through Douglas firs and lodgepole pines. Past the clearings where Mason and I had dragged withered brush from beneath the trees to burn it in a gasoline-drenched blaze, past the swampy pond where dragonflies gathered on reedy grasses to tint their wings with sun. My breath crescendoed as I summited a hill, and I paused to allow it to settle, sipping water and gazing out over a field speckled with

wildflowers. That's when I saw them: three autumn-colored balls of fur, somersaulting in the grass. I held my newly recovered breath, watching in amazement. Foxes? No, their noses were too narrow. Coyotes! Baby coyotes. They chased one another in an imitation of kindergartners playing tag, until they froze, and—taking notice of my presence—high-tailed it into the gaping mouth of a nearby drainpipe.

My first thought was: *They must be living there.* The second was: *I can't tell anybody on the property about this. Ever.*

That resolution didn't last long. Perhaps it was the arrogance of witnessing something unique—the coyotes revealed themselves to me! Or the desire to concretize experience by sharing it, the need to validate one's existence. Or the way that observing creatures in their natural habitat creeps its way into one's heart, heats it, and spreads outward, like lava—beautiful, dangerous, appealing. I grasped at the justification to reveal my discovery later that evening, while returning from a neighbor's house with Mason in his Ford pickup. As we competed with a white-capped river to rush past trees that blurred into Hunter Green, he reflected on the osprey his caretakers had killed, hands gripping the wheel. "I don't agree with shooting animals just because they're predators," he said. Occasionally, Mason would go off on a rant like this, the way we all do when passions bubble to the surface and insist on expression. The stunning creature had lain there in a majestic display of ivory and gold, ornamental in its lifelessness. "Like the coyotes. The caretakers think it's a family; they want to find them and kill them all. But they're just living their lives, just being themselves. They haven't done anything wrong."

This is it, my arrogance said. *Your opportunity to tell the world.* I opened my mouth, and lava spewed out. "Actually, I saw the coyotes today," I boasted, ignoring the pressure in my chest, confirming that I spoke in error.

Mason's jaw clenched. "What?" he bellowed. "Where? You have to tell them!"

"But ... you just said ..."

"You have to tell them," Mason reiterated, focused with determination on the road ahead. "They've killed dozens of chickens! Who knows how many more they might get."

I stared silently out at the diminishing sunlight, the way it flickered off the windshield and announced the coming darkness. Like most women,

I was conditioned to please. When people—particularly burly men—raised their voices at me, my tendency had always been to withdraw, to hide, to placate and retreat. But like most women, I'd always had an easier time standing up for others than myself. Especially babies. The coyotes were innocent—anybody who'd witnessed their playful tumbling would agree. They were killers, sure, but that was their nature. It wasn't mine, no matter how intensely my palpitating nervous system demanded an override. "I can't do it," I said finally, choking on my own volcanic pride. "If you find the coyotes on your own and decide to kill them, that's up to you. But I can't be part of it."

Mason shook his head, his disappointment even weightier this time—so dense it threatened to drag us both down. "I guess that's your decision," he said. "But the family's not going to like it."

The caretakers' daughter paid me a visit the following afternoon. Amanda was nineteen and beautiful in the simple, homegrown way of God-fearing Christians who live off of the land. Makeup-free, with wheat-colored hair cascading down her back, her clear-eyed sincerity reminded me of myself when I was not much younger, and still believed in a single, rule-based approach to existence, one in which good and evil are clearly delineated. Unsurprisingly, Amanda's main concern was for my soul. "Do you believe in God?" she wanted to know.

I transplanted a frail tomato plant into a larger pot, pondering where it came from and whether it would survive. "I believe in a larger, creative force," I tried to explain. "But I don't think that it's Christian, or belongs to any one religion."

Amanda's well-formed eyebrows furrowed in dismay. In her estimation, my soul was in grave danger, worse off than the coyotes. Maybe even worse off than the chickens. "The Bible says that we have dominion over the animals," she tried again. "Don't you believe that we have to make our decisions based on God's word?"

"I don't think we can look to texts for those kinds of answers," I said. "Even religious texts—at least not on a surface level. I think we have to listen to what's right for us, in our hearts."

That was almost too much for Amanda. "So you just do whatever you want? Whatever you decide you want to do, and say it's right?"

I returned to the budding leaves in front of me, the tomatoes and the butter lettuce and the zucchini. How could I tell this clear-eyed young

woman that the way they'd sprouted from mere seeds—a miraculous event even to me, the one who'd planted them—could never be fully explained? Not by science, not by religion, and certainly not by me. That larger questions, such as dominion over the animals, were exponentially veiled in gray. That I knew how it felt to follow my heart, and I knew how it felt to ignore it. That I'd experienced the consequences of its dismissal, and they were much more serious than the death of chickens or coyotes—they were a direct injury to the creative force itself.

I tried and once again I failed. "We'll find them anyway," Amanda assured me.

During my time there, at least, her prediction never came true.

THE SECOND DAY I saw the coyotes came shortly before I left Mason's home for my next destination: a B&B even further north, near the Canadian border. Amanda's father, determined to locate the vermin himself, had been patrolling the property, rifle to shoulder; each evening, he returned empty handed. One afternoon, at Amanda's suggestion, the two of us hiked the perimeter. While our route maintained a safe distance from the drainpipe, a subterranean part of me wondered at her motive. So when I again summited the hill to that grassy expanse to see the young coyotes frolicking, a peace descended over me, a knowing that I'd made the right choice. One leapt on top of the other, nipping at its ear; a third, alert to my presence, met my eyes before all three scurried back into their hideout. At intervals, they would peek their long brown noses out to see if I was still there, waiting for the danger to pass so they could resume their play. Yet I couldn't shake the sense that they trusted me on some level, that they knew their secret was safe. It nearly hadn't been, but it was.


That sense of knowing never left me—not even on my final day at Mason's. I'd packed my minimal belongings, along with my cat's substantial trappings, into my silver Honda Civic. As we strolled across the lush grounds to the caretakers' house to bid them farewell, Mason paused near the lake-like pond where a Canadian goose and its mate had come to rest. Then he stopped.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He scuffed the sandy soil with one boot, looking unusually sheepish for a fifty-three-year-old man. I hoped that he would continue to eat

well after I left. I hoped he wouldn't watch too many conspiracy theory videos on YouTube. That he'd get another work-exchange resident, that he wouldn't stay alone with his thoughts in that expansive house. "Last night, the coyotes killed forty chickens," Mason said. I drew a long breath. I wanted to feel upset, or angry on the caretakers' behalf, but instead, an unexpected pride engulfed me. In response, I simply nodded.

The caretakers saw me off with true Christian kindness—warm embraces, handmade gifts. They made no mention of chickens, or coyotes. But it was there, nonetheless: the proverbial elephant, finally taking up the space where it belonged. ♦



GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE FINALIST

ALLISON BLEVINS

BEFORE MY HUSBAND WAS MY HUSBAND

THE PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY calls occasionally to check on me. They want to make sure I keep taking their medicine. They are emotionally supportive.

Everyone tells me I look great, beautiful. *Aren't we all beautiful? This isn't helpful.* I want to know what it feels like to watch someone you love disintegrate. *Tell me how it feels.* I am dying. *Aren't we all?* That isn't helpful. I am dying faster. I am a character played by the woman I once was. I draw on eye bags with makeup, paint my face flushing red. I collect my walker from the stagehand and foot drop my way on stage right.

Laura tells me the action of creating watchers and their perceptions will always be fiction. *What must be true or might be true?* Laura says it is beautiful how must means maybe. I tell her I want to understand. *Don't sugarcoat it. Everyone does.* I want someone to tell me I look like

shit. Laura suggests I ask my parents or children. *Mom. Dad. How does it look to watch your child sick with a progressive neurological disease? How does it feel?*

In the car after a trip, we argue. The one we have on repeat like some distant moon's orbit, like laundry, like the children's running path around the kitchen island. I ask my husband what he needs. *I need you to need less from me.*

My needs could fill a bucket—water drained from clogged pipes—and tie my husband's neck with a sharp tensile string. *Aren't people meant to grow and change?* I won't let myself say I want my husband as the man he is now, and I want the woman he was before too. This isn't totally true. Shifts in the plates sent cracks streaming in diagonal rivers from our doorway molding before. The marriage has always been shifting. Isn't that how it goes? *Isn't that how it is meant to be?* I can't say a softness, a kindness has gone from his words and the pressure of his fingers once gentle on my back as we walked through a crowded room, now absent. I can't say when all my losses happened.

My therapist tells me I can't ignore my husband's transition. *I'm not ignoring it. I just don't care.* The therapist *tsk-tsk*'s tongue against teeth. No one believes me when I say there isn't enough room for all of the moving pieces. It's impossible to pull one bolt or crank handle from the clanging machinery. I know this paragraph will ruin us both. I shouldn't have written it. Everyone wants me to talk, to say how different he is now. Some of you want it too.

Before my husband was my husband, he was dandelion milk, green and tacked to his mother's fingers. He was a dish of cream and berries. He was a roller skate, a horse tail, a piano, a field of cows, wild yowling barn cats.

I cry in the car. My husband doesn't touch my neck or clasp my hand. Instead, he explains how he never enjoyed sex before. *Don't you want me to be happy?* And I am. *Happy.* All those nights we spent together falling in love were before. I have trouble following conversations. Fog has seeped in through my cracks. I ask him to speak slower, kinder. My husband has the last word. *The fog*, he says, *is only going to get worse.*

When I am doing dishes alone in the quiet house, all I think about are the text messages between my husband and his ex-wife. That one where he made a joke about my walking. I don't care about them meeting, what





happened when they looked at each other again, when their eyes met. I can't look at his face without thinking about his words. How casually some men dismiss words. I want to make myself tell my therapist the day he sent that text was *the* day. That was the moment. But I'm not ready to believe he doesn't love me.

We must start again. I beg him over and over. Silence screams from my mouth. I beg my husband to apologize again and again. Each time his mouth is only buzzing. My husband used to guide me through crowds with his hand on the small of my back. Sweet and gentle pressure. Ownership. *This belongs to me.* I loved it. I suspect my husband no longer does this because he is terrified anyone could think such a gnarled and rusted thing belongs to him, as if he'd brought a bag of his garbage to the party.

Maybe we are just in the middle?

My husband packs on his underwear each morning. I sometimes watch his back from our bed, his face reflecting in the mirror hanging behind the *his* of our his and hers vanity sinks. He never notices me watching and wanting.

Before my husband was my husband, he was a beggar star forcing his hands in car windows. His holy sighs like a sign: *The End is Near*. Pink and green and yellow like chalk transferred to pants from a child's driveway portraits, he forced his arms and feet into his house, his bedroom, even his own mouth.

Some nights, we sit together in silence on the bed. *Companionable*. The large orange cat between us snores low and deep. An inexperienced observer of sleeping cats might imagine the snore begins in the bulge of belly.

We fight often about *tone* and *intention*. These are code words for *I needed you to love me in that moment but you didn't*. Before my husband was my husband . . . I want to tell myself I have to think more intently about this. I must, but I fold him into a neat square and put him in my pocket. ♦

GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE FINALIST

IF MOSS GROWS ON THE NORTH SIDE OF TREES

If daylilies can find their way
in a midwestern ditch, if I ever really
loved you, if nightjars in a dawn
parade, wind turbines and their slow
pirouette, if I'd left the first time
you said, *Let's get high*, if cicada shells
lined on privacy fence corner posts
like bark, sticky and crisp as honey
toast, if I carry Portland in my legs now,
how water seems to drip on my calves
and thighs in bed each night, if muscle
memory from green-slimes porch boards
now kicks my feet in the shower, if even
my daughter's hair curled to candy rods
in the tub is Portland, how my curls
tightened and bent in the constant wet,

I know I won't be the last to imagine
their own illness is a punishment.





BRYANA JOY

GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE FINALIST

DEAR ANNE

"I have many schemes in my head for future practice,—humble and limited indeed—but still I should not like them to come to nothing, and myself to have lived to so little purpose."

—Anne Brontë, 5 April 1849 letter to Ellen Nussey

Caught up with your mortal remains
in your favorite seaside city today. The
coastal wind was very strong. I laughed
about it with Alex in the field belonging
to the castle & also felt faintly hollow
inside, like something a gust could take.
I too have a favorite seaside city & think
often of dying. *I have so much needed
work left to do* I worry, then chide myself
for this self-importance. You were coughing
up blood in this town. You were not
as little as they thought you were. You
were the only one who didn't come home
& if you're reading this, well then you
know already: the green waves are still doing
their slow grind against the beach that
is noisy with dogs & sweet with sea-glass.
Our prospects are better than anyone
realizes, & nothing was a waste, nothing.
I know this is true as I walk past the boats
with the sun going down & I am not afraid.

