

Book of Matches

issue 1





Book of Matches

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So much begins with accumulating snow.

On an exceptionally cold early morning, we sat bundled under too many blankets, and read poems aloud to one another from journals we had carried into our new shared home. Pages turned and our voices grew softer until there we were, silent and looking at one another in expectation. Neither of us remember who spoke first, but the words were simple: “It’s time we got serious about making a new journal.”

Fast forward to 2020, a year of extraordinary change, and *Book of Matches* has come into being.

This journal is born into a need, a space we believe too empty and too unsure of its own potential for Beauty. The pieces in this collection are meant to breathe many new worlds throughout a landscape ready and ripe for growth. From dark places comes the imagining of light. Yet, the work filling these pages offers more than illumination—the poems and stories here cast, swallow, and duplicate so many shadows, across walls and ceilings and skies. The authors represented in these pages are from countries and cities that share comfort, anger, protest, and gratitude. Here are works undivided in one bright sense: Each says, “I have been here all along, take my hand.”

We all understand that ignition is elemental: It requires material that will react to friction with enough force to transfer heat into energy. Language, too, is reactive and reactionary, especially when struck again and again with tongue and eye. It is our great hope that this issue will help lead readers into the question—Where does the light first glint? Many of us are the rough wood upon which the caustic bulb rests, waiting to be aggressed, to be brought into brightness. Many of us are the metal shards promising the transformation. And many of us are the quiet bodies in such need of a flash to promise heat in winters current, past, and yet to come. May these stories and poems burn your fingers and leave you hungrier than you have been. May the words gathered in these lines and swirls nudge you toward your own fields, your own rough desire to water the soil, to usher forward a blooming.

Sincerely,
Kelli Allen & Nicholas Christian
Editors

Bless the dying nests of the fevered,

the honeycreepers and their crested lives,
feeble and ferrybound, an island
of endangered birds. Bless the rifle
for what it doesn't kill, the dusty flowers
of its owner, plastic and placed in a suitcase
garden, something to spice up the porch.
Maybe the world has milked out all its love
and we are left with a dry breast. Of loss.
Of forgotten birds we never knew
the names of. Maybe the planet
isn't asking for forgiveness, maybe it's frustrated,
a parent saying, *Go to your room.*
Bless the gods who appeared
with feathers, their bones like hollow canoes.

Through the Exhaustion I Serve Absurdity

Humans are, at their best, a mess
like the palette at the end
of a child's arm when that child forgets
the canvas itself

and swirls on the thin slab instead.
I think I fall in love at least
a dozen times a day with a pigment
and hardly ever with an effort.

To know me is to hear
Look at the proportions on that cloud!
or perhaps *Oh the mountain top today!*
at least once in our friendship.

It is a kind of enthusiasm that serves absurdity.
I have found a compromise
of wildflowers
trespassing on the lawn,

and every blossom snuck on tiptoes
so as not to be noticed. Yet, they wore
the most brightly colored hats.
I notice these things;

I drive my aging mother
a little crazy with the way
I tilt rose-colored and ridiculous
into the world. I drive my wheezing mother

from hospital to home, home
to store, home to store
and store and store.
What about this?

There is still sweetness.
I lift a lemon
pound cake, a pumpkin
pie, trays of chocolate chip cookies

lined up like commuters on a bus.
Where are they going I ask

and my mother scowls and
I see the glint

of off-white from her fake teeth
and think *there, yes,*
oh that color; that
exact color. Yes.

Sex Life

The cheap pornography paperbacks
I stole at twelve from the Burlington Bookstore
on Madison Avenue grotesque stories
of men and little girls and animals
words of unearthly power
surface now like the fragmented dead
working like shrapnel out of soft soil.

When I was actively a woman,
wife, girlfriend, lover, summer
afternoons in the middle of the middle of
the thick of it, my breasts were bread
my pelvis a wheel, adolescence
a burnt match in a back pocket.

*

At sixty-plus, I watch the goddess
of bounty blubber over the cross
I have nailed her to, hands and feet
fire-retardant immortal crotch.
Stuck in a tree, a faceless doll suffers
and listens. *Tell me how you feel.*
I live in a hut that walks on chicken legs.
I haven't been kissed in a hundred years.

130. from *Essays in Idleness: a zuihitsu*

One awaits sensitivity training. One awaits confirmation that one was switched at birth. One awaits payment for another hour of uncompensated labor. One awaits the enemy's surrender. One awaits acoustic phenomenon built from megadata and algorithms to mimic random sounds. One awaits the leashed cormorant to resurface. One awaits an appointment's appointed hour. One awaits an invitation. One awaits the obfuscation of hierarchies. One awaits the slim glimpse of flesh in the fold of the folding screen. One awaits the resurgence of superstition, the interim between storms, between sonnets in a crown of sonnets. In the meantime, one waits.

Colliery: A Triptych
Panel III: The Way of the Glider

Most of our neighbors had gliders on their front porches. Ours had four vinyl cushions that could resist a light shower in summer. The rest of the year the cushions and frame had to be covered with tarp. In winter, the tarp filled with snow. Tarp is how I remember caring for the glider. But care of the glider might have involved more: lifting the frame off the porch, carrying it down the long hill on the side of the house, then dragging it across the back patio and wrestling it through the narrow door into the cellar. Something in my mind says we were supposed to care for the glider that way but didn't. We probably left the frame on the porch the first winter after my father died, so the metal rusted and couldn't glide anymore. Then, it disappeared.

We were the only family on the block with a fig tree. Every summer, it produced a few pints of fruit that my sister and I didn't care much for. "You kids don't know what's good," Dad would despair of our future or try to bully us into appreciating things that mattered to him. The fig tree mattered because it had come from Valparaiso, Dad's home town on Madeira. Or maybe he adopted a tree similar to ones from Madeira. Adopted or not, he treated it like his own flesh and blood, which is more than I felt about how he often treated me.

I understand why he kept his distance. Apart from good grades, I was a disappointment, if not a source of shame. My two older brothers had played sports and had worked part time to avoid asking our parents for money and even to contribute cash for household expenses. "Young men with ambition and guts," Dad said. They were generous to my twin sister and me, to all of us. I hoped to become a generous person too. Ambition and guts were a different story. There was already enough of that stuff in the family.

In our yard and garden were other trees that Dad made us care for, and this vine of Isabella grapes that canopied a wooden swing. The only thing I liked about caring for Isabella was pruning the branches in early spring. Pruning demanded skills I must have displayed to Isabella's satisfaction. I remember her embracing my head and arms, tender and green limbed. But she turned rough late summer when beetle swarms devoured her leaves, and wasps, claiming the last of the grapes, drove us from the swing.

Apart from the fruit that the vine and other trees produced, they provided leaves that we raked every autumn and heaped around the fig to blanket it from the cold. We padded the trunk and ground over the roots with layer after layer of leaves, protected the branches by pulling them as close to the earth as possible and fastening them with rope to the trunk itself. More leaves and, if I remember correctly, a canvas tarp. My allowing the fig to die would have been fratricide.

When Black Lung disabled Dad along with most other men in town, caring for the yard and garden fell heavily on me. Since Dad performed less work, I obeyed him less. He would gasp for breath trying to reassert his authority, and sometimes I escaped his belt when he tried for it. Sometimes I didn't.

One summer evening, he asked me to return home before dark. Nightfall was when the neighborhood kids would start roasting potatoes over a camp fire in the field at the top

of the hill. I loved potatoes with salt and was not going to miss the roast. Dad's worrying aside, I knew how to keep my clothes from catching fire. When I got home, I planned on saying one of our poorer neighbors, with no phone service, insisted I stay for dinner.

I think Dad must have struggled on his way up the hill, enraged, leaning against picket fences to catch his breath; the neighbors must have told him. Through the flames he appeared and yanked me from the circle. He whipped my legs with his belt all the way home. On front porches, neighbors enjoyed the lesson. Fear of punishment reclaimed the center of my life.

After Dad's death, Mom sold the house and we moved north to live with my brothers and their families. The married son of one of our old neighbors rescued the place and, for a while, kept the fig tree from going the way of the glider along with the grape vine and most of my resentment.

No matter how old I have grown, there remains this: whatever many things good and bad have turned out to mean, in the weak they matter less and less.

George Perreault

after the swing shift

usta stop that other place,
the riverside,

have a few with mullaney,
catch the scores

but he's always this
attitude,

like maybe
checks out my beard

tells me hey never,
you gotta mirror every day,

razor in your hand,
make a fucking choice –

night after night, man,
the sheer weight of it –

that goddam sunshine –
it just wore me out.

George Perreault

a robbery

drinking again, the local guys
bar room or coffee shop,
whatever age you've put upon yourself
like walking hounds of an evening those
same back roads: who's ever been fired,
who's ever been robbed,
how it gets easier over time
though always one, maybe the first
or the circumstance

say you took in a nephew
needed to be somewhere and he
got up in the night, hid away
the hundred your wife earned
running the rabbit barn, county fair,
laid over a chair or two, left the door open
like someone come in from the outside,
thinks you're that stupid,
or that soft

so you call up the state cop
the one lives in town, say Rusty
here's the deal but leave it be,
way past the point he needs to die,
only how the body never gets found,
the ghost town leach field or some dry well
out there on the llanos, and letting you know
man it's the only way
maybe won't do this

thirty years, you still think about it,
that place down by the river,
shooting at cans

George Perreault

the load

she found him stranded again
splayed against a wall

his inner ear, maybe another stroke,
she doesn't sleep that well herself

not since Vietnam,
woken by concussions

and a foot that never healed
so she's up most every night

and then he's a few years older,
the orange gnawing away –

we're each immortal to ourselves
else resigned to our own goodbye

but goddamn, the ones we love,
goddamn them, one by one

Fire in My Veins

The tiny orange specks of flying flames riding the room, within my childhood world, put fire in my veins.

I am sure it did. Fires that grew through my life.

My story begins as an eight-year-old in a placid village called Kondappanayakkanpatti in the Salem district of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. A tongue twister even for true-blooded Tamilian, I know. But I swear the name is real, one that honors a man named Kondappa, a *nayakan* (local ruler) of this *patti* (village).

My village was a quiet place. One day was in danger of being the same as the next. The annual *therukoothu*, where artists in exaggerated costumes and make-up enacted our epics through dance, song and music, was the only event that stirred up animation and broke disciplinary boundaries.

My life, thus, began beneath the gentle shadows of my village's banyan, *peepal*, coconut and tamarind trees who all "share a life and their nutrients through an underground system that merges their roots beneath the soil."

At least this is what my grandfather told me about the trees below-ground sharing and of the need for us to be like them, single people all joined as a community. This image of a tangle of roots, secretly joining single trees into a forest, fed my hungry imagination at that time and is something I have never been able to forget.

But what really settled in my mind with an enduring intensity, a fever almost, a madness if you will, was the image of scattering sparks in a goldsmith's shop. The hot, maniacal dance of unruly, leaping, flying specs of fire, embers in goldsmith Gunasekharan's workshop that were willing to land where they may.

But, wait!

Much before the allure for the goldsmith and his mastery to create sparks took root, my fetish for fire was present. I suspect it had something to do with my toothless grandmother's tales of Kannagi and Kovalan, characters of the South Indian epic *Silapathikaram*. Stories she told me at sunset, my bedtime. On some days, against the backdrop of flickering brass lamps. On others, in the light of the moon, when the shade spawned shadows that danced on tree trunks.

Her story went something like this.

"Kovalan, a wealthy merchant of Kaveripattinam, was married to Kannagi but met Madhavi, a danseuse, and left, spending all his wealth on her. He later returned to Kannagi, penitent, and the couple went to Madurai to make a new life with a pair of anklets that was now their only asset. When he went to sell them, he was arrested by the King's men. They said the anklets were those of the Queen who had just reported hers missing. On hearing of this, Kannagi rushed to the court, broke open her anklets that were seized and showed they contained rubies as opposed to the Queen's anklets which contained pearls. But by then Kovalan was beheaded. Furious with the travesty of justice, she burned down the city of Madurai, her hair and clothes flying, her eyes blazing."

This tale of my grandmother, like my grandfather's of the understory of trees, has had for me a fairy tale time of longevity. A sort of endlessness. I think I could say that she, like all the grandmothers in my village and those in my state, has handed me the language

of fire as powerful images that will never leave my mind.

Coming back to the sight of fire flecks lacing and lancing, twirling like fiends in Gunasekharan's shop, his deft workmanship with tools, the quickness and accuracy of his movements and his breath filled with warm exhalations...it was nothing short of magic. It caught my breath and made wonder stick in my throat.

My grandmother and I were in his shop one morning to melt existing gold ornaments and come home with a gold bar. One that was to be handed over to my mother to fashion earrings as a gift for a child's ear piercing ceremony that was to occur soon.

Gunasekharan had curly hair, tight black curls that stuck to his scalp, and intense eyes, ones that were full with dark pupils against a generous expanse of white that I could see around each iris. As he smiled at me, joining his palms in the Indian gesture of greeting, his lips stretched from one end of his face to the other and I decided there and then that I liked him and his shop.

To me, his shop filled with a forge and anvil, bellows, blowpipes, brass, iron and wooden blocks, varied-sized pots, earthen crucibles, chisels, files, dyes, hammers, mallets, pincers, tongs, narrow cast-iron troughs, moulds, saws, asbestos paper, charcoal and rice husk, was a shop where light and shadows danced hand in hand—was a fantasy island, a puppet show in motion. So much so that I thought I would burst with the scintillation of it all.

With kohl-lined saucer eyes, I followed Gunasekharan's actions as he heated up charcoals placed over a medium-size wide earthen pot on the forge filled with rice husk. I watched mesmerised as he turned his attention to his bellows made of goatskin. At one end was a conical long hollow piece of iron with a small vent that was fixed to his forge. The other side was open and fitted with two short sticks. With the help of these, Gunasekharan pumped air into it and squeezed it shut. With muscular arms he propelled the gathered air through the vent to feed the lit charcoals placed within the pot seated on the forge.

The bellow blew itself fat with hot air rising inside and the sight of the fire licking the bottom of the charcoal pieces, then creeping to the top of the pile, playful at first, gurgling like giggling girls, then building up its anger, flaring, hissing and spitting, was more than I could contain within myself.

The tiny flames flew around like a million fireflies, their whirs stirring the air, showering my being. I felt I was in heaven.

I watched Gunasekharan place an earthen crucible on the flaming charcoals, caught sight of how it turned ruby-red as if in rage, watched how he gently placed our ornaments within it, how they bubbled and frothed and turned into a liquid puddle before my unbelieving eyes.

I waited while he poured this golden mess into a waiting black cast-iron trough lined with oil where it sizzled and spluttered before settling into a solid slab. A dull line of gold. After its volatility settled somewhat, he finally dipped the slab into a vessel of water and then into another utensil containing some magic liquid from where it emerged as a gleaming, gold bar.

Over the years I saw Gunasekharan fashion many gold bars into intricate pieces of jewelry for festivals, marriages, death ceremonies and for temple deities, all stoking and keeping my own fire lit.

Yet it was only in my forties, far away from my home town, that these memories began to collect and bond together. I began to see a pattern in our women's connection to fire. The women in my state. They seem drawn to it as I.

There is Kannagi to begin with.

Then there are records of a war that took place in the 1700s in my Tamil Nadu where Queen Velu Nachiyar's husband was killed by the British. To avenge her husband's death and to protect her kingdom from invasion, the queen built an army. Despite high preparedness, her army and weapons were not a match for the guns of the British. Determined to protect her people in battle, she vowed to destroy the British ammunition depot.

The ammunition was stored in a temple and only women, assumed harmless, were allowed to enter. Using this prejudice to her advantage, she, accompanied by the fellow women warriors of her regiment, entered the temple under the pretext of worshipping. All of them carried lamps filled with oil and passed unnoticed. Once inside, the women came together and poured the oil they had brought on their queen. Drenched, she entered the storehouse and set herself ablaze till only a skin of flame remained. Eventually, the queen's army fought and won the battle.

Then there are, again, the tens of hundreds of present-day women of my state, bound to me through sisterhood and conjoined intensely with one another, as the trees in my village are, who routinely immolate themselves when there seem to be no solutions to their intractable problems.

This phenomenon happens predominantly in Tamil Nadu.

Knowing this, I have now set out to learn a new grammar and syntax about fire.

While my grandmother's legacy is why I will always light candles in the night, exult in taming flames within the rims of earthen lamps during our yearly festival Diwali and continue to live my nickname *neerupu kucchi*, matchstick yet literally translating into fire stick, I intend to separate memory from knowledge—to recognize the orderly fires in my world, yet remain mindful of the wilder, more dangerous ones in other women's lives.

Vital Point Gone Missing

That unsettling notion
things are as they are
for no apparent reason.

A niggling intuition
that in the end
nothing has been overlooked,
and even so it would little matter.

You're either half way in
or you're half way out,
declares a passing street-philosopher,
rain beginning to fall,
the traffic grating,
your train leaving the station
and you're not on it.

Accumulation

The second-sighted bard or hero placed his thumb on his wisdom tooth, bit it, sang a verse and offered sacrifice to the gods. –The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols

1.

Here's my tooth, as I stand at the mirror, left finger inside
my mouth
I arch my neck poking the gum

My incisors are stained as kitchen tiles
I stroke my cracked-wise tooth with a brush

glance at an outline breaking into the shape of a wolf at the
edge of the glass
How does the mind work when teeth are tiles and outline
is wolf
How wise the tooth used for enchantment

2.

The wolf sat under the picnic table eating bird seed
while I, troubled by the usual blue mess, let dust collect on a shelf

Recently mist as white as paper on the flat plain of the lake
rested like Lucite across the table of morning

Still I picked at a cracked cuticle and mocked my skin
though the cricket continued her hike up the back stairs

3.

And your death is an old cohort
and your death bed a thought bubble keeping wolves at bay
and you can say wolves are words
and your blue eye frames its contour

4.

Inside your brain thoughts wash themselves like a blender
Your pre-frontal cortex grows cells and your teeth snap
like the choppers
of the wolf

A shouting scratches your skin like tree bark
A shouting slams your mind like a fist
That speech is mostly mine
I speak therefore-I-am possibly
Speech that burrows into the tongue
Speech that is both/and
Speech that is song

(Are you saying I should declare my suffering before it floats away neatly folded?)

5.

The browsing wolf drifts into the kitchen
She howls, am I alive, am I alive

Her chest grey, with a tail so long it sweeps the floor and chairs
go flying
the wolf howls, am I alive, am I alive

It's a story about brokenness moving in slow motion like a train late
at night when you are going home

The tracks tick by as you approach your stop
you are leaning on the rails
you don't have to run anymore
who said anything about the value of your burden

The wolf howls from inside your eye sockets
the field narrows as you look into her mouth

Inside your sentences the wolf races her bodies at night
If you think about accretion she appears

Is this face the wild roof of the world
is your face the blue shore of your brain

The wolf is as wild and blue as your mind
am I alive, am I alive

Invisible

As if falling back into a swallowing field of green
a horse stampede over the body's ghost bucket
rusted-through and leaking
teetering cliff-edge close and over
Again I wonder about my family's need
for red entertainments—meat, leaders, wine—
subtle slaughters that make me think
of mortuary flower shops
how death's ruddy scent furloughs there
in the most genteel blossom fists
vibrating along pistil and vein
holding the party line
prompting duende clusterfuck in those of us born
with one finger in the socket
nectar swirling inside each peony's collapsing throat
while ants dance in the grass around tombstones
outside and overripe oranges drop from trees
the missed juice—critical—a matter of timing
of unattended sweetness
Lorca lying by the road saying love me love me
on his knees until the end
until the bullies wouldn't tolerate a flame
to truth and put a bullet hole instead
my brother's troubled loving
loving troubled men and for a while thinking
he wanted a child but it was just his boy self
sidelined in the gutter ball lane of growing up
How to forget the little pedestals
the concrete grins he kept erecting all evening
the last time we gathered? The corpse of himself
hiding inside his cheek's columbarium
the flowers fading there desperate for water?
That lesser him needing way more
than stupid holiday gifts like the Snoopy tie
we knew he'd love because some seed of him
stuck in a Peanuts fairy tale forever
the famed beagle and his yellow bird
Red Baron seared to his doghouse bomber
in the smoky hours counting down to Christmas
my brother sipped champagne
shut his mouth around a cracker of pate
the plans he was making to put a gun there next day

Useful

I dug a hole today,
Not one of my
Emotional pits,

But a real hole,
For transplanting
Blueberries.

Most of my holes
Take moments to dig:
Just one thrust

From loss or regret
Plants me deep in rock
Where nothing grows.

So I was pleased to sweat
In the constant sun,
To control my shovel,

To make something
Useful
In the ground.

