issue 3
Masthead

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the 45th parallel: halfway between the equator and the north pole
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AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH MANGUSO

Sarah Manguso is the author of *300 Arguments*, *Ongoingness*, *The Guardians*, *The Two Kinds of Decay*, *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*, *Sister Viator*, and *The Captain Lands in Paradise*. Her work has been supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Hodder Fellowship, and the Rome Prize, and her books have been translated into Chinese, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. Her poems have won a Pushcart Prize and appeared in several editions of the Best American Poetry series, and her essays have appeared in *Harper’s*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *Paris Review*. She lives in Los Angeles and currently teaches in the low-residency MFA program at New England College.
Natalie Villacorta: So in 300 Arguments, you write, “If you want to know someone’s secret, don’t ask a thing, just listen.” So I am going to see if I can get away with not asking anything.

Sarah Manguso: I was once interviewed by somebody who asked in the most delicate way about everything. He had about a dozen questions, and I think for each one he said, “I’d like to talk to you about… form.” And then he would just be quiet. I was amazed by it. It was so audacious.

Villacorta: Did it work?

Manguso: Yeah, I spoke. He came up with something, and the editor eventually killed the piece. But I don’t think his mode of questioning was the problem. He was the son of two psychiatrists, which often yields a hyperconscious individual, in my experience.

Villacorta: Because I’m not the child of two psychiatrists, I don’t think that’s going to work for me. I’m in the MFA program at Oregon State University and one of my anxieties is that I haven’t yet found my voice. So, I loved it when, in 300 Arguments, you write that your least favorite received idea about writing is that “one must find one’s voice.” Instead, you write, voice depends on interaction with the world. But I have an anxiety that I’m a sponge—I read something and then I just imitate it. A couple weeks ago, when writer Mike Scalise came to visit, he talked about thinking of oneself as a cover band. He said he might be a cover band for Donald Antrim. Do you consid-
er yourself a cover band for someone, and if so, who?

**Manguso:** No. Everybody has a natural register in which they write or a form to which they gravitate or a length or a topic or a sound or something that you just kind of do. It’s like the thing that you doodle effortlessly—I do spirals—people don’t really doodle any more now that we have phones. But I do loathe the idea of the hyper individuated voice that’s like no one else. That’s not really so much a thing except in a few cases, I think. But I do believe that there’s a set of natural proclivities that compose each guiding intelligence, and I think graduate school is a place where you’re trying out various things to see what you’re inclined to do. If I’d never tried writing prose I would never have understood that I like prose better than verse. There are a million of these examples.

Towards the end of this searching, weird, pressured, but very community-bound experience of graduate school, you hopefully come out with some, if not an idea of exactly what you need to be working on, some vector towards that which you need to be working on. So, for me, that has been a long romance with brevity. That’s why an Alice Munro story is identifiable, that’s why a Beethoven symphony is identifiable, or at least distinguishable from a Bach cantata. You sound the way that you sound.

**Villacorta:** This reminds me of something you wrote in *Ongoingness*. You wanted to write sentences that seemed as if no one had wrote them. Sentences without the distraction of style and form. But when I read your sentences, I
know that you wrote them.

**Manguso:** That sentence that I wrote sounds a little grandiose to me now. But, at the time, that’s what I thought I needed to be writing.

**Villacorta:** Related to that, you write this is why you liked reading diaries. You could get the writer’s experience without the trappings of literary devices. So I was curious about some of your favorite diaries.

**Manguso:** There are many categories. I feel that since I am at an MFA program, I have to mention Cheever. If you’re at all interested in what a writer’s diary looks like when he’s writing the diary every day and writing fiction every day, there are scenes that are lifted wholly out of the diary and transposed into fiction with, like, you know, one character changed. His very famous story “Reunion”—it’s a very short story and it’s often used in anthologies—the one that starts with the sentence, “The last time I saw my father I was…” and the end of the story is “…and that was the last time I saw my father.” But everything the father does in that story, Cheever’s brother did in real life, and he logged it in his diary. So that’s fun.

Before I moved from the East Coast to Iowa, when I was in my twenties, I found this really great series of diaries written by a mother and daughter—frontierswomen, let’s call them earlyish farm women in Iowa. They’re not literary but they’re sort of effortlessly beautiful and poetic. There’s an entry where the little girl, she’s just begun the diary,
she’s 9 or 10, where she says, “Turks peep. Strawberrying. Our little colty died. Pa cried.” I mean, you can’t really do much better than that. It’s so good.
The last example I’ll give—I just wrote an introduction for the French writer Jules Renard’s journal. *Journale*. He doesn’t call it a diary—because, you know, French. *Tin House* put that out—Oregon!—and his diary is great because it’s funny and mean but mostly very good-natured, and I think it’s a somewhat rare example of a writer who’s not just eating his heart, you know eating himself alive with envy. It’s like the opposite of Kafka’s diary, which is all about being tubercular and under-recognized and sad and cold and sick. And Renard is like, “I went out with a famous poet and he acted like an idiot and I’m just going to write it all down in a little scene.” It’s a wonderful book.

**Villacorta:** In *Ongoingness* you talk about how your practice of keeping a diary declines after you become a mother. I was wondering what your habit looks like these days?

**Manguso:** I’m actually doing more with a side diary project with my friend Sheila Heti, who’s a Canadian writer. We both had a big project coming to fruition this year, and we decided we weren’t going to Google it or Google ourselves after it was published, and of course, Jan. 1 we’re fine and, by the end of the week, we’re both Googling—my book came out in February. About half way through the year, she came up with this really good idea that we should just keep a Google diary. We could use any form or length or style that we want, but on the first of the month of every month we would share the Google diaries with
each other. And so we did. We’ve done it for about six months now, and it’s been really unexpectedly fruitful in thinking about many, many things other than just one's narcissistic urges—like where they come from, what they mean, who’s doing what online, why it matters, why it’s interesting, what’s interesting. Analysis of the weird things that you find online about yourself. And I’m also keeping my regular diary—everyday more or less.

**Villacorta:** It doesn’t surprise me that you are friends with other writers, as I find being in a community of other writers so important to my work—but it’s also a huge source of envy. Several of the aphorisms in 300 Arguments are about envy, such as “I don’t envy the great writers. I envy those who believe they might be great.” How have you, over the course of your writing life, dealt with envy?

**Manguso:** Well, by writing about it, for one thing. This Google diary project is very much bound up in the different kinds of envy that one feels but also witnesses—the internet being what it is. I also gave the commencement address at the Bennington Writing Seminars in 2015 or thereabouts, and my speech was about envy. I adapted it and published it on the back page of the *New York Times Book Review*. All I’ve ever done is write about feelings, and this is a vivid feeling. I think particularly vivid more so for a writer starting out now than for a writer starting out in the early mid-90s, which was when I was doing what you’re doing. Imagine doing all of this without the internet. It just wasn’t there. None of it was there. You would go to the Barnes and Noble and go to the literary magazines,
and there would maybe be a copy of *The Georgia Review* or *The Gettysburg Review*. Or you’d go to a library and they’d have some random year-old copy of this or that. You’d read some poems and think they were okay and then get your pencil and pad out and copy down the mailing address. I typed on a fucking typewriter. We did have a computer—so it was just an affectation. You’d send them out and not hear back for six or eight months. And that was it. All your work would be out.

In my MFA program, there was this one shelf where you would hand in your manuscript, and the administrative assistant would make copies—nice little stacks of everything—and you would pick up the stories and poems and read them. That was the milieu in which we were envious—if somebody had written something amazing. More often, at that point—I was too nascent a writer to really feel envious—I was just like, “Oh, my god, that was amazing! Max Winter is a genius!” Or “John D’Agata’s a genius!” And they turned out to be geniuses.

**Villacorta:** In *Ongoingness*, you write, “one of the great solaces of my life is I no longer need to wonder whether I’ll have children.” And in *300 Arguments*, you talk about how you spent your life insisting that you didn’t want children, that writing was your life’s center. I wonder, how do you suggest I make this decision to have a child?

**Manguso:** I can tell you that for me, after the fact—my son is in kindergarten—I’ve become very interested in people who have undergone this shattering. I wrote an
essay called “The Grand Shattering” about that. The first great surprise of motherhood is that it’s so interesting intellectually to be with this little creature. The second great surprise was that it was pleasurable, that I enjoyed it. It didn’t seem like something on the surface that I would enjoy. And another surprise was that although I do feel a little bit of nostalgia for the free person that I was—I could just go to an arts colony for fucking ten weeks in the summer, and everything would be okay, and I would sublet my apartment—while I really valued and treasured those years while I had them, I’m just really interested in people whose selves have just been shattered in this way, who are tied to the ground by these creatures who need us. And I enjoy being shattered.

Louis C.K.—it’s terrible to bring him up because of the misogyny etc.—but he has this dangerous bit about running into some woman in her twenties. He uses this misogynist, twisted voice, where he’s like, “I’m like a woman, I’m 22. And I’m like a woman.” And Louis C.K. is like, “You are not a fucking woman until people come out of your vagina and your nipples are chewed up, long as drinking straws.” On and on and on. When I first heard that I was like, “Eh, alright. That’s cool.” But the heart of that I now feel very much.

When I was young I thought, “I don’t want to fucking hang out with women who are mothers. It’s just gonna be about women’s stuff.” This was before I was radicalized and before I understood that the state of femaleness living in the white hyper capitalist patriarchy is just the more
interesting place to be. It’s the place where people are fighting for their lives. And so, I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to learn all of those things. I don’t think everybody has to have children. I don’t think you have to have children to be a better writer. I think I’ve become better, in several measurable ways, because of having a child. But I’ve also become a more fucked up person, just in the sense of like, I went to the wrong terminal at LAX this morning because I’m taking a Delta flight next weekend to Portland and I was like, “Oh, I’m going to Oregon. Oh, that’s the Delta terminal,” and I went through security in the Delta terminal. So it turns out you can just go through, like, all the way up to the gate without even having the correct ticket. And then I had to do the whole thing again. So, I fuck everything up, and I didn’t use to be that person, and I blame motherhood.

I was just talking to another writer friend of mine yesterday about why things are so much more fucked up now in that category of life. And I said it’s because you’re always trying to fit ten pounds of shit into a five-pound bag. You’re trying to take care of yourself but there’s all this other stuff to do. I’m constantly trying to do eight things at once.
Excavation
Grace Lytle

My mother stares me down, searching for places where my skin sheers like light through sheets and the bone shines through.

I sometimes feel as though I am coming apart.

My stomach dips until I am able to hold my hipbones in my hands, hold them up to lamplight like artifacts.

Goodbye stillness, extras. This is just to say I’ve filled myself with daffodils and clovers and things that don’t stick down where you’ve placed them.
This is just to say I’m swallowing air until I am a vacuum.

What my mother doesn’t know won’t hurt her.
I leave her bits of myself paper-trailed down the hall on nightly trips from bedroom to bathroom to bedroom again.
I’d give up my body if it meant she could never put the pieces together.

I don’t often return to the body –
not in a way that means anything other than a finger over the thump under my jaw.

A thumb in the divot behind my clavicle.
I don’t come back to my own bones often enough to know how heavy they would be in my hands.
I WAS A HOLE IN THE SNOW

Annie Blake
a black belly of fire light pores mist the sun is a candle's tilt i never thought my death would land soft fine birds birthing from a mouth under his shoulder life is not sequential memories i see visions in day light the woman who crouches raw angular bird visions are dreams bodies out of the pressure of time hover under ceilings

the mountains were as high as me meaningful exhalation in canals of shells the round sound of clouds listen the ontological merge thoughts scudding under my skin her hair on fur fire is a siren on the cross how roofs are made spires are templates for what death is trees spiraling in rivers flow as decisive as auxin arrows through throats who are these human feet who walk among them mud sticks us together

thinking is not linear neither is feeling there are caves made from the meat of women who breathe out clouds the contortionist hands of women need to be subtle i will never marry you in a church again i rest a blossom inside the washed flame your lips make the spike of your tongue a bell with a seed its circumference women stand when their water breaks pangs push through what needs to comes to life

when i lie down on rock underwater with nothing and hold myself down long enough i find breathing the grasses out of my head thumbs and fingers that ripple sand the woman who looks like a bird flies with one wing her hair sleek green snakes bulbing into a woven heart a vent rising and falling i have been set to life my feet don't walk i feel fluid then love there are many more steps before the candle's beginning sinks into stone and the arms of air between us holy
Unforgettable that a small crowd of jazz lovers waiting at round tables inside this midtown club make their own sounds: chairs scraping the wooden floor, glasses and ice, murmurs, table-top drumming, laughing. Take five minutes and notice. These are palpable, meaningful sounds, urgent expressions felt right here on the stage. Mix that with the colorless photographs lining the brick wall behind us. Monk, Bird, Miles, Coltrane, Dizzy, Chick, Esperanza Spalding, even Les Paul, each one caught in the middle of telling tuneful tales.

What the audience really wants to know is why this chord here, that rest there? What’s the story pulsating between the notes? By palpable I’m only saying their movements disturb in a good way what you’re attempting to proclaim with the trumpet, with the rest of the band right there with you. The important thing is to not take advantage of the audience’s thirst to know more. Never, in other words, start with the extreme beginning, the extreme
beginning being too far removed from here and now for any kind of musical explanation. Take the beginning of childhood, for instance. Try riffing off that theme. Recalled as a memory of a memory given, that is, a mother saying with tears that was how it was and that it lasted a long time, way too long. But now how she’d love to have that time back again because this time around it’d be different, cross her heart.