TURNING THIRTY

Today the things happened faster. Buckets
of sun went up like paint on a house
when the whole crew is there. *A-yo*
says a buddy on the roof
toss me that tape! Ah cold lemonade, ah
summers arriving already wearing
your endings like graphic tees.

In the window the Earl Grey was draining
from the cup. Each time I raised
it to my lips there was less. Fastnachts
fell from the counter into white paper bags.
Soon none were left. At the Boys & Girls Club
Yandriel scuffled like he does, got too old for it,
made his last basket. And left.

I begin to see how it will be, how it's not
Goodbye you die still trying to say but *Hello*.
Hello there you frail yellow thing.
Sun is a beautiful name. Nice to meet you.
You are opening your mouth to say
I don't know much, I just got here
but will not have time to finish.





CHRISTEN NOEL KAUFFMAN
GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE FINALIST

O SWEET, O REBELLION

“Train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.”

—Titus 2:4-5 ESV

I ask a man to take me to see the train
push through town, where once I stood

on the tracks while a whistle blared
its game of chicken until I jumped, no way

to stop the machine’s monolithic force,
voice how I imagine an angry god

might sound. on the ground is a young deer’s
swollen eyes, intestines spreading

like ribbons at our feet un-holied in the mouth
of a bear. I’ve tried to be honest in my revilement

at the end of each day, sheets pulled back
to reveal the naked springs poked through

the mattress like a hundred spiral eyes.
what in a woman is allowed to be self-

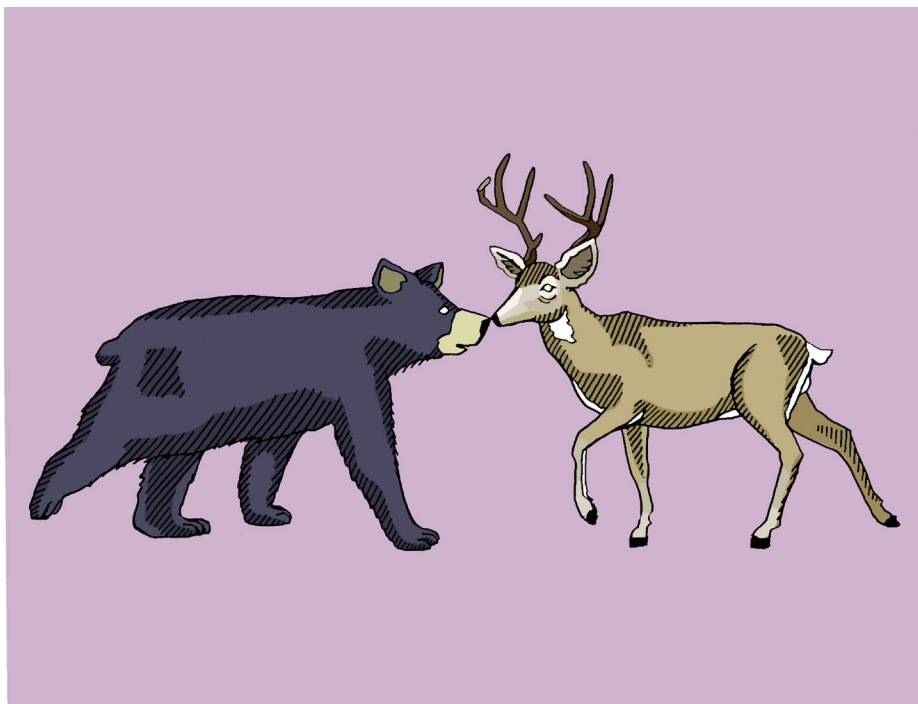
controlled, this an open wound I carry
instead of prayer. I submitted to love the bear

but put my hands inside the deer where
her children may have grown, all legs and spotted

haunches like bullseyes. marry me, then,
to the doe's soft ears, a word for love

that doesn't end in disaster. when I die
I want to come back as the bear does.

as the deer does. I want a man to ask
my word for god and commit to it.



A SUCCESSION OF CHURCH MOTHERS

—Golden Shovel of “Will the Circle be Unbroken”

in the mirror is a magpie, judicious beak that will
pick at the loose skin, holler about a temple the
lord made in a garden somewhere, lilies that circle
a valley before it floods and look, anything can be
whole again, rearranged and unbroken
if we want it enough, measure our faith by
accepting miracles. I could be a miracle and
wouldn't that be worth it, return to the alter, and by
this I mean river swollen to the levee's red mark. lord,
it's been months since I felt myself, stood by
an elevator to watch it carry someone up and
disappear them above me, footsteps so close by
but untouchable. in the morning there's
a hollowness no sunday could ever fill, but here is a
woman who has my eyes, tells me it gets better
once the rain ends. I've tried to find home
in the center of a cut tree, pew after pew awaiting
transformation but to confront the restlessness in
me is to set loose the wild dog from its cage, forgive the
tectonic shift when I should've seen only sky.
my mother could be a god, could claim herself lord
in an open field where we dissect the iris to see what's in-
side. I want something to carry my dead weight, hold up the
earth and plant me there. forget heaven. forget sky.

EMILY SCHULTEN

GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE WINNER

CAPILLA

It's important their small faces face the street, lit up
at night, their solemn eyes to the sky, blinded

by the street lamp, illuminated by yellow plastic lilies.
We are trying faith in beads, in dance, in the *promesa*,

for fertility. You lug three pieces of heavy fir onto
your shoulder, I follow you with a candle, clutching

a worn and fragile swath of cloth that, sworn to be a relic,
your grandmother handed to you when you saw her last.

At home, you teach yourself the rhythm of a saw—
its motion not unlike our penance, pressing forward

with all your strength toward the wood, pulling back
in repetition, progress nearly unnoticeable, the sweat

dripping from your forehead—no, from your entire torso.
I choose a pale blue for the paint, the one I remember

from the church as a child, from draped fabric veils
made of stone. We are hoping for an opening,

a crack in the sky to provide for the blessing
our bodies have hoped for each month.

But each month my body, a disappointment.
Our statue of Saint Francis arrives as you are finishing





the shrine, in time to be framed between two panes
of glass. He cradles a bird in one palm, frozen

and forever watching her, the blush of his face
high on his cheeks. You settle the little house

toward traffic, and we go inside only to stare
from a window. We ask for mercy before we sin.

GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE WINNER

EMILY SCHULTEN

THE SHRIMP BOATS ARE IN

WE HAVE THIRTY MINUTES to get his semen to the hospital.

It's on the next island, north of where we live. They only test one day a week, and after thirty minutes, it's too late.

It's a cloudy morning, with enough gray to keep us shrouded anywhere on the island. These days are so rare that we bask in their shadows. Usually it's not even a whole day, clouds move so fast from one end of sky to the other. The heat in our lives is otherwise relentless.

He keeps the sample in a plastic hospital cup measured on the side in milliliters, the all-caps label on the side that reads *Biohazard*. The cup is in a plastic Ziploc bag marked *Biohazard*. The Ziploc bag is inside a brown paper bag, in his pocket, next to the heat of his thigh. The white coat inside the room where men give on-site samples tells us it holds up better this way, close to the warmth of the body.



Today is cooler. Today we are beginning the search for the imperfect body between us. It isn't something we talk about easily, like almost everything else. It's a gag order on our intimacy, a longing too sacred to question. Maybe more mine than his. He doesn't know how to tell me no.

I only say, *Narrative dies without the oxygen of voices.*

The longest stretch of the drive is along the Atlantic, and it's just stormy enough offshore that the shrimp boats have to come in, their broad wings outstretched to gather generations of shrimp in their nets. The water shows its teeth, and sky out deep looms fat with rain. On these days it's the patience of the slow troll that nets the glut. They're always out there, even when you don't see them. The water endlessly gives.



I look to see if I can see the container in his pocket without him noticing. He stares at the sky so wide in front of him. Its broad sweep reminds us we're lost in the ocean down here. I can't find the shape of the container, but I am sure it is there. I watch the clock. No one has turned on the radio.

We come to the slender curve that's the only way out of the island, over the channel that heads north to the mainland 120 miles from here.

I wonder if he's embarrassed about the bag, about handing the bag to the stranger in the white coat with her dark hair hanging over the microscope like a crystal ball, watching the extracted inner workings of his body for hours, how they dance or slump, bolt or waver: the comma-pause that tells our fate.

If it's good news, it's my shame. The dry nest weaving itself like a wall within my body.

The drive home is so short, so fast. Once there, I lie next to him for what's left of the morning. It rains soft outside. It almost seems like this should be enough. ♦





GERI DIGIORNO MULTI-GENRE PRIZE WINNER

FROZEN EMBRYO TRANSFER

You're a whole new world now, you're an orbit—
I watch the screen and see where they place you,

where you will cling to me and grow. They say
there's a flash when it happens, a spark on the screen

where you are planted, where other worlds move
around you to prepare you for this one. For me

there was the warmth of relief, I could carry you now.
For months I worried you were cold, frozen in time

in Texas while I made a place for you
and waited. There were patches and pills

and needles—I followed the calendar so closely
and I'd gotten so good at waiting: I would envision

you a curled planet against the curve of my stomach,
stars glistening yellow around your round cells, dividing,

dividing. I knew it was time now, you were
coming, you were real. After dreaming you for years,

you weren't a dream anymore. They printed a picture
for me before. In it, your comet tail propelled you

toward me, and I controlled the stars, held
their hydrogen and helium and nuclear light

in my empty hands in that sterile room
and I brought their burning close to me, so close

the whole world was dark except that room,
except for us. And you began your spinning.



EUNHEE SOH

HYACINTHS

INSOOK SHUT THE CAR DOOR. Her husband, Chanho, nodded his head. Despite a coming storm, they were heading to the beach. It was the last weekend they could make a trip before Insook's due date. The car, a 1990 Vauxhall Cavalier Mk3, bore a thick black stripe around the blue body from bumper to bumper. A rear wiper blade pointed toward the car's roof, stuck in its place. Chanho drove them to East Sussex, where a ruined castle looked out over the sea. First the ruins, then the beach, they had planned. For a few days, he had been talking about a battle between France and England in the medieval era. "Did you know a lot had changed, even the English language itself?" he had said. She had knitted her brows, thinking about her English consisting of indefinite patches

like morning fog. She fell into the white, insecure mass of words—white darkness. From Korea to England, she shifted last year.

It was not raining yet. A stormy blast shook the car, and the sea threw its bulky body on the shoreline. She drew a breath and stroked her pregnant belly. Her baby was quiet, her belly tight. Her nurse had said her baby's head was down. Between the dark sky and the sea, clouds blurred the border.

There were only a few visitors at the West Hill Lift. Insook and Chanho got on a funicular lift to reach the ruins on the summit. Its wooden benches attached to the walls, the lift was bound for the top. It soon crept up the slope through a red brick tunnel. She sat down, feeling sapped, and rubbed at chipped paint on the seat. Tiny flakes of paint fell on the floor. She fixed her eyes on the yellow, shaking fragments.

The site of the castle grounds was mostly empty but for ruined walls and the howling wind. A destroyed gateway stood in a ghostly shape, jutting out to the sky. Insook slowly walked to the stonework that revealed the inside rubble and mortar. She touched uneven stones eroding into oblivion. Cold. She turned and looked at a narrow tower window where medieval soldiers had stood watch through the nights. The white pebbles and seashell chips on the wall caught her eye. Terrible storms had sundered the castle many times and drew debris to the seafloor. Her past remnants were also sinking into the layers of two languages, leaving frail tracks in her presence. *How genuine must I be to be real?* She was doubly lost in two realities: her physical presence in English and herself in Korean. She, in her mind, carried her Korean cities in the streets of Portswood, but it felt like a vacuum. Korean dubbed into English, like an arrhythmia. Neither reality accepted her into its respective space. The borderless sea roared.

REGULAR CONTRACTIONS STARTED that night when she was resting in their dorm living room. When she imagined it now, the castle they had just visited was collapsing, little by little, with split bones and flesh, the rain pouring out to the wild beach. They moved to a labor room in Good Samaritan Hospital. Her husband and a midwife clung to her overnight. But she was helpless. At dawn, her body, bursting to know the pain of mortals, dilated. Her baby's faint cry trembled. She opened

her arms to receive her daughter, wrapped in a hospital flannel. Her baby did not open her eyes yet, breathing against Insook's beating heart. Insook pressed her chin on the oval skull that had passed through her birth canal. One window was ajar, and the dawn wind dried up Insook's wet, swollen face. She and Chanho named their baby Miyae.

SOMEONE KNOCKED on the door of her unit, speaking in Korean. "*Jeogiyo*, are you there?" Surprised, Insook rushed and opened the door. A broad-shouldered woman, holding a plate covered with aluminum foil, stood in the corridor. The woman, her eyes cheerful, wore no makeup. Insook propped the door open with her fleshy calf. She had lost little weight while breastfeeding for the past year.

"Hi, you're home. I'm Namjung, Namjung Kim. My husband and I moved to this second floor a few days ago." She stretched out her right hand.