Dear Americans,

I am resting in the Protestant Cemetery of Rome my spirit communicating from the vast pool of poets I am grateful that you remember me by quoting constantly the beauty is truth, truth is beauty pericope etc. from my poem Ode on a Grecian Urn (I called it to a Grecian Urn btw) your T.S. Eliot claimed to have no idea what that meant he a poet with footnotes think about that.

I'm sure you understand the truth-beauty dynamic quite well and I am warning you to be cautious in your truth telling I see it is diminishing and your beauty is not that elevated that you can afford to compromise on truth so I am urging you to call out a lie as false on every occasion thus the most dangerous sacrifice I see from my perch in the past: truth on the alter burnt to an unintelligible crisp. Call a lie a lie.

The lyre strings on my tombstone are broken because the music is almost lost to the instrument if you know what I mean. Make the repairs. Come visit in Rome that guy inside the door by the café near the Spanish Steps, the one with the cream cravat? That's me.

John Keats, poet

Mouse In The House

Imperious mouse, set loose
upon an unsuspecting Earth.
A reaver pillaging crofts.
A bullet in search of a gun.
A flower under the heel
of our Great Dictator.

A mouse is a mouse is a
coin dropped down a sewer grate.
A fingernail pulled out.
An extraterrestrial biological entity.
A mouse is a soul
refused entry into paradise

and now wanders in night.
A noise in the forest's understory.
A shadow crawling up a wall,
seeking the inevitable.
Which, by definition,
is bound to happen.

High Desert Calculus

When unknown people drew
a house and dragged
the wood to raise it
our dirt road bent
to backhoe
metal arms and
excavation
Loaders crept along
the earth and rocked
the shoulder downing limbs
to drag the wood to raise
a house where once we
eyed long silence
Our dirt road
bent the open sky to endless
excavation
to scooping
wild noise
And on it goes: loaders
catch the earth and arm
with trees and clatter
Crows sit atop
connectors
cross their legs
trucks cough and lurch
The wind holds up
the crows
trusses and siding
a roof on Thursday
Friday full
of angles
The wind hauls up uneven
leaving wounds
Along the nicked sky
timber expands
in body
No sky left
without

Refuge

The smell wasn't warm and homey. It was the smell of trouble. It meant my mother was baking—stress baking she called it—and she mostly did it after Hurricane Joeyvee made landfall in our living room. My father, Joseph Vincent Donofrio, was the cause of the trouble, which started if he came home late after a night of drinking with his friends or sometimes didn't come home at all after forgetting he was married. The stormy arguments that followed began with accusations and excuses and usually ended with broken dishes and Dad storming out of the house headed God knows where. Then I'd hear the rustle of parchment paper and clatter of mixing bowls and cookie sheets and being taken down from kitchen cabinets. We ate a lot of cookies when I was a kid.

Unlike the smell of the cookies, which made its way to me by coming up the stairs, the sounds of my parents' seedling divorce came to me straight through a hot air heating duct intercom that ended just above the baseboard in a corner of my bedroom after making a stop in the kitchen on its way from the basement. It was my earway into the lives of my parents, letting me hear every word they would have liked to have kept from their little pitcher. Unlike my grandparents, who spoke to each other in Italian when they didn't want me to understand what they were saying, my parents were second-generation Americans and English was their preferred language for scouring each other.

Next to the heating vent grill there was a child-sized rocking chair which was hand-made for me when I was five or six by my Uncle Al who had learned furniture-making from his father. Uncle Al's rocking chair was where I sat to warm my feet beside the vent, read and shut out my parents "discussions" by listening instead to the voice of Tom Sawyer, Scaramouche or Sherlock Holmes. It was a sanctuary from the time I was in kindergarten until I was nearly out of middle school, a place where I could retreat.

Joey V. did eventually, and predictably, leave my mother and me. It was mom's best friend, Evelyn who summed up pretty much everyone's feelings by proclaiming "good riddance to bad rubbish." After that, mom baked a lot less often, usually only after her sister Selma came by to criticize her for "giving up on her sacred vows of marriage."

When the time came for me to move out of the house and into an off-campus apartment, I left the rocking chair behind. The upholstery on the arms was threadbare, the padding was oozing out of the seat and it made a disquieting, distracting squeak when it rocked. It had served its purpose, outlived its usefulness and was too small for me now anyway. It would be like trying to get comfortable in an economy airline seat. Besides, Uncle Al had died a few years back from a middle age heart attack, so he wouldn't be coming to visit, asking where the chair was. I did however take the books with me. These days, even if I have clients to meet with or closing arguments to prepare, I get home before it's time for my son to get into bed so I can read to him, sometimes from one of those old books. I've started to think that one day, maybe when my mom dies and I clean out her house to get it ready for sale, I might bring the rocking chair here, get it fixed up and see if Paul Jr. would like it in his room. Or I might just take it to the dump.

The Hive

Son:

Last night
I watched you steal a cig
and light it on the stove.

You slipped outside
to weave the smoke
and set it, flaring,

in a hive of bees,
to smother them softly
to sleep. First,

the workers
then the guardians,
then the queen

the last to quit, withered
into the wind.
I yelled,

but you would
not heed me, threw stones
but you did not care. You, who

thrashed
with knuckled fit, fought
hard to stay with womb,

what called to you there?
What carried on
into the amethystine mist,

wooing
you out for its pleasure?

Hypnagogia

For months
she watched
the black cat
climb the fence
and toe along
its splintered edge
to wait for
fledgling to fall.

My daughter
would slap
the glass. Swear
on earth she'd
never live,
if the nest
she watched
the mother
weave
with string and mud,
succumbed
to the cat's
swiped claw.

I'd feel her
pulse, head.
Wipe away
where worry grooved,
and wait
with hope
the cat would slip,
streak away
dejected. Darling,

I'd whisper.
And the girl
who rose
with waking dream
and lived
like tangled prey,
would look up
desperate
and shaky. Say:

Here, right here,
do you see
them daddy?
They are searching
for safety
but empty
of song. I scream,
so you come
back alive—

Paul Telles

Surrender

Only the strongest squirrels
Can scale the slippery pole
Where my neighbor hangs suet.

They flail so haplessly
Even the birds aren't disturbed.

So why does the woman wave
Her ladle at the squirrels?

Perhaps like me she cannot
Bear to see her battles end.

Friday Night at the Candlelight Lounge

She was better than I expected, hunched over the mic, arms and legs entwined with the silver stand like she was fucking it. My ex-lover, Pete said she sang jazz ballads mostly, throaty and low. *Almost like Billie*, he said, how she lagged behind the beat, her voice catching on the blue notes. Pete said I should catch her act, if I was in town. Look, it was June in L.A. — the gloom fogged my vision. Pete warned me. *Careful! She's bad news. Lonely. Clingy.* But those days I was needy, too. I could care less that her nose was crooked, that her speaking voice was little more than a whisper. I overlooked her slouch and her wandering eye, and those clothes she wore, wrinkled Dockers and a food-stained shirt. After her set, she stood in the doorway. Her untamed black hair, a frizzy halo. Her hands were in her pockets. Her eyes were on me. She made my fingers ache. I got up from my ringside table, left my jacket on the chair. *You want a drink?* I asked her. When I returned from the bar with two tequila shooters, she was sitting in my chair. Wearing my jacket. A noticeable improvement to her outfit. We clinked glasses. *Salud!* Pete said she was a cheap drunk. *Two rounds after each set*, he laughed, *she turns into a slut on wheels.* Already her head sagged against my shoulder. She had a tiny snore I found endearing. *Whatever you do, don't take her home*, Pete warned. Of course, he'd say that. He had what they call 'graveyard love' that 'I don't want you anymore but I don't want anyone else to have you' kind of love. The kind of love that makes me want to do the exact opposite of whatever he asks. So after the club closed, I took her home. Invited her into my bed. She was ravenous. It wasn't just sex or tequila, she consumed my thoughts, my marijuana stash, my peace of mind. She raided my closet. Stole my favorite thigh-high boots. When she forged my name on checks, I forgave her. When she rearranged my furniture, re-hung all the art, I looked the other way. And when Pete snuck into the bedroom one midnight, begged for forgiveness, wanted a threesome, I welcomed him. Look, I know it's crazy, but none of this mattered. What mattered was how she sang love songs in the shower. What mattered was that first night, at the Candlelight Lounge, how she stood in the doorway after her set, backlit and dangerously beautiful.

I Wanted Boys

Silent muscular boys,
boys with letter jackets.
Boys with dope who looked like Jesus.
Guitar boys. Mountain boys
with crossbows and trout
on a string. Boys who asked me
if Tampax made me come.
Boys who proclaimed
to the entire student body
they fucked me in the back of a truck
when they hadn't.
And finally, at fifteen, the one
my mother detested.
First boy who wanted me
who I wanted back.
who kissed me like a question
ending in *please*.
Whatever happened to him?
Does he drive a Land Rover?
Does he live in a beach house
above Waikiki?
Has he learned to live
without Coronas and Quaaludes?
Are his teeth knocked out?
First boy who touched me when I
was fearful in a dream
of pleasure. Whom I touched
fearfully, felt the alien slip
of testicle, his manhood—
pale veiny hybrid
of fungus and fauna.
Is there anything more velvet
than flesh?
Like the first skin to skin
after the blood-cry of birth
when we're placed at the breast.
Squeeze of oxytocin.
Sebaceous smells I'd forgotten.
How real it was, a new
mother I wanted to suck on forever.
What she'd taken from me
with backhands and cracked kneecaps

whatever it was she did to me
before I ever learned a word—
I took back, deep into my body.
Whatever happened next didn't matter.

Equation

Q: Princess Rosie finds a crucifix under her pillow. It tells her of a fountain pebbled with dirty coins where a milk-white koi drinks the dark water in which it swims.

If the koi = vesica piscis
and the crucifix = $\infty \div \text{time}$

Solve for why her mother locked her away?

Hint: rose + cross
(yoni) (lingam)

Q: One day the Prince came upon an old man sitting at the mouth of a bottomless pit. The old man told him as a child he'd dropped his most prized possession down the hole and sat the rest of his life staring into the abyss where it had fallen. Then the Prince felt something heavy and shiny in his pocket.

Solve for how the old man = pit/pocket/Prince.

Q: Queen Jane, who was barren, fell asleep in her garden where she was found by 3 fairies. The first bestowed upon her a son that was born a wild boar that mauled her husband with its tusks. The second granted her a madness so she thought her pig-son was the handsomest man in the kingdom, fit to sit the throne. The third mumbled something under its breath.

Given that Queen Jane = consciousness

and the 3 fairies > x, the unknown, to fight against it is to admit its influence.

Solve for how this happens to us all?
What is the beast your birth into existence
that kills everything you love?

Why do you think it is the most beautiful?

You ennoble the thing you destroy.

Peace/Spiders

A tiny red fellow hung
from a driftwood mobile in
the white kitchen sunlight
when the grapevines were shooting
and so was the corn.
I had just moved here
didn't know anyone, didn't care to
in the year of my peace with the spiders.

Slender web on a finger
fate in a hand
to crush 'neath a heel
or cast to the wind like a seed.
My son was born
five hundred miles away
and I didn't know him
barely knew her,
and I was alone in the year
I had peace with spiders.

I opened the door
raised that spider to the gold morning sun
blew like a storm and said
"Go, eat flies!"
Then I worked on a book
about addiction and poison
and people all alone
in my year of peace with spiders.

Spiders began to gather 'round my door
hang in corners
around my chair on the porch
where I read and wrote.
She called me one night
yelled for twenty minutes
then hung up.
And I could find nothing to say
in the difficult year of my peace with spiders.

When the grasses turned golden
from the fresh green of spring
and spent webs

hung like dusty nooses from my ceiling
I paid child support
lost two jobs, drank wine and was broke,
the year of my truce with spiders.

I saved them from showers
and sinks and brushed them gently
from corners when their webs grew too thick
I met a woman
who smiled at me
with the hungry eyes of a spider.

I fed one a June bug
her nest a white silken tunnel
in a crotch of drain.
She loved me in a tent
all lightning and thunder
rain falling down
on the Mendocino coast
one night in this summer of
Spiders.

A spider bit me as I slept
just once all the summer.
I'd killed one that morning
in the shower in my haste.
Now the spiders have left
because the cold rains have come
and I am alone
with the hungry calm of a spider.

Stale Traps and Closed Cafes

One night, hunger led him around like all suicidal rats
Rats which for bill of distance and time cannot have their own farms
And for the eternal spell on them will not stride without caution
Looking for food while thoughtful of traps
Like a soldier in whose mind is merged enemies' blood and white flags

It is surrounded by the scent of its brother's skin and blood
Knowing what lot awaits, it goes away as if it never saw

Like this night stalker who met the cafes closed
Healed and uneasy

Dead Bob

Dead Bob slept behind windows covered over with aluminum foil. The flies could not get to him there. They were not why he covered his windows with foil.

*

The screens over the windows of Miss Gay Alabama's home fit snugly but one, loose in one spot, one corner, you wouldn't have noticed, it curved up a smidgen away from the window frame. Miss Gay Alabama slept soundly. She awoke to find herself spotted with itchy bumps, each with a tiny red hole in its top center.

Damn. What happened to me?

She found a blood-sucking fly on the window screen. Engorged, too big now to squeeze to safety.

Bitch. That's my blood.

*

Renee of the Red Army readied for work. Hard sausage and saltines in the shoulder bag. High heels and tight skirt for better tips from the old men.

She never went anywhere without food.

She'd go home with an old man for an extra tip.

She went home with Dead Bob once.

*

Summer was the rainy season. Thunderstorms bulking up over afternoons, spilling their guts on the city come evenings. Rain was a blessing in the desert. Twice as much rain was not.

It was a good year for flies.

*

Fiona was a Scot. She painted abstracts on canvas twice her height. Curl-edged paintings, unstretched and unframed, shades of cream and khaki, tan and brown and red. No blacks.

No one understood her paintings.

No one understood Fiona. When she spoke—except for Miss Gay Alabama, she could sometimes make it out.

You guys. Just pay attention. It's not Gaelic.

*

The flies didn't get into the restaurant. The windows didn't open and there were bug lights over every door.

*

Fiona was the second-string hostess. She arranged menus at her station. Miss Gay Alabama arrived.

You covering for Terri tonight?

Fiona nodded and said something.

Probably. He's off tonight, too. I swear, I don't know what those two see in each other.

Fiona said something.

Oh, girl, you sure called that one square on the dollar. A quart of ice cream a day

and he's hers for life. Did you know he made out with me in my car?

Fiona looked surprised and said something.

That's right. I had a little bud to sell and there we were, smoking and sealing the deal. It wasn't too long before we were all kissy-kissy.

Fiona said something.

Oh, I knew he would. I've been waiting for him. He's kind of cute. Repressed six ways from Sunday. But I could see it coming.

Fiona said something.

I have no idea. You would think she could. She has two eyes and they both seem to work.

*

Renee of the Red Army sat at the bar. She sliced small pieces of hard sausage and ate them with saltines. Dead Bob was sure to come in. He always came in. Kneipenhocker. What her father would have called him.

That was a long time ago.

Herr Kneipenhocker, wie geht's? Hat du durst?

*

Zzz-zt. Zap.

*

Dead Bob checked the I-saw-yous every Sunday morning. He was never seen. And what would a seer see if seeing Dead Bob? Heavy-lidded light green eyes, always half-closed. Dimples so deep and old they were ruts. Mouthful of rotting teeth.

How else to explain Dead Bob?

He had the most beautiful singing voice. Rich, full baritone. Put Sinatra to shame.

But those teeth. And those eyes.

And then there was the smell.

Dead Bob.

*

There would be rain again tonight. Three nights previous it had rained enough to flood the outdoor patio, force the door to the restaurant to stay shut. But no one had been dining on the patio. The flies saw to that.

*

No one ever saw Renee eat all of her sausage and saltines. She always re-wrapped the uneaten length and crackers and returned them to her shoulder bag. She never offered any to anyone, either.

Miss Gay Alabama sat at the bar.

Mizz Red Army, you never offer anyone any of your sausage and saltines. Why is that?

Oh, I'm sorry. Are you hungry? Here.

No, that's all right. I'm not hungry. I'm just curious. You always have them, too, your sausage and saltines. Why is that?

The war.

Was that when you married the Red Army?

Not the whole army. Just one of them. It was the best thing to do.

*

Terri of Rusty and Terri thought she was pregnant. She told everyone at the restaurant, I'm pregnant. I think I'm pregnant.

Miss Gay Alabama said, Girl, that's wonderful. Rusty, don't you think that's wonderful?

Oh, yeah. Sure. We'll have our own little rug-rat.

Renee of the Red Army said, Terri, did you get a test?

Not yet. But I'm going to.

Fiona said something. No one could make out what it was.

*

No one knew why Dead Bob kept his windows covered in foil. Renee asked him, the one time she went home with him, Robert, why do you do that?

Dead Bob didn't say.

*

In came The Amazing Electric Max. He bellied up to the bar.

I make a thousand dollars a day, free and clear. Give me a drink.

Renee stood behind the bar.

That kind of money, Max, you can afford to buy one. And don't forget to leave a tip.

Show me some leg.

Renee of the Red Army hitched up her skirt.

The sky outside darkened. Max bought a drink and he drank it. He bought more drinks and he drank them, too. He ordered a steak from the restaurant menu.

Rare. I want to see blood.

Fiona came in and was concerned. The Amazing Electric Max squinted at her.

I can never understand what that Cockney is saying.

Fiona said something. Miss Gay Alabama made out, "cock-splattig pig-sticker," and was glad of Max's opacity and Fiona's accent, both.

Fiona was still concerned and said something else. Miss Gay Alabama followed her to the door.

Well, I'll be. I've never seen such.

Not far from the restaurant, three funnel clouds spun slowly around each other and made their way north. Fiona said something.

No, I don't think so. They're headed up the valley. We'll be okay. Fine and dandy.

*

It was almost dark when Rusty came in.

You guys! You would not believe what happened!

Miss Gay Alabama demurred. Oh, honey, you know we would. We believe every little thing you say.

Max took a napkin and wiped the blood from his lips. So tell us what it is that we're not going to believe.

The baby slid out.

What?

The baby. It just slid right out.

What on earth are you talking about?

Terri went to the doctor for a checkup. He did a DMC and said that somehow the baby had just slid out. Terri didn't even know. The doctor said all that was left was the placenta. So he took that out, too.

Renee lowered her voice and turned to Fiona.

He is such a fucking fool.

Fiona nodded and said "witless twit," then asked Rusty a question.

I'm sorry, Fiona, I never understand. Bammy, you can always tell—what did she say?

Miss Thing, she asked if Terri's all right.

Oh, she's fine. She's at home. A big gust of wind came up and blew one of the barn doors down. She's fixing it up.

Max belched. Renee, I need another drink.

I'll bet you do.

*

Zzz-zt. Zap.

*

Lightning flashed and rain beat against the restaurant's big windows. The Amazing Electric Max lolled in his chair. Blood from his third steak dribbled down his chin. His drink sloshed in the glass he waved at Dead Bob.

Robert! Give us a song! Our favorite! You know the one! I'd sing it myself, but I've had too much steak!

Dead Bob smiled, showing his rotting teeth. He had a beautiful voice. Lightning struck the power transmitter on the pole behind the restaurant. The lights went out. Bob sang, thunder obliterating the opening verse.

Salty Ghazal

The smell literally wakes the faint: salt
oceanic, islands, volcanoes, and Lot's wife turned to salt.

Though not floral like rosemary, she thinks, its bite
casts a hollow by its absence, a zero of salt.

Into stock with carrots, onions, potatoes, she stirs
her lamentation and laughter, earthy as salt.

Commonsense mineral, preservative, lick, -air,
-water, desiccant, of the earth. The verb to salt.

Ask, and it shall be given, even the selfish thing.
Please pass the water, please bring me salt.

Bitter as, sweet as, grain of, pungent as, strong as.
Shaker, cellar, tears, skin, and salt.

She roasts vegetables, bakes bread, simmers the soup
knows she is a cook worth her salt.

Why would you give your child sugar
when he asks in so many words for salt?

Waiting at the terminal in the crowd can it be real
after so many years, his tanned face distinct as salt.

You can train your child to be or know or do
or you can welcome him just for the salt.

So, set another place at the table. Every meal
is a homecoming. Faith, in your eyes, salt.

Mostaganem

He came out of the cliffs at a run, loping
Naked and oiled across the sand to the lazy sea
His cliff-coloured skin
Dissolved, his bones dissolved. Thin ships dozed
Like bored lotharios on a couch of blue indifference –
So far away, the sea between and the iron heat.