So this story goes.

Someone else's memory, though, a mother’s, and by all means illegitimate for you to adopt as your own but recycled in conversations nonetheless. Funny stories around the dinner table. Do you remember the night when you were five and had two fingers up your nose, pretending you were Godzilla? That sort of thing. Embarrassing moments dubbed in between potatoes hitting your plate and the smell of ham coming around. So this story goes, round and round. Others’ reminiscing that turned you into a ghost of yourself. They’d say again and again: How could we ever forget that look at your face when you couldn’t get your fingers out?

Maybe it was baked chicken that go-round.

Nothing inside confirms it ever happened. Sure, they’d never forget. That much they promised by the only transmission available, word of mouth. They called you Captain Fingers. You responded again and again in your silent way, focused on a single idea dancing in your head: that all the hard edges would get rubbed off by so much telling. Your body and your soul were harmonized then.

For here and now, focus on a much, much later
time, but not so late that the listeners who sit at the round tables in the half-lit club that clinks with chatter doubt you, credibility-wise. Say, for a remarkable example, just last week. What better time in the measure of things, last week, when the melodies and your anxious sparks of memory collide like a Fourth of July celebration. Weather sets the mood and should be the first point of reference in this song, a universal opening of the eyes upon dark satin clouds, of course, and then the slight smattering of rain on the window glass behind the couch where you sit, the rain like a drumbeat, hardly audible but enough to be felt, and beating in time.

Never rush this part, for the listeners’ sake. The couch you’re on is in the living room. Last week. Instead let this story lilt on the horizon of believability so some may doubt its validity. Linger there and they will sense the rhythm and begin to sway like branches in a slight breeze, not exactly sure they should or shouldn’t lean in closer and strain for it, the commerce between them and you the essence of improvisation. Never rush the tempo. Darker clouds than before and the rain maddening now against the pavement outside, hitting like metronome, like a kick drum kicking and a bass line walking, swinging.

Go on in this mode.

So what I’m saying is that last week Doreen arrives home tied in knots of prefabricated anger, right off grabs her grandmother’s cast iron skillet from the cabinet and swings it over her head with a shout that’s atonal. She’s leaving but there’s just one point to make before she walks. This is her coda. That much is memorable. You’re
on the couch and trying to explain. She’s leaving. All this a week ago.

Listeners clinking ice in the lullaby light of the club are sophisticated lovers of tradition and expect a repetition of this idea about leaving, although it’s not a commandment. Nothing is a commandment but you can get yourself slapped for believing it. Repetition is a circling back and indicated by the repeat sign. Knowing this, why would you not recycle the idea? Believe in results. Unless tension is the desired effect, which it always is at some level, or at some level below that level. Tension will exert its own pressure in its own time. Cast iron skillet swinging. She’s leaving but there’s just one more point. Guitar notes bend just so much that the listeners’ ears are tugged from their comfortable places, which is what they paid good money for, this pulling tension. A similar feeling to approaching a closed door, turning its brass knob and hearing the floor creak on the other side. In other words, to go through the door or not. Exert personal force or not. And the bass is repeating a walking line, walking down the scale, down the scale walking, note touching note, like stepping down stairs, descending.

Outside, the rain has a pattern, falling harder on the glass and making the mind take note: It sounds like Kentucky. Perceived as Ken-tuck-y. The hi-hat tap-tapping, tap-tapping, tap-tapping like rain against the glass, tap-tapping. Doreen calls you a liar of the horrific sort, ignorant of her emotional parts, a fool in paradise, too blind to see what’s plainly right in front of your nose. The skillet tremors in her hand and demands an explanation,
nonverbally demanding.

You shift on the couch. Okay, she sees one side but there are always two sides. What actually happened from my point of view—my side of the coin—Doreen, is that I hoped you would understand that I meant to include you, of course, that was true from the start, and when that other woman walked up to my table, there were no other empty chairs in the establishment. In other words—in still other words, there must be some improvised innocence, belonging to yours truly. She endorses public acts of human spirit. She searches for evidence of a beating heart everywhere, doesn’t she? And, yes! Doreen, you should have been there as I would have trusted your good judgment on this embarrassment, socially incongruent as it is with the here and now, Doreen, but who am I that I can put my foot on the only empty chair in the place and block human kindness based on principle alone.

Perhaps that look in Doreen’s eye is a glint of sympathy. Or that glint in her eye is the look of having her last nerve stepped upon. Being on her last nerve is an echoing remark of hers, a refrain, so to speak. But who am I to say my interpretation is the interpretation or who am I to turn a blind eye toward details piled like stones. Against the glass the rain taps harder now, knocking and pleading.

Why heavy weather plays such a critical role is a question of the psychological-slash-inheritance type, a product of ancestral memories passed down like a gum-ball through a gumball machine. But since dark clouds evoke a vigorous brooding mood in a statistically greater number of people than does blue skies and sunlight.
poking around a pine tree, let’s go with the surefire dark-cloud theme. For tension, though, the effect can be tinkered with. Which is why we have lightning storms and thunder in horror films. And plastic wrap around CD cases. Because when a young woman falls on the beach and it’s a lovely day and the sun beams like a spotlight, there’s no quickening pulse. Yet when the same lonely woman falls and it’s thundering with lightning cracking along angry clouds, the heart raps faster. It does something to the millions and billions of neurons in the brain. More epinephrine gets sprayed in the brain’s synapses like a dog marking its spot.

Synapses are the natural spaces between, make note.

Lightning cracks like cymbal crashes. Crash. Crash. Crash. Bass following down its neck, walking slowly down, walking down slowly, and, after reaching the lowest note, repeating it from the top downward, descending. Guitar offering a melancholic wail, a blue note bending between intervals. There’s a science here in that the bass and drums hold the progression in place tightly, the very key to progress. Just note the practiced focus on their faces, bassist and drummer both locked in, assigning a pulse. They’ve done this before, they’ll do it again. Locked in what we call the groove, which is nothing like a prison. Whereas the guitar tugs away from the progression, creating tension, clashing with the environment, soloing in the pursuance of togetherness. Not unlike the tension felt in a movie theater when the running woman chased by a terrible monster falls on the sand. Tension we know is fabricated. The
guitarist grimaces and you on the trumpet recount. But the listeners sitting at the round tables are sophisticated, wildly in love with being spoken to by jazz and the arrows that strike their hearts and they lean forward to take more of it in, to let the epinephrine scream inside them, chemically speaking.

Doreen, doll, listen, I want you to know, as I’m sure you do know, but let me say it just the same that, you know, that you’re the one and only one and that anything else would be just an attack on the truth, really. When I look in your eyes I see doubt, red as fire. I walked home against what I knew to be your sound judgment because I drank a little too much, against my judgment, and because it was dark and started to rain and, of all things, Doreen, baby, it’s almost funny to recall now in retrospect, but I walked along the beach and she lives near the beach and a lot of folks walk on beaches, night and day, so it makes sense, doesn’t it, that I would be there, walking when she was there also walking.

To paraphrase, who’s the central victim in all this? Here’s the underlying sentiment involved, the counterpoint: We’ve been trained by life to perform like rescuers. Signs of distress in another human being awakened something prehistoric and subconscious, something blue and atavistic, an instinct that tumbles forward at full swing the second it’s needed. It happens without our thinking about it beforehand. Or does it? Premeditation analyzed after the fact, now there’s an odd way of keeping time.

Just think about it, Doreen, have I ever acted in a
way that gave you the impression that I would ever think of—no! Heavens. I can’t even say the words. Well, yes, you make a stupendous point that emotionally I departed a long time ago. I’ll grant you that, but it’s one thing to say emotionally I left and another to have literally left, there being a magnificent difference here, Doreen, but, yes, you leaving now would hardly be construed as anything but an actual-slash-emotional exit, as in two birds with one stone. Or two birds with one skillet. Yes, you make a superb point with the visual swinging for effect, of course, for the blessed effect.

You’re not sure about the effect part?

All along the glass behind the couch the fallen water drips down while more drops gather until enough is there that gravity has a visible force on the glass and on you still sitting on the couch, watching. The drummer drags a stick across the ride cymbal, dragging lightly over and over and over. Doreen’s going out the door and has a peculiar look in her eye that is a fabulous substitute for words. Play it on the trumpet like it’s your heart you’re spilling out, which you are, and then the listeners will accent your pain with you. An improvised explanation is why they laid down their hard-earned cash.

But wait! Sweet, sweet Doreen, wait.

She’s going and the sharp light’s in your eyes. Play through the changes like there’s no one else listening but Doreen herself sitting in the half-light, as if she paid the ticket price and bought a drink just for kicks, hoping against hope to one day see your face sticky-tacked to the brick wall between Dizzy and Miles, and to hear you speak
about things you’d never talk about face to face. Just for kicks let’s say. The drummer and the bassist understand but for rhythm’s sake continue as if nothing happened, which, in their minds, probably nothing did. The guitarist moves quickly through dramatic chord changes, substituting strange for familiar.

Listen, Doreen, I know you’ve got every right, but she’s a nameless woman on a forgotten beach in a storm and, of course, I didn’t think about it properly but acted out of impulse, just think about it, and not out of planning or considering your feelings, as you say, which it is unfortunate, I’ll grant. That’s the part I’m really sorry for, the unfortunate part, but let me say here and now that I need to be forgiven and—sour word, I know—but nonetheless that’s what we have before us, sourness and forgiveness. Right? That’s what stares us down and makes us ache.

This is this, that is that. There can be no other ending, only a variation of the tension again, for effect, to tug the listeners’ ears from their still lives. They sit at round tables. There’s chatter. Clinking. Clang. They sit in true judgment of what they hear and the story beneath what they hear. The drummer and the bass and the guitar and the trumpet, all of us, are in what is termed the moment, vamping the changes, aiming for resolution, explaining ourselves, jamming. It’s our fantasia. Yet water drips down the glass window behind the couch, which you want to reach out and touch with your fingers but it’s outside, the water that is pushed by gravity, but rubbing your thumb there has therapeutic value, transmitting as message.
So much you want to laugh.

The bassist fingers his bass in a way the whole top-lit room senses has deep, creative meaning, and the drummer senses this, too, because he lets out a grin demonstrating recognition of the scene on his part. Several facial muscles are involved in this mute way of jamming. Such communication is typical and the reason we learned to play in the first place. That and to meet girls. At the risk of redundancy, take five and listen. Round and round it goes: The guitarist plays through the changes of a standard tune, substituting chords strategically, playing a Les Paul in a club where a picture of Les Paul hangs by sticky tack and where Les Paul himself once played a Les Paul guitar for listeners who wanted his picture to make it up on the brick wall, so they pulled out a camera.

*So that* story goes.

Jazz lovers sitting at the round tables nod, understanding without knowing how to put it into words how much can go by in the space of a few measures. They listen. They ask for more. Such grace. Such fire. They perceive the invisible pressure. That beautiful tug of tension. But in the span of a second they have to reconsider what the next measure will bring.

Whether they should keep following.
Whether they should anticipate this turnaround.
Whether they should wait for that surprising chord.

So take a deep breath and give them the rest. Just as Doreen, my satin doll, gave it to you.
wasn’t time

Carrie Chappell

don’t bound her there. wasn’t

a book kept her

in her place. wasn’t trance, teacup, toy turned

over. wasn’t mother’s voice. grandmother’s puns

weren’t there (except in vocation). wasn’t nearness

to the coast, wasn’t no vacation. these
women weren’t of her head, weren’t thus

married in a wasn’t. together in a ponytail.

wasn’t real anymore, not even at parties. wasn’t

new. wasn’t much a deception.

wasn’t rabid charm on her cheek,

not tears. wasn’t going to heal up like a wish,

leave like an intern. wasn’t so devout a calling,

wasn’t just babble either.
Biblical Passage

Ruth Williams
You move five pieces into the furthest square.
Your hips jut and you think,
I know how to play the game.
The board between your teeth, you think,
I’ve bit down hard, so something
will leave a mark. If not me,
then the hands of those who queen me.
It’s a kind of stuttering my body does
that needs fixing. A firefly
gives off its own kind of stink
when crushed. You’re a leaky lightbulb,
he says as my stomach flops
like the way I roll my car
over the speedbumps, careful
not to snag his nails.
I’m the swallowed movement in a film still,
10 cameras trained on me—no,
make it 7—because he says 7
is the sign of God
and I will be faithful to his memory
because it is better than mine. He can say,
You’re always holding yourself off,
but it’s just my body like a cross
at the end of a country road,
big buzzard circling me. Flame god,
feather on me, gauging me
for a take. I admit
I flinched first. Come, now,
part me from myself.
It's unfortunate,  
the grass landscape shivers  

and it's tickled, somehow,  
cottony white on the edges  

of each blade, to favor,  
to wave. You cannot touch  

yourself with your own hands,  
so you find others to do it for you.  

Oh, press, press—  
the feeling of a swatch  

of thicket, your meadow  
between someone's hands  

is a feathering cat's cradle.  
It feels as if you're alive  

but, only at the edges.
Mitch followed me through town, dragging a shovel. Scrape, scrape, stop. Scrape, scrape, stop, then one long scrape over the sidewalk. I stepped in puddles reflecting wavy neon, watched the color splash and drip down my ankles. Blisters formed on my ankles. Mitch was talking to himself about Tesla. He wore his old high school band uniform which he’d been fitted for when he was twenty pounds heavier, twenty pounds he lost and still didn’t the girl, which is what this was all about anyway. Scrape, scrape, stop.