Insook stared at the woman's hand, which hung in the air. She grabbed the tip of it, saying, "Namjung-s ..." She had not shaken hands with anyone for over two years, not since she had left Korea. No one had invited her to the formal habit of shaking hands.

"Yes, you should call me Namjung-si. We're in England, and I don't want to tell you my age. I've just gotten married," she said, "though I wasn't a young bride." She laughed. "You know, I'm late in many things."

Insook wriggled her fingers in the woman's firm grip. "I'm Insook Choi." Namjung was the first Korean neighbor in this dorm.

"Insook-si." She released her hand and pushed the oval plate toward her. "I brought some rice cake."

"Ah, thank you so much." She took it with both hands, bowing. "You needn't have brought it, though." She smiled.

"You know, such an old custom. I ordered it, and we went to New Malden in London to pick it up this morning." Her voice rang in the drab passageway. "The plaza was so shabby, but I could buy chili peppers and Chinese cabbage."

"Right, no Korean market in this city. I've been there only three times."

Namjung locked her fingers together and shook them like a baby rattle. "See you around then. We live in 209."

Smiling at her back, Insook closed the door. She stepped toward the tiny kitchen, put the plate on the laminate countertop, and opened it, excited. Brownish purple layers of a square rice cake looked soft. Her baby called, “Ma-ma, Ma-ma,” as she crawled to her.

“Look! You can eat it, too.” She dangled Miyae on her side and rubbed the saliva on her chin. “Let’s eat it after Daddy comes home.” She cupped her baby’s elbow and jiggled it to make her giggle. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

Miyae grabbed her mom’s hair, her mouth open, then clapped. Her first birthday, her *dol*, was coming next week. Insook might go to New Malden and buy a *dol* rice cake. *I wish I could order one*, she thought. Months ago, the fourteen-year-old car had reeked of gasoline fumes. Chanho had bought an epoxy and coated the fuel line while she and Miyae stayed in the car. “Our car will be okay for a while,” he said. But she was unsure.

She put Miyae down on a foam play mat and looked at her wrist-watch. Almost Miyae’s second nap time. “Why don’t we go shopping?” she asked.

She turned around and bent down to open a mini fridge. She checked what her baby could eat for snacks: frozen yogurt pancakes and Cheerios. *She should sleep in her stroller*. Insook put a padded cotton jacket on her child. She lifted her and rested her hand on a folded stroller at the door. *I could buy a toy at the thrift store on Winchester Road. They might sell wooden toys today*. She looked into her wallet again.

After stepping down the stairway, she unfolded the Chicco buggy and sat her baby inside. Miyae, eager to go out, kept dangling her legs. Pushing the stroller outside, Insook heard the security door’s heavy latching sound behind her. The three-story dormitory for international graduate students was at the fringe of a creek that was too small to warrant a name. The dark teal buggy clattered, making shallow wheel tracks on the gravel parking lot. She trod toward a short wooden bridge near the lot and slid the top button of her sweater through its buttonhole. *It’s colder in the shadows*, she thought, shivering. She checked on her daughter swaddled in a blanket. *Why did the woman, Namjung-si, urge me to shake hands? It was unusual, wasn’t it? And talking about her wedding at the first encounter!*

She walked toward the River Itchen. It was the third spring since she had come to the UK. In Korea, the April air would be turning into a pleasant, soothing breeze, but in England, the biting wind would not relent until June. Last summer, when her family had often visited the New Forest National Park, the forest's gentle openness embraced her. They were attracted by thatched cottages on pastureland. The beautiful village, Lyndhurst, looked like a town in a fairy tale, though she felt safer in nature than in the town. Sitting next to her baby and her husband on the grass, she calmed herself. Short breaks from the city seemed eternal. One afternoon, she watched a lone, gleaming tree rooted in the vast field like an answer to her insecurity. The foreign tree's name unknown, she gazed at it for a while. Warm wings of sunshine flew over it and over her with perishing brightness that barely penetrated the surface of her skin. She wanted to join the slanting sunlight as if she were an unbound particle. Insook felt an ease that had not occurred to her in years. She inhaled the air. *If eternity had a mind, this moment would allow me to enter.* Strangely enough, she recalled the sepulchral Hastings Castle standing in dilapidation on the cold cliff. A few wild ponies, brown and white, grazed the pasture near them and waved tails in the breeze. Clad in a portable car seat, Miyae rounded her lips, listening to the ponies.

THE NUMB, WET WIND hit her face. Near the River Itchen, she saw a man at the bus stop from a distance and almost stopped her buggy. He might be a dangerous person in the neighborhood. Last month when the couple was about to go grocery shopping, Chanho had found slashes in two tires of their car. The gashes were clean, looked unreal. Some youngsters in the neighborhood must have cut them at night. One tire was not enough for their hatred of foreigners. She shuddered with dark visions of when they had pierced the thick rubber. She turned around in vain to see if anyone was hiding and smirking.

Chanho called a friend to get help, looking down at the wet pavement. He told her to go inside with Miyae. It was raining all afternoon with incessant, irreproachable beats. About an hour later, he entered the dorm, puddles forming at his feet. It was his birthday. White powdered sugar muted the chocolate cake she had baked the day before.

She stopped pushing the stroller steps away from the bus shelter to

avoid something she could not even anticipate. The scraggly-looking old man turned around.

“Hey, look at your baby. Look at her tiny fingers!”

She smiled warily. “Thank you. She turns one next week.”

“Ha! It’s been a long time since I saw a one-year-old baby. Hey little beautiful, it’s your golden age.” He grinned, his blackened teeth showing. “How lovely the age is,” he murmured.

Street boys had often mocked her and her baby, following behind. A couple of boys had once snarled at her back, “Chinky, Chinky, Chinky, go home with your Chinky baby.”

Furious, she had turned around. Two little boys, maybe ten-year-olds, halted. “Neither my baby nor I am a Chinky.” She’d glared at them, her throat choked, her toes digging. They blushed either because she had turned around or because such a yellow-faced woman had said she was not a Chinky.

“No, no. ... We’re singing a song,” they’d claimed, looking at each other. “Time for Teletubbies. Time for Teletubbies. Tinky-Winky, Dipsy, Laa-laa ... Tinky-Winky, Dipsy ...” They had turned away and skipped across the road, still singing the Teletubbies theme song.

Boys would wander around the poor, neglected neighborhood. They did not go to school, just as their parents had not, and lived day to day on social security. The notorious Edwina House, the cheapest dorm for foreign graduate students and their families, was an easy target for their hate. Before Insook and Chanhoo had moved into the building, the wife of an international student told them street boys often threw raw eggs and pebbles at Edwina’s windows. But the young couple had had no other choices. Insook had been happy to have a small living room and a bedroom for their baby, who would be born in spring.

The boys’ scared, pallid faces, contradicting their mockery, were still inexplicable. The old man’s ears ruddy from the wind, she covered her mouth with a woolen cuff.

SHE GOT OFF AT the same bus stop about two hours later. She had not found any thrift-store toys for Miyae. Next to a charity shop on Winchester Road, she had watched tulips, irises, and anonymous spring flowers in large zinc buckets occupying the side of a grocery entrance.

Miyae twisted her sleepy body and fidgeted. Many things had been floating, uprooted. Chanhoo often went back to his university lab after dinner and worked on experiments for his dissertation. She did not ask him when they would leave England. Lying beside her baby, she would try to read a past issue of a Korean literary magazine. Distrustful of herself, she would fall asleep exhausted and wake up at midnight, feeling mortified. She dreamed of herself in Seoul, so many kilometers away. She would walk around the night streets alongside familiar faces, smiling and chatting, but now, she wandered like a ghost with her baby through the English roads in the daytime. In Seoul, she would sleep after watching the MBC late evening news alone, but would not go crazy waking up from dreams. She was far off from her congenial self and seemed to observe herself from the outside. Yet spring was coming. “Miyae will be a one-year-old,” she droned to herself, staring at lime-green hyacinth buds in terracotta pots. *They might bloom next week and celebrate her first birthday.* She justified paying for them, although to cut the budget she had scarcely paid for minor things like coffee, even at the university vending machines here in England.

A BIG ENGLISH WOMAN walked toward her near Edwina’s security door, putting one foot even with the ends of her forearm crutches while the other foot shuffled forward. Above the crutches’ plastic cuffs, her fettered elbows angled outward. Her white ankles drooped over her squashed shoes. Insook had seen her before—she lived in an attached house across the street. The woman’s skirt swayed separately from her belly. Insook pushed the stroller off the sidewalk and sensed the woman’s heavy breaths.

Miyae was still asleep when they came back to the unit. Insook laid her in the crib next to the double bed. The small pot had bumped around in the buggy basket yet held three stalks with tightly packed pinkish sepals. Glossy, sword-shaped leaves surrounded thick stalks like guards. She put the pot on the kitchen windowsill.

She went to the community laundry room on the same floor, a hamper held in her arms. A dryer was spinning, making a thumping noise. Gray, dusty balls rolled behind a slack swinging door. She loaded the laundry, turned a full cycle dial, and came out of the room. Hurried, banging footstep sounds drummed near the stairways. She stepped to

the noise, low chuckles in the air, loud thuds on the floor. The security gate slammed, cutting off a blare of laughter. Then a frozen silence. She walked to the stairs to check over what had happened. She saw excrement on the stair landing and instantly covered her nose. Refusing to believe her senses, she ran back to her unit. She exhaled after shutting the door. *They were a gang of street boys.* She stooped down, putting weight on her knees with her hands and bracing her feet against the wall. *It can't be real. How did they get in? Has the gate ever secured the entrance?* Their laughter rang in her head. She looked up at the kitchen window where the hyacinth pot loomed out of the grim background. Dusk fell. Skeletal tree branches brushed the air. She stepped toward the window and remembered the day when she had decided to come to Britain with her husband. She had thought three years of staying abroad would not be long. She reached to the pot and touched the moss clumps underneath the plants. *We are disgusting to them. But how so?* She rubbed a leaf. *They want to smash us, the fragile possibilities caught between countries, till we disappear.*

Her baby woke up crying. She entered the room and cuddled her tightly.

Chanho returned to the dorm before dinnertime.

"Did you see that? On the stairs?" Closing the door behind him, he spat his fury. He lifted Miyae from the carpet. Insook did not answer him as if she accepted the accident as such.

Reading her stillness, he said, "It must be the street boys. They're killing us! What further evil will happen?" He looked into his baby's eyes for a while and caressed her thin hair.

Miyae said, "Da-da-da." The moment seemed perpetual as if they stood in no sound.

"Somebody should clean it up, but who would?" he asked. Miyae touched her dad's moving lips with her fingers.

She never imagined cleaning it up. It was as impossible as that it happened. *They see no difference between it and us. I can't remove it.* In her dark isolation, she looked at her husband.

HER BABY WIGGLED HER LEGS, took one step forward, and fell. Insook praised her. The obnoxious thing had hardened on the stairs. They ignored it. Every tenant in the dorm would have seen it, but no one talked

about it. She said greetings to Swati, her next-door neighbor, silent eye contact lingering between them. They went up and down the stairs.

Insook cut her hair by herself, looking into the bathroom cabinet mirror. Two tied strands of her hair were now on the white sink top. Her hair had grown in England; its irrefutability shocked her. She measured the length of the estranged past she had assumed to be temporary and null. Still, days passed as her hair grew, which brought about a thought that she might be real and continuous in England. She touched the sharp cut above her shoulders.

The first pink hyacinth bloomed with an indulgent scent a few days before Miyae's birthday. A dense cluster bent down the neck of a stalk toward the windowpane like a martyr. On her birthday, Chanho stuck a candle on the cake. They sang happy birthday to her, clapping their hands. The candlelight was like a burning wind blowing from the end of a grinding tunnel she was passing through. She did not know when the tunnel would end. She put the hyacinth pot next to Miyae and took a family photo, the flower heads of other clusters reddened.

SHE HAD BEEN THINKING of returning the oval plate for a few days and needed something to give Namjung. It had been about a week since Namjung had delivered the rice cake. The kitchen brimmed with the hyacinth fragrance while the pink curls of petals lit up the space. Before turning off the light, she often looked back at them. She snipped a flower stalk, thinking about what to say to Namjung, and wrapped the crisp cut with a wet paper towel. She lifted her daughter to her chest and rested the flower on the plate as if it were a queen's botanical teapot.

Unit 209 was at the end of the corridor. She knocked on the unpainted door, looking at the pink hyacinth. Soon, Namjung opened the door with a tall man behind. Insook nodded.

"Hi," Namjung greeted. She lowered her face and touched Miyae's round hand. Miyae gripped Namjung's index finger.

"Hi, I'm here to return your plate." Insook showed the hyacinth.

Namjung and her husband looked at it and looked at each other. They did not know what to do.