Never surfacing, gone God knows where,
The dark apple of his head bobbed in a green bowl
And could not be seized –
On a dune the width of a tennis court, sand scoured
Our unfortunate shins; needles of sand
Wind sharpened, precise, and small black flies.

I wanted nothing more than to save you

heart valves are beaks, aneurisms are ponds.
We renamed the fire you carried:
for that place under water,
where the thick loam of crabs skirt your eyes,
& your veins skittery water sliders.

The sand chimed where you fell,
the webs of your brain scattered
pieces of heat & contusions.
we cut bread that morning, you drizzled honey
on the loaf we made in a pan
so plain it hurt to look at it, had folded corners
metal wings of an origami crane.

You took it with your crab hands,
anemone hands, & threw it to the stars,
who ate it like the hungriest ants.
I held the honey knife, I stood on a coral reef.
I sewed the sail & you repaired the box,
mitered the corners, wove the dove tails.

Ravens in the attic kept flying into the gable.
You nailed it shut, you didn't want any more in.
The cacophony of them scratching a way out,
led to a nightless winter, you walked down the road,
lost, the snow was blue ice & everyone stood by their mail boxes
to watch you, sun so fake, so thin so plastic.

You ignored the sound of my voice:
that littered collection of words,
horseshoe crabs in the rocks who
look for somewhere angular to rest.

Your eyes throw starlings all over the crust
of folded shells & any minute a series of slotted
details crawl like slugs. We took the bread,
the honey knife & buried it.
You walked away like that was enough.

Thundercloud

Old woman in December's
meadow watching the swarm

she lives for birds and the sharpness
of winter's bladed edge

this field in which she bides her time
is a field of ice laid out
like a cerecloth across an altar of loam

bounded by wires shielded
from the sun's white glare
by towers of cumulonimbus

* * * * *

she knows the storm is coming
but still she squats unperturbed

she watches the weather approach
while the crows surround her
dark as violence

this is a harsh world where fear
would be misplaced

this is a world in the terrifying
throes of change
but not here not yet.

The Funeral Bird

I.

In the observing afterlife,
everyone gathers around you
to watch your funeral.

It is a rite of passage.

It is also a chance for the younger
wraiths to debate which of your sisters
is the most fuckable
in her black dress
and sexy-or-solemn expression,
a chance for the elders to place
their shadowy hands on your shoulders,
the quiet voices asking you to point
to your mother.

There,
you say, pointing at the white woman
at the head of the procession.

II.

But there she is, too—

dressed in all black
head to toe, fat rolling and hair
rolling wild, all mourning
but for a pair of oversized, hot pink
sunglasses—a squawking, exotic
bird flying high on grief
and little pills and powders.

“Ay dios mio!”
the bug-eyed bird wails

and the crowd floating above, in the ether,
clucks their formless tongues
and gasps
as she does a beak first dive

directly into the coffin, splaying
her short, ring-cruised wings
over your body.

III.

And for a moment

it is almost nice
you can almost feel her mothering

IV.

your last embrace
when you were eight
was twenty-five years ago
when she put you
shattered starving breathing
into a blue and white Ford
pickup with two white strangers,
a new family, a biological father
you never knew
existed
and you never saw
or heard
from her again.

V.

A white man tries to wrest
this squawking flamingo
from your coffin.

And the observers have so many questions
but all you can think about
is how the scuffle over your corpse
that you can see
but not feel

(do you wish you could feel?)

might knock off your white gloves
might send your severed,
poorly stitched Vienna sausage thumbs rolling
across the polished floor of the funeral home

that she might peck them up
and consume them like worms
just to prove that you
are still part of her.

Basketball

Translated by Julia Meitov Hersey

“This is Alexander,” said the one behind Anton’s left shoulder. Skinny and tall, over six feet, Alexander was clad in a faded yellow jersey with a number “9” painted on the front. “And this is Ludovic.”

Ludovic perched on a rock, in shade provided by a lopsided fence. His glasses in a thin bent frame kept sliding down his nose, and every so often he jerked his head up, forcing them into place. Anton couldn’t take his eyes away from those glasses—he felt something pulling his gaze as if by a thread. Ludovic smirked and winked through the cloudy glass; shivers went up Anton’s spine.

“...And this is the ball.”

The orange ball bounced with a clear twangy sound, and Anton caught it instinctively. He felt tiny bumps on the rubbery surface—it was a familiar sensation, sharply reminiscent of nice things. Of things from the lovely, glorious past.

“Today Alexander is playing for Ludovic, and you will be playing for me,” the other one finally stepped from behind Anton’s back, raised his head and looked up at the sky, squinting at the light. “Such a scorcher today...shall we?”

His name was Mel; he was on the short side—at least compared to Anton and Alexander. Mel wore an orange T-shirt with a yellow and turquoise design on the front—a still-life with two pears and an unnaturally blue plum. His jeans were folded up at the ankles, revealing enormous white sneakers.

“And this is our court. Do you like it?”

The basketball court was completely covered with snow. The one-inch thick layer of snow partly melted and then froze, and it was unpleasant, because the sun burning them from above was invisible yet brutal. And still, there was all this snow on the ground.

“So, anyway, guys,” Mel smiled, and that smile for some unknown reason had a calming effect on Anton. “Go ahead, stretch, warm up, shoot a few hoops, and Ludovic and I will just watch you for a bit. Come on, Anton, go for it.”

There is nothing stranger than playing basketball on well-packed snow. Every now and then his sneakers slipped; the beanstalk, Alexander, let Anton dribble for a few minutes, jog a few feet, toss a few into the basket from the free-throw line—and then they stood in the center circle, face to face.

Alexander went for the ball and almost immediately managed to take it away from Anton. He sprinted for the basket—Anton had trouble catching up to him; a shot—and the ball shook in the net. Alexander smiled nervously, then glanced at Ludovic and Mel, quietly sitting in the shade:

“Come on, let’s do it again...”

They circled the court, having forgotten about the packed snow underneath their feet and the invisible sun above. Alexander was clearly a professional; Anton was ready to stop the game, shrug and give up. At some point Alexander’s face appeared very close to his own, and Anton felt the acrid smell of Alexander’s sweat and a slurred whisper:

“Slacker...Play ball! He’s watching! Play, you bitch!”

Anton got angry. He faked Alexander out with a feint, finally took possession, led

him around the icy court, and each time the ball touched the dense white snow, Anton felt his skills, his reflexes, and the pure joy of the Game return to him. He even managed to be surprised by that.

A grating, labored breathing behind his back; Anton twisted to avoid Alexander and sent the ball into the basket, like placing an apple into a fruit bowl. The orange sphere slid into the mesh as if it were oiled. A soft applause came from the audience. Anton looked back; Mel was clapping. Ludovic sneered, his glasses gleaming in the sunlight.

“Nice work,” Alexander said. His hair stuck to his head like icicles. “Come on, let’s go again...”

And they played again. Alexander scored twice. Anton scored three times, and one of those times he scored from the mid-court. Every time Alexander’s face was close to his, Anton heard the mumbled whisper: “Play hard. Don’t slack off.”

Finally, the ball bounced off Alexander’s knee and rolled straight under the audience’s feet. Ludovic held it in place with the narrow tip of his shoe, looked at Mel, then moved his gaze toward Anton and Alexander who waited a few steps away.

“Go ahead, you two,” Mel said. “Anton, you should meet the team.”

Alexander walked ahead, Anton followed. They went along a wooden fence; Anton fought the impulse to look back at Mel and Ludovic who were still sitting in the striped shadow of loosely fitting two-by-fours. Alexander licked his lips:

“You, uh... You play well. Just don’t slack off. There was this one guy before you... Anyway, just play, and just do it real well, don’t slack off. Got it?”

“That’s what I’m doing,” Anton said. “It’s just that...”

“Nobody cares,” Alexander said. “At least here you got lucky, so work it. Were you in a pro league or a semi-pro?”

“Neither,” Anton said. “I didn’t get a chance.”

“Mel likes pros,” Alexander said. “You are one lucky dude. This is just a pile of good luck here. Well, don’t freak out. Once you get used to this place, it ain’t so bad.”

Anton looked around. Nearby, some thirty feet away, stood two tight groups—the kind of guys whose heads usually float above everyone else’s in the crowd. Four wore yellow jerseys, and four—green ones. One guy, head closely shaven, held a green jersey in his hands.

“Hey,” said the shaved head. “That’s yours.”

“Anton,” Anton said, hand outstretched.

“Vlad,” said the shaved head.

Everyone’s palms were moist. The handshakes were firm and straightforward, no hesitation at all. “Arthur.”

“Igor.”

“Kostya.”

Alexander nodded to his team, and they came over for introductions.

“Oleg.”

“Slavik...”

“I’m Slavik, too...”

“Dima...”

Everyone stood quietly, shuffling from foot to foot. They watched Anton take off his white shirt, then pull on the green jersey, smelling of...what was that smell?

“So we gonna play,” said Vlad, and his discomfort was obvious.

“Yep,” Anton said.

“Who did you play for?”

“For Zenith, the youth division...”

“What do you mean, the youth division?”

“Well, I didn’t have time to move up...” The green team exchanged glances.

“He is a good ballplayer,” Alexander said. “Mel took him, didn’t he?”

“Sure thing,” Vlad agreed readily.

Anton thought he sounded relieved. “Come on,” Alexander said. “It’s time.”

To Anton, it seemed as if only a couple of minutes passed since Ludovic said: “Go ahead, you two.” Both Ludovic and Mel still sat in the same place, in the shadow of the crooked fence.

“Are you ready?” Mel smiled.

He had a nice, sincere smile; with an immediate boost of confidence, Anton smiled back tentatively: “But we...what about training? Drills, strategy?”

“Our games are based on players, not on strategy,” Mel said earnestly. “I will help you, Ludovic will help the other team. No fouls, no rough play, listen to the whistle, and the rest you’ll figure out on your own.” Mel nodded, letting him know that they were done talking.

“You’ll be on offense with me,” Vlad whispered.

“But we didn’t practice,” Anton objected weakly. Vlad scowled:

“Just get your head out of your ass and pay attention to the game. I’ll go straight down the center and pull your defender on me, and then I’m gonna pass overhead to you, and you dunk it.”

Ludovic pursed his lips and whistled. The ball flew up; Ludovic’s team moved in for a smooth controlled attack. For a second Anton felt disoriented—Vlad pushed him in the back, screamed some sort of an expletive, and that flicked the switch in Anton: he saw the ball, sent straight into the frozen snow by a wide palm of the guy in a number “5” yellow jersey, then he saw Alexander waiting for a pass, and then he finally saw the entire game—all the wheels and gears, ready to catch onto each other, and there was the other team working as a single mechanism, and here was Alexander attacking the basket, and there were Igor and Kostya protecting it...

There was no slam-dunk. Kostya intercepted, passed to Igor, and Igor passed to Arthur; a defender with a number “6” on his jersey, whose name Anton didn’t remember, blocked Anton. He needed to shake the blocking as soon as possible; Vlad was waiting for a pass, and Arthur passed to him, but Alexander—it was Alexander!—jumped up and grabbed the ball, and flew to the basket, dancing, waltzing around the defense, then passing the ball to someone on his team, and getting a pass back, and jumping up again.

Out of the corner of his eye Anton saw Mel swing his arm. A round rock the size of a chicken egg hit the back of Alexander’s head; the ball bounced off the rim. Alexander fell, long bony arms thrown in front of him.

“Zero-zero,” Mel said calmly.

Already standing right next to Alexander, Anton watched Alexander's eyes roll in place from the back of his head. Anton reached out, but Alexander struggled to get up on his own. He straightened up and kicked the rock off the court with the tip of his sneaker. He touched the back of his head gingerly.

"Don't just stand there," he barked at Anton, "Play." Anton looked at Mel in surprise.

"Go ahead, Anton," Mel said softly. "It's OK."

Anton kept looking around, trying to catch the eyes of his team members. Some looked away. Some smirked. The game was back on.

Almost immediately the opposing team managed a successful multi-stage pass to one of the two Slaviks, who missed the basket. A game is a game; through his shock and the ringing in his ears, the sense of the court, of the ball, of the team was slowly returning to Anton. He was beginning to grasp Vlad's strategy, and was able to mentally complete the winning combination; he threw himself into the midst, took possession and executed a nice pass to Kostya, got a return pass, and immediately sent it to Vlad. Vlad charged, finally managed to get the blocking defender away from Anton, Anton opened up, Vlad passed to him, and for the first time since the beginning of the game, Anton felt truly bold and driven. He dashed for a slam-dunk.

He saw the ball drop into the basket. And then, with a slight delay, pain came; a small dart that looked like a sewing needle with a tiny silk wig on its head, protruded from his shoulder. Fighting nausea, Anton jerked the needle out. There was only a little bit of blood, and it clotted immediately. Somebody was clapping. The ball slid out of the basket and rolled over the edge of the court.

"Two to zero," Mel said happily. "Anton, that was brilliant." Anton looked about him in confusion.

"Play ball," Vlad said quickly. Puzzled, Anton turned to Mel.

"Nevermind your tiny scratch," Mel said. "You made the shot! We are leading, two to zero. Shall we hold the lead?"

The game started again, but now Anton found it difficult to follow. He watched the yellow team charge for the basket, and the green team's desperate defense; he heard Vlad shout at Igor. He noticed Oleg sprinting over to the free-throw line; instead of attacking the basket, Oleg executed a gorgeous pass to Alexander, who by then shook off his blockers. Alexander flung himself over the basket—and at this moment a small iron pellet, a bearing from some random wheel, slammed into Alexander's temple. The ball rolled around the rim but didn't go in; it plopped heavily on the ground. Someone - Ludovic! - swore with disappointment.

"Still two to zero," Mel stated contentedly.

Alexander got up from the frozen snow. He looked around trying to focus. His eyes slid past Anton, not seeing.

"And the ball is back in the game," Mel said. "Anton, what's the matter with you?"

Anton was silent. He watched Alexander shuffle across the court like a blind man. As if for him the world lingered in darkness.

"What's wrong, Anton? The game is on."

“But I can’t play like this,” Anton said.

Ludovic snickered. He jerked his head up, reestablishing his glasses in their proper place, then shook his long lackluster hair. Mel raised an eyebrow:

“Really? Well, do it anyway. Didn’t your mommy teach you to try harder when you couldn’t finish your oatmeal?”

The word screeched like a piece of metal over glass. *Mommy*. Anton shuddered; a mild smile on his lips, Mel stared into Anton’s eyes. Once again, Anton wanted to hide. Hide from this stare, from the word, from everything. He picked up the ball; somewhere inside him grew an understanding that the game was a possible hideout. He suddenly longed to put the orange sphere into the basket—he wanted it desperately, intensely, like someone wanting to scratch an itchy mosquito bite.

He charged. Sound of a ball hitting the frozen snow. Vlad understood him immediately—such an awesome playmaker he was, that Vlad. A pass, another pass, a feint; a sprint, a fake, a jump...something hit Anton from behind. He tripped and fell, sprawling in the snow; he couldn’t feel his body and didn’t see his back, but somehow he knew that the handle of a heavy throwing knife was sticking out of the middle of his back, and that it was the end, and it was unfair, and it was rotten, but this cruel game was finally over.

“Four to zero,” the words came from above and far away. “It’s only the beginning,” the answer came.

“It’s a good start. See, Lud, I was right.” “Let’s keep going.”

“Let’s keep going...”

“...going...”

Anton shut his eyes, waiting for the pesky echo to subside in his ears. Waiting for the finite silence. “Don’t get too comfortable,” a tip of someone’s shoe lightly poked him in the ribs. “Get up.”

Anton felt someone’s hands forcefully pulling the knife out of his back. “Come on, get up. Up you go.”

Someone pulled him up by the hem of his shirt; he realized he could once again command his arms and legs. He realized that his back hurt, and the pain was dull and slow, as if he was hit by the end of a shovel. It happened once, in the country, Anton’s neighbor got very upset about a cleaned-out cherry tree, and...

In the country? A neighbor? He raised himself on all fours. Then he managed to crouch; Ludovic stood over him, wiping the blade over his pant leg. His eyes, mocking but not cruel, shined from behind the cloudy lenses:

“Mel was smart to pick you...You are one stubborn bastard. Ready to play?”

“Now?” Anton asked softly.

And he heard how pitifully his question hung in the air. “Should we let him rest?” Mel’s voice rang in the distance. Anton forced himself to stand up.

“Fine,” Ludovic smirked. “Go ahead, guys, hit the showers.”

*

White tiles covered the shower walls. Here and there dark concrete squares gaped in place of lost tiles; water drops hung heavily from the ceiling, and from the plastic spray nozzle hanging on a long nickel-plated pipe shot a wide fan of intensely hot, incredibly

hot water.

Anton fiddled with the faucet, but to no avail; the water temperature could not be adjusted. The guys stood with their heads thrown back, foreheads thrust towards the scalding streams. Right now they were naked, and Anton could not tell his teammates from the others. Mel's players from Ludovic's. The shower room was spacious. Everyone got a faucet to himself.

Unintentionally (or perhaps on purpose) Anton chose a spot directly across from Alexander's shower cabin. Out of all those kids he felt closest to Alexander. Maybe it was because Alexander was the first one he met?

"Just jump right into the shower," Alexander watched Anton cooling the water in his palms. "You'll get used to it. It's not like it's boiling."

"Really?" Anton asked tentatively.

"Trust me," Alexander said. "Just get in the shower."

Anton obeyed. The first moment was unbearable, but then—rather quickly—he actually got used to it, and only winced under the heat.

"So why did you do it?" Alexander asked staring at the ceiling.

His cheeks were too pale for someone who was standing under scolding water. Anton chose not to answer.

"I was drafted," Alexander said. "Those morons in the army...whatever. Anyway, I was in the army, what about you? You too?"

"I never got drafted," Anton said. "I was a student."

"So it wasn't because of the army?" Alexander was surprised. "Then why did you?" Anton pretended not to hear.

"I thought they would take it easy on me," Alexander said wistfully. "Because of those jerks. But not even close. I was just lucky that Ludovic was looking for a basketball player. Otherwise, I'd be out according to the standard procedure."

"What do you mean, according to the standard procedure?" Anton asked. Alexander shivered under the hot sprays:

"Who the hell knows. I imagine it is worse than here...Like a whole lot worse. This guy who played for Mel before—he's out according to the standard procedure now."

"Why did you call me 'bitch'?" Anton asked. Alexander gave him a harsh side glance:

"You don't get it, do you? If you kept playing like you did the first ten minutes, you wouldn't even be here anymore. Things would be very different for you."

Water gushed out of the nozzles. White tiles gleamed. "Why d'you care?" Anton asked.

Alexander sighed:

"People should support other people."

The guys spoke to each other in the nearby cabins. The wet arches of the ceiling made their voices sound strange, bird-like.

"Yeah," Anton said to break the silence.

"I mean," Alexander rubbed his shoulders with both hands. "If even one of those jerks ended up here...I would try to help him out, honestly, even one of those morons."

"What did that guy do?" Anton asked softly. "The one who played my position?"

“He was goofing off,” Alexander said reluctantly. “Or maybe he wasn’t. Maybe it was just the way he was. And actually, he was good, he played for a good team. Mel said he didn’t love the game. To love this game—it means...Look, you scored twice today. And I flopped twice. I fail like this couple of more times—and I am done, according to the standard procedure.”

“No,” Anton said quickly.

Alexander shrugged.

“No. Because next time I won’t fail.”

“How can you love this game?” Anton whispered. Alexander smiled ruefully:

“A game is a game...” Alexander sighed. “I’ve been playing basketball since school. Since first grade. I thought I’d be playing basketball all my life. And then I was drafted. And there, I didn’t make it in the pros. There was this one coach, this asshole. And so they did this, according to the standard procedure. So...and if you don’t want to tell me anything, it’s not like I am bothering you. I just wanted to talk, s’all.”

Anton twisted his body trying to reach the middle of his back. He touched the spot where the knife entered his flesh; there was nothing. His skin felt perfectly smooth.

“It’s only spooky in the beginning,” Alexander said. “It gets better. You just sort of get into the routine. The most important thing is not to think about anything. Like Vlad, he’s on your team. Mel changes his defenders like a baby’s diapers. But Vlad is holding up. And you should do the same.”

Water gurgled.

“Now what?” Anton asked. “We play.”

“Again? But...”

“There is no time, you see,” Alexander said, and his voice rang with melancholy. “The worst thing is—there is no time. No mornings, no nights. Nothing. The court and the showers. That’s it. And if Ludovic allows—you can sit in the shade for a bit. But you would have to ask Mel. And Mel is the meaner one, I reckon.”

Anton thought of Ludovic wiping the blade on his pantleg. Mel is the meaner one?