“Will you quit dragging that thing?”
“You want to carry it?” He asked.
“No, I want you to carry it.”

I stopped by a cement bench and lit a cigarette with a match. The sulfur smell and heavy taste of smoke and sweat would remind me for years of that summer when we all had Congratulations! soaped across our back windshields. Sweat and matches and Mitch. Mitch gradu-
ated years earlier. His sister, Nancy, planned to meet me by the bridge later that night when all this was over.

He slipped past me and made an extra loud grating scrape before resting the shovel on his shoulder. “We close or what?”

“About that far.” I motioned out to where Main swung left and turned into Route 26 way down by the bridge. “Zip your bag. Everything’s about to dump out.”

“I can’t reach.” Mitch twisted his neck and flailed at his backpack with his free arm for a minute before I told him to stop, and zipped it up myself. Inside was the bottle of gin and carton of smokes Mitch promised me in return for helping him out that night.

Mitch twirled the shovel as we walked. Streetlights popped on and cast funny round shadows. Misshapen gray flowers climbed up the storefronts. Nancy was probably getting ready by now. Ready to let her parents stay up and worry about Mitch while she and I rode out to the drive-in off highway seven.

Nancy didn’t talk about home unless she was the right kind of drunk. The quiet that hung in her house on most nights. Her parents sipping drinks in the living room, watching the phone, watching each other watching TV until reruns gave way to late-night infomercials for carpet cleaner and salvation.

Skin on the back of my heels rubbed raw against my sneakers. People crossed the street when they saw us coming. Mitch and I passed the GasLand where they didn’t sell gas or put price tags on anything, and I remembered days when we all went in there for cough syrup and ciga-
rettes and stole tall boys from the cooler. We passed the abandoned Hollywood Video with the weird light that slipped through the cracks of the boarded up windows. Then Donny’s Bar where the poker machines paid out and you could find a card game in the back room or a hand job upstairs. The town weighed on me, even then, but I tried to enjoy the warm wind and the last of the summer nights that had me leading Mitch on missions through town, in return for a bottle to drink with his sister.

At the last intersection in town, I stopped and grabbed Mitch by the arm before he walked into traffic. Mitch looked straight ahead and high, as if there was something on top of a far off house he couldn’t understand, a crumbling chimney or fancy weathervane.

“Nikola Tesla invented electricity, you know,” he said. “But do you know about the cover up? Would you like to see my adaptation sometime about the story of his life?”

“You showed me already.” I tossed my cigarette in the gutter and waited for the light to change.

Mitch’s thing about Tesla was also about the girl. As far as Mitch cared to know, Kelly Green was his one true love. They were in band together from fourth grade through high school, and he was doomed from the start. It was one of those ones where he had this crush pent up in him for years and never did anything with it for so long that when he did, it came out different.

One night a while back, at one of those God-awful rich-kid parties they threw when we were all still close,
Kelly professed her love for the rock band Tesla after she’d met the bass player at a gig in the city and booked them to play at her graduation party. Somehow, Mitch took it to mean she loved Nicola Tesla, inventor. So Mitch became a Tesla historian. Poor guy actually built a Tesla coil in his back yard just to impress her. Months Mitch spent doing research then constructed a seven-foot-tall electric tower behind his house. It’s still there, all rusted and bent.

It’s hard to say for sure exactly how Mitch and Kelly’s relationship got to the coil-building stage. Depending who you talk to, you’ll get varying stories. Nancy told me sometimes Kelly would call Mitch all drunk and they’d meet down at the river and she’d spill her guts while they got stoned and undressed, halfway to running off somewhere, before daybreak and better sense stepped in. Mitch says they vacationed together one spring, two weeks in Orlando. Some say Kelly never gave Mitch reason to think there was anything between them at all, never touched him, never led him on. Rejected him cold and Mitch couldn’t deal with it. He deteriorated until he was nothing but skin and bones and frayed polyester, leaning on that shovel like a cane under a traffic light.

After the coil went up, things got worse. Kelly knew Mitch had it bad for her. My gut says she fooled around with him a few times, out of pity or spite or just for fun. Then Mitch drowned her with gifts and bar-napkin poems, notebooks full of songs written only for her. And Mitch’s obsession with Tesla grew. Thoughts twisted around in his head to the point he decided what he had to do to prove his love for Kelly, was dig up the body of Nikola Tesla and
bring her the remains. Tesla’s body, he swore, was buried under the 17th fairway at the country club where I caddied. Which made me the perfect kid to guide Mitch that night.

“You know Tesla is buried in New York, right?” I said as we continued down Main Street.

“That’s what they want us to think,” said Mitch. “The government faked Tesla’s death, and put him to work for the military. Then Tesla patented a device that could draw electricity directly from the atmosphere. Directly. From. The. Atmosphere. Roy. Of course the oil companies had him killed. Destroyed his papers and buried him here in New Jersey so their puppet, Edison, could reap the rewards.”

How I could have refuted such a theory? I didn’t have the heart, and I needed the booze. Nancy and I spent hardly a sober minute together, which worried me some, but fuck if booze didn’t help me forget how clumsy I was, in the dirt under the trees, bottle between us, craning our necks at the movie screen as killers terrified towns and aliens snatched bodies. After a few drinks Nancy always said the same thing, “You know this is the last drive-in in the whole state?”

Main turned into Route 26. We slid down the embankment and under the bridge, climbed over broken concrete. Mitch knelt by a sleeping bag, and rummaged through a milk crate full of garbage day treasures. He pulled out a plastic gold star that shone through the dark. “You think she loves me, right?” he asked, inspecting the star.
“Who knows anything about love anyway?” I said.

“Hurry up.”

“Roy,” he said. “What kind of sheriff are you?”

“I don’t know, Mitch.”

“One without a badge is what kind.” He threw the plastic star at my feet. I picked it up and dropped it in my pocket.

“You taking your meds?” I asked.

“Fuck no. My dick is worthless on that shit.”

“Can I buy ‘em off you?”

“Maybe. Put on that badge. Could be I need a good lawman. Out there with me to keep watch.”

“Watch for what? Indians?”

Mitch scraped the shovel over a mess of graffiti and knocked loose a chunk of concrete into the ravine.

“Listen. This uniform. It's full of bad energy. I need to incinerate it at Tesla’s grave. For Kelly. A cleansing of sorts. I’ve researched this thoroughly, and it might be a two-man operation.”

“Come on,” I said. “I'll take you to the fence.”

We came out from under the bridge, and walked towards the access road that lead to the path through the woods and the hole in the fence.

“After Kelly sees how good I'm doing, plus my dedication to Tesla, she’ll come around. Don’t you think?”

“Hope so.”

“But do you think she will?”

I lit a cigarette and swatted a mosquito. “Yeah, Mitch. I think she will.”

We headed down the access road and the air
smelled like hairspray and batteries. Fireflies rose everywhere, a swarm so thick it seemed we were standing still while the forest rushed past us. Like a corridor through time and space. We came to the trail that lead through the woods, and followed it down to the edge of the creek. I was listening to the bottle clink around in Mitch’s bag when I stepped in a wet spot and stumbled. My blister popped and my shoe filled with stagnant water.

“Shit, I’m bleeding.”

“It’s just a blister. Pour some gin on it, cowboy.”

“No way.”

“Just a little. Let me see.”

I held my foot up behind me. I teetered forward like a torn paper doll with my palm in the mud, and Mitch holding my ankle, pouring gin on my heel.

“Fuck. It burns,” I said.

“That means it’s working.”

“Quit wasting it.”

“Are you gonna get my sister drunk?”

“Your sister gets herself drunk just fine.”

He let me go. I slid on my shoe and stepped over a fallen tree. I pulled back some branches. “Here it is,” I said. As promised Mitch gave me the carton of cigs and the bottle. He ducked through the hole in the fence. “Roy, you’ve got to come with me.”

“No fucking way.”

“Just till I find the spot. Once I start digging, you can take off.”

I stuffed the carton into the back of my shorts, straightened up my posture. The bottle I held by the neck.
“Just till you start digging,” I said.
Mitch unbuttoned his jacket, and we passed the bottle a couple times as we walked down the fairway. The course was burnt bald and yellow. Lightning might send the whole town up in flames before I got the chance to see Nancy that night.

Some nights, Nancy told me, she used to stay up and wait in her room, listening for Mitch to get home. Nights he came back with the cops after he was found asleep inside the elementary school where he and Kelly met. The night he burned a heart into the fifty-yard line of the high school football field where he marched behind her at halftime. The incident in the garden outside the Greens’ place. The restraining order. The restraining order Kelly herself didn’t follow, which made no sense at all. With Mitch’s parents being who they were, they kept him out of real trouble. His dad greased the right palms and paid a few fines. Mitch saw a series of shrinks who prescribed pills that either didn’t work or he wouldn’t take. One doctor strapped him down and shocked him twice a day for six months.

Between the bunkers on hole 17, Mitch and I stopped and listened to the frogs and crickets telling us we should know better. Dark settled in across the sky and glowed pink underneath. Mitch stripped naked and balled up his clothes. His silhouette arched and stretched. I turned away and lit a fresh cigarette of the butt of an old one, asked if he was good to go now that he found the spot.

“Stay until I find the body,” he said.
“I’ll stay till I’ve finished this cigarette.”
“You have at least given me this much help, Roy. Take comfort in that.” Mitch stood stark nude, cigarette wobbling in his mouth. He paced off the distance between the bunkers, found the exact middle, and stuck the shovel in the ground. My eyes adjusted and I sized Mitch up in the shadows while he awkwardly put his boots on and pulled a trash bag from his backpack. “For the remains,” he said, and grabbed the shovel.

“Maybe you should let Nikola rest in peace.”
“Boy, woo. Shit. That’s impossible.” Mitch propped the shovel against his stomach and spun his arms, loosening up. “I need to dig him up then burn my uniform here, in his heretofore final resting place. Don’t you get it? Tesla was murdered and dumped. Right here. This is the only way.”

I grabbed up Mitch’s uniform and handed it to him.

“You got shorts or something?”
“Don’t worry about me, Cowboy.”
“I won’t,” I said and headed back the way we came.
Nancy said her mom used to cry. She said, “Like rain, Roy, rain after a drought, and her face is creased now from it. I don’t know what to do. I can’t be in that living room. They talk all this bullshit about country club politics, and it’s the worst shit you can imagine.” Nancy’d go on like that then lose her breath or run out of energy and it’d get quiet and we’d drink and start talking about movies and the drive-in and where we would go if they ever tore it down.
I was halfway to the bridge when I saw flames spit up and tower above the fairway. A fireball big as the moon. The pro shop alarm went off just as I got into the woods and was silenced by the time I made it back up the access road. I climbed up the overpass and sat on the guardrail. From the crest of the bridge, the valley looked fake.

Out of my pocket I pulled the plastic badge and rolled it over between my fingers, while I watched traffic. Headlights colored me blinding white. Exhaust stung my eyes and brake lights pumped red around the bend. Most folks, I figured, were just passing through and wouldn’t be back. But Nancy would be there soon. Nancy would wear those red shorts I liked and the tee-shirt that felt like a pillowcase. And she’d tell me about the last drive-in in New Jersey before we shared another bottle and that same soft spot, in the dirt under the trees.
The true theater of a girl is to glitter with excitement, a shimmering display of technical skill: the point is the performance. You don’t want to be restless and bored. You want to be a success. So you don’t suggest the evening you’d like to see; you don’t tell him the truth.

You’re ready when your date calls, your excitement bursts operatic (your first number is concluded). To spare embarrassment, you stand at the window until he collects you. You will be good, you will be satisfactory even if he’s grumpy. You prevent a scowl and grumble if you know the right system: your date goes first, and you follow.

You sit closer—you’d love to shrug off your program, but how? This unreasonable tradition that “a lady should not be unkindly” is your fate. You won’t endanger that stiffening across a table, the veiling cage. If there’s a question that will disturb him, you quickly check it, shed it grace-
fully. Your mission: to thread your way back by making yourself as small as possible (the aisle is narrow).

You deliver a particularly good line; you’re the only one who appreciates it.

You take your cue when he turns—selection is concluded—pauses like paragraph breaks, not the ends of chapters. He rises, rigid. A certain amount of foot-stamping and an outcry is expected; you finish, downbeat, quietly, sadly, forgivable. It is a performance.

You reflect upon your heart—tempting to smudge, spoil, break the exhibition. You will make the job easier. You do a little research for a preview of what is to come; you know the game. It’s wise to appear unknowing so he can instruct you, to turn to him and say, “What’s a sport?,” to cuddle, nuzzle, wrestle—you know where the action is. He is breathing heavily past your ear, in your lap, your territory, beyond the boundaries, the wrong time, a serious moment to taunt the player.

If anyone had wanted to take it, he could have (he should). See: you, a full-blast radio, a country road, deserted, unforgivable.

A sociable boy, the one magnificent reason to force the person you have been since you were bib-age to face your fear: a meal with a napkin on your lap.

(You tuck it under your chin, a spaghetti feast at home)

You’re given a napkin ring, you sit up straight, the chair pulled in.