"I ... I have," Insook hesitated, "nothing to give you back." Her cheeks warmed, and her shoulders tensed. "We were so grateful." *It was*



my baby's dol flower, she wanted to say. *She turned one year old*. She felt the fragrance fade away.

Namjung took the plate. No words.

"Then, see you later." Insook turned around with Miyae. She heard, "Yes, bye," and then laughter followed the door's shutting sound. They laughed behind the door until she passed a few more units, not caring that she could hear. Insook was puzzled over why her behavior was that funny. All around her, the quotidian doors locked her out. She was a

foreigner to them as the distance between her and them stretched far apart. She let down her baby on the floor. Holding her mom's hand, Miyae took one step after another as if performing an assigned mission. Miyae was her gravity drawing her down to the earth.

Soon after she entered her unit, she prepared to go out for Miyae's vaccination at the Children's General Hospital. She thought about stopping breastfeeding. She practiced vaccine names in English and came out and stood at the top of the stairs, one arm holding Miyae, the other her stroller. She dropped her eyes to the clean spot on the stair landing. It was gone as if nothing had occupied the space before. Somebody had removed it. It was tempting to believe it had never been there, but that was not possible. She stopped at the last stair and looked back at the place. The cheap carpet stairs remained unscathed.

Outside, the wind circled on the dirt, small debris carried around as if someone danced in the center. A ripple came nearer to her chest. It was an unexpected joy she had never imagined. She drank the fluid movement of a breeze in the street. Over the chimneys, tree branches swayed, the wind visible in the fledged leaves.

INSOOK CHECKED in at the hospital lobby and sat her baby on the carpeted play area. She crouched down beside Miyae and the other babies. A few mothers were sitting on chairs and sometimes watched their children. Wooden blocks squeezed in both hands, Miyae raised them to her face. She talked gibberish, bababa, mamama, to other toddlers.

"Insook-si?"

Hit by her name, Insook straightened up her lower back. Namjung, in a blue uniform, holding a mop, stood behind her. A cleaning tool cart and a yellow caution sign were near the wall.

"Ah, Namjung-si?" Insook stood up.

"Hello again! Is your baby seeing a doctor today?" Her loud Korean filled the hall.

"Yes, it's for a twelve-month checkup and vaccines." She felt uncomfortable to see her in the janitor's uniform. But Namjung looked glad to see her.

"I dump used needles and syringes, too." She put her left hand on her waist with a booming laugh.

Quiet, Insook did not smile.

"It's okay. I was a nurse in Korea, and offensive things happened all the time." She added, "I even removed the waste on the stairs yesterday."

Insook stopped breathing. Namjung, laughing, started mopping the terrazzo floor along the wall. "When I climbed the dorm stairs, hugging a full bag of groceries," she almost shouted, "I spilled food and apples at the spot." She mopped toward the doorway and looked back at her.

Insook remained in the area, watching Namjung move away again without saying goodbye. Her fearless mop cleaned the floor like the water flowing from a sluice gate. Namjung, near the entrance, turned around and waved to her. She waved back. Namjung bent and kept moving. Insook thought of Namjung's grocery bag, which might be heavy with Weetabix whole-grain cereal or Swanson chicken broth like hers. She grabbed the blunt ends of her hair. She felt herself recede into her body as if the last remnants of sunlight arrived on the earth, becoming a background of a dim horizon. Disappearing lights solidified the things on land with grooved shadows. She stood there until a nurse called her baby's name.

SHE LEFT THE HYACINTH pot on the kitchen windowsill for several months, busy with her toddler. Miyae climbed, danced, and teethed. The university notified them of a vacant dorm house available near campus. They hurried to move out of Edwina House, though they might leave the country soon if the dissertation review process went well. Insook wanted to plant the bulbs somewhere around the dorm before the moving day. *People in the neighborhood would see the flowers next spring*, she thought. The weather grew colder, the days darker. On a raw October morning, she and Miyae went to the edge of the parking lot where sidewalk strips were covered with mulches and anonymous weeds. She carried the hyacinth bulbs in the pot, a broken fork as a digging tool, and a paper bag for Miyae to sit on. One hand in her mom's hand, Miyae hugged a yellow school bus to her belly.

Insook leveled the bag on the moist ground for her child, but the morning mist was already gone. Miyae sat on the paper bag and tapped the Fisher-Price toy bus. "Booo-booo. Go, go." The school bus without a roof showed four little people's heads inside. Their faces ranged from dark brown to white.

Insook said, “Come on, everybody on board!” and pressed the red nose of the school bus. Dew outlined spider webs on tall weeds and glinted in her somberness. She and Chanhø were unsure if they had to apply for a visa renewal. *We should*, she thought.

Miyae smoothed the brown dirt with both palms. Moist soil stuck between her fingers. Insook swept decaying leaves and jabbed the ground with the fork. Miyae had put it under the desk leg and wiggled, bending the prongs slightly outward. The inner soil became darker, mixed with sand under the topsoil. Her nail tips blackened as she dug.

She heard coarse breaths behind her back. Miyae placed a black-haired schoolgirl on the toy bus. The heavy woman in the neighborhood stood about a meter away, her walking sticks touching the ground.

“What are you doing?” she inhaled.

Insook stood up and stretched her body. Miyae rose and held her mom’s hand.

“I’m planting hyacinths,” she said.

The lady’s chest wall wheezed. “You think,” she exhaled, “the flowers would,” and inhaled again, “come back—here?”

She nodded. “Guess so.”

Miyae hid her head behind Insook’s thigh. She dug into her mom’s jeans.

The woman moved her walking stick to her right, saying, “They may.” She started to shuffle forward.

Insook pulled out Miyae’s hand from behind. She crouched down and looked into her daughter’s face. “She is our neighbor. It’s all right.” She had never considered the woman to be her neighbor, but now she did before her child.

A few days later, wailing sirens of an ambulance dashed through the street, blue lights pulsating in the afternoon air. Insook watched through the kitchen window. A dark uniformed crew, pulling a wheeled stretcher, entered the attached house where the big woman lived. The flat, yellow roof of the vehicle obstructed a thin fence. Insook hugged her child to her chest. Miyae’s short arms clasped around Insook’s neck, resting her head on her mom’s shoulder. Four boys ran toward the van from the frame of her kitchen window. A boy dashed into the house, three stood against the shared wall. Later, two paramedics carried the

gurney out, a huge body secured by straps. No one came out of the house but the boy. Insook stroked her child's back. The boy followed the stretcher, and his friends followed him like small nails attracted to a magnet. The crew loaded the neighbor into the vehicle and closed the rear doors, the boys left behind. Sirens slid into dim space, but Insook still watched them. The four boys formed a thick circle and sat on the front steps. They did not move for a while. A boy rose and ran along the sidewalk to her right. Then the rest of them entered the house. Insook wondered if the woman would see the hyacinths in spring, if she would inhale their fragrance. "They may," she had said. "They may." ◆

BRYCE EMLEY

FUTURE ELEGY ON ST. JOHN'S EVE, BARCELONA

Another city hums inside the evening—
the streets breathing bass and car horn,

dinner smoke from kitchen windows
curling into sky. From the sidewalk,

a barefooted kid lights a firecracker, marvels
at his handiwork, tosses it into our footsteps

like some ordinary blessing.
At the edge of a country whose lords

spent centuries burying less ambitious gods,
here on the altar of a coast robed in night,

our host anoints the flat of his hand
with a little mound of bone-white powder,

an offering for us to take from his body,
and his girlfriend fills her lungs with praise.

The air shimmers alive with bottle rockets.
Strangers in summer's familiar temple,

we let rum and Fanta untether the anchor
behind our eyes, standing at the shore

with a thousand silhouettes as evening empties itself
into a darkening sea, turning our backs to the light.

TODD DAVIS

THE TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER RETRIEVES A HEAD

You smell her, even before you start down
the hollow, rot clotted and beginning to bloat.
She won't rise this year. Body worn by infection,
last days spent septic in the persistent embrace
of hunger. Before the first snow, you watched her.
The odd gait, misshapen paw dragging an awkward line.
What to call a sleep you can't climb out of, a dream
that holds your legs as you try to crawl away?
On this first warm day, you've come for her skull,
to honor her last thoughts by gathering them in the basin
of her bones. You bind a handkerchief across your mouth
and nose and still gag. The hole she crawled through
opens beneath a fallen beech, burrow where light retreats.
You don't mind the dark, having been raised in a house
that looks north. You find her by the rough end of the snout,
draw the great head near, tipping it away from the thick fur
of her chest. After breath is banished, heartbeat
beaten from the body, you live in a room full of death,
walls adorned with skulls. As a child you were taught
to care for carcasses, to salvage roadkill, the dead
dragged back to the barn where the last bit of blood
might drain. The beetles you keep in deep plastic bins
scramble over flesh, gorging the residue of past lives.
You marvel that they never tire, desire unfulfilled
by the testament of skin and hair. They tunnel
into the ear, ravishing themselves on the pink folds,
eating the sweet meat of memory. Before exiting
her den you feel the rest of her. Thinness of hips,
autumn fat gone. The head slips from your hands
when you bump a lump, dead as well, latched
to a dried breast, mouth still open in protest.

JA'NET DANIELO

FOR THE BODY AS NUTSHELL STUDY

I'm looking for clues in your blood / red walls, in fat / yellow roses that soften them. In the curl /of a bed's brass headboard. / Above it: a framed buck / on the plains. The sky / is blank. Antlers hold it in their cupped palms. / I'm looking for answers in the space between / them, in the buck's inked- black / eyes. They gaze at something off / in the distance, something beyond / the frame, out of sight. What / do they know that I don't?

ROBERT PAUL WESTON

TUESDAYS

MY CONSCIENCE VISITS only on Tuesdays. Her name is Ingrid. She drives a green Nissan Figaro with a fine undercoat of rust, so that each time she thumps a pothole, the car sprinkles the pavement with the world's shittiest pixie dust.

It's down there now, her vomit-green Nissan. I can see it from my office window, parked by the curb with the top down, Ingrid draped over the wheel like a bored teenager, hair tied up babushka-style, sucking on a vape stick. She always knows precisely when it's quitting time.

As I spin out of the revolving doors, she barks at me. "Did you call your mother?" This is Ingrid's take on, *Hello*.

I nod, but it lacks conviction.

“*Really?*” She tips down her cat-eye sunglasses to size me up. “Did you?”

“No.”

It is a mystery why I think I can fool her.

She stretches over and pops the passenger side. “All right, buddy, hop in. We’ll settle up with Mama later.”

Earlier that afternoon, I leaned on the elevator doors with one hand—like an idiot. When the little arrow went *PING* and the doors slid open, I couldn’t right myself before they tugged me off balance. My hand mashed into the narrow gap between the door and the elevator shaft, causing my middle finger to nearly shed its nail.

Tending the wound in the office kitchenette, I remembered it was Tuesday. Of course it was. Something tragic or simply graceless always precedes a visit. Events like these are cosmically linked: my fuck-you-finger, bandaged up like a little invisible man, and Ingrid.

“What happened this time?” The question stings with indifference; she isn’t even looking at my finger.

“I jammed it.”

“Clumsy.” She swerves us onto the freeway, smooth and fierce. We’re heading out of town. “You can’t just show up out of the blue like this, whisk me off whenever you feel like it.”

“Tuesdays?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not like I show up *every* Tuesday.”

“I have a life, you know. Plans. Intentions. Where are we going?”

“To see Nour.”

That shuts me up.

Ingrid first appeared on 9/11, a Tuesday. Two weeks earlier, Uncle Flynn had flown in from Calgary on business. The trip coincided with Nell’s birthday; she was turning six at the time. Flynn arrived with a massive, unwrapped container of knock-off Legos. BRIKKOs, said the box, every piece dyed a ropy, diluted hue—bilious yellow, bruised blue, intestinal gray. “She never plays Legos,” I assured him.

“No worries then,” said Uncle Flynn. “These are BRIKKOs.”

Nell made a moue of protest, then proceeded to build a ziggurat taller

than either of us. Later that night, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even close my eyes. I just glowered into the darkness, wondering why Uncle Flynn never flew in for business with armloads of BRIKKOs on *my* birthday. In the end, I crept downstairs to prod at Nell's tower. I nudged as far as I dared, until the whole thing canted grotesquely to one side. It appeared unshakeable. I left it that way, returned to bed, where I instantly conked out.

On the way to breakfast, no one noticed anything was amiss. But then came the creak, the snap, the unmistakable crash of a thousand BRIKKOs.

Nell was inconsolable.

The following Tuesday, my fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Ijeoma, interrupted morning class when a message arrived from the principal's office. Looking puzzled, he switched on the class television, tuning in a live broadcast, something that had never happened before. By then, the towers were already billowing; we were just in time to watch them collapse. All of us—even Mr. Ijeoma—were speechless, confounded, terrified, but for me, there was something else. Surely, I thought, this was the universe's way of saying: I see you. Here's your punishment for destroying what was, without a doubt, Nell's finest hour.