He remembered the grassy backyard underneath his feet, the squeak of a tin awning, his glum determination to punish someone for something. Himself? Elena? Mom? The entire last month he searched for and wrote down in his notebook quotes from the great ones and simply famous ones. Quotes stating that events tend to develop from bad to worse, that if a disaster may happen, it will surely happen, and that the only freedom of choice in this slave existence is having the choice not to exist.

He remembered the shock of pushing himself away. He even remembered a bit of the actual flight. A second, frozen in time; he seemed to remember blood in his veins turning into jelly...

And he knew what happened after. He now knew a lot. Mom came home from work, washed her hands, and began making supper. A small television set stood on the kitchen counter, and one of her shows was on. The phone rang simultaneously on the screen and in the hallway. Mom wiped her hands on a towel and picked up the receiver. A voice, unfamiliar, official, asked her if she was, in fact, such and such...And then she

knew.

Alexander made the shot—a beautiful ending to the attack of the green jerseys. And then he immediately collapsed, because a short arrow with a black plumage was wedged in his neck.

“Those are hard to pull out,” somebody said; it may have been Oleg.

It was pulled out. A large drop of blood rolled out of the small hole; it trickled down, leaving a lacquered spiral around Alexander’s neck. It crawled down to his collarbone, then stopped; Alexander wiped his neck with the back of his hand. He didn’t so much wipe it as just spread it around. Vlad and Anton tried several different plays, but ineffectively.

“You need to practice the actual shots,” Vlad was getting frustrated. “We can plan any sort of different plays, but we’re not going to get any results. You are letting the team down!”

Ludovic seemed pleased; the narrow tip of his shoe swayed slowly. Mel gnawed a blade of grass. Anton was tired. His muscles were pliant, and his legs felt light as if during warm-ups, but inside Anton was on the brink of exhaustion. The invisible sun came down hard on his head from above, frozen snow sparkled underneath his feet, the bright lumpy ball shot back and forth in front of his eyes like a streak of orange lightning. Vlad was saying something, and Anton caught only a few of his words.

“Anton,” Mel called. “Come over here.”

Anton came over. The shade from the fence fell on his face—for a split second he felt better.

“Anton,” Mel said. “I am counting on you, you know. Get a hold of yourself, because, frankly speaking, I’ve got two candidates for your position. Got it?”

“If I could rest for a bit...” Anton struggled with the words.

“You don’t need any rest. You are in perfect physical shape. Either you play now, or you go straight to where you are supposed to be. Got it?”

Anton nodded silently. He walked back to the court; everyone parted to let him through. “Play,” Alexander pleaded. “It’s much worse over there. Trust me.”

*

There was no morning. No night. No one went to sleep. Just now Anton knew what it meant to exist without time. They may have been playing for a day. It could have been an entire week. It could have been a year. His muscles remained fresh—it was his frayed nerves that begged to quit.

The game was getting more and more intense; a foul came after a foul, a free-throw followed a free-throw. The two teams, before surprisingly loyal to each other, now let out streams of obscenities and even displayed some clearly unsportsmanlike conduct. The score was twelve hundred sixty-four - twelve hundred sixty in Mel’s team’s favor. Anton got nine hundred twenty-six points and grabbed four hundred and five rebounds.

It appeared that Ludovic and Mel also gave into the excitement of the game. They also quarreled; now they sat back to back, not looking at each other, and with each shot the “arms race” was getting more and more advanced. At first Anton was getting rocks in the back of his head. Then a javelin pierced his neck. Then a knife in the back.

Then an arrow was shot into his carotid artery. Then, as he was in the middle of a jump, he heard a gunshot; the ball rolled around the rim but missed the basket. While Anton lay on the snow with a bullet in his lower back, Mel and Ludovic started a quiet, tense investigation: Mel insisted that his opponent made the shot not during Anton's actual jump, but earlier, and Ludovic maintained that Mel should learn to lose with dignity. In retaliation, Mel also began shooting Ludovic's players, and the caliber he chose was fit for an elephant. He killed Oleg on the offense about a hundred times, and Alexander was killed two hundred and seventeen times. The last of Mel's shots crushed Alexander's head, so that he lay under the basket for about three minutes before he managed to get up.

"Players up for grabs!" Vlad yelled.

"No breaks! Keep up the speed!" Alexander screamed.

The score was thirteen hundred ninety-eight - thirteen hundred ninety-six in Ludovic's favor, when Mel pulled out a flame-thrower.

*

Drops fell from the ceiling, heavy and clear, and so very cold amidst the shower sprays. Steam thickened. The world appeared as if viewed through a sheet of blotting paper. Alexander's body bore no more traces of soot, and yet he kept on rubbing his sides, his back, and his shoulders. Rubbing his face. His cropped hair.

"...and sometimes you are just ashamed of admitting it," Vlad was saying. "Ashamed of telling people about this nasty thing you've done."

"This stupid thing you've done," Oleg corrected him, wincing slightly.

"This nasty thing," Alexander's voice sounded hoarse. "Vlad's right."

"I lived in an orphanage," Oleg said haughtily. "No one missed me."

"You could have had kids," Alexander gave him a reproachful look.

"Or not," Oleg snarled. "You, the ones who had mothers, fathers...the ones who hanged themselves for a stick of gum—you did something stupid. I had no choice. I would have been killed no matter what."

"Shut the hell up, you. Who do you think hanged himself for a stick of gum?"

Anton stepped away quietly. He turned his face to the wall. Hot water whipped the top of his head.

*

... It didn't happen in one day. It was a slow process. Long months. He still had time. Six months had passed since Elena's wedding. Her stomach protruded like a gigantic basketball. They said it was a shotgun wedding, and told Anton to "forget all about it, to take it easy." Because "she wasn't worth it."

Anton listened. He didn't nod, but he didn't argue either. Only when he came home, he would spend a long time washing his hands, his ears, scrubbing his cheeks with soap. Skin on his face started to flake. Mom bought him a moisturizer. Mom spent hours watching never-ending television shows. He went to the school basketball court and played. Played against himself. Played with abandon. He slam-dunked into a naked net-less basket rim. He slammed the ball into the asphalt. He played in the dark. Blindly. He played.

"Do you realize that if you flunk your courses, you will be drafted?"

Obedient, he went to classes. He understood nothing. He sat there like a bobble-head doll.

He was made fun of—because of his height. They called him Big Foot, Stretch—all basketball players are teased the same way.

Inside his desk he kept photographs of himself with Elena, and he never tossed them out. Such an idiot. He was sick of Mom's nagging. He was sick of her shows. He knew he wasn't going to pass his finals. He didn't have a single friend in the world. He was not needed. That day Mom made him lunch, two slices of bread with butter and cheese. She brewed strong tea in a small thermos. She added an apple. He didn't know about it. He never opened his bag. He only knew about it now. If he had opened his bag, that apple would have held him back.

*

"Mel..."

"Yes?"

Anton realized he couldn't utter the prepared phrase. Mel's eyes were dark green, viscous, and his sneakers—white, like eggshells.

"I am sorry," Anton managed. "I repent."

"Sorry because you weren't playing well?"

"No... Sorry that I..."

He stopped short.

"And?" Mel's wink was almost imperceptible.

"I am scum!" Anton almost shouted. "I am a traitor."

"So what?" Mel sneered.

Anton was silent.

"It does not matter," Mel said. "I am not here to judge you. You should have one task and one thought in front of you: how to get this ball into the basket. This is the only consolation I can offer you. You should be pleased: others have no consolation at all."

*

Only much later Anton grasped the meaning of Mel's words. The court was a substitution for life, and the showers analogous to death. A symbol of despair.

During the game all he thought of was the ball. Only of shaking off the defense blocking him, and of opening himself to the playmaker. Of executing an elegant pass. Of dodging his opponent. Of taking possession. Of making the shot. Routine death that waited for him at each successful shot no longer frightened Anton. Only the flame-thrower still terrified him, but both Ludovic and Mel rarely employed the flame-throwers, saving them for extraordinary situations. Anton watched them burn Alexander one time, and another time it was Vlad who went up in flames. He hadn't yet gotten the flame-thrower himself.

But in the showers, he always remembered what happened. In the showers he always thought of Mom, and of the red apple on the bottom of his gym bag. He stood facing the wet tiles, listened to the guys bantering in the other shower cabins, and saw the grassy yard underneath his feet—and Mom's face, when she found out.

Elena almost never came into his thoughts. She must have had her baby by now. Or perhaps only one day had passed. Or maybe a hundred years. And no one who knew

him was still around. And that meant that Mom was now free; or perhaps it was for eternity.

“Listen, Alexander...”

“What?”

“What did those...those jerks in the army—what did they do to you?”

“Buzz off,” Alexander frowned, instantly distant and glum.

“You see,” Anton let the hot water trickle down his throat. “No one made me. I am one of those who ‘hanged himself for a stick of gum.’ Only I didn’t hang myself. I...”

“What’s the difference,” Alexander shrugged. “Look at Little Slavik. His father was some bigwig businessman. Slavik went to college in England. But he got sick of it. He chose freedom, if you please. And you chose freedom, too. And here I am, with you guys. Because of those jerks.”

“What about your Mom, is she still there?”

Alexander stared at the ceiling, not squinting under the spraying water, as if his eyes were made of glass:

“If only there was some justice...but there isn’t any justice. Ludovic would swap me at the first opportunity. I said to him—you know everything about me. It’s not because I was spoiled or greedy, it was despair. And he said—it doesn’t matter.”

*

“What’s going on with you, Anton?” Anton was silent.

Second game in the row he openly engaged in sabotage. He dropped the ball. He missed clearly open shots. He watched the game without any emotion, strolled around the court like an indifferent bystander.

“What’s going on, you don’t want to play anymore? Are you tired of the game? Are you ready to part with your team—and with me?”

“Yes,” Anton said.

“What?”

“I would like to be treated according to the standard procedure,” Anton said, staring above Mel’s head. “It’s about justice.”

Mel paused. He tapped Anton’s shoulder; the touch of his hand felt like a caress of a gigantic praying mantis:

“What do you know about justice? Bestow your knowledge upon me please. I don’t know anything about it.”

*

“This is Daniel,” Ludovic said. “He’s excellent on offense. Please join me in welcoming him. Anton, may I ask you to warm up with Daniel, a little on-on-one?”

The new guy was over six feet tall and very young, definitely no older than sixteen, glum and tense, but not frightened. He wore a designer T-shirt.

“Let’s go,” Mel tossed a ball to Anton.

And watching the trajectory of the ball, Anton realized he would never see Alexander again. “What do you know about justice?”

Why Alexander? He, Anton, volunteered to be treated fairly, refused to be given some slack. And Alexander—Alexander was always frightened of being treated according to the standard procedure...

“Ludovic would swap me at the first opportunity...”

And here he was, Anton, playing one on one with some guy named Daniel...

This kid was decisive and confident. He was also a few inches taller than Anton. The game went in a circle: Daniel pressed Anton to the line, the ball went out. And again, Daniel pressed Anton to the line.

“Good,” Ludovic said. “Mel, Anton, give me a minute.” He walked around the fence, Daniel following.

“He’s going to swap him,” Mel said.

“What?” Anton didn’t understand.

“This one is no good.”

“What was wrong with Alexander?” Mel shrugged:

“It’s Ludovic’s right to choose his players, not yours, and not mine. Agree?”

At that very moment Ludovic reappeared with another guy—this one was Anton’s age, with a haunted look on his face, scrawny, dressed in a striped shirt.

*

When the score in the new game reached two thousand one hundred eight - two thousand ninety in Mel’s team’s favor, Ludovic put aside his automatic rifle. Anton hadn’t seen the flame-thrower yet, but he knew it was about to appear; he was sure it would, but he still charged for the basket. He knew he was going for a slam-dunk.

The ball was orange, and the fire was white. If one looked at it on the inside. It was white with delicate black branches, similar to blood vessels.

Anton ran and burned—it took a while, a few long seconds. The flame crunched chestnut leaves into tight little rolls. He saw somebody’s letters, with the childish handwriting, and black-and-white photographs dissolving like icicles....Elena next to him, on their trip to the seashore. A photo studio background. Elena is smiling, her arm around Anton’s neck. Elena again, a thin beach cover-up over her wet body. Elena...

“Dear Mom! Please take me away from this camp. This place is boring, and they make us go to bed at nine, and it rains all the time. And I hate my counselor, he’s a jerk. See you next Sunday...”

When Anton was able to open his eyes, the stink of burned flesh still hung in the air. Sneaker-clad feet stood around him—grey and blue sneakers; he saw a flash of egg-white, and, like a ship in the deep blue sea, a pair of white sneakers swam out and stopped in front of Anton’s face.

“Get up,” Mel said.

Everything was covered by soot. There was this smell.

“Now you have a rough idea of the place you’re so anxious to visit,” Mel leaned into Anton’s ear. “And now pull yourself together and let’s play ball.”

*

Water poured down the drain in the center of the shower room. The guys spoke in soft whispers, throwing occasional cautious glances at Anton. The new kid, Kirill, crouched nearby, holding his closely cropped head with both hands. The water was black. Anton struggled to wash off the soot.

*

“Mel...”

“Yes?”

“There is nothing I can do to fix it...I can't turn back. I can't, right?” Mel smirked.

“You want me to comfort you?”

“No,” Anton said. “I was just asking. I was thinking...It's hard to make the shot under the flame-thrower, isn't it?”

“Sure is,” Mel agreed.

Anton looked away. He stared at his hands. The palms were grey, the color of ash. “What if somebody does it? You know...Slam-dunk while on fire?”

Mel studied him for a while, and then he burst out laughing:

“Are you trying to negotiate with me? No, really? Did I get that right? Are you looking for a deal?”

He had very even, very sharp teeth. A large opalescent plum on his T-shirt boasted many shades of blue.

*

The score was fifty-two hundred to fifty-one hundred thirty-six in Mel's team's favor. The newbie, Kirill, was an excellent player, but not much in the psychology department. Every time a machine gun caught his back, he would die in earnest and for long. His teammates had to practically pick him up from the frozen snow, and only slaps on the face would force him back into reality. And every time after it happened, Kirill would wander around the court like a newborn kitten; Ludovic's team lost points, and Anton knew the flame-thrower was about to appear.

And it did.

Anton jumped up from the foul line and saw Vlad dashing to the basket, completely open. Anton passed to him, and Vlad would have definitely made the shot, if it weren't for a thin fiery stream sent by Ludovic, a stream that turned Vlad into a dancing torch. The ball was out. Kirill the newbie slumped on the snow.

Anton walked over to the black doll that only a second ago was Vlad, and that in another second would become Vlad again, dirty and foul-smelling.

“My turn,” Anton said darkly. “Block Little Slavik and pass to me. Got it?” Vlad nodded.

*

Below was the grassy courtyard, and enormous chestnut trees, and cars parked at the nearby entrance. Electric wires. The tin awning creaked. The treetops swayed invitingly. Gentle curves of the clouds called for a flight.

Headlong, like a cat on the wrong side of the domestic law, he threw himself away from the edge of the roof. Stumbling, getting tangled up in a piece of wire, running into antennae, destroying everything in his path—he ran away from the roof, down the stairs, into the darkness. Sixteenth floor. Fifteenth. Fourteenth. Someone staggered backwards:

“Are you crazy?”

(The fire interfered with the images and the thoughts. The ball was white. Everything was white as snow. His charred fingers had already burst, but his eyes could still see the dazzling white light of the final flame.

The flame was thick and firm like gelatin. It was white, with black threads. Anton had a second to watch the basket with its charred rim. By then he was no more, he had

burned up. The large, misshapen ball descended like the head of a snowman. It rolled and fell into the basket...)

He ran out to the unfamiliar courtyard, under the unfamiliar sun, scrutinized by unfamiliar old ladies. The old ladies who never had become witnesses of his flight.

(Fire...)

He was followed by stares and shaking heads; he ran along the sidewalk, stumbling into passersby, threw himself to the pay phone, but couldn't deal with the dial and kept on running.

(Grassy courtyard underneath his feet. The screech of the tin awning...)

That's his building. That's his floor. That's his door. In a moment it will open. "Mom!"

*

White tiles covered the shower walls. Here and there dark concrete squares gaped in place of lost tiles; water drops hung heavily from the ceiling, and from the plastic spray nozzle hanging on a long nickel-plated pipe shot a wide fan of intensely hot, incredibly hot water.

Something Peculiar

This is something peculiar
Something I try to forget
Whenever I chance to remember it
Do you remember it? The laundromat
With its doors hanging open
And the ripped posters on its walls?
You carrying loads of laundry
Across the street in the winter?
There was coffee and cigarettes
And your black things
There was snow pushed onto the sidewalk
And Thanksgiving decorations for your hair
We translated your name into many
Languages that neither of us speak
And drew pictures over each other's hands
Those pictures were less than permanent
As we found the same about ourselves

Rare Book

I read about my disease
in a leatherbound book.
You happen to know,
how hard I worked,
in order to remain
entering The Void
to suppress screams
I walked unfettered.
It's this wherewithal
making me stagger.
Take a good look
at the recent mail.
A name is inscribed,
the namesake chosen
the Western skies show
their signs of possession.

Paris

Because I was the smallest in a line of four
descending in strength and size Father Mother Sister Me
because I sat beneath an ironing board reading *The Wizard of Oz*
and held time's center close like holding a dog in a spinning house
because my mother feared Pentecostals who spoke in tongues
and I became aware of my tongue
called antelopes *envelopes* and the twisting whip *angel in the sky*
because I recited hellish sea shanties
then took the bloodwine of punishment
because with every beating I was reborn into dagger light
because I learned to shut the back door behind me and lie
on pink concrete with a snake's happiness of warmth
because there were bobcats and coyotes in the mustard field
we saw each other and the electric seconds never left me
because I could startle away from pain with a redtail's cry
because I was taught to kill fifty rabbits in a single afternoon
saw their lungs and kidneys tunneled for air and blood
thought of Paris and the sewers where children lived
because I felt the hush and flow of my organs
my glow of meat my crystal bones

One Child, Some Crows, And A Cat

Morning has edged one child under
the balcony of a bombed hotel. Crows
glisten with the dust of the concrete.
The child has not noticed their wings
though the crows have watched some shoes
skipping above her with foreign names.

Instead, she's pretending she is not
the news, not an orphan peeling a lime
under the balcony. The place isn't
much of a shelter though she imagines
her name is being whispered by a cat
jumping beyond the smoke of a small fire.

129. from *Essays in Idleness: a zuihitsu*

Instead of unfolding and refolding the map, one gets lost. Nevertheless, one is at the midpoint between the pole and the equator. Shade pulls one out of the sun. If only one could subtract memory, perhaps then the overlay of intuition would not be so ill-fitting, so stifling. A computer generated weather system offers a rebus of clichés. The common denominator remains to be seen. A cloud? A lightning bolt? Should one stoke or starve the fire? No one, of course, takes the prerequisite and thus the curriculum's scope and sequence is disrupted. An elegy is the most common of souvenirs.

The Pallbearers

When my grandfather's priest swings the thurible
over him, gravity & the pendulum
prepare us for ruin, but luck intercedes:
he neither drops the censer nor taps the casket,
but when he eats the host, it crackles.

He speaks of the everlasting—his voice shaking
the ready tree, these gathered who want comfort,
even those who doubt the psalms remember
their warmth, & crossing pews to reach strangers' hands,
a noble ceremony I have missed for twenty years,

not since graduating from the kids' table
to the dining room where sherry was kept
in crystal, & we were expected
to hold hands during grace. Sundays,
he'd take us to the center of town,

& though I was a secret atheist, I admired
how the room made itself quiet for the sermon
to be delivered, the way my grandfather's
children lifted the weight of their father over
the glare ice, balancing his body & our grief.

The Gallery of Nearly Empty Rooms

For each one gone, there's a room above that keeps it all for a limited time. But you're busy—just crushed—these days, so it's a while before you finally get up for a quick look around. Alone—not that you expected a crowd. Images on the walls are moving but difficult to make out. That one—your favorite aunt. There, a childhood friend. Around the corner, hands on hips, Mom from 1985. You move closer, expecting words, a gesture, something she couldn't make when you kissed her goodbye. You're ready to place a hand upon her face when a buzzer sounds, and the guard admonishes you with furrowed brow.

Weeks preen then wither. A month. Work makes hurt. A colleague broods aloud about the “dull plod to the sod.” Finally—a vacation—you've time to check back. The old rooms remain, but there is little left on the walls. Dejected, you move on, turn, circle, gape at various diminishments. Further and further. A docent provides an updated map. So much has been added since your last trip up. “The current exhibition runs until the 30th!” cries the flyer fixed to the entrance to the brand new wing. You're not ready—and may never be.