(You look bad, the food-dribble on your clothes, elbows on the table)

You fidget, a petite flit of patterns on the tablecloth with a fork, fiddling with the silver, a finger round the rim of your glass. You’re not sure which fork to use—that old trope—you have to take your chance with your absent date in the loo. Pick both.
You don’t reach anyone’s hopes; you don’t pick up at all. You won’t avoid unaesthetic smudges. The long trial, the spoon in the glass you forget, jab your eye, soup slurped, teeth clicked with spoons. Only puppies are cute smack-ing their food.

Some people do. Some people don’t answer a question. Your mouth is full, unmanageable: a look at a toddler, not a teen. Nerves, your nerves. You need to corral stray breaths on the blade of a knife, removing the uneatable from your mouth; prune the pits, bones, slivers of doubt with your fingers. You can’t retire behind your napkin for any of these maneuvers.

Choking? Leave the table till a platter doesn’t splatter the fraction of elegance you’ve shown him, enticing trust in your fitness by his side. Convince him, soup to spoon, you fit the bill—a girl who can transcend her lack of opportu-nities and model the decorum he wants.

So you eat steamed clams, pop the whole thing in your mouth, fake-swallow, vomiting in your napkin when he looks the other way. You aren’t as skillful as you suppose. You don’t get flustered, a slippery peasant, when corn on the cob is on the table. You glide it between your teeth, scraped cobs at your fingertips. Preferring mozzarella sticks to kale kills your cred.

It won’t happen; you’ve narrowed his vision to your soured cream. You reach, a gesture as sloppy as half-price nachos at Applebee’s.
After Your Suicide, I Write This Poem

Sarah Barber
It wants you to stop although it knows
you’ve already chosen the words
*gun barrel* and *throat*. It does not like

how they come together, cold, as you drop
the phone and walk outside and sirens
five miles away flash on. It wants you to wait
eleven more minutes for the sun to rise
before you decide to be done, forever,
with the sky. See how this poem is already

emptying the cup of the night and breaking
the egg of the moon. See how already
it is inflating the slow balloon of morning

with violet and plum and rose gold. See,
see how it sends up into the milk-pale blue
the word *beautiful*, as if it could do

me any good, as if it could make you pause
for the ambulance tires to squeak out
the stark bright simple words *do you need*

*help? do you need a doctor?* and you do
but you do it—and already in this poem
the sun swells up but you’re gone.
It’s not not what they say it is. But it is also like walking—idle and over-full of wine and bread and octopus dressed with vinaigrette—through the rebuilt grounds of an old estate to which we’ve been driven by a dark-skinned man getting ripped off by Uber. It’s true I raised a solidary fist for the somos táxi! flags that all day marked the union’s protest outside the international hotel where we have a suite, but Uber was built to be cheap on the next-to-last day of three weeks in historic ports and beach resorts and capitals where all the service people speak our language and we have seen all we want to see of churches, museums, rivers, the sea. Later on our big white bed we’ll watch American TV. For now here we are again among roses and sculptures and peacocks and hedges. We’re walking the wooded path to see the one big twisted tree that might be as old as the slave trade that built this place. It’s true we took a minute to recognize this last night at dinner before we took a second glass of port. We should take a picture of this tree but we’re bored and my feet hurt just a little and away across the field the art foundation that manages this place for public use has built a little house. The curtains where its doors should be billow mildly in the wind and yes we can go in—it’s there for us to walk into like the reclining chairs inside which are there for us to sit in—and inside it’s beautiful and cool and when the curtains move the light streams in. It was built, like everything, for us. It’s like this.
Chef Liz bursts through the kitchen like the blast of hot air that slams into me whenever I open the doors to our thermonuclear convection oven. Her cyclonic flight past stovetops, ovens, and grills leaves us all breathless as we await the scolding we will undoubtedly receive.

“This sauce is too thin – this sauce is too thick! This omelet is too brown – this omelet is raw! Your apron is filthy – where is your apron?”

I may as well be working for my mother.

After stumbling out of college with a nasty drug and alcohol habit, I gleefully found the kitchen a hotbed of miscreants and adrenaline junkies just like myself. It is clear to me now that spending years and pots full of money on psychotherapy for my many issues was unnecessary. After 26 years in the industry, every dysfunctional family problem I’ve ever needed to address has been unveiled to me amidst the forbidding stainless steel and the smoldering saucepans. Looking to recreate the parent-child relation-
ship? Secure a position as a sous chef. Probing the origins and consequences of a fucked up family? Go be a line cook. Hoping to understand the long-term effects of childhood mental abuse? Pastry chef is the position for you.

I’ve done them all, and while I am no closer to inner peace, I have gained some valuable insights with the added perks of being able to cook a perfect roast chicken and bake a killer rhubarb pie. I have never worked in any other profession so I may be tilting at windmills when I say no other career affords such Freudian benefits.

I have recreated the parent-child relationship in every kitchen I’ve worked. Chef Imelda, a Grand Dame of haute cuisine in 80’s Seattle, galvanized her humble minions with an exquisite combination of a dedicated animus for praise of any kind and a fondness for setting culinary standards that Martha Stewart herself would need 3 clones to help her accomplish. Chef “Moldy” as we affectionately called her, employed mental torture tactics that would make the boys at Gitmo jealous. Sleep deprivation, starvation, physical exploitation and verbal abuse were de rigueur during our hellish 14 hour days. In the singular event that she found something acceptable, a pasty-faced cook’s pallor would suddenly brighten, and hope would course through those veins like chemo in a stage IV cancer patient. “Maybe Chef will be proud of me now!”

And yet, as if to spotlight the bipolar nature of the kitchen, an inexplicable phenomenon occurred every day, as it does in many kitchens everywhere. The persecuted prep cooks would seize the rare opportunity offered by the
chef to exercise what little creative ideas still burned in their warped psyches and prepare what is known as “family meal.” Imagine a kind of “Survivor” meets “Top Chef” scenario wherein the overworked and weary cook has to put together a meal for all the staff AND the chef that will please the palates of the foodie crème de la crème and prove that the cook has the skills to remain employed. Staff gathers around a table before service begins and frantically devours pasta or three-day-old reheated roast chicken like some twisted version of the Von Trapp family. And at the head of the table, “Moldy” would reign a little less tyrannically than in the trenches. With her brood strewn about her, one could almost see her soft underbelly.

Many commercial kitchens operate under a “we’re pretty-sure-this-isn’t-legal” special ops approach. I was called to the cook’s life, in part, because the kitchen mirrors my childhood experience of being “educated” in the Catholic school system circa 1962. Sister Loretta Anne ran her 8th-grade classroom like Mussolini in a habit and if you put her behind a six-burner range with Gordon Ramsey today, it would be his Rocky Mountain oysters sizzling in her pan.

Somehow, I naively thought working for women in the kitchen would be like having an extended Easy Bake Oven party with The Carpenters’ “Bless the Beasts and the Children” wafting from the boom box. I have not met the Julia Child of the professional kitchen. But I’ve worked with many women who were clearly the experimental hybrid clones of Ina Garten and the monster from Cloverfield.
The female chef can inspire and motivate her “kids” with a firm but empathetic style. She can celebrate successes and quietly correct mistakes – like Shirley Partridge did with Keith and Laurie.

Male chefs are infinitely easier to please. As a young female in an all-male kitchen, I was pampered in ways I feared I’d be expected to repay in a dark, musty basement on the baker’s butcher block table during the lull between lunch and dinner. But most of the men I worked under were kindly father figures rather than lechers. Their sexual shenanigans were reserved for the wait staff.

I have probably always been drawn to female-run kitchens because my primary relationship with my father was not my main problem. But the other one, well, I’m still working that one out.

After a few decades in this field, I have achieved some level of seniority. I now have a “crew” I can shape and mold to be future culinary superstars. I now blow through my kitchen, invoking Chef Liz, while I gesture theatrically at the sauce splattered walls and greasy floors. I am not ashamed to admit that I frequently slip into “no-wire-hangers” mode and have to fight the urge to use my spatula on the backs of heads like Sister Loretta Ann used her yardstick. It might be my greatest contribution to trigger the transference process free of charge right there in the workplace.

But transference in psychotherapy, when properly managed, should bring resolution and closure. In the kitchen, closure comes at 2:00 am when the last ungrateful
customer leaves, and you finally get to have that complimentary drink at the bar with the people you now think of as family.
I’m not proud I bullied Elsa. But I’ve changed. The woods still stand outside town the same way—they still catch the wobbly yellow light of late day in their limbs. The change I’m speaking of happened in late summer. The trees still wore their full green bluster, but the corn rows had begun to stagger high up. School had started. We were cursing, miserable, on account the air conditioners hadn’t kicked on. Weekends went by in a long swelter. Bobby, my boyfriend, had made a birch-bark canoe. Perhaps that’s why I teased Elsa—because of Bobby. *Amber, leave Elsa alone,* Bobby said. They were friends, Elsa and Bobby. But not boyfriend-girlfriend like Bobby and me.

Bobby had just turned sixteen—he was one year older than both of us. He lived all summer like an Indian in the woods. He had a house—his dad’s—but spent all his time getting sun-browned. And there was Elsa going trekking with her archaeologist tools, digging for Indian things. I hated that Bobby was supposed to be at my window, knock-
ing, but instead was in the pines humming and whittling.

Bobby knew I wanted my boys strong, to wear cut-off jeans and have muscled legs. Bobby was strong—but his legs were skinny. And he wore nice clothes, then dirtied them. When he found that mound of dirt—an earthwork, he called it—in the woods, he went straight to Elsa. I don’t know if he went to her window. But as for the earthwork, it was all he could talk of! At the café Bobby had mad ecstasy in his eyes. He didn’t touch my hand, which I set down near his Coke, just waiting. He believed the earthwork was a genuine Sioux burial ground, and that Elsa could dig it—responsibly, of course, after contacting the appropriate authorities. In the café Bobby drank Coke and took bites from a crabapple he just plucked. His pants dripped from wading in the stream. (Back home he had a manual on frontier life, Indian treasures, and it taught him to chart all the streams.) Then he did squeeze my hand, and said, “It’s a real find, Amber!”

The day it happened, not long after the earthwork had been discovered, my old boyfriend, Jordi, went duck hunting with his dad and Stu, their neighbor. Bobby said it wasn’t fair to hunt—it was too early in the season, and some ducks were molting, couldn’t take flight.

Bobby was in the woods that day.

Elsa wasn’t eating.
Hadn’t been eating.
For weeks, apparently.

Elsa, with her melancholy brown eyes and pug nose. Now I can’t stand to look at Jordi anymore.

On account of the accident: was it I who sent Elsa to the woods? Tearful, I went too. We heard the shot and ran, just knowing. Bobby had been picking Indian corn. He stood in Stu’s crosshairs. Elsa got there first. She just knew.

I remember: Jordi looked at me jealously when leaving the café.

The Dakota Sioux made beautiful vases, I’ve since learned. The Sioux buried their things with them when they died. They buried vases, delicately shaped with pigments depicting births, deaths, lives. The earthworks could contain anything—skulls, bones, vases, cooking utensils. But really they were just shallow graves, shallow graves sitting too close to the corn.

I touched Elsa’s face. It was an accident, I told her. She didn’t stir. She lay where she had passed out, after seeing Bobby like that (head cracked, bloodied) and Stu run off for the police. Elsa didn’t believe me. She didn’t come to, acting like it was murder. Her pug nose, her head in the
dirt. An unexplained softness came over me. I thought, on account of starvation and Bobby, she was dead. I touched her cheek, not thinking. But when I touched her cheek, her eyes opened. A wind brushed my face. Sun split the trees and wind cooled us.

Bobby's canoe waited, still tied to a tree. The clear stream gurgled. The green oaks kissed the convex lid of blue sky.
Christmas Bird Count
Sarah Bates
Bird enthusiasts might call it inhaling the spore, the way I study the wound and read about nature. The nest of goldfinches reminded me of the nervous system of a pigeon, the portrait of the boy holding a shell to his ear asking about the cries of killdeers. I’m sure there are other moons, more beaches. A color to describe the part of the frog's hind leg where the snake finds its way in. This year the head of the James settling at my feet, you sitting on top of the rocks counting 78 different species, two eastern towhees foraging on a small patch of white. I know I was wrong to say whether it was a hemlock or a sycamore, I know I was wrong to believe that the rains would come again and take the old tree with it. In many birds, the beak is the only organ capable of being grasped. In order to understand the life of any animal, you try to get answers. Call it transparent walls, a stranger passing in the crosswalk, call this the feeling of Antarctica breaking off and not being able to name it.
In The Moss Forest

David Bernier
There is a moss forest that my computer says is two hours forty-five minutes away

Moss sprawls wet and we are allowed to sprawl on top of it

Retired kindergarten teachers work the visitor centers and tell you when they’re proud of what good effort you showed today

My backpack holds our lunch because today it’s my turn

Meet me by the fountain and we’ll take all the right trains

Admission is free if you are over sixty or in love

Listen to the moss and the silence it builds

You showed me how to do that

Show me all the things I never thought to listen to

You have moss in your hair

Moss has your hair wrapped around its body

I have your body wrapped around my body

Today we are not paying
I'll hug you hard when our tectonic plates come back together. Something green will germinate when the skin around our ribs is touching. It always has. Green growth blooms all around. We collect jars full of it, windowsills full of jars full of moss and sprouts and more of what is living. I pull off my socks and sing: *Our hooves come off, see.* You clip your nails and sing: *We trim the rot so the roots are strong.* The growth between us will be juniper. We will hire a surgeon to make our chests spongelike, so the juniperroots will burrow deep. One day we’ll cut the roots and plant the plant in full sun and you’ll go north and I’ll go east, but until then, we will hold each other and be held, each of us a muscly vessel fucked into existence by previous muscly vessels, life binding and bound by life.
Night into the division. From headlights, the rough-hewn sign reads Woods & Lakes. Look at that, my mother says. The symbol’s reversed. It was, I looked: the ampersand. And as a symbol hard to tell—reversed could mean matter of course or worse. My father navigates through the blackout landscape. The paved road gives way to dirt and clay. And the first streetlight for miles. We stare from the windows into trees.