Convinced of this, I vomited, a splash of bile blinding Buttercup, the class chinchilla. Mr. Ijeoma sent me to the office, where the administrators were meant to contact my family and send me home. But the office was empty. No principal. No admin. No one.

Only Ingrid.

She sat on the counter in a sky-blue poodle skirt and fluffy blouse, knocking the hard heels of her saddle shoes against the pressboard. Her hair swooped down in those days, preserved in a perfect bob.

"It's your own fault," she said.

"What is?"

"All the towers of the world." Her fingers made the languid flick of an old god, toppling the cosmos.

My stomach gurgled. "I didn't mean to."

"Except that you did."

At which point, I cried. I sobbed. I brayed like an ungulate. Ingrid didn't lift a finger except to examine her nails. She advised I fess up to

Nell and apologize. So I did—thus setting in motion a trend that would persist into adulthood, right up to this moment, gliding off the freeway and into the nether-burbs north of the city.

“You’re quiet,” she says.

My bandaged finger throbs. “I’m not ready.”

“Today, tomorrow, forty years from now—it’s all the same.”

“Is it?”

“Buck up, buddy. This is happening.” Again, magisterial with indifference, Ingrid gazes out, watching the hood of the little Figaro gobble up unfamiliar road.

Thanks to periodic checks of her Facebook page, I know that after our split, Nour relocated to a place just like this. Somewhere nearby.

“I can’t just show up unannounced.”

Ingrid smiles with too many teeth. “No? I do it all the time.”

The truth of the matter is, I broke off my engagement to Nour because of a webpage. I found it when we were living together in Montreal. Occasionally, her work took her away on business and, home alone one evening and craving a kebab from the new delivery place we had recently discovered, I tried to find its name in the search history on our shared desktop. I saw the title of one site—*Rubyfruit*—and thought, that could be a restaurant. It was not a restaurant. It was porn, and nothing like the kinky shit I was into. This was beautiful, raunchy, genuine, *serious* erotica—and there were no men.

The second truth of the matter is, I never mentioned it. I never told Nour the truth. I never even asked her about it. I think I thought Ingrid would pull up in her little Figaro to nudge me in the right direction, but I should have known better. This was deep in those grim few years when, for no apparent reason, Ingrid stopped visiting.

It wasn’t until months later, while Nour was back home, preparing to make the final move, packing up whatever belongings remained in her parents’ house on the far side of the country, that I broke off the engagement. I did it over the phone. Like an idiot. Like a coward. Like a terrible human being.

A week later, Ingrid was back. She reemerged on the icy last Tuesday of November. “You fucker,” she said.

I did not refute her.

“We can’t deal with this now,” she said, “but some day.”

She told me she planned to stick around for a while. From now on, she said, I could expect regular weekly visits, right down the line. She instructed me to call my fucking mother.

Ingrid stops on a street perfectly canopied with ancient maples. “This is it.”

“Which one?”

“You honestly don’t know?”

“Why should I?”

“She’s only your ex-fiancée.”

“You expect me to know everything about—”

“Shut it. You’re stalling.”

Why do I think I can fool her?

Nour’s house is aching well-kept, windows framed with fine French shutters, a rock garden out front swaying with autumnal katsura trees, the walk from the road a gentle slope up to a glittering green door. It’s such a gorgeous place, I briefly wonder what might have been. “Get it over with,” Ingrid shouts at me from the car.

It is not Nour who answers, but a prodigiously freckled woman in soiled dungarees and a thin, faded-yellow T-shirt. Freckles pepper her arms in equal measure, faint constellations whorling all the way down to her fingertips.

Her face cracks into a disarmingly bright smile. “Please tell me you aren’t selling something.”

If only I had indeed arrived with vacuum cleaners or cheap cosmetics or stacks of obsolete encyclopedias. Anything really.

“I’m not a salesman. I’m here to see Nour.”

The woman’s smile fades, but only slightly. She’s trying to place me.

“Tell her it’s Kurt.”

“Oh.” She lengthens the syllable so it’s a hollow descent, a plummet down a very deep well. Her eyes skip past me to the little green car.

“That’s Ingrid,” I tell her.

Ingrid gives a sharp salute, and the woman’s smile melts entirely. “I’ll get Nour.” She shuts the door and I hear the conspicuous click of a lock. Some moments later, it un clicks.

Nour looks better than I remember. She is visibly healthier, sleeker, happier. “How do you know where I live?”

I poke a thumb over my shoulder. “Ingrid brought me.”

"Ah. I see."

"Yep."

"Well, it's nice to see you. You look fine."

"You too."

"Do you want to come in? We're potting plants. I can make some tea. Or coffee. Or..." Nour's dungarees are identically soiled. The house inside appears every bit as immaculate as its exterior.

"I just came because I wanted to say—I wanted—" I feel dizzy. An organ approximately the size of my liver clogs the back of my throat.

"Jesus, Kurt. It's been *eleven years*."

"Not to me," I tell her. "For me, it's like I just hung up the phone."

Nour shrugs. "That's something I cannot help you with. You want some coffee or not? Maybe just water. You don't look so good."

"I just came because—I want to say, I'm sorry."

Nour laughs at first, but then she sees I'm serious. "You already told me. Remember? You told me on the phone when you broke it off. You told me in emails. A lot of them. A lot of emails. You *wrote me letters*, Kurt. Remember? I might still have one or two of them laying around somewhere, but, uh—actually, to be honest, I have no idea where."

"Sure," I say, "I remember."

"You *told* me, Kurt. And you told me, and you told me, and you told me. I get it. You're sorry. But seriously, eleven years?" She takes a long, deep breath and blows out every molecule. "Sure, yes. Okay. Telling me in person is a step up—even after eleven years." She throws up her hands. "I accept."

"Great."

Nour gazes at me for a long time. I wonder what she sees.

"If you don't mind, I've got a shit-ton of bluets to plant, so..."

"I'll go."

Nour nods. "Say hi to Ingrid for me."

I follow Nour's gaze out to the car. Ingrid isn't watching us. Behind the wheel she's stiff as a monument.

"It was good to see you," I say. "You look so, *so* well."

"Jesus, Kurt." Nour shakes her head and closes the door.

Ingrid doesn't speak until we're ten minutes down the highway. She has the top closed against the wind, which is picking up, rattling the

chassis. The radio says rain's on the way. "There," Ingrid says at last. "Wasn't so hard, was it?"

In the side-view mirror, I watch the air retreating behind us in a swirl of crimson, a vast, spinning galaxy of rust. Ingrid switches to a jazz station, chin bobbing to brassy cornets of Dixieland swing.

"I'll bet you feel better now. Don't you?"

Eyes fixed on the mirror, I say, "Yes—yes, I do," and perhaps, maybe for the first time in my life, I fool her. ♦

JULES FITZ GERALD

YOU KNOW

I LOVE YOU, TWILA

TO COOK GOOD EGGS, you gotta know what people mean when they say easy, medium, or hard. Trouble for me is most people don't know what they want. They say medium, but they want their whites cooked and their insides runny, and that's easy, baby. That's easy. Give people what they ask for, and piss them off. That's life, though. Twila's the only one who was different.

Most people, the way it goes, you gotta listen past what they say and hear what they mean. It's an art and science. The science part is noticing how long they stare at the menu and how many times they change their mind before they finally pretend to make a decision. The art is figuring this out when you're not the server—some asshole named Bernie is—

and all you have to go on is the chicken scratch Bernie brings back to the kitchen. Anyway, the day I meet Twila, I finally get smart, and when Bernie clips up an order for medium eggs, I plate him a couple of eas-ies. I give him a big wink when he comes back to the kitchen for them, which pisses him off because he can't figure out why until his tight-ass customer complains that her yolks are runny, and what do you know but Bernie rats me out to the goddamn manager for insurrection.



Bernie's probably just getting me back for the coffee timer I clipped to his apron strings last week two minutes before it went off. He couldn't figure out where the hell the beeping was coming from. It's what he needs. Humility. He's the type who didn't finish college when he had the chance and regrets it now that he's twenty-five, gonna make up for it

by becoming a manager at a dive like the Broad Street Grille. He's just a server now, but you can see the manager in him already, asshole that he is.

After the lunch rush, Kevin calls me into the back office where he sits on his ass all day smoking and pretending to check receipts. I know he's half-assing it because about twice a week I take a few bucks out of the till. Not much, just enough to know he isn't watching real close. Sometimes I hide his smokes while he's in the can so I can watch him get some exercise looking for them later. Kevin clears his throat. "I'm sure you know what this is about."

I shrug. "I can't help it Bernie doesn't know how to write."

Kevin coughs into his hand, a gravelly wheeze that just stirs up the sludge in his chest. "I'm talking about the drawer. Bernie's tracked it over a couple weeks. You're the only one working every day it comes up short."

I try to remember how much I took last time. Fuck, maybe I got greedy. "How do you know it isn't Bernie? You know he hates me."

Kevin's chair groans as he leans back and folds his hands across his stomach. "This isn't a discussion. Today's your last shift. You can come pick up your last paycheck on the fifteenth."

"C'mon, Kev, I been here longer than you. I never call off. I cook the best damn eggs in the state of Ohio. You ever heard of second chances?"

"The one thing I can't tolerate around here is theft, Gil."

I glance down at my grease-splattered apron and reach around to pick out the knot. "Shit, you should be the one getting canned. Took you long enough to notice." I toss my apron at him on my way out. Out on the floor, Bernie is dumping decaf in some middle-aged state employee's cup, and I tell him to go fuck himself loud enough that he almost spills it on her. The bell clangs against the glass as I shove the door open.

When the cold air hits me, I remember my coat on the hook in the back, but I keep walking past the State Office Building, warming myself up a little thinking about Kevin trying to cover himself with my dirty apron, Bernie soon to be sweating over the grill, missing me. Sometimes you gotta remind people they need you, even if it's just to cook eggs.

ANYWAY, this all ends up being why I meet Twila. I walk down to High Street and catch a northbound Number 2, which I usually can't afford

to take any more often than it rains, but I'm feeling a little celebratory, and I'm hungry, because Kevin couldn't bother to wait until after I'd had a chance to eat lunch. When I get off by the White Castle, there's a woman on the sidewalk trying to set fire to a cigarette butt. She's pretty in a plain way, with good legs in tight jeans under a loose green sweater. Small tits, but that's okay. She takes the straight I hold out without looking to see where it comes from, like it's the most natural thing in the world for a Winston to float down out of the sky. "Thanks," she says and then coughs and turns away from me a little, like maybe she's just trying to get out of the way of the wind. I wish I could offer her my coat.

I shake out a smoke for myself and watch her flick the wheel of her lighter until a tiny ghost of flame jumps out. Her long dark hair is streaked with silver. She's older than I thought at first glance, maybe even older than me, but I've gotten to a point in my life where I've learned to take what I can get, and it's been six long months since Lorea left. God knows my luck is due to turn. "You from around here?" I ask.

She takes a hard drag on her cigarette like maybe I just asked for it back. It's the first week of March, and the trees are all empty and gray as the sidewalks they're planted in. A southbound Number 2 shudders by and warms us with a short-lived gust of exhaust.

"I'm Gil, by the way," I try again when it's quiet.

She blows a long line of smoke and looks at me for the first time. "Twila."

"Pretty name for a pretty face."

She turns up one side of her mouth. Maybe a smirk, maybe a smile.

"Can I buy you something to eat?"

"I don't want nothing to eat," she says. "But I could go for a beer."

"Well, let's get you both," I say.

We slip into Vic's a few blocks away. It's late afternoon, and the chairs are still up on the tables from the night before. There's nobody else but the bartender, a dark-haired girl with a metal hook through her nose and a rattlesnake tattoo—rattle on the back of one hand, snake twisting up through her sleeve and coming out the other side to kiss her neck.

Twila says nothing except to order. Most women tell you more than you want to know before you even have a chance to get interested. Twila's the other kind, like she has a lot to say but isn't saying it, so I just buy

her the beer and watch her and wait, wishing we'd sat at a table instead of the bar so it'd be harder for her not to look at me. I only get her to eat two of my onion rings. After a couple of pints, I ask what happened to her coat.

She shrugs. "Some fucking animal pissed on it. Raccoon, maybe."

I wait for her to ask about mine, but she doesn't. Instead she stares into her beer and traces the rim with her finger, and I wonder if a pint glass can sing like crystal.

I add up the hours Kevin owes me for, the balance in my bank account. Not much, but I figure I'll find other work soon enough. Never had trouble getting jobs, just keeping them. The Grille's the longest I been anywhere but the Army. Six years.

"Let me buy you a new one?" I ask.

Twila smiles, sunlight cracking through clouds. "You're the chivalrous type, aren't you?"

I grin and wonder how grizzled I look. "I try."

We hoof it up to the Goodwill in Clintonville where I buy her a navy peacoat for six dollars. It's getting dark when we leave, and I ask if I can walk her home. She shakes her head.