It takes time, turn upon turn to find your way out. Eventually, you're home, in bed, where wrinkled dreams of loved ones smooth into one pithy quiz: 1) What were you expecting? 2) Why didn't you see? You wake, answerless, plagued by the thought that the space above shows no end to its growing. You hear hammers and drills, feel the whine and crash. Up, you don a shirt and pants. Dust twirls from a new crack in the ceiling. You escape to work, certain it's a matter of time before it all comes down.

Dictionary

Instruments of light vary like its perceptions. Some call the sky desert while breathing it in. Do words suffer in a false statement? North Pole is wherever you think it is. Our future bends when we blink. Wherever you think you are, flowers grow. Do statements long for a more honest speaker? Some let the sky define them while breathing it out. Perceptions of light cast shadows over lives. Conclusions rely on correct future instruments. *North Pole* and *sky* are synonyms in our language.

Confinement

Sweet air through the bars,
sweet lock on my door,
sweet song outside.
~~Who knows another~~
~~enough to be certain?~~ I
ask my lover to wait. ~~Who~~
~~can say everything~~
~~before silence?~~ The
melody survives in the
air – as if we had begun in
love. Our long guilt hides in
these plaintive notes, our
small memories. ~~Who's~~
~~to say permanence~~
~~exists?~~ My lover bled by
the river. If out there I'm
the singer, here, I mourn
the melody.

Unlearning my place.

Resourceful these days I make all my own wind
and though I died of wellness I've made a full recovery
with all my demons smartly dressed
and a sense of righteous outrage hot to trot.

When the dark waters of sleep
close across my resting butch face
and I become a fat Ophelia
floating down the weedy slope
of memory, hope and duck billed platitudes,
back to childhood, back to faith,
where a diarrhoea fountain
of bare-knuckled nationalism
provided us with its dullard troops
each one trained to shit on sight,
the brightest and best promoted to teach
in the places that smelled of failure and feet,

when masters came to class tooled up
and the biggest looters wore the best suits,
where if you worked real hard and walked head down,
did as you were bid without a song or a dance
then someday son you might become

a supervisor.

It was so much later when reality dawned
that it was so wrong to be so afraid
for oh-so long.

Lord Doing His Part

I heard yesterday, maybe later than most, some space explorers say that there is a star believed to be older than the universe, which makes it somehow easier to remember, to believe there are some who have claimed to have seen the blue watery lanes of Heaven. *Some walk on the foamy waves; some wade within them, but it's all holy*, I hear one say on the radio as I pass state lines through a city. Oh great city of both ancient dancehalls and cathedrals, sometimes I still stop in a building constructed of pale green tile and dark tan cement square—a giveaway to its birth in 1973. It is a building for the lonely to be with the lonely, housed between the echoes of the magnificent within vespers and sorrowing sobs to D and E minor keys in dreamy trancing, the once new sound, the always old: *I still want and love you even though it has all been so long ago*. And in this place dwell the ones of memory loss, and for some so much more, who hum along with one or the other, depending on which side of the pastel aqua walls they reside within. Their names written in bubbly letters on blown up photos: root beer mugs of some diner from 1955. Though this is before or after so many of the prime of their lives. And the priest said it would heal my loneliness, that all I had to do was listen and serve the soft volleyball to them while naming train send off and war by ocean scenes of classic films. Or while, naming the ones they thought had departed, not abandoned them, before the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. Then there were others who didn't know; mostly they were happy when they thought they were back at school, but then the wailing. Their fathers forgot them. Their mothers didn't want them. Their friends would not come back. And the sad part is I couldn't comfort them because most of what they said was of truth. I couldn't comfort them because no one wanted me either. And I had no reason for such sadness to not let my loneliness be healed by their beauty where mystery met truth. The cry in their throat so deep they breathed and that lump would take root deep within me. But I had no excuse for such hurt. I remembered

everything. Nobody would remember with me.
At least you wouldn't and you were only one I had
ever really known. I did not know this earth,
or this earth did not know me. I remember you.
I remember you, walking through every room even
into this one with the aroma of lemon and basil.
She is seasoning the chicken in the kitchen.
She is humming with the plaid table top's transistor radio—
soft acoustic songs from 1973, sounding as smooth
and achingly elated as the far off California shore
and coastal breeze. She keeps telling me her mom is
letting her cook, and the care-aide in her red apron
just laughs, and in her Ghanaian accent says, *Do I look
like your mother to you, Lucy? What am I going to do
with you?* But Lucy just goes on and says she is helping
her mother because that's what good daughters do,
and one day she'll find a husband to help too because
her mother says she's pretty and kind and those
are the ones who find love early. *I'm Going to be so happy;
I'm going to be so happy*, she says jumping up and down,
clapping, going to joyful odes of halleluiah and it is sincere.
Then the care-aide joins in with her, and it's one of
the most touching things I've ever seen, but also sad.
For the woman is quite young but already made old.
Older than you? Older than you? she asks before I leave,
but I don't even know what that means anymore,
except she is too young to be locked away from
any real hope and until her body becomes so pumped
her heart is a balloon waiting to burst and shatter
at the slightest pinch of truth. And I am too old to keep
wandering in my car thinking there is anywhere still
left to go, here or anywhere along the highway with
a lit-up cowboy hat in sparkling brown to lead into
the vintage motel restaurant. And this is not an Americana
or country-western style music kind of city.
So why does it feel sometimes the realest thing
about this place? Or do turn off exit ramps just do that
sort of thing to us? I am gone and I am here now—an orange
glowing skyline and neon blue foreign language invites
to eat of faraway bread, to wash in a pool after red silk sheet
dreaming. And for a brief moment, there is that relief
of reaching some part of our dream, that I have arrived
or I have been here all along. And when the new earth
comes, they will say of us they lived in a time

of great weeping and joy. They will say of us,
they watched over and over from their rides a film
of beauty: pink blossoms along the highway and at night
a lucent blue from roof top tennis courts. I still dream
of those nights, of what it was, what I wanted it to be.
But I know it's time. It's time to go. The new way
is coming, which some say will be the better way.
And I must leave this place.

Once Upon a Lazy River

The brilliance wakes her. She leaves home without making a sound and walks downhill through her mother's garden and passes the broken gate that many times was her pedestal for conducting birdsongs. Led by the brilliant sunrise and the strange feeling it stirs inside, she heads through the pine forest and toward the river.

When she enters the water, it's sensational, she is barely able to stand. A wall of pine trees on a branch of jutting land blocks the view downstream. A pine cone falls and banks off the shore and she laughs at it bobbing in the current. There are monsters in the river beyond those trees, she had been warned again and again by her mother. Sometimes they would eat ice cream at the river's edge where her mother would tell her important things or read aloud. Crocodiles with eyes floating and nostrils making soft, pulsed ripples, and brown bears that snap at fish in midair. For a long time now she stays where the water wraps around her waist and small fish swirl around her toes. She figures there must be a large boat on the water somewhere. There must be people onboard, hands clasped together, gasping at acres and acres of horizon. There must be.

With the sun now high in the sky she lets the warm current sweep her off her feet and carry her past the jutting pine trees. Mesmerized by the bellies of leaves and clouds and birds that come to her like pictures in a book, she lays back and lets herself go. Water sweeps over her cheeks. She gulps its olive green warmth. This must be, she thinks, spitting it back, what they call drowning. She should have left a note, an explanation. Worried people will start searching for her. After a few swallows she realizes it's not as bad as they say.

There is a trout fisherman casting a line. He looks strong in the rippled hat, standing where it's shallow. Home-spun hooks hang like medals on his vest. She feels intimate unease and wonders how anyone could be so focused on rainbow trout when there are lots of fish in the water. She asks, "Can't you spend one Saturday at home?" There is only silence as she leaves him and that annoys her. At a slight dogleg, she notices that her hair, floating behind her, has started to lose some its vibrant dark color.

She hears her mother in her head, "Didn't I tell you about staying safe?" She knows her mother must be worried but a piece of her must understand.

Water as warm as a fire in a stone, it's soothing. There is a picnic on the shore and a meadow of people and small children playing in tall grass. She sees food on a table before a splash weakens her eyesight, before two men holding beer cans motion for her to stop.

"I can't," she says to them.

"Others have," one of them says, pressing one foot in the river.

"No, it's not a good idea," she says. "Besides, what do I really know about you?" The words echo her mother's.

"What's to know?" the other man shouts. "The last one we pulled out didn't have so much to complain about by the time we were through."

The current carries her around a sharp bend and she thinks she hears them both call her witch, or maybe it's that other word. She once heard it is wrong to panic, that flopping about makes it worse. That and what's inside, she imagines, will weigh her down like an anchor if it ever gets out.

The sun starts to set and the air grows cooler. She imagines that those who search for her have switched on their flashlights. For the first time, she aches for her mother and their swimming pool, when all the water ever did was tickle her toes. Pregnant salmon swim upstream. Some dart under swipes of bear claws, while those less vigilant are caught and eaten on the spot. She figures the difference between escaping and being caught is a choice, but she can't fathom for one minute who gets to make that choice.

How long, she wonders, for lungs to fill? There are more clouds than ever. Rain has starting falling and hits her face. Her arms are now tired and weak and sag below the surface.

In the almost dark she sees a couple in a rowboat. She greets them with an ironic smile. She feels disgusted on the inside and keeps it buried. For certain, the young man is pursuing the young girl.

The young man says to her, "Been in the water long? Because your skin's so ruffled where I bet it once was like butter." He doesn't take his eyes off his companion.

"Seems forever." She hadn't thought about her skin before now.

"Why do it?" the young girl asks. "Why keep going? You're like a leach."

She passes by, skin shriveled by the water, so tired she can't reach out her hand for help. She knows what they're thinking. Funny, she never used to read people. She says it for them, "I'm glad I'm not you. No fight left, no kick."

She's convinced that those who search for her have given up by now. All alone in the twilight, then, her heart gives up too.

Retraction

It is quite clear,
that daily diaries
absolve the gods
with their smears.
The first thing they allow
is to swim in the channel.
Their breaths inch
toward the far end
as long as they live.
Heroics get tested,
on the same rocks,
finding their heroics
to be second nature.
Like on a watch face,
the hands whirl slow,
under cracked crystal.

After You Left

I kept leaving my book on the bus
And I kept seeing hats whirling away
From their owners.

It was summer. The city withered
Like a blossom lopped from its stem.
The heat kept growing,

And I saw men breathing clouds
Outside the bars. I heard a heart slam
From across the street.

I heard the buzz of itinerant bees
And saw the water flick its tongue
From the hose.

Nights, I sat alone, scanning the void
For constellations I thought
I knew. At breakfast,

My blade called my orange “wife.”

Famous Long Ago

Einstein's colleagues at the Institute of Advance Study were worried. By mid-afternoon his office wastebasket would be overflowing with empty mini bottles of Tanqueray. Additionally, he had recently shaved his head and grown a wild red beard. He was even talking about getting a neck tattoo of $e=mc^2$. They blamed it all on a radio song that pictured him going around town sniffing drainpipes and reciting the alphabet. At first he had threatened to sue the singer for libel, but now he would often just sit slumped at his desk listening with eyes closed to the ticking of the universe's cooling engine.

&

About 600 miles south of the North Pole still stands the world's northernmost statue of Lenin. There have been many people who feel uneasy in its presence. The face is like a mask, with a guarded but threatening expression. Some years ago, a tableful of coffeehouse radicals confided to a police informer that they planned to topple the irascible old Bolshevik from his pedestal. "We're the rifles our ancestors didn't have," one declared. The informer made a shushing sound. He wasn't used to the kind of drunken talk where you say you are going to do something and don't do it.

&

Schopenhauer had a brown poodle named Atman, which is Sanskrit for self or soul. The dog would often sit with its head tilted to one side and a quizzical look on its face as if entreating the philosopher to explain why he considered nonexistence so much preferable to existence. With no answer forthcoming, the dog would get up and leave the room and deposit, like a philosophical rejoinder, a turd or two in a conspicuous spot.

Nocturne

I'm all decked out in cardboard
(shipping material kind of stuff)
as I climb into your bed, because, see, I need some protection—
something, anything—between my person and your modicum
(and now and again the neighbor woman's boatload)
of wiry hair and gooey moisture, but as so often happens,
the land-o-lakes sun and those clouds that give strong winds
asylum have easily scaled down my pointing "it's-this-way"
peter, and they've whipped up one terrific appetizer salad
from my hanging-garden testicles. O you and I
are simply going to have to outlive the aggressive stars
that keep puncturing dusk-to-evening skies.
My own suggestion would be along the lines
of our using calligraphic brushes and ink to stroke
several crescents and arrows on my cardboard; you know
(I can see you understand): these markings can serve
as phony directional indicators pointing *away* from where
our privates are in hiding, hiding till the moon doffs its mask
during tonight's penultimate hour, and its beams probe
the land for folks still up in this day real soon to vanish.

The Great Encyclopedia

It was the sixties and so we were stoned of course at the US Senate—not the US Senate in Washington, but the US Senate apartment house off Union Square in Manhattan where my friend Tom, who sang his songs and some of mine at Folk City and other Village joints, lived in a flat with a bathtub in the kitchen and a toilet down the hall—when I found underneath the tub *The Great Encyclopedia of Universal Knowledge* (London: Odhams 1949).

“Can it be?”

“What?” said Tom from a purple couch in the corner of the room.

“This book.”

“Yes, it be.”

“But does it really contain, you know, universal knowledge—everything there is to know?”

“That’s what it says,” he said. “So it must.”

“Where did you get it?”

“My father. It was his. I took it when I moved out.”

“Won’t he miss it?”

“He read it. He knows everything.”

“Have you read it?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not ready.”

“I am.” I opened *The Great Encyclopedia* at random and read about the Empire and the victory over Germany and Japan and the Marshall Plan and Stalin and then about Indochina and Korea and aardvarks and lemurs and about hashish and the Great Barrier Reef and Edith Sitwell and Noël Coward and Orson Welles.

“I’m hungry,” said Tom. “Stop reading, and let’s go get some pasta at the Italian place on the corner.”

“Okay.”

As we ate carbonara, Tom asked me what I learned.

“Spaghetti is hard to control when you’re stoned.”

“No, I mean from *The Great Encyclopedia*.”

“Nothing I didn’t know already.”

“That’s the thing about universal knowledge.”

Second Hand

I was finally all at ease after losing my mama to time and then I uncovered that there is nothing ordinary in or of or about the world. All I had to do was sit in my rocking chair and not go anywhere else with the spirit of my mind that likes to run like all that's left of the world is wind and it's trying to prove the world wrong for leaving us in it for all this time. This chair is chipped enough to creak, but it doesn't. I hear that groan anyway, my memory round about fifty-five years old now, of trying to race up the stairs to sneak past the dark so it couldn't snatch me away and hitting the patch of rotted staircase just when I thought I'd survived so I could do it all over again the next night. Several people who have needed their environments to match their interiority have painted this chair, but the gouges in its leg and armrest reveal its true color. This chair does not creak even when it rocks and it rocks me like my mama did when I was still stalling within her, not so ready to get along with things.

12

Mama brought us up to believe what her mama brought her up to believe: everything that's here should be here. She was one of those people that got all grateful and dew-eyed about existence, and I'm not going to make like I don't myself love a good miracle. But I never did ask her if I was made on purpose.

1

My Mama and I, just like she and hers after their separation, are two bodies in one heart.

Mama's eyes were so blue I wouldn't believe she wasn't seeing asters all the time. She got those from Gramma, the ordinary woman turned religious leader by all the writing everyone did about her. It's just like the Jesus situation run backward: Gramma didn't know she was to be worshipped until people starting doing so by writing about her, whereas I think people starting writing about Jesus because He was all, "I'm God in the flesh," which some took as "worship me" and some took as blasphemy, if I've got it right.

We've got volumes of these accounts: stacks 30 hands high, the original version of the copies still instructing people on how to build their lives as underdogs. Though sometimes, the memorializations themselves are second hand: oral accounts penned down. Many seem more like memory cues from someone who's intimately familiar with the material rather than full-blown stories for the novice, which is why all we've got about what started the story writing are guesses.

I didn't know people wrote about Gramma until I was sorting Mama's things after she died. If I'd done that earlier like she asked, Mama might have been here to tell me that "Santa Mary" is Gramma; instead, because I was so damn convinced that Mama wasn't close to death but would be if I started acting like she was, I read through the first six holy volumes of writing about Gramma wondering who the hell *Santa Mary* was.

2

This chair wasn't always made to rock. Gramma had lost her hand somehow—Mama thinks some infection from all the work on the family's chicken farm before we updated to all the new-fangled sanitation—but she pulled a chair from her house to work on anyhow. She plopped it on curves of wood she'd drilled holes into and turned screws through the base and into the legs from the bottom to secure them, all pretty quick for someone without a second hand. This is my guess for what kicked off the story writing, which started as people writing down what they heard and sometimes claim to have seen themselves, I think.

3

This kicked off her first career as the town carpenter. She didn't paint any of her pieces. The legend has it that this is why she only used young—and therefore still real pink—mahogany. People weren't worshipping her yet, but they loved her work, the beauty of minimalistic touch and recognition that nature colors things just fine.

4

It takes some doing to gouge mahogany, but then, I don't know how old this chair is. I just know it was her first creation. I'd gotten through a good bit of my life assuming that this chair is over a hundred years old or something, but that's a myth about myths, I think: that it takes so long for them to develop. Either way, beat-up handmade furniture, whether it's preciously old or not, is one way to align the inside—house or soul—with the outside.

5

I don't know if I gained this perspective by suspecting that this woman put gouges in her firstfruit on purpose, or if they look intentional because I already strive to see everything on the outside in life (that's been there longer term at least) as a mirror. It's the only thing that's kept me from stroking out with bitterness at my wrongdoers.

6

You can tell when (in the writings, not in time) people started worshipping this woman. They went from describing the flicks of her biceps as she scrubbed down her finished woodworks with burlap, to shorter and fewer words about how she takes their fear away. "That woman is a window" appears in most of the later writings in some context or another. One part I know for sure is lore is the vignette of my relative inventing fire to cure fear of the dark. One part I'm not sure isn't truth is how she validated everyone's fears, of the dark or otherwise; more than one script has her saying, "People think love and fear are opposites. Seems to me that the opposite of love is apathy and the opposite of fear is ignorance."

I'm kind of getting the worship thing.

When I was growing up in this house I'm now on the porch of, the staircase was difficult and painful for me to climb. I thought it was because my bones were basically papier mâché due to a row with polio, but we found out later, after my dad died young of poisoning the autopsy revealed to be from mold, that it had been rotting for years. It sagged with each step, which hurt my ankles, but that's because it was full of *Aspergillus Niger*, which also messed with my breathing and my lines of sight in a variety of hurtful ways.

Those were the buds of migraines that happen still, long after we gutted the house of mold. I get instant tiredness, vertigo, pain that escalates quick to throbbing and vision that turns to lights bobbing around on oceans.

And she has something to say for this: "If you can work with pain, you will have no enemies."

Santa Mary's village reacts to getting a gong for its town center like the big city reacted to getting a hockey team last year. The god I'm related to calls it—the gong? the pandemonium around the gong? the village that now has a gong to announce town meetings and public shamings and horse-feed days and executions?—"a heavenly and irredeemable bullseye" apparently.

This high praise is a new development in the later volumes, too: "Santa Mary really listens to the names of things." One writer documents an interview they heard about with this woman, Santa Mary: "all I can remember about Santa's explanation of how she learned to listen so close was 'God came upon me for God's self and I surprised myself by welcoming it.'"

The wind sounds like a table saw as I read. Santa Mary is traveling the countryside teaching and visiting people who gather by the hundreds. It seems like this is the only snippet from a member of one of these audiences:

"These are scary times where some are so full of dread that an unexpected gust could knock them over. But friends, we need everyone strong on their feet. We are in this lethal predicament because of decisions people before us made. We are convinced we would have made different ones had we been offered that option. Let us think about the bodies, minds and spirits of those who come after us that they may not think of us what we think of those we have come after."

This is the only time in the volumes so far that I have caught any reference to wind.

Someone wrote down a conversation they either had or imagined with Santa Mary: *We tried to measure this war. It seems like it stretches from one end of history to the next.*

“Doesn’t anybody remember why the conflict ignited to start out?” Santa Mary asks me.

“Two entities equally matched in supply of weaponry disagreed on something, I presume.”

“Yes, but two opposing forces doesn’t have to create conflict—”

“How’s that? There is always tension when two forces oppose.”

“Another word for tension can be stabilization.”

“True enough. Were you scared in the bit of the war you fought?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you run when they came to cut off your hand?”

“I didn’t know they were coming for my hand, of course, but I wouldn’t have run if I did.”