A perfect cube: four equal walls, seamed in. My brother already gone from his twin bed. I blink into spackle, then roam to small mercy: a window seat. Peer out to the tamped drive, its tire marks in mud. View of the cloaked road beyond, view of the carport, its car-width steel frame rusting.
In gunmetal light, I wait by the stop sign at the end of Sellers. I shiver against the early morning and stare down the road in wish for the bus. Across the highway a field stretches endless. Then a dandelion figure overcomes it: she walks hard and jean-blue, reaches asphalt, pulls out a cigarette.

The bus thrums like it’s waiting to prey. Red over ochre and back again, lashing and fire-bright. The girl goes missing behind its cheetah frame. Through the fog, heads bob behind glass. I take a breath and trudge to join them.

Two men twang Maria over the radio as we curve around Highway 25 and the sun begins to rise. The Florida prairie is replaced by sand oak and scrub. I take in this new stretch of highway leaving, and remember before, states away by the ocean, how open life felt. Citrine light falls into woods. Beyond the dividing line lie thickets; up ahead to the left stands a clearing.

And in the valley, wait. And in the open field. A trailer dots the clearing, sags in the middle, wears years-old coats of dirt and mold. Dead oaks shrug to its roof. Then I forget my breath: a death, body gone silent about all but itself, swinging among the branches. Inside me the low drone of some plummeting organ suspends, sustains, inside me
Retrograde, as the bus swings the corner, I realize the stitching. A mannequin figure hoisted dead as a warning, warning this is belief here. We cross through shadowed forest into exploding sky. Flatland flanks the narrow road all the way to the horizon.

2 /

It’s strange weather, years later. For eight months north Georgia has burned: the imminent burn now spreads some forty thousand miles. Unprecedented wildfire. Winds shift; smoke chars into the state’s bottom half. Smells of winter and singe drift over the landscape. Winds shift; sharp air cuts through. This phenomenon, they project, will continue. A kind of weather: recognizable as thirst.

A school group parades the sidewalk. I drive toward work and absorb their weather: several classes, a hundred mouths speaking. Their teachers: all women; the children: seven or eight years of gradation. Their weather: electric, open. To hold that currency for a moment, to alight on...
I'm seven. The weather is near-coastal Carolina and diesel. From the gas station's swinging door comes the sharp char of cheese singeing the indoor grill. From the backseat window: my mother's heels disappear into the unlit building. Then the tap of fingernails against glass, and a man making the roll-down gesture. I roll the window down.

No, alight on the actual weather. The open electric outside of some moment.

3/

Six weeks pass. In gunmetal light, I wait at the end of Sellers for the familiar lunge of the bus. Thirty days of rounding toward the effigy, in twilight and in afternoon. My strategy becomes to only look sometimes. I am twelve, thirteen. I do not think about what this or that does or does not mean.

Six weeks. Four o’clock heat away from school, pushing along the highway against glare. Sun splinters the bus’s interior, cuts up the view, the backs of heads. Dandelion gets to her feet at the front of the bus; country music sings of drinking. Sit down, Misty, Mrs. Jessup the bus driver bellows. Misty doesn’t sit down. The country music song
tells of lost love. The glass window of the bus’s back door shines bright orange then white. Up near the windshield, Misty plants onto the rubber aisle. She pulls a hand from her pocket, flicks open a pocketknife, and thrusts the knife-edge toward Mrs. Jessup and stops mid-air.

Half of us sit into the second hour, hot and bored. The others have been dropped off or picked up. We are more than midway through the route and pulled over onto the Florida prairie shoulder. The air wafts and stews. The bus doors stay closed. Misty sits in the front seat with her arms crossed. Some birds wing off from the road toward shade. The movie-bright day: lashed blue and red by bruising lights. The cruiser engine quiets; the police sigh forward toward the bus, holsters on.

The dandelion starts at the edge of the field in silver light and crosses slowly. From there she leaves her brothers behind: three of them, all deaf and shoeless. Those bits are verbatim. And dandelion is their sun. She crosses, and morning light goes gray then lavender. Misty is back with a warning, in jean shorts she’d cut herself. Closer now toward the revolving light, slowly, like it isn’t anything, like it hadn’t been anything at all.
In Ocklawaha, people live in yellow trailers, tan trailers, trailers painted cornflower blue. People live in trailers the size of minivans; families crowd around hand-wired television sets. People live in campers, permanently, in patches at the ends of dirt trails, in enclaves of moss and blackberry. People live in vans, in cars, and they bear Confederate flags from window to neighboring window. Clotheslines air stained whites. Dogs run collarless through the dust. There is no local newspaper, no trash pickup, no carpool or mall or bookstore or social club. There is the dark and the dark beyond. There is the rumble and fade of a lone engine. There is the blink and hesitation of the peripheral deer. Most nights my father comes home looking worse off than when he left. There is the dinner preparations, the radio on. There is the sitting down and the saying grace of it. And the washing up and the going to bed. There’s a song on the radio we like to sing along to. It’s called “If I Had a Million Dollars.”

Rick’s Flicks is tobacco-colored even on bleached days. VHS boxes line secondhand bookshelves. The store smells of steam and dirty carpet; F. and I skim the titles while Rick readies to flirt at our mother. He steps slow through a particle matter sunspot, his thumbs through his belt rings, his ponytail swinging right and left.
We step into full sun and concrete. Matte cars broil in the Winn Dixie lot. We cross over and pause in the cool air beyond the sliding doors. We go slowly and carefully while my mother counts; we grow impatient before checkout. We step back into the light. Smoke lists along the daylight sky. A smell of melt and char. The wrong season for it—no crisp inhale breaking through. 52nd into view, the familiar ess-curve of the bass-shaped mailbox. Hotter and thicker onward. The quiet neighbor not in view. Who had stood with a rifle against the doorframe, Halloween, floodlights shining over red white and blue. Lead mark for a mouth. Smoke collapses into fire: the neighbor’s house flashing amber into the tree-line. We idle across the street, watch the volunteer station’s insignia blink through smoke. The house, it’s rumored later, returned a sizeable compensation.

5/

Night into the division. I’m twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one. This new town’s sign hard to read by headlights. The name forgettable but odd. The conjoined brick facades, the drained swimming pool and its barbed wire fence. Smoke in the Georgian air smothered by rain.
November turns clammy and strange. Gatlinburg engulfed by fire. Arsonists in the trees. I step from the car into this old new world and free fall but no, I’m opening the door. Certain frames remain, even into the ninth hour. We left Ocklawaha, it seemed, on a dividing line: so overexposed it had to be noon. That knife-edge glinting in sun. The parched expanse of scrub; the lynching elm; the deaf brothers; the primal images foretelling later hours…

No, alight on the actual weather. The open electric outside of some moment.

I’m seven. The weather is coastal Carolina. The ocean is April and brine. Sandbars crest the horizon; there is no one here, hardly anyone at all. Sun whorls and threads the clouds. A Vespers sunset knifes the west edge, and reminds me of nothing but itself.
Your silence is unrestrained,  
    wild even, in your slow blink,  
    unless I bring up God.
Who will tell about the ravine rising against you as a baby,  
    the flash flood almost tearing your velvet skin
from you?
    Your older sister ran to save your new life.
You didn’t know you almost died;  
She had to tell you about it later,  
    like a myth.
Tell me before it’s too late,  
and you can’t begin every sentence with  
    We used to.
Please tell me the one story, father,  
the only one I know of your childhood.
Tell me of your old man’s dream, too,  
how you sad old age was falling asleep a young man  
and waking up an old one.
Canella Scanzelli was born when the humming began. In the dead of night, in the midst of summer, she was ripped screaming from her mother’s womb and the trees mourned her. “How—?” Her mother’s voice was hardly there, but her father answered by pressing their baby into her arms. Mrs. Scanzelli held the small thing and felt the hospital walls echo with her cries. “She’s a loud one,” she said, sleepy smile full of pride. “They’ll hear her clear across town.”

Joseph Leibowitz was thirteen when the humming began. The night he almost hit a home run in the third game of the season on his select baseball team, he lay in bed staring at the ceiling. It was 11:58 p.m., well past bedtime even in the heart of summer, when all he had to look forward to was baseball practice, but still he was awake, reimagining his hit falling like a stone into the leather-gloved hand of Sammy Pratt over and over again. “A pop-up is as good as a hit,” his father had told him on the
car ride home. “Some of the boys didn’t even clip the ball.” Joseph had stayed quiet, tuning out his father’s consolations and already counting how many swings he’d taken that season against how many bases he’d touched.

He lay in bed that night, his cat Babe curled behind the crook of his knees, his father asleep on the other side of the house, and felt the soft vibrations of something strange in his sternum. Babe sat up, ears perked, tail fluffed, and stood silently. He wandered to the edge of Joseph’s bed pressed to the window, and chirped through the glass. Joseph sat up, too, and gently pounded his closed fist against his chest, thinking maybe the soda he’d had with dinner just wasn’t sitting quietly. But the vibrations kept up, and now there was a low, audible hum filtering through the wall. He peered through the window with Babe, towards the woods that carved a half moon around the north edge of town.

Deep in the heart of the aspen grove, something stirred. It reached invisible, sonorous arms out into the town. The skin on Joseph’s arm tingled with goosebumps and he lay back down and pulled his blankets up to his chin. Babe sat facing the window, chirping occasionally, as if trying to talk back to whatever was humming. Joseph’s bedroom door opened, he saw in the reflection on the glass, and his father stood there, one hand pushing his hair back off his forehead like he did when he was nervous—before Joseph stepped up to bat, before he left Joseph with the babysitter barely two years older. Joseph caught a soft breath leaving his father, almost audible over the new background sound. He lay still, waiting to see what his father
did, if he had an explanation. “What in the…?”

The door closed silently, but a minute later, his father’s agitated voice on the phone drifted down the hall. Joseph caught bits of the words and half questions: Construction? Quake? Swarm of—? Nothing definitive, nothing explainable, and soon even the queries stopped when Mr. Leibowitz ran out of people to call. Joseph heard a discordant chorus of dogs barking down the street and he turned his back on the window, afraid to see something that shouldn’t be there, something to accompany that single, strange note.

One year and four months before the humming, the town council had voted in a new construction project to boost commerce in the town, thereby boosting the housing market and the wealth of every landowning citizen. The project was a slam dunk, approved by anyone who owned property in town and only opposed by a small group of self-proclaimed environmentalists whose picketing campaign had collapsed after two weeks of being ignored. A slab of the grove was marked out for development, a full third of the rhizome that curled out from some central organism. When they broke ground, eight months and twenty-eight days before the humming began, no one heard the grove scream.

Veronica Delgado was seven when the humming began. Sound asleep in her bed, she didn’t notice until morning when her mothers woke her with their voices down the hall, hushed too intentionally. “Should we cancel
her tutoring?” Mama asked. “Maybe we should all just stay inside today.”

“We don’t want her thinking something’s wrong,” Mom answered, voice tense and low.

“Something is wrong. What if it’s a bomb? Or a swarm of locusts?”

“We’re not in Biblical Egypt.”

It was then Veronica noticed the low hum underscoring this hushed conversation, a third voice weighing in. She sat up, tiny fists rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Today was Sunday, which meant she had her French lesson, church in the evening, and family dinner with her grandparents. No weird noise could keep her from her schedule.

Her parents startled when she opened the door and looked up at them from beneath the straight cut of her bangs. “What’s for breakfast?” she asked.

On the way to her French lesson at noon, the road curved past the entrance to the main hiking path through the woods. A crowd had gathered at the mouth and Veronica, straining against her seatbelt, peered at them as they passed. There was a cluster of police cars, noses pointed toward the tree line. “Mom, are they looking for the noise?” she asked.

“Yeah, they think someone might be doing some illegal construction in the woods,” Ms. Delgado said, driving slower so she could glance over as well.

“Why?”

“Because it sounds like construction equipment.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Her mom looked at Veronica in the rearview mirror,
the crow’s feet deepening around her eyes. “Then what does it sound like, baby?”

They were at a stoplight, a quarter-mile past the onlookers, but the humming had never changed in volume. It remained a constant buzz, a pressure on Veronica’s ear drums, the same pressure she felt when she rolled her window down on the highway or pushed all the air out of her lungs so she could sink deeper underwater. “It sounds like a song,” she said. “The start of a song.”