"Let me buy you a bus ticket at least. How far are you?"

"Let's go to your place," she says, and my heart does a little twisty dance in my chest.

Turns out Twila is running from the law. She tells me that night on the couch in my apartment, still wearing her new coat, halfway through her second forty after the pints at Vic's. Says she embezzled money from a gas station deli in North Carolina, one breakfast bagel at a time. Memorized the prices and didn't punch half the cash orders into the register, just told customers the drawer was stuck, tucked the money into her apron pocket and gave them change from there. "How much we talking about?" I ask.

Twila takes a big swallow of Steel Reserve. I watch her count in her head.

"Bout eleven grand," she says.

I whistle through my teeth. That's about what I make in a year. I know then I won't ever tell her why I got fired from the Grille. She's the real deal.

She tells me she knew the game was up when she went in one day and found the assistant manager from the other store waiting for her. Said she put her purse down in the break room, slipped her wallet into her pocket, and walked out the front door with a pack of cigarettes like she was just going for a smoke. Instead she got in her truck and drove north. That was in October. She drove all day—through Virginia and Maryland, then turned west in Pennsylvania. I imagine her in a small red pickup with the windows down, her long mane wild in the wind, mixed up with the distant howl of sirens. I'm on the edge of the couch. "What did you do then?"

"Hell, I didn't have a plan," Twila says. "Around sunset I ended up in front of my grandparents' old house outside Zanesville. They've been dead for years, but the farmhouse was still there. Somebody'd stripped out the copper, but it was there."

She stayed there for a few months. She hid the truck in the barn, but she was nervous someone would show up one day and find it and report her to the cops, who'd run the plates. Eventually she drove the truck to Columbus and sold it for scrap. She rented a storage unit on the east side of town and stayed there until they kicked her out the day before yesterday, says she can't get a job or apply for Section 8 because she's afraid to give out her social.

"Jesus, Twila."

"You won't tell anybody, will you?" she asks, suddenly wild-eyed.

"Of course not."

She clutches a fistful of my shirt and pulls me toward her, gives me shivers. "I mean it. It'd be my third."

I look her in the eye. "I won't tell anybody."

Twila relaxes her grip. Leans back and takes another swig.

"What happened to the money?" I ask.

Twila laughs, a laugh that keeps on spreading, like beer from a knocked-over bottle that runs all over the table and then drips through the cracks to make a second puddle on the floor.

A WHILE LATER, I get up to take a piss and come back to find Twila passed out on the couch—eyes closed, jaw loose, open forty tilted at a dangerous angle between her legs. I shake her gently and whisper her name, but she's gone.

Now the man I was at twenty might have tried to kiss her anyway. No sense in both of us missing out on a good time. Nothing more than that, you know—might have touched her a little over her clothes, but not enough to wake her. Sitting there, I still think, just for a moment, what the hell. But no. Nothing sexy in a slack jaw.

Instead I cover her with a blanket and finish the forty. Shit, I think. What kind of lay is this? Nine-thirty on a Friday night, I've lost my job, and all I have to show for myself is some Bonnie & Clyde-type bag lady passed out on my couch. Even Kevin is probably out getting some ass.

By the time she wakes up, I'm ready for bed, watching my old VHS tape of Game 7 of the '97 World Series—like things might still be able to turn out different—and wondering how I'm going to get rid of her. Sandy Alomar shows bunt and then grounds out.

Twila groans and scrunches up her eyes, clears her throat. She squints at the TV. "What're you watching?"

"Indians lose." Jim Thome hits into a double play. Inning over.

I turn the TV off and trace the seam of her jeans up the outside of her thigh. "So if you hadn't found me," I say, "where were you going to stay tonight?" There's a needley edge to my voice I don't like, but I'm a little too toasted to help myself, like I'm somewhere outside my own body hearing myself talk.

Twila stiffens. "Fuck you, Gil." It's the first time she's said my name. She stands up and wriggles out of her coat, and I remember why I bought it for her. "Keep your fucking coat," she says and tosses it at me.

"Jesus Christ, Twila, sit down. I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. Please don't listen to me."

She ignores me and heads for the door.

"I'll tell the cops," I call after her, and next thing I know she's holding an empty forty over my head with a feral look in her eye. "You son of a bitch," she spits. "Take it back."

I cover my head with my arms. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding!" I shout and hope she believes me. It occurs to me how easy it would be for her to kill me and how little the world would care. Who would find me? Maybe the landlord, only after I fell far enough behind on the rent? Or Larry next door when I start to stink? "I'm drunk!" I add for good measure and peek through the gaps between my fingers.

“So am I,” she says through gritted teeth, bottle still in her fist.

“I take it back. I promise. I would never tell the cops.”

She lowers the bottle.

“Stay,” I say. “Please stay. I need a woman like you in my life.”

She studies me. “Look, Gil. If I stay here tonight, I want you to understand one thing.”

I slowly uncover my face. “What’s that?”

“I don’t have to fucking stay here.”

I nod. “Sure thing. Got it, boss.”

She sits down next to her coat. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“*I*ll sleep on the couch.”

“I said I’m sleeping on the goddamn couch.”

“Okay,” I say and wonder what I’ve gotten myself into.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I wake up when the mattress shifts beside me. “Twila?” I put my hand out blindly, catching some soft part of her I can’t name.

“Don’t touch me,” she hisses. “Move over.”

By the time she gets settled, there must be three feet of bed between us. I lie there with my eyes open, wondering if I should make a move. For a few minutes, her breathing is loud and fast, and then it slows and her body jerks and relaxes into sleep.

In the darkest part of the night, I wake up with her arms wrapped around my waist and the square of her forehead burning a hole through the back of my shirt. But in the morning, she’s back at the far edge of the bed, facing me, and I wonder if I dreamed it. She’s all semi-circles turned down—lips and eyelids, cheeks and chin. I watch her body grow and shrink for a while before I haul out of bed to start breakfast.

When I stick my head back into the bedroom, she’s stretched out on top of the sheets. I nudge her foot gently, and she opens one eye. “How you want your eggs?” I ask. “Scrambled, easy, medium—?”

“Don’t care,” she mumbles.

“Sure you do. Everybody cares how they like their eggs.”

“I like ‘em however the hell you cook ‘em.”

“Shit,” I say. “You’re my kind of woman.”

“I try,” Twila says, and my heart blows up.

WE HAVE A COUPLE GOOD WEEKS in the apartment this way, even though we don't get any closer to having sex than we do that first night. I figure maybe she's had some bad men in her life, wants to take it slow. No use rushing it if I'm gonna prove myself any different. But at the rate we're going through beer and cigarettes, I figure I better find work.

I put in applications at all the fancy hipster places in the Short North, but I know they won't call me back. Half the time when I walk in the door, the hostess starts by telling me they don't have public restrooms. I try Vic's and the White Castle, too, but they're full up on fresh-faced college kids. No place for an old guy anymore, even in the kitchen. We switch to rolling papers and shag to save a little on smokes.

When I go back to the Grille for my last paycheck, Bernie looks up from pouring coffee like he never moved. "Excuse me," he says to the woman before he darts out in front of me like a chipmunk. Coffee sloshes in the glass belly of the pot in each hand. "What are you doing here?" he demands.

"I'm just here to pick up my check." I step around him and head for the kitchen.

"We should have called the cops on you!" Bernie calls after me.

A pimply kid hunches over the grill like it's keeping him warm, and it startles me to realize this is my replacement. He's got a tattoo in the shape of Ohio on the back of his bony arm, just above the elbow. He frowns at me. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the Ghost of Christmas Future," I tell him. The chair in the office is empty. "Where's Kevin?"

The kid jerks his head towards the bathroom. The door handle rattles, and Kevin emerges, wiping wet hands on his Dickies. "You've got no right to be here," he says when he sees me.

"Missed you, too, Kevin," I say. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch the kid pick a shard of eggshell from an omelet with his fingers. "You told me to come get my check."

Kevin crosses his arms. "I put it in the mail. You know I could have pressed charges, Gil."

"And my coat. I left my coat." I head for the back, where Jesus looks up from the sink. "Hey, Zeus!" I bellow to him, our old joke. Jesus smiles. "G-man!" he says. If his hands weren't wet, I know he'd give me a fist bump. Jesus is the only one at the Grille who ever liked me.

"I took it to Goodwill," Kevin calls over my shoulder.

"You what?" I say, even though I can already see that my old field jacket isn't on the rack by the back door. I recognize Bernie's leather bomber, Kevin's North Face, Jesus's blue parka, and a lumberjack number that must be the new kid's.

The kid curses, and Kevin and I turn to watch a plate of scrambled eggs jump out of his hand on its way to the line. It shatters on the floor, toast triangles skittering under the grill like roaches. While Kevin squats down to help pick up the pieces, I lift Bernie's jacket off its hook. I wrestle one arm in, then the other. It's tight in the shoulders, but it'll do.

Bernie sticks his head back into the kitchen to investigate the racket. By the time he sees I'm wearing his jacket, I'm already through the back door, running.

The cold air slices my lungs open. I cut through the parking lot, around the dumpsters. Just before I turn the corner into the alley, I look back to see Bernie flicking me off and shouting something that gets lost in the same wind blowing his apron strings out behind him.

THAT AFTERNOON, Twila and I take a long walk down to Goodale Park and huddle together in the gazebo and watch the geese swim in the gaps in the ice. I remember it's the Ides of March, so I tell her all about the buzzard festival, how they aren't really buzzards but turkey vultures, and how this is the day they always come home to roost in Hinckley, not far from where I grew up in Akron. How they're drawn to the smell of natural gas, so the gas company uses them to find leaks in the pipelines.

"You're really full of some shit, Gil," she says.

"I saw a nature program," I say.

Twila lets her head fall against my shoulder, and I wonder how long this can last.

When we get back to North Fourth, Larry from next door pokes his head out and tells me the cops were just sniffing around my door. Larry's the tinfoil hat type who spends about three hours a day listening to rightwing talk radio, but he's a fellow vet and we look out for each other. He raises an eyebrow at Twila and holds out his hand. "Have you met me yet?" he asks. "My name is Herb Yablonski, and I'm in the Witness Protection Program."

Twila flashes him a shit-eating grin. "And I'm Lady Gaga," she says.

“That’s Larry, and he’s full of shit,” I interrupt, grabbing Larry’s hand before Twila can. “Thanks, bud. I owe you.” I hustle Twila past him into the apartment.

“What are we gonna do?” Twila whispers once we’re inside.

We, I think. “We’ll bug out,” I tell her. “I ain’t interested in going back to jail myself. I’ve served a little time already for driving under suspension.” There was another time I went in for sixty days after one of Lorea’s old boyfriends came around trying to get in her pants, but I don’t mention that one to Twila. “It’ll be warm soon,” I say. “We’ll camp by the river.”

It takes us less than an hour to pack up whatever’s worth keeping from the apartment. I leave my second-best knife and the Game 7 tape for Larry as a thank you. He’s a Reds fan, anyway. We head for the Army Navy surplus, and I use some of what I had set aside for next month’s rent for supplies—tent, sleeping bags, camp stove. Been long enough that everything’s colored for the desert now instead of Europe or the jungle. Looks like Twila and I are headed for the fucking mountains of Afghanistan instead of the banks of the Olentangy River.

There are camps we could go to for safety in numbers, but bad for somebody trying to get in Twila’s pants. So we scout out a place down below the bike path where we can be alone. I set up the tent while Twila sits on a stump with the bedding bundled up in her arms, coughing and watching the river go by. Everything else we have is in a bunch of Kroger bags around Twila’s feet, along with a McDonald’s bag full of shit off the Dollar Menu going cold. Traffic hums by on the freeway across the river, and the light still left behind the trees is turning pink and orange.

“You okay, sweetcheeks?” I ask. I’m already feeling like shit for letting her sleep outside on the ground, but I don’t know where else to take her. Her cough is almost as bad as Kevin’s now, getting worse instead of better with the weather.

She beats her chest with her fist. “I’m fine,” she says, with what sounds like pieces of lung rattling around in her windpipe. “You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I know how the hell to pitch a tent, Twila,” I say, even as I fight to get the stakes worked into the half-frozen riverbank. You’d think the ground would be soft by the water.

“I’m not talking about the tent.”

I look up and see what I think must be fear in her eyes and drop the stakes and go wrap my arms around her. Of course, she’s wearing her coat, and with the sleeping bags in her arms, holding her is not much more sensual than carrying a load of laundry, but still I know something good has happened to me. For the first time in a long time, I got somebody who needs me.

NOW, I’ve been on hard times before, and I know how to hustle up a dime or two. But I’ve never gone in for lying, that old song and dance about how my car just ran out of gas around the corner, and I don’t piss around with sad sack bullshit like, “Hungry, anything helps. God bless you.” I prefer the preacher who says, “Ask and you shall receive, knock and the door shall be opened to you.” So a couple times a week, I leave Twila and walk down to the corner of Second and High and find a scrap of cardboard and write, “Broke. Accepting donations for liquor and shag.” But it’s harder in Bernie’s leather bomber than it would have been in my old Army field jacket.