“Did you feel brave?”

“I just know that, in this family, we die right.”

“Did you want the war to continue until we won?”

“I didn’t want there to be a war at all, but peace can’t happen unless there’s a foundation under us made of a strong sense that we belong to each other.”

After I read that, my heart could barely walk for days.

11

They write about her because she can build chairs that rock and carve ornate figures in them with one hand. They write about her because she was the one who hung the gong in the center of the village. They write about her because she made sure all the chickens got fed by getting calm and confident enough to call them to her just by kneeling and then unfolding the skirt she sewed herself one-handed that she had filled with leafy greens, corn, cooked beans and berries. They write about her because maybe they don’t know that there is already nothing ordinary about the world and that there won’t ever be, even in time.

Homeward

Hell, I'm going to bleed
all the way back home
and my sister is going to drive us
by the empty lot
where I hung out my window
and handed down a Hendrix CD
to a Wash. U. kid
who'd picked me up on a deserted
West County road
in the middle of the night after
I'd been kicked out of a party
for crying over an INXS song.

I mean, there's just no time.
It's been so long since I've seen the arch.
I'm all fried and freaked out,
forlorn, something's
terribly wrong with my perception
as I pick up on Sartre with my unstopped ear
and tangle with the concurrency
of Cupid and Lesbia and Christ
and my blood is so real it's there
but I think
it might have stopped moving
but I can't meet with my doctor in person
so I'm telling myself I'm a new creation and
I've come out the other side, I'm homeward bound.

Underfoot

When my father won big at the casino,
he bought hardwood floors
for our home.
For weeks, we had cardboard
on our floors, while the carpenter
worked, and I'll never forget
how flaccid it felt,
softer than the carpet we had.
Afterwards, my mother lectured us
about how not to scratch
the new floor,
cold and hard against my bare feet
on mornings when the sky was still
dark (No school again because of a snow storm,
radio already switched on by my mother
as she sipped tea,
hoping the buses were still running,
so she'd have a way
to work, and make enough in tips
to buy milk and bread. My father
asleep, over a year since his layoff from the plant,
dreaming of a pension
he'd get six years later
after a government bailout.), and my boots, dry,
next to the front door
with no where to go,
not knowing how lucky that was.

Thanksgiving, Montreal

aucun bon chien ne marche seul
(no good dog walks alone)

You're going? he asks as I rise
to our Labs' cries—they must be relieved.
Thanksgiving will dawn, foreign and freezing—
our hotel thermometer pre-sets to inadequate.
He is down-stuffed under comforter, hot
from spooned sleep. I do not expect shifts.
But, here we are, over the border.
I'm coming too, he rasps.

A mountain forms Montreal's core. Yesterday
we climbed icy steps for the vista—discover
Mount Royal's really a three-hill cluster, shaped
thousands of years ago by glacier. We were shaped.
Three grown kids cluster our center.

*Newborn nights, facing their hungry forever,
a young father sleeps sounder. I rose in the unlit
hour to cries of bald-anger, soaked in breast milk—
let baby's cheek rest on the bone
of my naked left shoulder.*

Dogs pee on snow crust, we scavenge for breakfast.
One shop is lit up from within. Mamie Clafoutie's
fluorescent lights stream above white-bosomed
women. Their fresh baked baguettes, hot stacked,
steam from their trays. From their side of the window
they shake their heads at us: *fermée*.

Every roadmap has a rat. We roam, it's still dark,
and a fat one crosses our path. This iced park's lamps
burn into dawn. Hot into the pulse of my left breast, milk duct,
closed up. One of our gloved hands, each, holds
a leash. His free hand squirms in my pocket.

*First touch, before knowing, we jay-walked
fifth avenue. He gripped me by the arm
at the elbow, wanted me
safely through traffic.*

One café opens. *Oui*—we are welcome. He drinks a latte, eats an almond croissant. Coffee's all I want—milk and thaw. Labs lie down on the tile floor. In the mirror of store-front glass, his hat-head hair's tousled, bluebells, his eyes, like freezer-puffed bulbs. I shiver, awake—he could have faked sleep.

The End of Early

Morning lifts its leg to hydrants
and to azalea bones harboring comets. I lengthen
a single om to lift the orange dawn
hammering word to wand.

I dreamed the neighbors' sheep blossomed
fat skeins of gray yarn while I mended socks
with mismatched thread. It's a terrible thing to covet
wool, even worse to long for the thing becoming.

Today I'll make noodle soup. I'll make a job of
making noodle soup. As long as the tin with a single chocolate
chills, maker mother is not dead. Every tendon I owe to her,
every swelling tunnel hollowed for nerve. Spirit twins

born of the same stem, all I cannot do without
her instinct misplaced like the pearl ring she gave me,
silver gleam drifting through some other story
coming to rest in elegy, the bright afghan

I piece together from scraps, though we wear cold
the way the old house wore doors, letting heat escape
through gaps, hoarding frost at the hinges.
I long for just enough

light to separate loop and hook
at the end of early, no time to mourn
handshakes and cursive, the tractor already turning soybean fields
to weapons and dirt, winter's first words.

Winter is a hermit quietly fasting in my joints

Cross-legged at the base of my spine wrapped pale in his vow of solitude, the deaf monk piled up death masks behind my face, washed my rooms with bleach, blindfolded the sky with gauze and slammed every door on its arthritic hinges. Outside, snowfall plays a glass piano that makes me think of silver strings untouched, the way Tony Elman thinks of a Ferris wheel.

To the trained ear, the Metropolitan Opera turns its back to the radio, the sound of a cloudy mirror. Who will answer it? Edith Piaf is no longer perched on my windowsill so why bother? Sleep forever! Harvest forgetfulness!

I will not feel sorry for myself. I will not go back to Chicago. Not accountable for the rush and welter of its lofty spires. Not an enduring city but a city that is to come. I'll no longer sit and listen to seasons wail, gnash their teeth at that forest of umbrellas where dirty rainwater flows in Carl Sandburg's lines. Like him, I have no taste for anything anymore but brick and metal and ice.

Aren't you afraid to speak, much less write anything down? Every word you know and every city that gave them meaning will be outlasted by a wet plastic bag clinging to the hem of five lakes, their mouths full of snow.

Trapped indoors until the world has become a box and the rain, its lid. Without anyone new to wear I am improvised, a game of feints. With nowhere to go, no one to see, without their forms and difference to define me, I am naked save for you, an ill-fitting overcoat enfolding the hermit, winter.

The Powder and the Wick
(Excerpt from The Epistle of Dan)

Paris, France
February, 15th 2020

If you're like me, Dan, you go out. When it's late you empty your pockets, put on your jacket and you head out. This is no dope run, you're just out walking up shit streets and down dark alleys to find out who the nightcrawlers are. You go to the scary parts of town and lumber around half-lit to see if anyone cares enough to try and victimize you. You roam at night sniffing out the action that's usually not there, none that you want; drunkards and speedfreaks, wasted slags defecating between parked cars, plastic-bag crashers staking claim on sidewalk real estate, drowsy doorway guards and bottle deposit recyclers, and almost no cars if you go out late enough.

It's all the same to me. The whole world could be Bed-Stuy for all I care. Always on the front line in the war against the poor, these brokedown battlegrounds where the industrialists march their file. It's the smell of damp desperation at night. Nobody's out there for no reason, you only go out when you can't stand to be in any longer.

If you're like me, you're meant to be this way; always cold, always sweating, always lonesome by default, always a couple miles from where you need to be, always gaming death, always courting disaster. It's chemical, but who knows which? Dopamine probably, oxytocin for sure. You sweat norepinephrine, cry serotonin tears. You need them all pumping all the time. You've got to always have everything all on the line.

I know you understand, Dan. You're out there with me in the pale, haunted by Heath Timmons--who got so strung out on gambling machines and flickering mental math and unstanched kegflow that he finally just walloped himself off that tall cold bridge in Portland after closing up the pub one night.

Ruminating on Heath. Heath Michael Timmons, or Michael Heath Timmons depending who you ask. Heath; a barren wasteland. The kind of guy who helped invent the nineties. It was something. Most twenty-year olds don't give a fuck, they got no worries and they got no problems, but you never seen anything like Heath Timmons in mismatched socks on a sunny Florida afternoon. It was everything, I'm telling you. No house? Whatever. Wreck his car for him? Who cares? Where'd he get that amp? Who knows? He lived in the impossible vacuum of pure bohemian perfection; sputnik in orbit; a misconfigured T-rex skeleton on display, a gut-wrenching last-second turnover at the buzzer. Heath to me was the static that draws your hair toward a bright, anxious balloon.

When I was fourteen my mother took off to another town and me and my sister had the run of that 2.5 bedroom house on McKinley Avenue and soon a kind of hippy-punk acid cult moved in with us, and the first who showed up and never left was Heath Timmons and

I swear to God, it inoculated a revolution, a half-dozen punk-rock bands spawned in that instant, myths were sired, rituals born. It makes me sick every time I think of him now, and there are three or four pieces of music that'll have me bawling like a child if I hear them in passing. Probably right now I'm wiping tears off these pages and I'm a grown goddamn man.

What germ did we pick up in the nineties? This constant burning urge for guts, the subconscious need to keep the powder and the fuse and the candle lit all in one hand?

And why? All this ambition and empire and mars missions and clear-cutting opulence just so every last one of us can swim around in clinical depression most our lives?

Follow me Dan, we're gonna make a list: Tamara Clemens, Marcy Miller, Doug Driggers... you know where I'm going with this...Sammy Griffith, that kid who called himself Perry, Trey Clark, Ricky Binford, April Morgan you know the rest, most of those kids didn't live to see thirty, the rest didn't see forty. Imagine if you took our sixth-grade class photo, Croton Elementary 1990, and just X'd out half the faces at random; all of them, *all of them*, died with drugs in their fist or a pistol in their mouth, even our teacher, Mr. Kuntz took himself out, I mean, it's gotta break some record. What kind of mad eugenic experiment did the State of Florida pull over on us? Dan, I'm asking. Did they put a suicide virus in our lunch milk, man? Our handlers did not do OK.

Do you feel that loss of gravity? That sudden weightless, thrilling clench of your solar-plexus just after reaching the apogee on a roller-coaster, that eminent drop-out: the feeling of being born in peak empire and knowing suddenly that means you'll die under its waning days. It happens that fast and buddy don't it take a few out with it when it goes? Heath must have felt it, pulling him over that last girder. But, if you knew for sure that brighter days were not ahead, how could you possibly persist? How could you go on? Can you imagine working and working for a *darker* day?

And this colonial machine? Grinding and wheezing and raping and eating everything all at once, lying back on a jeweled bear rug mouthing melodies from a philharmonic overture? This transglobal human circuitry, this impossible mercado built on the mud of dinosaur bones, and kabuki and calculus, on bear-baiting and mercurial physics? This astrological progression of civilizations tic-tocking away in sync with mass-extinction and the wholesale digitization of humanity? It sounds like rain, Dan, on cold cobblestone and weak FM signals that just won't tune in through the swollen clouds.

A Flower's Evening
Translated by Patricia Worth

It was thrown from carriage to carriage during the racing festival, tossed at random, caught and tossed again like a shuttlecock, and the hands of Parisian women were the exquisite racquets. Then an onlooker snatched it clumsily and dropped it into the mud and the short wet grass. No one bothered with it, at first. And later during the damp festival it was trampled by hundreds of feet beneath the flagging cheer of lanterns and coloured glasses, while large drums and trombones played in the fairground stalls. It was a tiny wild rose, hardly more than a bud, with a long thorny stem.

Yesterday evening, as I was passing through the crowd, I saw in the greyness of the mire something small and blush that was this dead flower. I guessed right away what had been the fate of the wild rose, triumphant, then melancholy, during the day's pleasure and folly. And there it lay, a memory between two small heaps of mud, as between two pages of a book, already wilted, charming still, a soiled, perfumed relic. I had the thought of picking it up and keeping it. How could I know I wouldn't find in it the scent dearest of all to me, the scent I breathed for just one moment when my quick lips touched the end of a small gloved finger in the foyer after five o'clock tea while we were putting on our coats? And anyway this rose was all that remained of an hour's gaiety, of a promenade decorated with ribbons and flowers where Paris had imitated the fantasy and laughter of a Corso in Italy. The passing poet has a duty to collect what remains of human joy, the sadness that is like the dregs of happy things; and from them he makes verses.

So I bent down to pick up the flower.

But a hand had got there before mine, a tiny hand, that of a little girl, shabbily dressed and grubby, almost in rags, with the air of a beggar. I let the child have the flower, I did not challenge her for the sullen castaway that she grabbed and very quickly and furtively put inside her bodice, under the gaping buttonless cloth. The poor little darling! She enjoyed this; she was used to walking in the mud, and there finding a flower and picking it up.

I looked closely at the people who were with the child, a man and a woman, and I followed them amid the hubbub of the throng making haste through the rain. They were in paupers' garb, he in a jacket, she in a cheviot wool dress with no coat. Her untidy chignon was falling down over her neck; his brown hair, curled by a suburban hairdresser, fell in ringlets down to his eyes from under a round hat. Both of them, in their dress and attitude, were a picture of poverty's destitution and ragged loitering. It was truly the dreadful Parisian pair: the blackguard and his woman. She did not offer him her arm. The little girl who had picked up the flower was made to walk before them; and as they went along, they talked.

"Swine of a day, after all, with these showers always threatening! The rich didn't leave their carriages, and with the bourgeois who came to look in spite of the bad weather, there was nothing we could do, they being clever types that keep a close watch on their pockets. No, it was infuriating in the end not to get something out of it, when you just want to work and you're as good with your hands as any of your associates. The foreigners have all the luck, especially the English, because of the Grand Prix: they're taken for respectable types with connections in the stables, they can get people to chat, ask them

for information about the horses that will be running; and then, while they're chatting... But the French don't trust the French; no way of getting them into a conversation."

And now it was ten o'clock in the evening; they had come to the racing festival at two o'clock in the afternoon, and in all that time, not one bit of luck, nothing. They would not have even had enough for a drink before going to bed if the little girl had not received a few sous by begging among the coaches. As if there were nothing to get angry about! So, to live, would they have to emigrate, since there was no means of plying their trade honestly in their own country? And all this was spoken with grumbling, with filthy swearing and the tone of shady lodgings that gives every word the indignity of slang.

Why was I following, why was I listening to these vile passers-by? Because of the little girl, all in rags, thin, ugly and frail. What was charming was that she had picked up a flower.

"Marguerite!"

"Mama?" said the child with a start.

The mother slapped her.

"Next time, don't take so long to answer. Now, look, there, in front of us, those people coming. Go on, hurry up."

The child approached a bourgeois family who were almost running in the rain, looking for a carriage; and, holding out a hand, feigning a crying voice, she whined:

"Please, sir, ma'am, there are five of us children at home. Papa has no work. Give me something. It will bring you good luck!"

They gave her a two-sou piece, which once they had gone she handed to her mother.

"Silly girl!" said she. "You should have run after them, they would have given you more."

And she slapped her again. The little girl dissolved into tears. She could not have been more than seven or eight years old. She was so thin that, under the festive lights, she had an almost deathly pallor, with blotches of freckles that looked like blotches of mud. She had broken into short sobs. Then she started walking again in front of the horrid pair, no longer crying, her hand inside her dress. She seemed to be consoled by touching the flower she had picked up.

What could this flower be to her? Born in some dirty house in a suburban slum, used to a life without Sundays, she could not have had any nostalgia for the fields or bushes or walks in the woods with friends after school. A wild rose, for her, must have been something she sold to gentlemen in the evenings on the boulevard; and if she did not make enough money there would be a beating after midnight when she returned home. All day during the festival she had seen, from the coupés to the victorias, a mad exchange of bouquets. Well-dressed ladies, vibrant, happy, their faces abloom with joy, laughed and ducked their heads to keep their hats from being knocked by flying roses and peonies. A hatred of flowers – flowers, a job for her, luxury for others – this is what the poor creature should have felt. But no, beneath the buttonless stuff of her bodice, she kept touching the wild rose she had picked up. And though her eyes were barely dry, she had a smile on her lips, a thoughtful, determined smile, with an air of happy premeditation, as if she had formed the idea of some great pleasure. I noticed that she had under her left arm a torn newspaper, folded roughly. Once, when it fell, she very quickly picked it up. What did she

want to do with it? I watched her. She was sickly and sad, yet not at all naughty. Washed and nicely dressed, she might have been a beautiful rich child, not this ugly poor child. She walked purposefully. She had in her eyes something resembling a dream.

Meanwhile, the man and woman whom I was still following had left the festival. They had reached some suburban avenue; they stopped under an awning heavy with rain and took their place at a table. I stopped too, and sat down not far from them. They asked for a bottle of wine. I could see them under the light of a globe lamp hanging on a post. Him clean-shaven, her moustached; their faces were repulsive. Elbows on the table, they were talking quietly, murmuring and plotting. Around us, some people who must have been horse groomers and jockey valets were making a great racket, drinking, calling the waiter, quarrelling, insulting each other. In the air there was a smell of wine pouring from barrels, and a smell of stables. I noticed that every few minutes the blackguard and his woman made signs to each other as they watched two manservants in livery jackets playing cards, their small change on the table.

But where was the child?

Very close, sitting on the ground amid people's shoes.

And it was delightful to see her.

With the old torn newspaper, she had made two little paper carriages – carriages, or what vaguely resembled them – and her hands, now this one, now the other, were tossing, from one coach to the next, the flower she had picked up in the short wet grass. I understood, then, why she had so quickly grabbed the sad castaway, and why she had so carefully kept it! There among the legs of drinkers, in the filthy air, squatting with her feet in the mire, her skirt in the mire, she was imitating, on her own, all the gaiety and all the blooming splendour of the festival. With just one wilted wild rose, she was catching and tossing the countless bouquets of the freshly fought battle, and she was having fun, and she was laughing, and she had, this child of thieves, this beggar, this ragged girl – while the man and woman bent over red glasses were plotting some evil deed – she, more sincere, had in her heart and on her lips all the joy of the worldly beauties who had exchanged blooming projectiles. Soon she would go back to some stinking, dark, paltry lodging where no one sleeps well during the drunken quarrels of the father and mother. But it does not matter; the poor little wretch would have had the illusion, for a moment, of being happy like so many splendid ladies. And it was, I thought, out of destiny's pity, that the wild rose, hardly more than a bud with a long thorny stem, had fallen from an awkward hand into the mud and grass.

Armor and the Fabulous Softness

The fabulous softness of chinchilla fur
is what caused the extinction
of one species, the two remaining

now endangered. We wear our lives
like a lavish shawl
we inherited and did

nothing to earn. We wear polished
armor to war and thick furs upon return
as if by covering our battle-mangled bodies

with the most vulnerable pelts
we could shield the stone fist of our heart,
which, if need be, we

would tear from our chest
and bludgeon our enemies with it,
crush their heads while children cower,

their soft, silken hair
offering
no protection either.

*

The baby rabbit,
whose white coat we are invited

to pet, trembles.
The yellow chick,

bright as a dandelion, shivers.
Be gentle, the volunteer warns us,

and the children at the petting zoo
(stanza continued)

who have gathered around

to hold something so helpless
even they have dominion over it,

they make of themselves
pudding, peach fuzz,

part sugar and full-fur.
You can stroke it

with the back of your hand,
the woman says, and the children do,

every one of them obedient
to the delicate.

*

The chick, a droplet of yolk.

The rabbit, that tiny god
of scrambling limbs. With two fingers
we can snuff them out like a match.

My god, our brutal and fragile
fires, these calloused hands
on my daughter's
incomprehensibly soft cheeks—

M-I-Crooked Letter-Crooked Letter

You've heard the televangelists call it the end of the world.

The crowd presses around you, herds you along with their click clacking and scuffing footsteps. Above you, the sky is the bleached blue of a hot summer day, the rays stealing the thin moisture from the air as you keep pace with the mass. Your unwashed sweat joins everyone's evaporating into nothing, a futile sacrifice to end the drought.

You've heard whispers of government conspiracies with their claims of hidden water reservoirs leaving the people to exsiccation.

You edge your way to the fringe of the mob with subtle moves. Now you can see the brown grass crisping in front of office buildings. Small curled leaves pool out from the shrubs and trees shed in a last effort to preserve some moisture. You cling to this moment of space, letting the others flow by, and watch a sere leaf drift over to reveal a desiccated bird. The horde pulls you into its incessant forward motion.

You've heard the dire murmurs of people killing to drink the blood of others to slake their undying thirst.

Above you, the winds have scoured the shine off the once proud Gateway Arch. Vehicles are scattered around its two legs as if toys left behind by a careless child. A parchment corpse lies in front of an open hood marking where someone had drank from a radiator, driven mad by the gnawing thirst.