The sounds of Canella’s birth were the loudest sounds she ever made. In second grade, she was sent to the hall more days than not for ignoring the teacher, staring obstinately at her desk, tracing the smooth whirls of wood, as if it was easier for her to communicate with them than the people shouting her name. “She’s got an attitude problem,” Mrs. Fairfield told her parents at her first parent-teacher conference. “She refuses to answer questions, she fidgets even when she’s told not to, and when she’s told to write an answer on the board, she doesn’t even get up from her desk.”

Her parents stepped out of the classroom, where Canella was sitting at what she then considered her desk—the one in the hall. “Let’s go home, cinnamon stick,” her mother crooned, taking the little girl’s hand and leading her out of the school.

They enrolled her in classes to help with her people skills. Her teachers taught her to make eye contact, to speak up when spoken to, to keep her fingers still on her desk. “Why do you like to fidget so much, Canella?” one of them
asked her. She shrugged, stopped, and then began to hum.

She hummed the same note as the trees—low, in the back of her throat. It was inaudible over the hum that permeated town and so she bothered no one. She became the girl who sat alone, sandy hair like a curtain around her as she peered down and waited for the days to pass. In middle school, she took the short walk home along the edge of the woods. She kept her head low, her thumbs hooked into the straps of her backpack. Halfway through seventh grade, she became a figure of interest, an oddity, something to poke and irritate. “Canella!” one of the older boys shouted from behind her on the way home. “Why don’t you walk back into the woods? Why don’t you crawl back to where you came from?”

She was not allowed in the woods on her own. She was not allowed in the woods, period. It had been twelve years since the trees had begun to hum, but her parents held a certain amount of fear that wrapped around their daughter. Canella had let that same fear seep under her own skin in spite of the warmth she garnered from the humming, in spite of the pull she felt, like a magnet dragging her inescapably towards the trees. So instead of responding to their call, Canella walked home at the edge of the grove and did not dare look into the eyes of aspen trees that called out to her, that sang her same note.

—

Kerry Crawley was seventeen when the humming began. Wrapped in someone else’s body and the detritus of the woods, she was there in the midst of the sound when it first pushed out from the bark. “Do you hear that?” Ira Parti
asked.

“Shh,” Kerry hissed, fingers pressed against his mouth as she sank back down. Her toes curled back on her thighs and when she breathed out a soft yes, she mistook the hum for her own release. She lay down on his chest, fingers curling in the soft cotton of his Yankees t-shirt. “Your heart is so loud,” she said after a moment.

He didn’t respond. The summer-lush grass rustled by his head as he looked back and forth and she looked up at him from his sternum. “What?” she asked, only a little put off by his apparent disinterest.

“Don’t you hear that humming?” he asked again.

He propped himself up on his elbows, dislodging her onto the soft earth beside them. She huffed and reached around him for her underwear. “God, can’t you be cool for one second?” she grumbled.

“Kerry, I’m serious! Someone’s here.”

She slowed with her shorts around her knees, listening to the grove. It was only then that she felt the humming pressed against her eardrums, the slow, insistent sound. “Shit.” She yanked her shorts the rest of the way up and grabbed her shoes. “Who the fuck is in the woods at midnight?”

Ira buttoned his jeans and moved to stand, pausing at the sight of the condom draped over a tree root. “What do we do with—?”

“Just leave it, come on.”

They ran through the trees, looking over their shoulders at every shadow cast by the branches and the moonlight, every potential source for the noise. Ira was
faster than her and his attempt at romance — holding her hand as they stumbled along — crumbled almost immediately when he raced ahead of her. The night wind, cool even in the summer, even when the humid air of the grove surrounded them, whipped Kerry’s dark hair from her face, curling it around her neck and jaw and slicing against her eyes. “Slow down!” she called, voice muffled against the hum. “Christ, Ira—!”

She stumbled over a divot in the ground, catching herself on an aspen tree. The trunk buzzed with the sound that seemed to rise out of its roots. Kerry looked at the pale bark and met one of the eyes, lopsided and ringed, that surrounded the young tree.

“Kerry!” Ira’s voice was hissed, crisp and clear through the air.

She looked away from the tree, chest still heaving, and said, “I don’t think anyone’s here.”

The aspen grove was born 154 years before the humming began. The central organism, the main stem, the first born, sprouted up in the wake of a forest fire. It was blown in on the hot wind of the flames, settled down on cold ash, and flourished in nutrient-rich soil. It stood undisturbed for nearly fifty years before a creeping colony of men with loud guns and bright flags claimed the land for a new town which at first consisted of one ranch and three banners decorated with stars and stripes. They let the grove continue to grow and it stretched for hundreds of square miles before the town really became a town, and by then the young families who had settled there were so fond of the grove that
they posed no threat to its many lives. The grove coexisted
with its citizens even as they built stone homes around it.
Canella’s mother, before she was Canella’s mother, or the
mother of anything except a dream, read about the little
town near the aspen grove that was rumored to be on the
verge of a boom. She showed the article to her new hus-
band, pointed to the golden leaves shadowing the welcome
sign. “That seems like a good place to raise a child,” she said.

Freshman year of high school, Canella clutched
a can of soda she stole from her dad’s mini fridge in the
basement. She was still bad at making eye contact, but the
quiet girls she spent time with were bad at it, too. They sat
in Canella’s backyard, staring at the trees fifty feet beyond
while her parents met with another one of Canella’s teach-
ers at school. “Do you hum the same note as them?” Rini
Privya asked. “Or do they hum the same note as you?”

Canella shrugged, stopped humming, took a slow
sip form the soda. Rini liked to ask questions, and so did
Casey Wayne, the other quiet girl, but they never expected
Canella to answer, so she never did.

“What would they do if you went into the woods?”

Rini and Casey stood at the edge of the grove, staring
at her from the early shadows of the aspen branches. “They
wouldn’t do anything,” Casey said, answering her own
question. She reached a hand out.

Canella took three steps forward, felt the hum in
her chest where it belonged, and then heard the shriek of
her mother. Her mother’s hand wrapped around her arm as
she was dragged back to the house, away from the soft cry
of the woods. “You don’t know what’s in there!” her mother shouted over her father watching TV in the family room. “You don’t know what’s making those sounds.”

No one did. At the start, fourteen years ago, there had been reporters from big newspapers, geologists looking to fund their research, psychics trying to break out from hotline fortunes. Now they were all gone, dismissing the anomaly as a long-term prank or a collective hallucination. But the trees still hummed and were still heard. “It sounds different today,” neighbors would tell each other, as if the grove was just another citizen to gossip about. “Must be that storm rolling in.” Teenagers threw search parties beneath the hanging limbs, looking for the source of the sound in the bottom of bottles and kegs. Canella watched the waves of flashlights from her bedroom, missing the hum beneath the low boom of bass, missing the feeling she had when she reached for the shadow of the aspen trees.

Joseph is thirty-one when he brings his baby girl back to his hometown. He goes by Joe among his friends and the only hits he makes are to the bottom line. He’s a consultant for an accounting firm in Akron, hired to fire—but he makes good money, and this little bundle in his arms is just the start of the family he has planned. “She's got a wicked sense of humor,” he tells his father, who is cradling the baby in the same home Joseph grew up. “She’ll make this little snarl face when she’s pooping—cracks her mother up, wait until you see it. It almost makes up for the dirty diaper.”

Mr. Leibovitz Sr. chuckles, bouncing little Adele
on his knee. “I’m glad you brought her to visit,” he says. “I thought maybe you wouldn’t want to.”

The humming hasn’t stopped in the eighteen years since it started and the only thing known with relative certainty is that it comes from the woods. Somewhere in the miles of trees and uncorrupted earth cradling the town, the source of the humming lives. Joseph left for an out-of-state college at eighteen and when he came back for Thanksgiving, he couldn’t sleep. For five years, his body had grown accustomed to the constant intoning groan from the trees, so accustomed that it had been no more than white noise. But after three months away, the humming had made his jaw clench, his ears burn, his heart race. He made his excuses for every holiday after that.

“I want her to know where her daddy grew up,” Joseph says, adjusting the strap of Adele’s soft baby overalls. “Plus, maybe if she visits while she’s young, she’ll get used to it. Like a vaccine.”

His father stays quiet, smiling at his granddaughter, who seems to be trying to blow a spit bubble. “Your room is going to waste as a study,” he says finally, glancing out the back window towards the woods. “Maybe I could paint it, get her a crib, some toys, make a more permanent place for—”

He stops, squints, leans towards the glass. Joseph stares, waiting for him to continue. “Dad?”

“That’s the Scanzelli girl,” says Mr. Leibovitz Sr. “What’s she—?”

He stops suddenly, face pale as he stares at the grove. Joseph puts a hand on his father’s shoulder. “Dad, what...?"
But then he hears it—or, rather, doesn’t.

Veronica spent her school days wrapped in excellence, achieving easily and swiftly. The hum followed her when she skipped fifth grade and went straight to middle school, when she transferred to a magnet school sophomore year, and when she graduated at seventeen and her moms moved her into her dorm at MIT. The humming was inaudible so many miles from home, and for the first two weeks of classes, she hummed that familiar note under her breath to drown out the homesickness. Eventually she no longer needed that white noise in the backdrop of her life, but when she visited her mothers the first holiday of the term, she wrapped herself in the sonorous sound and felt at home.

Veronica is twenty-five, immersed in graduate school when she gets a call from her parents. “Hi Mama,” she answers, tucking her mechanical pencil behind her ear. “How’s things?”

Kerry is thirty-five and a nurse at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital. She drives the half hour home in her lavender scrubs, thick curls crawling out of her last unbroken ponytail holder. She had a twelve-hour shift today—her third this week, hopefully her last until Monday, but her coworkers know they can call her if they need a shift covered short notice. The insides of her ears are echoing with the high whine of the maternity ward, the screams and sobs of mothers emptying their wombs, the shaky breaths of fathers sitting in the lobby, numbly chewing ice chips. Kerry needs her
silence, the near silence supplied by the hum that muffles any other irritants.

She pulls into her garage, turns off the car, and waits. Her buzzing ears stay buzzing with old sounds. There is no hum, no monotonous push pushing out the remnants of the day. “What the hell?” she murmurs to herself.

Outside of the garage, the neighborhood is silent. The whole town is, apparently, silent. Kerry stands in her driveway, looking up and down the street for any indication that she isn’t the only one not hearing things. Ms. Mira, the old woman across the street, is sitting on her porch as usual. “They’re all down at the trailhead,” she calls over to Kerry, who is halfway across the street in search of answers. “Some girl walked into the woods and it stopped.”

Canella is eighteen. She stands at the edge of the woods, bare feet cold on the early fall soil. It’s midday, but she’s been standing here since dawn. Her mother thinks she’s at school, sitting at the desk in the back, the one that replaced the desk in the hall. Her friends think she’s skipping, deep asleep still, or perhaps they haven’t thought of her at all. Her silence leaves little room for her to be missed.

The humming tugs at her. It hooks behind her sternum, sweet and full and sure. She lets it sink in finally, and releases the fear her mother raised her with. You don’t know what’s making those sounds. But she does, she feels it in her fingertips, in her stomach, her lungs. She hears the note like a call and now that she’s listening, actually listening, she wants to call back. You can hear me, she thinks, and feels a pulse under her feet, a double beat that matches her
heart. She meets the eyes of the large aspen in front of her, one of the tallest, and walks into the grove.
Coyote finds the skull of a human, & sniffs, & puts it on.

Inside, it is the beginning of winter, a great plain, ice-white.

Out of the eyes of the skull snow ones, snow zeros. They drift & pile, whiting out the earth:

0 0 0 1 0 1 0 0 1 0

.

Coyote peers into an o in the ice: it is deep, boundless.

Inside, Coyote can see
animals moving in the white, her face—

They are almost invisible, flashing
in & out of sight—

White flakes sift down from the eyesockets,
cover the paws, the tails.

One lands on Coyote’s tongue:
the zero she carves into night when she howls.

.

Zero is a placeholder: the point
from which reckoning begins

o the collar, the mouth of the trap

o the sign the bullet leaves behind

.

Her tail, through the o,
Coyote lowers, a lure:

& so she hooks them—
these emptied skins, these hungers zeroized —
& so she draws them out
to fur across this empty plain:

The pelts darken in the whiting. The bones.

& so, in the black, she reckons us up,
one & one & one.
We sit, Coyote and I, & the future lies between us, breathing softly. Puddles gallop in the wind. Whatever is singing in the trees keeps singing & the future lies quiet. “What shall we do now, Coyote?” I say, & Coyote hushes me. Hushes me & the future lies closed & breathing. Where shall we go when the future awakens? There are things coming out of the earth at our feet. There are things opening in great clouds in the sky & still the future lies between us, breathing but not moving. Around us it is snowing. Snow falls in clumps & gallops off into the dark Forest. It devours the Forest, sucking the marrow from the limbs of trees. Some of the snow burrows under the earth, & waits, like a fossil, to be memorialized. The snow is gathering around my feet, sucking gently on my toes. Beneath us the earth breathes softly in & out. & the future opens its eye.
The Epiphany of the Animaled Eye

Claire Hero
Inside the earth the animaled eye opens. Inside the earth the eye oviposits its cache of extinction – its code of fin & eyestalk, beak & bone, recombinants selecting in the egg’s thick shell. & in the earth it broods. & in the earth it hatches. It hatches, & the oculoblasts emerge, limb by exapting limb.


The oculoblasts can see atombone and soilmouth, can see the paw inside the root, the ear in the rock. Can see the filamentous feet, threading through, connecting. & they chew them free.