We start making the church rounds, too—lunch at the First United Methodist on Monday, dinner with the Unitarians on Tuesday, and so on. I eat a lot of soup and day-old bread, expired sheet cake, the icing slick and greasy on my teeth. The only thing I ever see Twila eat is chocolate-covered mints she shoplifts from the Family Dollar. Once I try to cook up some scrambled eggs, but she says she’s not hungry, leaves me to eat them out of the skillet by myself.

One afternoon, I come back from buying beer to catch her hacking up phlegm in the bushes. “Goddamn, Twila. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“It sounds worse than it is,” she says, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. “Leave me be.”

I put my arms around her from behind and feel her stomach swollen hard, and it sure as hell isn’t because she’s pregnant. I put my face in her hair and breathe in. It smells like her—both sour and sweet, like the clean earth smell of a leaf pile. “I can’t let you get sick.”

Twila pulls away from me and reaches for the beer. “Who says I’m sick?”

LAST WEEK OF APRIL, the Powerball jackpot breaks \$400 million, and Twila and I talk about what we could do with all that money. Buy a yacht and sail around the world. Fix up Twila's grandparents' house and move into it. Twila tells me she always wanted to go to China, just wonders what it's like. But all I really want is to live with Twila somewhere with central heating. A dry, soft bed and real health insurance.

The next morning, I climb up the bank and just as I step through the thicket that mostly hides us from the bike path, some downtown-type jazzed up in orange tights and reflectors almost runs me over on a three-thousand-dollar bicycle. "Watch it, asshole!" I shout after him. I see him glance at me in a round little rearview mirror as he whizzes away, and I give him the finger. A red light clipped to his bag blinks back at me.

That same afternoon, I get a particularly good haul of loose change on the corner of Second and High and come back to camp with a couple of forties and a handful of quick picks. I'm almost there, walking along the bike path, when I hear voices—Twila arguing with a man. "Darren, you know I love you, baby," I hear her say, clear as day. It's the worst kind of luck, like being struck by lightning.

I creep down the riverbank to get a better look, but the spring rain has turned it to mud, and I slip and drop the forties. A branch snaps under my ass as I fall.

The man whirls around. "Who the fuck is that?" He's got the look of a junkie—gaunt and hollow-eyed, clothes as dirty and worn as my own, but there's no trace of gray in his patchy beard. My heart drops like a rock into the river.

"You skank-ass bitch," I say as I scramble to my feet. "You won't even—"

"Gil!" Twila's voice has a warning in it I don't understand until the sky explodes over my left eye. I stagger backwards. I try to stuff the quick picks in my pocket, but most of them flutter and catch on the breeze. Darren swings again. This time I manage to duck. I lunge, pop him a good one in the jaw. We're half in the river by the time Twila gets between us.

"Enough!" she screams. Darren glares at me, blood running from the corner of his mouth. I glare at both of them with my one good eye and reach up to touch the other, already tender and starting to swell.

Twila's soaked from the waist down, her coat, everything. She opens

her mouth to speak, but she starts coughing, a terrible hacking wheeze. “Gil,” she says finally, with the rasp that’s left of her voice, “I want you to meet my son, Darren.”

AFTER DARREN LEAVES, we change into dry clothes, and I wrap Twila up in a blanket. She sits on her stump, watching me hang up our wet coats and clothes on some branches to dry in the afternoon sun. Smoke uncurls from the tip of her cigarette.

“Shit, Twila, why didn’t you tell me?”

Twila shrugs. “Wasn’t your business.” She takes a long drag and starts coughing.

“How did he know where to find you?”

She stares past me now. Sunlight glints off the water in a thousand broken shards. A family with loud little kids passes by on the bike path above us, voices carrying down, but they don’t seem to know we’re here.

“Is that what you did with the money? Did you give it all to him?”

“Darren’s a good boy,” she says, and the way she says it I know she’ll never believe any different. I crouch down in front of her, reach out to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. I try to look in her eyes, but she looks down. “Lie down with me,” I say.

“I don’t want to lie down.”

“Then stand up with me,” I say, but she doesn’t smile back.

“I don’t want to stand up.”

“Just tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

She puts her cigarette out on the side of the stump. “A beer,” she says. “Just beer and some smokes, Gil. That’s all I want from you.”

I hold her shoulders in my hands for a long moment and try to decide whether to believe her, and she doesn’t move away but she doesn’t come any closer either.

THAT NIGHT, I startle awake to branches cracking, men’s voices. My heart jumps in my chest. I pull back the tent flap. Flashlight beams jerk like wild eyes in the trees. I nudge Twila. She pushes my hand away and groans.

“Shhh,” I hiss. “I think it’s the cops. Stay here. They’ll hear you if you try to run. I’ll try to get rid of them.”

Her eyes go wide as I crawl out of the tent.

“Hands where I can see them!”

I blink and hold up my hands.

“I only see one,” says the asshole with the maglite.

The other one swings his service revolver in a slow arc. “Who were you talking to?”

“Myself, sir. Are you looking for someone?” I ask, trying to sound helpful.

“You know you’re trespassing,” says the cop with the light.

“Sorry, I thought this was public land.”

“You can’t camp without a permit on public land. We’ve been getting complaints. You need to pack up and move on. We can escort you to a shelter if you’d like.”

That fucking cyclist, I think. Or Darren. Would he do that to his own mother if she didn’t give him money? “Yes, sir,” I say. I don’t move.

“We’ll wait for you.”

I try not to glance at the tent. “That’s really not necessary.”

“We’ll wait,” the cop repeats.

I take a deep breath and do the only thing I can for the woman I love, whether she wants it or not. I run. I’m loud as a horse, splitting twigs, tripping on rocks, splashing in the muck along the river. The cops curse and start running after me. I know I won’t get far. I just hope it’s far enough for Twila.

I GET BOOKED for trespassing and evading arrest, but they let me go after thirty-six hours. When I get back to the river, the tent is gone. Bernie’s leather jacket. Everything. I half-expect to see turkey vultures wheeling overhead, but the sky is empty, too. I search the ground for anything she might have left behind until I find a half-eaten bag of chocolate-covered mints nestled in a pile of leaves. I pop one into my mouth and chew, feel the mint whistle through my sinuses.

My heart cracks open slowly in my chest, and something like a cold, wet stone turns in the pit of my stomach. Then I see the folded shadow of her navy coat blacking out the round-faced moon of the stump where she used to sit, and the only thing left for me to do is crawl inside it and try to breathe in what’s left of her, but already I can’t tell what’s Twila and what’s just the smell of the river when it dries on your clothes. ♦

RYLER DUSTIN

STILL LIFE

When you left, all you left
 was a peach
 on the windowsill.

For weeks it went slowly
 to ruin, leaking liquor
 from the arson
 of its skin.

Originally published in *Trailer Park Psalms* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023)



READING BASHO IN BERGEN

Lights of traffic pass through
my face on the black window.

Metaphor is this shiver of distance,
how the body feels fever
as crippling cold.

Sick for three days, I'm reading Basho:
how to set something down
without flourish.

Swedish reruns drone in the hallway.
Outside, old snow
shows the lines of an elm.

And if a poem can see dimly
into another poem,
do those words feel watched
like a TV screen in a movie?

Do they flicker and scroll
faintly
in the first poem's eyes—

Originally published in *Trailer Park Psalms* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023)

THEO LEGRO

**IF IT'S NOT THE SHAPE
OF YOUR HANDS THAT MAKES THEM
SHAKE, EVEN THE WIND IS POISON**

My face could belong to anyone when I first wake up,
and when I remember who I am, I don't feel better. It's winter,
always winter, and another day rolls over like a maggoty log.
Outside is all white and nothing, landscape unbroken
but for the crushed egg spilling almost a sparrow
into the snow, sealed eye bulging over the beginnings
of a beak. I do what I do best: I look at a dead thing
and wonder, why me? I count my pills and I don't talk
to anyone. My psychiatrist tells me I am not my diagnosis
and my oncologist tells me there is no why. It's humiliating,
how what's killing you never even thinks of you. The storm
pulling down your house doesn't even know your name.

BILL HOLLANDS

CHURCH STEPS

then I heard it
my name turned and
he opened his arms
Bill and my father
he opened his arms
like an offer to dance
October already so
cold oh how
puzzling it was
to watch him dance

HANNAH BONNER

IN THE BEGINNING

You could smell the earth
through the earth.

The house beyond
the forest

like a burning ship.
Plum star, lodestar,

lead me by the horn
like a lantern.

Let me be the light
that supersedes the light.

Let the letting
sink deeper.

UNDRESS, SHE SAID

DOUG ANDERSON

FOUR WAY BOOKS, 2022

\$17.95

BOOK REVIEW

ROB GREENE

DOUG ANDERSON'S COLLECTION—*Undress, She Said*—has hooks and turns as effective as a James Wright last line. Just ask “Pastor Fred” who felt the crisp belt of one of Anderson’s deft hooks and turns [32].

Many of us are taught to fight for our lives, whether as kids, soldiers, or civilians looking back on traumatic experiences. Doug Anderson’s latest collection is full of empathetic touchstones, conveying understanding for others in the battle to stay alive through shared experiences of war, addiction, recovery, loss, love, work, caretaking, and fear. I opened the book directly to Part II, titled, “The War Doesn’t End.” I can see why the editors at Four Way Books positioned this section as a spine, splitting the center of the book, as it contains elements of war and platoon camaraderie, and conveys empathy even for the enemy in a time of war.

In Anderson’s poem “Splibs and Chucks,” we witness a brotherhood among those who are Black along with those who are white who were likely “taught to hate each other in some funky ass bean town in Mississippi” [53]. We see the loss of a brother, through images that give us a glimpse of our own losses, whether to war or other tragedy. We, too, have seen the grim silhouettes in the shadows that mirror images of those from our past.

On the trip “Driving Down Route 9 Last Night,” we motor on by the Veterans’ hospital, where some of us hallucinate in the radical dark either by way of the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Schizophrenia. I am not positing the speaker has either of these conditions; I, as the reviewer, have both these illnesses, so I can easily see the

hallucinatory images Anderson conjures up from his memories of the Vietnam war. Yes, such experiences are valid and yes, they are believable.

For his ability to unflinchingly speak freely of his time in the military, I have much respect and admiration for Doug Anderson, who shares careful and thoughtful expressions on moments in history when Americans were sent to burn “the poisoned land, for reasons that grow dimmer every year we were sent to fight” [60].

Though we are veterans from different eras with different experiences, I can visualize the images in Anderson’s poems, as they contain extensive and layered tenors that ride inside the vehicles of the multi-tiered metaphors. These poems have the ability to resonate with service members and also with civilians.

In “Killing with a Name,” we see American platoon members pull a five-foot Vietnamese man from the hole he was battling from, to see his face. Never again could the poet call the Vietnamese people by the names the Americans of that time were taught to say, to vilify the enemy. I shall follow the poet’s example and not repeat the racist epithets that were used to animalize the people of Vietnam, but we must reckon with the consequences of the propaganda that comes with war. As stated in the poem “Killing with a Name,” while in the village, it was somewhat easier to “kill its vermin” than it was to harm innocent human beings.

Time and again throughout this book, we are met with Anderson’s bravery to speak out to those who can and do empathize and sympathize with him. In his poem “The Good Doctor,” some readers will recognize that “flattened affect” and appreciate it; some of us speak in a blunted affect as we are suppressing our trauma and experiences. At the same time, Anderson writes “of things too dreadful for others to speak of without trembling” [61].

In lighter moments of the war, if that is possible, Anderson’s poem “Fishing on the Lunar New Year” shows us how some fished with grenades. Yes, a first grenade toss, or drop can make your palms sweat and your knees will shake. In the poem “Little Chi” we meet a kid selling popsicles on a 120-degree day to the soldiers on both sides. Little Chi reminded me of Ernest Hemingway when he served chocolates and cigarettes to the soldiers. The battle arrived directly in Little Chi’s homeland, and he likely had no choice except to find a purpose during these hellish times.

In the poem “The War Doesn’t End” we see signs of xenophobia among the people of today’s Vietnam. Those who are of other races and nationalities, including “Amerasians,” the children of soldiers, are unwelcome by some, even if Vietnam is the only home they have known. When soldiers set out on foreign lands, the illegitimate children created in times of war—and their mothers—have no recourse to be supported by their military fathers deployed overseas. There are many born during times of war, and many of these kids are at risk of exclusion and extreme poverty. Anderson’s poem reminds us of *all* those who are left behind, and no, “The War Doesn’t End” for them.