You've heard rumors of water being passed out by the National Guard at the armory.

An eddy brings you to the edge of the bridge that once spanned the Mississippi River. Curious, you step over and look at the dusty riverbed. The muddy water stripped away revealing the junk and trash of years of human mis-use. You had heard that fish had flopped in the mud when the water had reached the bottom, now their bones shifted as listless dust in the heat created vortexes. You wonder how long it will take your bones to turn to dust and float on a heat haze.

You've heard many rumors, except ones saying the rains are coming.

You can almost remember the smell of the air after a rain. Once you ignored the lazy dripping of the last drops falling from tree leaves. Now you would welcome its refreshment to your parched ears.

You walk onto the bridge seeing water rippling in the sun. Humidity clings to your skin as you smell diesel and mud. You hold your hand over the edge to feel the coolness of moisture rising out of the moving water. The blast of a barge horn snaps your eyes open and far below you is the Mississippi full and flowing with its ponderous weight of water. You don't resist the siren call.

Nobody's Savior

Remember our first shared Easter, so warm it was
in our tiny apartment we had to crack the window
while the glazed ham cooked, how we had just enough
time to take a bike ride before your mother arrived,
the two of us pedaling across the South Street Bridge
to West Philly, the view of the city there something I once
painted, back when tall cranes were pushing glass spires
into the sky, the day so warm we took off our shirts,
how on the way back all the things I'd saved myself for
became suddenly pinned to a lone figure—a man standing
too close to the edge, looking like he was going to jump.
And he *was* going to jump, told us so as we neared. I
slowed. Told him no, he didn't want to do that
as I pushed you off to call for help at the 7-11 a block away.

What I talked about to the man I could not tell you now,
only this: the way he knuckle-gripped the balustrade
overlooking the water, the way his lined face looked
pained with worries that I, at 25, could scarcely imagine.
Cars slowed at the strange sight of this white boy and this
black man and the waiting leap that seemed an invitation,
and still a current of words spilled from my tongue
as I tried to stall his intention. Car doors opened, a crowd
gathered, people in Easter finery, a preacher among them
who called out *Brother, you do not want to do this*. I let
the preacher take over, hoping the man could be reached
through prayer and appeals to the Lord. The day was bright
and blossoming and I was a lost key to a lock rusted shut.
By the time you returned with the police, the man had been
rescued, redeemed, led down from the edge, and I felt
cotton-mouthed, spent, vestigial and shaking.

The old bridge
has been replaced in the years since. Its rust scars are gone.
No longer do chunks of concrete fall like fists to the river
and expressway below. The world spins. Your mother is in
a home now. Men still think of jumping. I know.

Language Is a Bridge to Me

Underneath the coarse European woolens Heidegger loved to have his leg rubbed he did not conceal his delight and he returned often for a squeeze. There was one recorded act of kindness when he brought Celan to Freiburg and arranged for the book shops to display Celan's poetry. This was good but for two things: Celan's suicide and Heidegger's appointment as rector of Freiburg University under the Nazis. Not a confident trail of humanity he left behind though he liked the ficky-ficken under the desk behind the door in the closet with his student when she was willing. Heidegger missed some of the nuance of social thought and behavior though he understood personal privilege.

H. sent Jaspers some of his writings after the War in which he described language as the house of Being; on the contrary Jaspers wrote back, I know language as a bridge between human beings not a shelter or a home. Levinas another student of Heidegger before the Fall-out found an ethics of ethics in face to face encounters the obligation to care for one another but from Heidegger being in itself was frozen in a totalitarian fascistic drift where anything could happen and did.

For Levinas language was no house or if it was it was uninhabited and the point was to respond to each other; talk to me language is a bridge to me said Jaspers. Heidegger was a *spell-macher*, he could half induce a trance in the rest of them but the implications were monstrous uncompromising ultimate sacrificial heart-less dangerous.

Celan's parents were carried off by Nazi murderers they perished in an internment camp in Transnistria. Celan the son translated Shakespeare's Sonnets in a Romanian ghetto. He continued to write in German honoring his parents tortured by guilt after they were taken away. In his later days Celan felt only language was secure from loss. Not secure enough. Some time around April 20, 1970 Celan jumped into the Seine and drowned. He had reached his limit to bear impossible witness.

Sleep Paralysis

It starts slowly. I'm lying in bed, sober and still, feeling my wife breathe against my ear. Her breath is warm and a little sour, and my legs contour themselves to her form. The moon is nothing outside. I'm staring through the window slats. The other day I remembered something trivial about childhood, then I forgot it, then it said hello in a dream, and that might mean something. The pillow below my head is either too high or too flat. My feet are blistering furnaces. I have already turned over four times. And then: shoulders locking into place, body sinking into itself. I can't raise my arms or call her name. The moon won't do it for me. Other times my father—dead four years—asks me what I want to eat. I can't answer him, so I receive nothing. The moon won't do it for me. Or I'm napping in the office alone, and I see, with brilliant clarity, my colleague on a chair watching me. Her hair is bright, and I don't recognize the expression on her face. She says nothing. I say nothing.

I think of the countryside, the purple sleep-dots miraging themselves into one large man my sister couldn't see. I was afraid for so long and if I had to choose, I'd say that's when everything started: needing company, seeing signs, writing this life out of my mind. The paralysis always stops in the morning. My wife puts cinnamon in the coffee before work. I drive into the sun.

1985 MEXICO CITY EARTHQUAKE

She watches a helicopter descend
 onto the landing-pad outside her window,
 and I ask her if she'd like me to pull the drapes,
to bring her a set of ear plugs, but she mumbles

through the oxygen mask and calls me by my brother's name,
 her fingers touching my face and the scars that are not there.
 I wasn't the one who flew through the window, who fell
 out of our lives, but I play along this time,
let her mind take the driver's seat until she forgets
she's steering, and then we have cake and hum along to *Elton John's greatest hits*.

I can see the red tail lights, she says, the mask stretching
with a smile—

 Her eyes wander to the chopper,
 the paramedics leap onto the roof, and a gurney barrels forward.
 She asks me
if I remember crashing through the windshield
 when she hit the brakes,
remember the ground trembling
 beneath us the day Mexico City rattled its buildings
 from their foundations,
 sunk bridges and crumbled the hotel where my father was bussing tables.
 She asks me
 if I feel the vibrations that had sent her car flying through the
 roundabout
 where she had crashed into the steps of *El Ángel*.

My brother had landed at the base, glass dusting his skin.

 I nod and she shivers in her gown, an earthquake rising
within her. A layer of mucus has crusted over her left eye.

 Her head shaved and chest heaving, she is a thousand miles away,
hovering in and out of each decade between breaths.

Where I Come From, Where I Go To

What is it about this place? It's populated by an army veteran and his medals. Against all advice, he slides a cigarette between his lips. The room smells of dying smoke. He was in a few battles but he was drunk so many times more. Now his pulse slows, mimics the speed of his breath. I wonder should I just leave. I answer myself - no.

In the mirror, I'm a shard of him so they say. That's family for you - like a band in the park that only knows the one tired song. I like to think of myself as independently formed. He's a prisoner of his house, these days, less useful, he says, than firewood. It's a white cottage tucked into a street of similar constructions.

To him, it's one step closer to the nursing home. He's no longer the farmer with the wife, the acreage, the kids, the seasonal hands. He refuses to reminisce. To him, the past is just another name for silence. The farm was sold up of course, mostly to pay the bankers. Every last shed, even every weed, was auctioned. No wonder that time goes willfully unremembered.

So, he welcomes me home with muttering, complaints about sparrow nests and cockroaches and the noisiness of parrots. He ignores my life altogether. The world is nothing more than this drought-stricken country town. He won't go out during the day. The sun, he says, is just for the crazies.

And this from a man who worked his sweat off in the heat, who held on to his optimism with a languid, "This will pass."

It's a miserable way to make a living. That's the message I got growing up. But he wouldn't trade it for anything. That was the adjunct to the same message. But his joints and heart did the trading for him. Now in old age, his blood's meager fuel is carefully proportioned, crawling sadly and slowly to his extremities.

Outside there may be kids playing, mothers chatting by the shuttered fountain, and still plenty of land, a map that would have once showed my people. Inside there's none of these things. He bears the rueful smile of a creature already extinct.

"Damn the land!" he shouts.

He's blackened, scarred, no longer standing tall and straight. I lower over him. That's unintended but I cannot help myself. I watch him for a long time but I don't reach out so well. Even for exiles, they say, pull remains strong. But it merely infects me with the latest strain of hopelessness. So our relationship borders on nothing. Yes I am still, and always will be, his son. But, based on the evidence. I don't know that.

The Phantom Limb

In the observing afterlife,
the severed leg hops from one
ethereal space to the next
searching for its professor

but the leg, you see, is early

and it covers too much
ground, fast and unencumbered
by its dying body.

It watches a soccer game
peruses a shoe store, tries
on phantom socks—the pleasure
of the wool tingling
where it still feels its body—
and gets pedicures for half
the price usually paid.

Oh, to be reunited with the hip,
to feel the click of bone
into that concave cradle of cartilage,
to grind smoothly into the ischium
instead of swinging wildly

through the veil. Such belonging.

It selects just the right shade
of purple polish,
feels the spirits rush over
its stump, each like the teeth
of a ghostly bone saw—

it spends all of its time

chatting with the feet that used to wash
up on the empty beaches of Canada
like blackened conch shells.

Madonna of Lascaux and the Frozen Foal

The dun mare, a Madonna of Lascaux, in the dark cave of Montignac sur Vézère. Black mane, black eyes. A broken bowl-belly. Eons of odes, mystical ritual, magic inharmonious to contemporary consciousness.

Seventeen thousand years. Humans brought her to being. Parietal art in generations—the hands of men or women cleaved rock and ore, mingled permutations of ochre, hematite, charcoal, groundwater, animal fat, and clay, conjuring the belly of the world.

A foal unburied from Siberian permafrost still has a heart 42,000-years-gone. The mud that killed her sunk in her lung. The intimation of her prehistory—racing under the sun; sucking cool streams and her mother's milk.

Why I still confuse Gloria Swanson with Norma Desmond

is almost the same reason even nonbrand cotton swab manufacturers still call them *Q-Tips*, but closer to why no one knows Leo Gerstenzang or that he called them “Baby Gays” first, then “Q-Tips Baby Gays” before the name we know now.

“Baby Gays” probably wouldn’t play, silent films are good mostly by their existence, but everyone has ears and dust in narrow spaces, and if you want to make a movie now you’ve got to know how they managed (or didn’t) then. Plus, there’s always a hipster waiting to be weird in public.

So what it’s closest to, what really makes sense, is that, before I looked it up, I hadn’t the slightest clue that the Q stands for Quality, and when quality comes then that’s remembered by name, like *Sunset Boulevard*. Really, and I know exactly the importance of that close-up.

I Have No Problem with the Existence of Yellow
—Betsy Barre on her indifference to poetry

Neither do I object to rugs
As a concept, although
I have somewhat negative feelings
About shag carpets
Loitering in the wrong decade.
Coin laundromats
Do nothing for me one way or the other.
I could take or leave guavas.
I am indifferent to the empty ritual
Of saying “How are you?” “Fine, you?”
As that reminds me
Neither of this shared air we breathe
Nor of the chicanery of capitalism.
Newark? No, I have no opinions on any part of New Jersey,
Nor anything against those who do.
I have, as I said, no problem
With the existence of yellow.
But I refuse to exist without blue.

Antonio

How many more times will I say farewell
without realizing it? Tonight I stare
at the man in moon's toothy grin, and
I think of the last time I saw Antonio, my dear
friend, 3 months ago, when I dropped off
some food on his front porch. He waved,
opened his window, and said
we'd talk again "before I knew it."

His last words are bomb shrapnel, stuck
in my trick knee. My thoughts scatter,
like broken branches, argyle socks, and scarlet leaves
in my back yard's crab grass. I look up
again. A storm cloud covers the lower half
of the moon like a foamy, purple mask.

Letter to Hamrick from the Century of the Invalidated

Dear Charlotte: The sun here winces daily, stumbles across morning before smudging gray like an old slate scarred with decades of chalk dust and erased messages. I'm hunting work, and there are days when it feels as if past experiences have been rubbed out, or maybe I can't make myself slog through the powdery white crusted blend of ennui and discounting youth. Those years spent chiseling out budgets and manipulating spreadsheets have wrought zilch. Even the service seeking writing tutors shot down my application. Seems SAT scores from the 70s can't be validated, and how else might they measure one's qualifications. But somehow I still exhale air cleaner and more carefree than any I've taken in since the century rolled over. Funny how that is. The more shade they throw my way, the stronger I feel. Seated at wobbly tables by restrooms in near-empty restaurants. Chipped at, ignored, reviled. Questions answered with curled lip and haughty tone. Laughing, I relish it all. Lyra the kitten just launched herself at the table, scattering across the fake wood floor mail and bits of poetry which might be hammered into a collage of shady loan offers, crappy lines and massage therapy ads, if my talents leaned in that direction. But scooping out the litter box seems my crowning achievement lately. I wonder how a creature so pure and new to the world produces something so vile, without intent? I have other questions, too, but will leave them for a subsequent whine-fest, which I'll scribble in smoke or invisible ink on another long-shadowed day. Until then I'll dream of southern winds and coffee and beignets under bright skies in a life I should have lived. If only. Your virtual and faithful friend, Bob.

There's Something About the Sea

Meg cried when she stumbled. Sean looked in her suit and saw sand in her vagina, so he took her up to the bathhouse. Lisa wandered with their other girl at the brink of the sea. The water was frigid and the year almost spent. No one swam, despite water's call.

Under the pier, three boys crept backwards on hands and feet, backs parallel to the ground. Their contorted bodies taunted the waves, and it was disorienting to Lisa. She looked away, into the sea, and followed foam back to land. Her eyes ached from the sun-glazed water. It swelled and suspired. It clutched at Em.

Sean had talked of a spring break in college when there'd been a man screaming at the ocean for his child and how the police came and a helicopter too and everyone was searching for the kid, but Sean couldn't tell her if they ever found anything in the water. He just laughed at how drunk he and his friends were.

Lisa and Em moved through the sand, and a woman dumped one last bucket on a buried child. The girl shook the earth, resurrected, and her mother held her. She looked good, the woman, wide eyes green like her daughter, little fat webbing her thighs, bikini bottom pulled to her belly button. Lisa looked back at her own body, touched at her womb, looked down at her daughter. Em was so thin, so sinewy. Her little belly pushed out as though her miraculous guts were too much to contain.

They stepped to the bathhouse. Like the others, Lisa washed her child's feet, but she was scrupulous, overwhelmed with unreasonable blood, coaxing water over skin, rubbing flesh and joints, scrubbing at each speck of sand.

Once again all together, they walked their collective shadow down the pier. A shirtless man tattooed with a skeleton soldier reeled in a black sea bass. Lisa stared beyond him at the steady merge of sea and sky, and Meg asked what smelled like fish and how many seagulls there were. Em said one hundred. Meg said no. One hundred and fifty-five. Sean said seagulls were brutal birds, fierce protectors of their chicks. Lisa could smell grilled beef and grease now, carried through music from a bait shack turned fifties diner. The Chambers Brothers sang of love like rain.

A Coca-Cola sign glared red on the white building like a benevolent, ubiquitous symbol of Lisa's life, even out here almost in the sea where the waves had already scrubbed out the 1984 her girls had carved with curled toes in the sand.

They ate on the diner's roof, nostalgic for a time hardly passed, a time she and Sean had never really known. One day they'd be nostalgic for this moment too, if they outlived it long enough. Meg cried when a pigeon brushed her face. "Where's my goddamned chili?" Sean shouted.

The sun was bright. He cooled after beer and food. "You know what I hate about the ocean?" he asked his daughters. "The vast, endless, unspeakably phenomenal ocean? It almost distracts me from my immensely more beautiful girls." He leaned over and kissed Lisa. She smelled onions and beer on his breath.

They walked back down the pier's cracked cement, over the oblivious scuttling pigeons and their waste. She held Meg's hand and felt its little bones and tendons, wondering that they might be one day rattled by arthritis. Sean and Em called them to the edge of the pier, and they looked down into water. Starfish rested beneath the surface, sea-lost from

over other horizons, wished on perhaps by decent enough people.

Someone else's child screamed and Lisa's viscera dropped so hard her knees buckled. But the child was not afraid. It was a scream raw with jubilation. There was a sea lion on the other side of the pier. It glided with grace uninhibited and unencumbered through the green water. Lisa's blood thrashed wildly in the precocious throb of her little girls' hearts while the sea lion rolled and turned and seemed to put on a show. But it was just alive. As everyone on the pier was that day, high above the ocean

Some Guy

*You might think that love is just a matter of leaping out of the frying pan of
yourself
into the fire of someone else.* Billy Collins

He could barely get it in. I was so young
and dry. *I'm gonna fuck you*, he chanted
like a pep talk as he pushed.
I'd agreed to this coupling
in his closet-sized room—
the walls papered in pictures
of girls in string bikinis—
because he was named Guy, and I liked
the idea of that: *My first guy
was named Guy*, I would say
like a child's excuse
for breaking a crystal glass.
He was my next-door neighbor
at Pleasure Point. Surfing
had shaped his trapezius
like flesh wings. This also stirred me.
I think I thought men closed
the wounds in a woman's body.
But when it happened, I felt the ache
of seeing the moon up close
through a telescope,
knowing I'd never touch it.
My mind wandered as he
drilled and pumped.
I thought of irrigation pipes
I'd jammed together on the ranch,
then pulled apart with a twist
to move to different fields.
The next day, he saw me
in my yard lifting a trellis.
I knew—it was almost telepathic—
if I raised my arms, he'd be cruel.
Your armpits are too wide,
he said and walked away.
I felt like a vase in the home
of a hoarder when I needed
to be prized on a mantle.
Proud of itself. Picked up and polished.
If I couldn't be that, I wanted to shatter.

Rimbaud's Vertebrae

Rimbaud decided
to surgically remove
a piece of his vertebrae
so he could suck his own dick
But he kept that piece of himself
in a jar
And called it Paul Verlaine
because it was the reason
he was always able
to get off

Grave Scything in Takachiho

Obon: the week for cleaning family graves,
when ancestors revisit household shrines
and try to stir up guilt. Armed with small scythes,
the three of us ascend the mountain path
to graves that haven't been tended in years.
I wonder what the ancestors would make
of me, a twice-divorced American—
depends how hard I work. We scythe in silence
while micro-showers range, leveling grass
and weeds of Sayaka's father's family.
Her father has no grave. He wasn't liked.
A few charred bone fragments rest in a vase
now lost to years of clutter, maybe tossed.
The day after he died, Sayaka heard
her mother, Omma, sing for the first time
in decades, like she sings to herself now,
her voice soft and delicate as ash.

Our sickles whisper to the dead, my mind
adrift. Last week, after an hour on Skype,
the interviewer ended with "good luck."
I knew I didn't get the job—good luck
being a cordial notch above "fuck you."
When my mom emailed after I'd left the States,
"I hope you find what you're looking for. Good luck,"
I knew what it meant—the last I'd hear from her.
I pull and cut above these dead who aren't
my blood, who lived when we were enemies,
thousands of miles from where my own blood dwindles,
dies in the unforgiving sandy flats
of Southern Illinois. What does blood
mean anyway but food for mosquitoes,
a few dead ones stuck to our sweaty necks.

A toad escapes my blade. We re-pile stones
that toppled from the rains and shifting earth.
Omma stands. Her whispered song trails off.
At last our work is finished here. We swig
cool barley tea, bow to the ancestors:
"We did the best we could," we say. "Good luck!"

Bless the Drive-way
Each thing was infinite things
-- Borges, *The Aleph*, 1949

Workers came by with giant trucks and laid down a new street in front of my house three big trucks that laid down the black top two of those Bobcat beauties I'd like to drive one of those two cleaning and sweeping trucks workers in orange and yellow shirts nice hats like pith helmets.

I asked them if they would lay down a new drive-way for me while they were at it they told me to get lost and I smiled waited a while changed into a very tasty unseasonable white linen suit made in England with more pockets than I can fill with pens and paper etc.

I asked again if they could lay down a drive-way for me in the back I got specific and one of them said let me take a look his name was Roy he followed me to the back of my house and he said sure we can do that no problem we'll get to it when we finish up here.

Later that day I was meeting with students on my porch Roy came over and asked me what I was teaching I told him I am teaching these children how to be decent human beings to learn the Sources pay attention to the ancestors and be respectful of all beings.