Through the holes in the earth the oculoblasts watch us. With their compound eye they watch us singling & over. & they count the years to the emergency. When they will shed into their nexting bodies. When their exoskeletons will harden in the humaned air.
In Search of Organizational Control

Craig Foltz

I.

Despair is a useful starting point, although there are certain inefficiencies which must be attended to. In order to authenticate your experience you call on the expertise of three marketing experts.

II.

The first marketing expert is all transparent bristles and wispy antennae. She feeds on pollen and flying insects and inscribes her initials in the lower abdomen of her lovers. She says, “It’s not enough to adapt to those around you, you must also be willing to coexist.” She balls her hands into fists and begins to pummel. There are small anatomical variations within her body from one day to the next. One variant scavenges off the carcasses of strangers. Another variant hangs upside down using nothing but a row of
hooks attached near her elbows. Still another variant is a dispassionate memory, comprised of liquids of varying thickness and viscosity. Hers is a solitary existence, on the cusp of some indecipherable memory. She sleeps during the day.

III.

The second marketing expert is characterized by a sharp drop in air pressure. It’s as if everyone within his reach is suddenly thrust deep underwater. He says, “Your happiness depends on the richness of your unarticulated desires.” His movements are restricted to mossy and aquatic habitats, but he transcends these by subtly pairing himself to a host—in this case a pack of wild, ravenous dogs that had been set loose upon the city years ago. He tells you about a film he made in which all the characters were eyeless, but had achieved a clarity of vision through the invention of promising, new dimensions. “Perhaps we should reinvent our concept of time.” In the interim, he suggests, you embrace the natural world.

IV.

The third marketing expert was a poet in a former life. Her writing often described characters who had a pastelike consistency. These characters weren’t really characters but people who had arrived here after encountering many years of war and famine. A large percentage of them had perished during the journey. Unlike other poets her work is not
parasitic, but relies on a pure and concise scientific knowledge. Metaphors and images are validated with data and technological resources. She uses a microscope to examine the words and tells you that you are a central character in a number of the poems.

V.

The poems she directs you to do not contain any humans or anything that resembles even the most removed form of human offspring. They are lifeless swatches of language devoid of color and tone. She doesn’t even attempt to present some ontological filament for you to latch onto. There are, however, some specific thematic traditions which resonate. A row of neatly arranged chairs. A grove of chestnut trees. A tower of chronometer needles. She uses your shoulder as a crutch and gains a slightly better view of things. “The stars in the background are so far away, but I do believe that this feeling of emptiness is natural.”

VI.

There are crevices in our skin, you think, but you are unsure what function they serve. The ghosts you initially thought of can only confirm your despair by projecting their own reflection upon your wall of windows. There has been no light in the sky for weeks now; it’s cold. It’s become normal to expect a depth in our experiences, even if they mostly go unnoticed.
A Brief History of Strange Birds

John Sibley Williams

The transient made solid by taste

that last ripe peach from a barren tree

& metaphor leafed in birds the dying
tree’s fire, undiminished.

I slash the stalks at healthy angles so the flowers may drink outlast you.

Your last-ditch prayers keep their god valued

& here. Between us a whip-thin body of breath, greedy for life.
A few tears to keep the dry world
at bay. We can convince ourselves the sky

*eternity* is opening *burning*
or that permanence is a blessing. If the body is

just a room within a room in the basement
of some huge house, I think I remember you asking,

mustn’t there be an attic, a roof, a chimney
lit by winter wood? & love: the kind of love plucked from

a kind of tree that doesn’t grow around here anymore
wrapped in magnificent, unfamiliar birds *unrequited.*
Vespertine

John Sibley Williams
Within the clink of light bulbs going dark, just before monsters reemerge from wherever we keep them & the prayed-to dissolve like freshwater in the ocean. Before the bedsheets, wet with panic, fuse the body to itself & our dead launch into lesson & want. Before we writhe, wail, ask for a list of our sins, somnambulate all over the house looking for an open door. A door opens. Before we memorize night’s music, yield to its rhythm, sway out over that dreamt sea where folded paper boats rise & sink like great vessels. Before shipwrecks, black rot. & sometimes love & love & love returned. Love is returned. Before childhood comes into focus, grief finds its voice, manhood asks more questions than it answers, all our rescinded promises made due. Within the emptiness, an emptiness. One moment of sheer terror, before the world begins.

I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual.

—Virginia Woolf
Raze (Up): Making *I Dare You*

*Stephanie Sauer*

To you belongs the praise for these pearls I pronounce: you are the giver, I the arranger.

-Abu at-Tayyib Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi (915-965)

An invitation arrives:

On March 5th 2007, a car bomb was exploded on al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad. Al-Mutanabbi Street is in a mixed Shia-Sunni area. More than 30 people were killed and more than 100 were wounded. Al-Mutanabbi Street, the historic center of Baghdad bookselling, holds bookstores and outdoor bookstalls, cafes, stationery shops, and even tea and tobacco shops. It has been the heart and soul of the Baghdad literary and intellectual community.
The Al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition is issuing a call to book artists to work on a project to “re-assemble” some of the “inventory” of the reading material that was lost in the car bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street. We are asking book artists to join our project and further enhance the work of the Coalition by honoring al-Mutanabbi Street, by creating work that holds both “memory and future,” exactly what was lost that day.

A year of gestation. Then: searching, researching, collecting, cutting, collaging, gluing. Worlds and histories come together and fall apart in my hands. Each image a work that survived its attempted destruction. Each image makes sound. Together, they howl and echo, tragic and lonely, so riddled with ghosts. I play no music during the entire process. I need to hear their sound. They have something to share, they have stories to tell and I need to listen. Al-Mutanabbi Street becomes every street. It becomes a thruway for the forgotten, the killed, crippled histories the world over. The silenced voices become the loudest – those stories that were never made manifest in human words. The ones that stayed bubbling there under the surface. They give off heat in their anger, their shame, their desperate need to be released.

After encountering little serious resistance, U.S. forces roll into central Baghdad and take control of Iraq’s capital city. On April 9th, Marines pull down
I spend two months alone in my studio listening to these memories with my hands. It may not yet be proven by modern science, but there is a type of listening the hands are capable of, one that leads to an intimate kind of knowing.

You worship him by walking on earth.

Years ago, I walked into a room-size installation composed of books. The artist had lined the entire floor with books so that the spines were turned upward and viewers were required to walk on them, crawl upon them in order to enter. It was both a sacrilege and an honoring. It felt intimate in a way I had never felt with books. But mostly, it was loud. All the other people were quiet, sitting in awe, but the room
clamored. There arose a sound so big, so robust that I fled.

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When I was a child, my aunt covered her bookshelves in the guest room at night with scarves when I came to visit. She insisted they interfered with sleep.

The books that become part of Al-Mutanabbi Street in my hands become just that: alive and demanding attention, my deepest concentration. A thermos of tea and listening. These stories required witness. They were testimonies to which only my hands knew how to listen.

*When my hands from brimming cups weakly shook, I awoke, ere sense my wined mind forsook. Shunning choice wines, as rich as purest gold, I, of spring showers silv'ry draught partook.*
“If they are really the resistance, why don’t they kill Americans?”

Then the introduction, the memory of my own silencing. The exposure to its pain, again. Alive, visceral. I resist for days. I want to stop, throw it all out. I try to deny my own presence in this millennia-old story. I want to downplay the female silencing that has gone on too long because it still hurts so damn much. Perhaps this is why the silencing continues inside of us. I have forgiven, but the pain is still there. The rage is subdued, but the scar tissue is tender when prodded.

Throat aches, tightens, restricts breath. Throat telling me where the pain is left, that there is still trauma. Cannot breathe. A moment passes, a moment of rage and vision. The heart muscle pushes blood up, a spilling of memory into arteries. A gasp at air, a stifling. Eyes bloodshot, scared. Lids down, lids up. Eyes wild again. Airway cleared. Tears welling. A pinch at the clavicle. Full weight of body in throat, puked out through mouth. No stench, no waste, no

[14 Dec 2012]
To look at the damage. To really see it. The thing that is holding me back? Held back from being heard? A recurring scar. How my body has atrophied over it in the most tender places, most vulnerable. How I have become deformed from my own natural disposition. How my body has grown over the wound, healed itself best it could in order to survive. And to finally be shown the full scope of damages. To see the scars, the festering places – no, just the disfigurations, the crippling. A life quieted, not quite silenced but shying away from its power let out, let loose into the world. Putting it out there, but never too loudly.

This work ripping me open. Violent. Unexpected. Letting me see it, open to it. Heal it or just accept it. Not sure which. Having something to do with becoming louder. Becoming unafraid of my loudness, not always expressed as volume.

Break my own chest open. Break the bones if need be, pull out the beating heart. Swaddle it. Rinse it clean,
cold. Set it back on fire. Let a winter rain cool it, light it aflame once more.

Burn the shame out of its hiding. Scream out the wounding, the pain, the rage, the leftover now-self-facing hatreds. Singe with my own breath the needless doubt, the dead narratives. Burn the outworn, damaging stories. Explode my own self from the inside. Shake up the stagnant, atrophied muscles, impulses. Let the instincts out of their cages. Fashion my heart anew from magic, make it back into its own original form. Shape it with all the love in all my bodies and beyond. From the river and from the lightening. Love it. Put it back in me, start it pumping. Live it, again. Forgive it. Forgive me.

“...to know, really know, that history, like geography, lives in the body and it is marrowdeep. History is our illness. It is recorded there, laid down along the tracks and pathways and synapses.”  -Linda Hogan

I thought this a failure on my part, failure to grow beyond. But it was simply acknowledging, again, in a deeper way, that this was no isolated incident between mother and daughter. This story tied us to a perpetuated violence of silencing inflicted upon women, internalized so well that it’s then inflicted upon women by other women. Mother, daughter. Grandmother, sister. Aunt. The pain was my own, but its impact opened me to all the other pain felt by all the other women, all the silenced others.
This is what it means to listen with the hands, to receive the repetitions of language, the contours of story with the body. Moving through this takes a lot of writing, a bit of movement and ritual burning. In these moments of confronting history, intellect does little. Our bodies do the listening, the continuous healing.

*It combined every tongue and nation, so that only interpreters could understand when the speakers conversed.*

“The 9th of April is a day in which one tyrant fell so that another occupying tyrant could take his place.”

—Iraqi Islamic Party statement, as quoted in *The New York Times* in April 2005

The video. A $15 tri-pod from the pharmacy and a series of lucky guesses about positioning. Several overcast days in Rio spent finishing up all the shots. In high production time, I lose some of my perfectionism. This loss frees me. I become humbled enough to give it up.
[9 Jan 2013]
Reading *The Universal History of the Destruction of Books*, noting dates, locations for the film. Binding more copies, orchestrating dates, locations into a poetic recitation.

316 LUOYANG
363 ROME
389-391 ALEXANDRIA
398 EPHESUS
400-500 GAUL
410 ROME
438 NICEA
448 EPHESUS
550-750 EUROPE
554 JIANGLING
8th Cent DERRY

I sit still in the studio, working through worry about how to vocalize these stories of destruction in their slim, solemn format of dates and place names. This is a heavy history to carry and I have to do so through my voice, the part of me that has been most battered, that shows most signs of violence. Facing it at this angle, I feel insignificant. I take a breath. Capable. I close my eyes to all the doubts and hold tight to the feeling of being able, talking myself into it aloud: *years of displacement and language acquisition give your tongue a unique ability, you have a low melancholy voice when you read*. I repeat these things until the moment I finally hit ‘RECORD’ and begin. I very intently open my body, then my
mouth to let the stories come through. I have to record in my studio, with roosters crowing and dogs barking outside, because that is where the stories can be heard. I have soaked them into me for over two months without pause, and now I am full with them. I am alive in their testimony and they will come out. Most of the place names I know not how to pronounce. Rather than researching each one, I accept my accent and loosen my tongue. My mouth feels round with sadness inside. I speak. It takes only a few trials. I am too full to stop. Like the song says: “I guess I should shut my mouth / and rethink a minute, / but I can’t shut it now / because there’s something in it.” To pause, to take more time would be to give in to fear, to self-doubt. To silencing. It would be to let those killers of all things living win. Because this, this kind of listening and being and making and acting, this is being alive in the world. This is why Al-Mutanabbi Street will start here. And here.

INTRODUCTION

Al-Mutanabbi Street stops in the silencing. It cuts across centuries and echoes off every flame, flood and...
bomb that has destroyed a book, a story, a library, a history, a culture. It begins again at the tip of a pen, a piece of thread, a word that forms in the mouth and makes the body tremble. It always begins again.

This book is my hymn to each and every page, image, narrative, person, symbol, codex, quilt, mural, scroll, stone carving, illuminated manuscript, tapestry, and oral account throughout time that has been banned, shamed, destroyed, or subverted. Each word and image found in these pages is a surviving piece of a work or a culture or a tradition whose destruction was attempted or achieved. From ancient Ethiopia to the Americas and present day Baghdad to all that remains between and before, the targets are not always what we consider books. But they are always potent conduits of ideas, histories and sentiments at odds with empire and ownership.

Scattered throughout are fragments of my own first poems, poems my mother found when I was thirteen. Poems she confiscated and tried to burn. I saw then first hand the power of words and the white heat they cause in people who try to silence them. In the end, burnings were averted and the punk attitude that had finally reached our home in the backwoods urged me to shout fuck you and write harder. To never back down.