To illustrate the effectiveness of his craft, in particular his ability to convey empathy and care via the imagery and tenors of this collection, I shall close out this review with Doug Anderson’s poem “Somewhere South of Danang, 1967.” And yes, the last line gives us hope for a better tomorrow:

At dawn we sit in ambush outside the village.
A cat emerges from the ground fog,
sniffs the air, passes through us
with indifference. The sun
turns the fog to spun glass.
Spiderwebs with drops of dew
hang in the trees.
We see a saffron shape
coming through the fog.
Safeties are eased off. Fingers
rest lightly on triggers.
A young monk emerges from the fog,
kneels on the ground in front of us
closes his eyes and frowns.
We check his ID and send him
on his way. A rooster crows in the village.
Someone lights a fire. We will not fight today.

An earlier version of this essay first appeared in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*.

FROM THE PUBLISHER

AS THE WORK WE PUBLISH at *Raleigh Review* has always come mainly from unsolicited submissions, there's just no tit for tat when it comes to our magazine. We do not attempt to build superficial connections on social media but focus on the quality of the work inside each issue. At the same time, the quality of the work found in our magazine overrides those lost opportunities. In fact, *Raleigh Review* is a place for genuine friendship as we collectively believe in meritocratic principles.

On my first trip through Russia in 1998, my now-wife turned to me in excitement to tell me that the man grabbing his luggage across the turnstile from us was a great Russian poet. She approached the man who I now know was Yevgeny Yevtushenko in Sheremetyevo Airport.

However, my wife miscalculated her approach and she mistakenly called Yevtushenko by the name of Andrei Andreyevich Voznesensky, a rival, and she asked Yevtushenko for the rival's autograph. Yevgeny seemed to huff and scoff a bit at being misidentified as he stated he was "not that person."

That's when I knew the power of poetry, in the former Soviet Union at least. My wife was a business major who'd received a full academic scholarship, all of twenty-one years old with her MBA. And yet, she recognized a famous poet when she saw one. It is said that Yevtushenko and Voznesensky in their prime would fill stadiums the size of the World Cup for poetry readings when still in the USSR.

I was in the sciences at that time and was amazed that my wife knew of both poets by name, even though after a twelve-hour flight she had mistaken one for the other. Easy mistake I had assured her as this was prior to the time of Google. It was still quite astonishing to me as an American who'd never attempted to write a poem nor familiarized myself with any poets from my homeland. It took my brother dying early and me not wanting to leave the house outside of my research work at Duke for my

wife to encourage me to sign up for a creative writing course. That was back in the fall of 2005 and I haven't looked back since my first class in the basement classroom 0002 of the red-bricked Winston Hall at NC State.

Now as we celebrate our thirteenth year, the *Raleigh Review* team brings that same seriousness to the literary arts in our approach to the poets and writers we select. Our events, when we had our loft in Raleigh's Five Points, were legendary. This was a place for all, the young and the old and everyone in between. Senior citizens went down on their hands and knees to crawl up the steep pitch of stairs at the height of the recession to see the poets, musicians, and writers we brought into the *Raleigh Review* Writers' Loft nearly a decade ago.

Landon Houle, our Editor-in-Chief, once mentioned in an interview that she'd wished we at Raleigh Review could give something in return to writers who send us their work; I've thought about her saying that ever since. We are now giving free e-issues away. The free issues for everyone are made possible thanks to those who submit their work to us. We offer a free submission period every December to those who are experiencing financial hardship. We also allow submissions via US Post from inmates incarcerated in the prison system as well as the protected classes, the elderly and the disabled. And each submission to Raleigh Review is read by three to four highly skilled writers and poets. That is generosity at its finest.

Perhaps it is blasphemy to speak highly of the former USSR's respect for the literary arts. After all, there was a time when a Russian writer might have to duel for respect and ultimately—their life. The great multiracial poet Alexander Pushkin lost his life in his 27th duel. That said, today he is fully accepted as a cultural figure, celebrated enough that the Russians named their flagship airport after him, in Moscow. Yes, a poet!

Perhaps though let's reimagine our own stadiums full of readers heading out to *peacefully* listen to their favorite poets and writers. That's the idealistic vision we have for our magazine and our community. Please subscribe today. ♦

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Greene'.

Rob Greene, publisher

contributors

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DON BOES teaches at Bluegrass Community and Technical College in Lexington, Kentucky. His latest volume of poems is *Good Luck with That* from FutureCycle Press. His first book, *The Eighth Continent*, was chosen by A.R. Ammons for the 1993 Morse Poetry Prize from Northeastern University Press.

HANNAH BONNER'S poetry has appeared in *Bear Review*, *Rattle*, *The Hopkins Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Two Peach*. Her criticism has been featured in *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, *Cleveland Review of Books*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *The Rumpus*, among others. She lives in Iowa.

JA'NET DANIELO is the author of the chapbooks *This Body I Have Tried to Write* (MAYDAY, 2022) and *The Song of Our Disappearing* (Paper Nautilus, 2021). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Diode*, *Frontier Poetry*, and *Mid-American Review*, among other places. You can find her at www.jdanielo.com.

TODD DAVIS is the author of seven books of poetry, most recently *Coffin Honey* and *Native Species*, both published by Michigan State University Press. New poems appear in *Prairie Schooner*, *Water-Stone Review*, *North American Review*, *Cutthroat*, and *American Literary Review*. He teaches environmental studies at Pennsylvania State University's Altoona College.

RYLER DUSTIN represented Seattle on the final stage of the Individual World Poetry Slam, and his newest collection, *Trailer Park Psalms*, appeared this fall as winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press. You can learn more or reach out to him via rylerdustin.com.

BRYCE EMLEY is the author of the chapbooks *Terminating Physics [a reference guide]*, *A Brief Family History of Drowning*, and *Smoke and Glass*. A recipient of awards from Aspen Autumn Words, the Edward F. Albee Foundation, the Glen Workshop, and the Pablo Neruda Prize, Bryce works as a content writer in New Mexico.

JULES FITZ GERALD (she/her) grew up on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Pittsburgh. Her prose has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Tampa Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

TREVOR FULLER currently teaches at the University of Texas at Arlington. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Story*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and *Wigleaf: (very) short fiction*, among others. He lives in Texas with his girlfriend and their dog.

KARIN GOTTSALL'S most recent book is *The River Won't Hold You* (Ohio State University Press, 2014). Her poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and elsewhere. Gottshall lives in Vermont with a small but formidable pack of intensely anxious rescue dogs. She teaches at Middlebury College.

JESSICA GREENBAUM is the author of three books of poems, most recently, *Spilled and Gone*, which was named a year's best book by the *Boston Globe* in 2021. She is also a co-editor of the arbor-centric anthology, *Tree Lines; 21st Century American Poems* (Grayson, 2022). <https://poemsincommunity.org/>.

BILL HOLLANDS'S work has been featured on The Slowdown podcast and has appeared in such journals as *The Greensboro Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *New Ohio Review*, *Rattle*, *DIAGRAM*, *North American Review*, and *Boulevard*. He lives in Seattle with his husband and their son.

EVANGELINE JONES is a freelance writer whose fiction has appeared in *The New Quarterly* and *Foliate Oak*. She has also published many nonfiction articles, and one book: *Grief on the Front Lines: Reckoning with Trauma, Grief, and Humanity in Modern Medicine*. You can read more of her work at rachelevangelinejones.com.

BRYANA JOY is a poet & painter who has lived in Türkiye, Texas, & England, & now resides in Eastern Pennsylvania. Her poetry has appeared in dozens of literary journals—including *Poetry Northwest*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, & *Red Rock Review*—& she also hosts online poetry workshops to foster meaningful arts community & support writers. Find her at www.bryanajoy.com.

CHRISTEN NOEL KAUFFMAN is a 2022 National Poetry Series finalist and author of *Notes to a Mother God* (2021). Her work can be found in *A Harp in the Stars: An Anthology of Lyric Essays* (University of Nebraska Press), *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Copper Nickel*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *DIAGRAM*, among others.

THEO LEGRO is a Vietnamese-American poet who has received a Pushcart Prize nomination and fellowships from Kundiman. They have performed extensively throughout New York City and their work appears or will appear in *diode*, *Frontier*, *No, Dear*, *SARKA*, and other journals. They live in Brooklyn with a cat named Vinny.

SARAH LULLO currently resides in Chicago and is an Illinois native. She graduated with her MFA in Poetry from West Virginia. She has read submissions for *Ninth Letter* and served as the poetry editor for *Cheat River Review*. Her writing is forthcoming in *Raleigh Review* and *Gulf Coast*.

A.J. NEWSOM'S writing appears in many literary journals and magazines, including *Stonocoast Review*, *Islandport Magazine*, *West Trade Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Bar Bar Literary Magazine*, and *Hearth & Coffin*. She is an alum of the Stonecoast MFA program, lives in Maine, and is writing her first novel.

EMILY SCHULTEN is the author of two collections of poems, *The Way a Wound Becomes a Scar*, a 2023 Eric Hoffer Award Finalist, and *Rest in Black Haw*. Schulten's writing appears in *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, *Tin House*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. She is currently a professor of English and creative writing at The College of the Florida Keys.

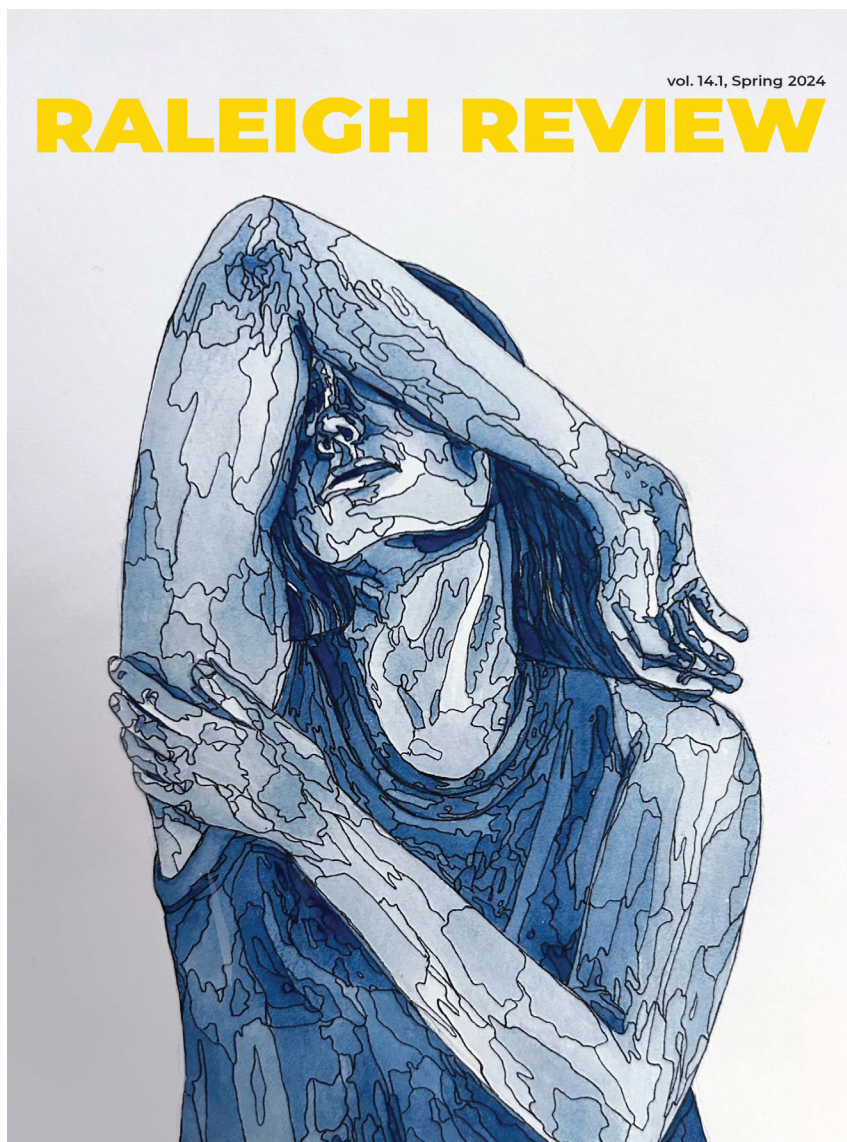
CHRISTOPHER SHIPMAN (he/him) lives on Eno, Sappony, & Shakori land in Greensboro, North Carolina. Recent work appears in *Fence*, *New Orleans Review*, *Poetry*, & elsewhere. His play *Metaphysique D' Ephemera* has been staged at four universities. *With Vincent Cellucci, Getting Away with Everything* (Unlikely Books, 2021) is his most recent collection.

contributors cont.

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ROBERT PAUL WESTON is the author of several award-winning children's novels, including *Zorgamazoo* and *Prince Puggly of Spud* and the *Kingdom of Spiff*. His short fiction has appeared in *The New Orleans Review*, *Postscripts*, *Kiss Machine*, and elsewhere. He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln, where he is Faculty Fiction Editor of *The Lincoln Review*. Find him on social media @rpWeston.

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