So, destroy this book. Drown it. Question its legitimacy, relevancy, need. Burn its pages. Strike a match and light this book aflame. It will never go away. This impetus
to make, to preserve and impart will forever surface. This street will always wind its way back.

Rio de Janeiro, 2012
I will throw soil in the street and plant an onion in your name,
and give myself time to admire the iridescent beetles that burrow between your deconstructed bones

I will not dance over this dirt
but will go so far as to place snakes there
to eat the beetles, build an ecosystem:
an effigy of you that moves but isn’t true enough to bleed

Around this onion I will throw my inner space,
plant and learn to grow where nothing should thrive,
and manifest home where there is none
“Start with: ‘In the beginning...’

“In the beginning the earth had just one enormous continent.” Dad chewed his words uncertainly—unfamiliar food that he did not want to swallow but was too polite to spit out, his stomach turning nervously at the thought of digestion. His fingers entwined to make a basket of his hands too tight to let light through the cracks.

At four-and-a-half years old, Mariah’s sister Fiona tried to repeat the gesture, overlapping rather than interlocking so that one hand held the other.

“One island,” Mariah said. She was seven and always looking for ways to be helpful.

“And one sea,” Dad confirmed.

The three of them were crowded into Fiona’s lower bunk, she and Fiona under the flower-patterned duvet, and their dad above it and between them, so that his weight pinned her and her sister in place at his sides. They stared together into the dark wall of the upper bunk. Their voic-
es and breath circulated in the cave of the lower bunk as though they were a litter of puppies growing together in the darkness of a womb. The oscillating fan blew air in gusts that in near-dreams sounded like muted whispers conversing with the water and electricity flowing through the walls. The complex was occupied by diplomats, wealthy retirees, and foreign scholars (like Mariah and Fiona’s dad) who worked for the university. Nearly everyone in the building spoke English, ate foods that came shipped in tins and packets from Europe to the upscale market on the corner, employed nannies and maids who lived across town, and belonged to the local health club that had racquetball courts and a sauna. Beyond their building was a neighborhood of similar buildings, then the mansions of Miraflores with their well-paved drives and manicured lawns that pressed against the bustling city of Lima to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the west.

Although Mariah and her sister were told a story every night, this was the first time Dad had told them this story, a story that he would tell them afterwards on occasion when they prodded him. But this first instance, in the winter of 1977, was an attempt at emulation. He was writing the script as he went—lacking the details and finesse of Mum’s original story or the later versions of his own.

Using all of the appropriate scientific terms he told them that although the earth seemed like one solid thing it was only the thin layer of crust at the surface was really solid. “And the crust is cracked like the shell of an egg so that the fragmented plates float on the molten asthenosphere.”
She and Fiona knew immediately that the story was wrong. Fiona especially protested and because Mariah worried Dad may be discouraged she hushed her sister every time Fiona spoke. Anyway she liked the excitement that bloomed in Dad’s voice to dip and turn with each new tack, the way that his hands carved images out of the air, the warm feel of his arm pressed against hers through their sleeves, and the smell of his aftershave that was like a leather jacket with freshly cut grass stuffed into the pockets. During the past months he had been strange: present but careful, nurturing but distant. It was as though he did not want to wade into the role of caregiver to usurp their mum. But now it was clearly the end. The past week Mariah and her sister had rarely been allowed into Mum’s room, the doctor’s visits had been more frequent, and neighbors had begun to use the language of apology and past tense. The flat had become dark and quiet behind pulled drapes that filtered daylight to cast the rooms in purple and blue shadows. Nurses came and went. Memme, the foreign nanny they’d had since they moved to Lima six months earlier, now attended to Mariah and Fiona during the day and their mum at night, sleeping only in the gasp of dawn and dusk that embraced neither light nor darkness. The master bedroom had been transformed into a hospital suite smelling of things dripping into and out of the body. Dad sanctioned himself to his office, resting at his desk with his head on the pillow of his folded hands. In the evenings Memme bathed Mariah and her sister and sang them songs in her native French. Then Dad came to say good night.

Dad was a geologist. It made sense that this was the
story he told, that his was a catalogue of tectonic plates converging and subducting to form mountain ranges and riffs, a timeline of volcanic events that birthed islands and formed coastlines, and an offering of proof—in an account of earthquakes—that the ground beneath them refused to be still. In his story the supercontinent pulled apart then pushed together only to be forced apart and together again and again. Oceans gave way to deserts, glaciers sculpted mountainsides, the sea poured into places where cities once had or would exist. It was a sketch engraved only to erase itself and be drawn again, layers of marking and scrubbing away that left the paper soft and scarred.

“No,” Fiona said vehemently. “You forgot the sun.”

“The sun?” their dad asked.

When their parents met in New Zealand their dad was on a study abroad tour with Cambridge University that focused on geological sites in Australia, but included visits to Bali, Fiji, and the coastal areas of New Zealand’s South Island. Their mum was studying astronomy in Christchurch. “I was looking up and your dad was looking down. It’s a wonder we saw each other,” Mum had said often, a joke that Mariah could only imagine literally—two people pacing, their sights set, bumping into one another in their mutual blind-spot.

The bedtime story that Mum told began with that single mass of hot energy small enough to fit in the palm of a hand and containing the elements to make the entire universe, “every planet, every star, every mountain and tree, every animal and insect, every car, and plane, and boat, and person.” Then the Big Bang that sent gases flying in all direc-
tions: slowing, cooling, condensing, combining, becoming hydrogen and helium, and eventually carbon and oxygen, “the earth, and everything that mattered.”

Mum had told them that life on earth would go on until the sun burned through its fuel and stretched to swallow the solar system. But even then the universe would expand until gravity slowed its unraveling. Then stopped it. Then pulled it back like a yo-yo. And everything would happen in reverse, like watching a filmstrip rewind. The sun would breathe its fire back in, and the people and plants and animals would grow on the earth, then the earth would turn back to dust floating in space flying back and back into that tight fist of energy no larger than a stone that you might skip across a pond.

“You forgot the part when the sun dies,” Mariah told their dad.

“Grows and grows,” Fiona added.

“That won’t happen for billions of years,” Dad said.

He was trying to comfort them, but instead he broke the promise of Mum’s story that did not end with the sun engulfing the solar system, but with everything returning to previous states: the sun shrinking to the size of a lemon in the sky and drawing their family back to the day, weeks before Mum’s diagnosis, when Mariah and her sister were running along the beach in Lima collecting seashells. Mum watched and smiled with her hand pressed like a visor to her forehead. Mariah had a memory like a photograph of Mum waving as Dad bent to examine the calcified forms and tell her and her sister that these were not rocks formed deep in the earth, but an entirely different mystery.
In the past month, Mum had grown more gaunt and pale daily, like a sheet left on a laundry line to bleach in the sun and fray in the wind until it was threadbare and sheer and then nothing. Mariah would wake terrified that Mum had disappeared and run into the bedroom to touch the hot form beneath the covers that began to smell like overripe fruit and char. Memme would stroke Mariah’s long hair and say in her accent, “Not yet.”

Memme came from an island in the vast space between the northern coast of South America and western boundaries of Europe. She had attended school in French Guiana before taking the job with Mariah’s family in Peru. She was of European descent, with olive skin, rosy cheeks, long black hair, and blue eyes. Her beauty was the sort that was complex and difficult to look at for long.

When Memme put Mariah and Fiona to bed she told them the story that her nanny had told her when she was small. “In the beginning, there was the Mother Earth and the Father Sky.”

“Or Mother Sky and Father Earth,” Mariah suggested.

“They loved each other very much. All of the time they lay right next to one another, so close that there was no room for anything between them. One day they had a child, and then another.”

“One called Mariah and one called Fiona,” Fiona added.

“The children lived in the darkness between their parents. As the children grew older they wondered what it would be like to live in the light.” The story tumbled into
the trials of the children trying one tactic and another to first move their parents separately, then finally to pry their parents apart. “At first Mother Earth and Father Sky were heartbroken to be away from one another,” Memme said, “but the space between them made room on the earth for the plants to grow and then the animals and people to be born. And it made room in the sky for the sun and the moon and all of the stars to appear. Then Mother Earth and Father Sky saw how happy their children were playing in that open world, and they were happy too.”

“The end,” Fiona said when every story came to its conclusion.

When Mum died, Fiona and Mariah sat between Memme and Dad in a church they hadn’t been in before and listened to the priest read a story from the bible about heaven. “Death is not the end, but the beginning of an eternal life in God's kingdom,” he said, and Mariah imagined Mum arriving to St. Peter’s gates with a packed suitcase, as though she were moving into a luxurious palace to have a fresh start.

“Where is heaven?” Fiona asked that night when Dad put them to bed.

“It’s not a place really,” Dad said. “We can’t go there.”

“Only if you die?” Fiona said.

“Only if you die.”

“When you go there you stay forever and ever and wait to see everyone again,” Fiona said, confidently repeating a version of what the priest had promised.

“That’s right,” Dad said.

“Do we believe in heaven?” Mariah asked.
Dana Kroos

Dad didn’t answer. It wasn’t rejection, she thought—or maybe hoped—but contemplation, as though he were trying to decide, trying to imagine heaven, trying to construct a vision of heaven. And if he could envision it, then it would certainly exist.
Why this loss? One might as well ask “when”
of the windfallen peach, or of the sky
weaving its last dusk on a purple loom.
Each day ends. Evening comes when it comes, veiled
as a nun. Pipistrelles fill
the trees. Is the bat any less lovely than the dove?
It keeps the night with its high-pitched song. Feathered
or furred, it makes no difference. We watch lives pass
like a book, half-remembered. Beloved faces blurred
as foxed pages.

A chill company of doubt surrounds us, dismantling
our family. Our saint’s supplications and rosary beads seem
just as probable as the bone, the twigs, the twist of hair
in a juju bag. Everything is fruitless as we bend
under static lights, genuflect
before IV pumps and arterial lines. We fracture like glass. Parent becomes child. Hospital rooms are blued as morgue drawers. As with the crepitation of crickets or wet lungs, our ears recognize an ending. A sort of panic spurs us forward. Groping. A shard of lost days refracts, giving glimpses, both, of Mother's knee and the family crypt, where something rank seeps beneath carnation-scent. And I am caught here, bleary-eyed in the sour half-light between grief and memory, between pill bottle clutter and the 3 am pacing that creaks floorboards like bad knees. I listen to the tethered breath, wait out the faltering heartbeat's dimmed throb. Hours of time pleat, compress into minutes. My vigilance is the vulture's outspread wing. But still, I can find my mother, in the corner just beyond sleep's diminished margin:
the deft hands and lovely throat of the woman she once was: sleek in a spangled cocktail dress, (an emerald swath of silk,) aquanetted up-do, her dark apprehending eye in its frosted glamor. She is there, smoothing her curls. So clear, before dust settled its web across her face, diminutive
as her young daughter’s dream. As easy to recall her lipstick and heels before they were replaced with piecrust and knucklebone soup, in some othertime, before. Bedside, I take her slack hand, stroke the purpled maplines, the arthritic humps. Around the room’s antiseptic edges monitors chirp and blip. Shadows slide closer, fill with a collection of regrets. The sky deepens. Something flickers in the dusklight of her hospital window. Bat or dove? All I recognize are wings.
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Born in 1992, Katia Arcarese earned her BFA in Studio Arts in 2016 at Concordia University in Montreal, Québec, Canada. She has exhibited at the Montreal Art Centre, Galerie Onze, Never Apart Gallery and the Warren G. Flowers Gallery. She currently lives and works in Montreal.

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E.G. Cunningham’s work has appeared in or is forthcoming from Barrow Street, Drunken Boat, Hobart, The Nation, Poetry London, Puerto del Sol, 3:AM Magazine, and other publications. She holds an MFA from the University of Iowa and a PhD in English from the University of Georgia. She teaches at the University of California, Merced.
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Trisha Kostis is a writer and Chef who spends the bulk of her time running a misfit crew of cooks and servers in a Seattle food establishment. When not creating dishes that diners can insult on Yelp, she is writing flash fiction and working on a short story collection that she previews to her grandchildren for their candid appraisal.

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Dana Kroos received a Ph.D. in creative writing and literature from the University of Houston and an MFA in fiction writing from New Mexico State University. Her short stories and poems have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *The Florida Review*, *The Superstition Review*, *Minnesota Monthly* and other literary publications. Her work is frequently influenced by her travels in Africa, Asia, South America and other places, and by her studies in art through which she also holds a MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and a MA from Purdue University. Currently, she is a Mitchell Center Postgraduate Fellow at the University of Houston.

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Adriana Medina has an MA and MFA in English and Creative Writing from Chapman University. She is interested in the cultural and political implications of poetry. She enjoys Zentangle, sci-fi movies, spending time with her daughter, and being a people-watcher-watcher.

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Lita is a full-time visual artist based in Germany. Originating in Russia, Lita assimilates and rethink sociale frameworks in her artwork. Upon completion of professional education in graphic design and fine arts, she turned herself into a bizarre kingdom of contemporary art. Holding to biocentrism ethics and fragility of human nature, she portrays mental and physical transfiguration, highlighting the issues of aging, body imperfections, lostness and prostration. Unlock your potential, fight boredom, and dare to join the vulnerable flow!

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