How-so asked Roy I showed him the letter aleph it is the first letter and it is silent and through it everything else comes into being it is the only sound we heard when it was revealed and when I write I give myself through the aleph I place the infinite within as I discern it.

We'll get at that drive-way now Roy said and it took only an hour or so to lay that baby down.

Sheep Shear

My grandfather loved Victor traps.
My grandmother, a sow-bug vacuum cleaner.
Zoetropes. A set of wooden spoons.

My Father loved his roll-top desk,
crank adding machine, books
by Sinclair Lewis and Lewis Browne.

For my mother, it was aluminum pipes, knives,
and whetstones. Braided whips.

For Mr. Davenport—the man who sheared the sheep—
hemp ropes to hog-tie, a razor to shave them,
slash their light-pink skin on purpose
while he raved that Jews controlled the banks.

Stay in the house, Mother told my Jewish father
when she saw Davenport's truck
barrel down the driveway
like a loose bull.

Back then, I thought all tools were human—
the mind picked the tool
to fit the mind.
The tool shaped the mind.
But sorrow, sorrow was animal.

The soft, frantic lambs with thick, shitty coats,
fragrant of grass and body heat,
baaed like babies beneath the blade.

Job done, they struggled to their feet,
shivered, their bodies covered
in ruby slits like little mouths.

Davenport sheathed his hand shear
in its ringed belt. It sounded
like ice on ice.

The Rough Boy

We were the same age, about fourteen, when he left town. When he returned no one knew how old he had become. Valleys tunneled into his face, worn like rock, where riotous and extinct rivers had coursed through. He drank. Whatever he could lay his hands on, his eyes running red with it. He smoked. Sometimes he rolled his own, the papers and weed all in his right back pocket, and from there also, occasionally a spoon's sheen sparkled briefly. We'd heard he'd broken the law, arrested for vague offenses. His fingers were lengthy thin, conspicuous with fissures filled with motor oil, calluses from sliding nail quicks on guitar strings, and yet you could see that at one point this man had been quite something to look at, and a lady somewhere would have welcomed his hands on her breasts and inner thighs. He spoke tenderly, pausing where he could, making a sentence stretch further to pass time. He walked like a man, with a purpose, in strides, but he remained on the carnival grounds until the summer fair ended then he moved on. Everyone in town talked about him at length until he returned in a coffin, and the gossip ceased. Rumor had it that on his death bed, he requested he be placed face-down in his casket. So there we stood, looking at the back of his head and the solitary pleat in his black dirge coat. Looking at what could have been, grieving.

When the Rent is Due

We chose to play with desperation,
My Love, men vs. themselves.

We came upon this hole,
stepped in,
forced to darken our nail beds
with digging,
smoothing the creases of our palms
'til we could barely grasp,
erasing our very fingerprints,
anonymous in the filth.

Occasionally, we straighten up,
stretch and un-rush our heads
amid the lumbar agony.
Though our muscles ache,
our minds barely register.

We struggle in the climb,
all the king of Corinth.

Ghost Fishing

The tired son slogs downstairs for a bowl of cereal in the middle of the night. He just wants to feel the cold milk in the back of his throat and sit in the quiet of an empty kitchen. But right there on the arm of the sofa is the ghost of his dead father waiting for him to clear the bannister.

The old man always loved sitting there so he could look out the front door glass while he told stories. This night he's got a fishing story on loop, and there's no way the tired son can pass up the chance to hear his voice again.

The ghost reminds him of the time they fished for specks off the dock of the family's camp. How they baited the hooks with crawfish and couldn't cast fast enough with all the fish they were pulling out of the pass. Speck after speck piled on the dock until the tired son hooked a fish so small it was almost embarrassing to reel in.

The ghost just shakes his head at the memory of how tiny that speck was and spreads his hands out wide to say it was about that far from the dock when a huge bull red swallowed it whole. And the tired son remembers just how heavy that line got, how the bull red made a hell of a run toward deep water.

The ghost just keeps counting how many hands had to pitch in to drag the whole lot onto the dock. Counts with the same grin on his face the old man had pulling that tiny speck out of that bull red, then yanking that crawfish out of the speck. Just grinning like the whole catch was a big, black top hat with a bottom so deep and full there'd be no end to any of it.

As One

She stands on a podium, shivering. November wind sears her face, sending cold fingers probing up her sleeves, down her collar, under her skirt. Her skin crawls at its touch, and without thinking she turns to where she last saw her husband. He is not far, talking to Trotsky; over her husband's shoulder Trotsky's eyes meet hers, and his reptilian gaze freezes even her shivers.

A long, cold second later a distant band strikes up, *Internationale*, of course, and everyone looks to the square.

"Smile," her husband hisses into her ear.

She does her best: she thinks of summers in the country, of rabbits and goats, of her face buried in their warm fur, and feels her face relax. "That's better," her husband whispers. She nods, and pushes away other memories of warmth.

The front of the parade approaches: soldiers in their overcoats and fur hats, sabres bare and held aloft, boots slap the ground like a truncheon breaking ribs. A mounted officer leads them, his horse sidestepping as he salutes the podium.

Out of the corner of her eye she sees her hatless husband return the salute. Her smile grows—she remembers a phrase from her military training: *do not salute*, the drill sergeant had said, *if your head is empty*. And that, like a locomotive, pulls memories long sidetracked: of friendship that took all fear from the world, of camaraderie that shrunk to nothing the threat of bullets and exploding shells, of a simple love that warmed even trench mud, even Baltic winter. Of being chosen—trusted—to guard the newborn Provisional Government of an infant republic.

Of celebrating today, November 7 New Style, her failure on that Julian October day, to do her duty.

The soldiers sheathe their sabers; the officer canters ahead toward the train station. Trotsky smiles. Her husband bends toward her.

"It isn't secret anymore, so I can tell you," he says. "Poland has given right of passage. These men will be in Brest-Litovsk by morning, on the German border two days after that. In Weimar, probably in a week."

The next group enters the viewing square: women, in workmen's faded blue - skirts, blouses, kerchiefs. They must be cold. In their bare hands they carry banners - "Long Live Permanent Revolution," "Glory to Red October." The music changes: it is now "We bravely march to battle/To die as one for power of the Soviets."

She draws a breath as one particular face approaches.

Is this real, or her memory painting over reality's palimpsest? This face belongs elsewhere, elsewhen, much closer, a bit askew, eyes unfocused and gazing into hers, lips touching lips.

Katya.

More memories surface like links of anchor chain winding on the capstan, emerging from deep, cold, murky waters: memories of the day they faced an army of deserters in front of the Winter Palace, and surrendered. Of running from Red death squads; of volleys of gunfire in the distance, too regular to come from battle; of forgetting her name and taking another off a gravestone of a girl born on her birthday and buried soon after; of

running, alone, leaving Katya behind.

Of looking, hungry-eyed, at a man biting a loaf of bread.

Of being invited to share it, and staying.

The present reasserts itself. The woman's eyes look ahead; there is no change in her expression, her posture, the cadence of her steps. She banishes the thought of asking after her— death warrants for each surviving veteran of the First Petrograd Women's Strike Battalion are still in effect. They, and rewards to informants, were announced within a week of Trotsky's accession.

A burning cold pierces her cheek. She wipes away a tear; it freezes into a spark on her glove. Her husband pats her shoulder. "Excellent," he whispers.

Parade lasts until dusk. More workers pass, and peasants herded in from nearby villages. It is November dark when her husband's Party limousine stops in front of their home. Their chauffeur leans on the horn; their servant opens the door. They enter a warmth that is far too cold.

"Darling?" her husband says. "Comrade Trotsky was quite taken with you today. He said of all the people, your joy at this momentous celebration was most palpably sincere."

"He saw that?" she says, lifting her head.

"Comrade Trotsky sees everything," he says and wipes her cheek, and a moment later his own.

Last Station

Maybe you would like to remember what the world was.
Sad and cold dusk pale pink sky fading over grey ocean.
Still it is good to feel alive again.

It is good to remember these things under
the carnival yellow market tents. Yet then
the hurt one waited and cried as he watched
the sea man peel the skin from the fish.

*I did not know they did that. I did not know
they were born and living when caught.*

Then you heard someone ask to the mother,
Excuse me, does your grown son have mental problems?

*Because he really should not be here
if that is so.* You cry some, still you want
to be back in that place. Moist air aroma
of fresh palm and drenched breeze
because everyone wants to live in a world,
even when there is no world.

We just thought we wanted the radio
and television to swallow their signal,
to dream with what has no real memory
or home, but just far off in space
speeding into time too faraway
to ever again become what was.

In Retrograde

In the house of the blind astronomer.
Among a scrabble of charts and graphs.
In retrograde, the cosmos unperturbed.

We hear the extraordinary plainly spoken.
We taste evanescent radiation.
We see the unseen things, which are
by definition unattainable.

You're in his workshop, biding an old cosmology.
In one drawer are giant blue suns.
On a shelf, the hallmarks of anti-gravity.
And everywhere is the scribble of his guesswork.

The home of the weepy-eyed somnambulist.
There's no telescope or light detected,
just the scent of interstellar cold.
A hint of universal code.
A soupcon of the electro-chemical.

Visitor, it's always night in his observatory.
It's always night in the eyeless dark,
when brilliance ranks among the stars.
You can't see for looking.



Contributors

Kelli Russell Agodon's fourth collection of poems, *Dialogues with Rising Tides* was published by Copper Canyon Press. She is the cofounder of Two Sylvias Press as well as the Co-Director of Poets on the Coast: A Weekend Retreat for Women. Agodon lives in a sleepy seaside town in Washington State and is an avid paddleboarder and hiker. www.agodon.com

Emmanuel Akaolisa is a Nigerian poet with a major in Political Science. He loves sports generally because of the creativity behind them and plays table tennis with the passion with which he writes poetry.

Michelle Askin's poetry and short fiction have appeared in *Raleigh Review*, *Off The Coast*, *2River View*, *Pleiades*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Pif Magazine*, and elsewhere. She lives in Virginia.

Jack B. Bedell is Professor of English at Southeastern Louisiana University where he also edits *Louisiana Literature* and directs the Louisiana Literature Press. Jack's work has appeared in *Pidgeonholes*, *The Shore*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, *Okay Donkey*, *EcoTheo*, *The Hopper*, *Terrain*, and other journals. He served as Louisiana Poet Laureate 2017-2019.

Anatoly Belilovsky was born in a city that went through six or seven owners in the last century, all of whom used it to do a lot more than drive to church on Sundays; he is old enough to remember tanks rolling through it on their way to Czechoslovakia in 1968. After being traded to the US for a shipload of grain and a defector to be named later, he learned English from Star Trek reruns, apparently well enough to be admitted into SFWA in spite of chronic cat deficiency. He has published over 60 pieces of prose, poetry, and translation.

Michelle Bitting was short-listed for the 2020 Montreal International Poetry Prize, won the 2018 Fischer Poetry Prize, Quarter After Eight's 2018 Robert J. DeMott Short Prose Contest, and a fourth collection of poetry, *Broken Kingdom* won the 2018 Catamaran Prize and was named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2018. She is a Lecturer in Poetry and Creative Writing at Loyola Marymount University and Assoc. Professor of Film Studies at U of Arizona Global.

William C. Blome wedges between Baltimore and Washington, DC. He once swiped a master's degree from the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work appeared in *Poetry London*, *PRISM International*, *Roanoke Review*, and *The California Quarterly*.

Paul Bluestein is a physician and a blues guitar player who lives in Connecticut with his wife and the two dogs that rescued him. His work has appeared in *The Linden Avenue Literary Review*, *Heron Tree*, *Sunlight Press* and *StylusLit* among other publications. His first poetry collection, *Time Passages*, was released earlier this year by Silver Bow Publishing.

Tetman Callis has published various short fictions in such magazines as *NOON*, *New York Tyrant*, *Atticus Review*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Cloudbank*, *Four Way Review*, and *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and two books, *High Street* and *Franny & Toby*. He has a degree in philosophy and lives in Chicago with his wife and two cats.

Lauren Camp is the author of five books, most recently *Took House* (Tupelo Press). Honors include the Dorset Prize and finalist citations for the Arab American Book Award, the Housatonic Award and the New Mexico-Arizona Book Award. Her work has been translated into Mandarin, Turkish, Spanish, and Arabic. www.laurencamp.com

Michael Cocchiarale is the author of the novel *None of the Above* (Unsolicited, 2019) and two short story collections--*Here Is Ware* (Fomite, 2018) and *Still Time* (Fomite, 2012). His creative work appears online as well, in journals such as *Fictive Dream*, *Fiction Kitchen Berlin*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Atticus Review*.

Mick Corrigan's poems have been rejected by many excellent magazines. He has also been nominated for The Pushcart Prize and The Forward Poetry Prize. He has spent the pandemic doing wild and reckless things with his hair.

Paul T. Corrigan's work has appeared in *TheAtlantic.com*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Saint Katherine Review*, *Poets Reading the News*, and elsewhere. He has also twice won *Rattle's* Ekphrastic Challenge. Currently, he teaches creative and academic writing at the University of Tampa, where he is also slated to become the next poetry editor for *The Tampa Review*.

Kristen Cypret is a PhD student at The University of Kansas. Her work has appeared in *Elder Mountain: A Journal of Ozark Studies*, *Moon City Review*, and *Paddle Shots: A River Anthology*. Her research interests include language pedagogy, multilingual education, language teacher identity, and post-intentional phenomenology.

Margaret Diehl has published a chapbook of poems *it all stayed open* (Red Glass Books, 2011), two novels and a memoir (*Men*, 1989, *Me and You*, 1990 and *The Boy on the Green Bicycle*, 1999, all from Soho Press) as well as poems, short stories and essays in literary journals.

Robert DiLillo is a west coast teacher and writer, by way of Lewis and Clark College, UC Berkeley, and the Centrum Writing Workshops. He has published in journals such as *Backchannels*, *Ginosko*, and *Litbreak*, and is currently working on an autofiction book of reflections on personal transformation and midlife.

Kelly DuMar is a poet, playwright and workshop facilitator from Boston. She's author of three poetry chapbooks, 'girl in tree bark,' 'Tree of the Apple,' and 'All These Cures.'" Her poems, prose and photos are published in many literary journals. She blogs her daily nature photos & creative writing at kellydumar.com/blog

Marina and Sergey Dyachenko, a former actress and a former psychiatrist, are coauthors of thirty novels and numerous short stories and screenplays. Marina and Sergey were born in Ukraine, lived in Russia, and now live in Los Angeles. Their books have been translated into several foreign languages and awarded multiple literary and film prizes. Marina and Sergey are recipients of the Award for Best Authors (Eurocon 2005). Three of their novels, *The Scar*, *Vita Nostra*, and *Daughter from the Dark*, have been translated into English and published by Tor and Harper Voyager.

Alexis Rhone Fancher has authored six collections, including *The Dead Kid Poems* (KYSO Flash Press) and *Junkie Wife* (Moon Tide Press). *EROTIC: New & Collected*, from *New York Quarterly*, drops in March, 2021. She's published in *Best American Poetry*, *Plume*, *Diode*, *The American Journal of Poetry* and elsewhere. Find her at www.alexisrhonefancher.com

John Findura is the author of the poetry collection *Submerged* (Five Oaks Press, 2017). He holds an MFA from The New School as well as a degree in psychotherapy. His poetry and criticism appear in numerous journals including *Verse*; *Fourteen Hills*; *Copper Nickel*; *Pleiades*; *Forklift, Ohio*; *Sixth Finch*; *Prelude*; and *Rain Taxi*. A guest blogger for *The Best American Poetry*, he lives in Northern New Jersey with his wife and daughters.

Lynn Finger's poetry has appeared in *Night Music Journal*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Daily Drunk*, *8Poems*, *Perhappened*, and is forthcoming in *Twin Pies* and *Drunk Monkeys*. Lynn is an editor at *Harpy Hybrid Review* and works with a group that mentors writers in prison. Follow Lynn on Twitter @sweetfirefly2.

Matthew Freeman's new book, *Ideas of Reference at Jesuit Hall*, was recently published by Coffeetown Press. He holds an MFA from the University of Missouri-St Louis and is known to teach a workshop here and there.

Howie Good's latest poetry collections are *The Death Row Shuffle* (Finishing Line Press, 2020) and *The Trouble with Being Born* (Ethel Micro-Press, 2020).

James Goodman writes and performs with several musical groups, all of which specialize in original poetry and story and music based on traditional themes. He has a day job, thank goodness.

Chitra Gopalakrishnan uses her ardor for writing, wing to wing, to break firewalls between nonfiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript, and tree-ism and capitalism.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. He has work upcoming in *Hollins Critic*, *Redactions* and *California Quarterly*.

Pamela Hart is writer-in-residence at the Katonah Museum of Art where she teaches and manages a visual literacy program. Her book, *Mothers Over Nangarhar*, was published in 2019 by Sarabande Books. She was a 2020 NYFA finalist in poetry. She received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2013.

Max Heinegg's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *The Cortland Review*, *Thrush*, *Nimrod*, and *Love's Executive Order*. He lives and teaches high school English in Medford, MA, and is a singer-songwriter whose records can be heard at www.maxheinegg.com

Julia Meitov Hersey, born in Moscow, moved to Boston at the age of nineteen and has been straddling the two cultures ever since. She lives north of Boston with her husband, two daughters, and a hyperactive dog, juggling a full-time job and her beloved translation projects

Michael Igoe, city boy, neurodiverse, Chicago now Boston, numerous works appear in journals online and print. Recent: anserjournal.org, minerallit.com, *Spare Change News* (Cambridge MA). *Avalanches* i Poetry Anthology@amazon.com; National Library Of Poetry Editors Choice Award 1997. poetryinmotion416254859.wordpress.com Twitter: MichaelIgoe5. Urban Realism/Surrealism. I like the night.

Paul Ilechko is the author of three chapbooks, most recently "Pain Sections" (Alien Buddha Press). His work has appeared in a variety of journals, including *Juxtapose*, *Rogue Agent*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Thin Air Magazine* and *Pithead Chapel*. He lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ.

Luke Johnson was born and raised in Cayucos, CA, and later graduated from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo with a degree in History. When he isn't vacuuming or chasing kids, he spends his time writing. He is a published poet, sports blogger and editor with years of experience creating targeted online content. He lives on the California coast with his wife, three children and Bluepoint Siamese cat named Louie.

Fred Johnston was born in Belfast, 1951. His most recent publication is a ninth collection of poems, *ROGUE STATES* (Salmon, 2019.) His work has appeared in *The New Statesman*, *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, *The Irish Times*, *The Spectator*, *STAND*, and elsewhere. He is a recipient of a 2020 Irish Arts Council literature bursary. He lives in Galway, Ireland.

Clyde Kessler lives in Radford, VA with his wife Kendall and their son Alan. In 2017, Cedar Creek published his book of poems, *Fiddling At Midnight's Farm House*, which

Kendall illustrated.

Denmark Laine is a freelance writer, poet and music critic whose work has been featured on *Fox 2 KTVI*, *Subprimal Poetry Art*, *STL TV Live*, *Eleven Magazine*, *Bad Jacket* and *Spartan Press*.

Diane LeBlanc is a writer, teacher, and book artist with roots in Vermont, Wyoming, and Minnesota. She is the author of four poetry chapbooks. Her work has received numerous awards, including *Mid-American Review's* 2019 Fineline Competition prize. Poems and essays appear in journals including *Bellingham Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Natural Bridge*, and *Sweet*. A full-length collection of poems is forthcoming from Terrapin Books in 2021. Learn more at www.dianeblancwriter.com

Richard LeDue was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives and teaches in Norway House, Manitoba. His poems have appeared in various publications throughout 2019, and more work is forthcoming throughout 2020. His chapbook, "The Loneliest Age," was released in October 2020 from Kelsay Books.

David Luoma's fiction has been published in *The McNeese Review*, *45th Parallel*, *The Literary Review*, *decomp*, *Third Coast*, and elsewhere. He teaches at Johnson County Community College.

Clare L. Martin's most recent book, *Crone*, was released by Nixes Mate Books. Her collection, *Seek the Holy Dark*, was the 2017 selection of the Louisiana Cajun and Creole Series by Yellow Flag Press. Martin's debut, *Eating the Heart First*, was published by Press 53. She founded *MockingHeart Review*, an online poetry and art magazine.

Kelly McQuain's poetry appears in *Best New Poets 2020*, *The Pinch*, *Trampset*, *Assaracus*, *Kestrel*, *Spunk*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Rogue Agent* and numerous anthologies. He's been a Sewanee Writers' Workshop Tennessee Williams Scholar and a Lambda Literary Fellow, and he has received two fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. His chapbook, *Velvet Rodeo*, was awarded the Bloom prize by poet C. Dale Young. Also an artist, he regularly illustrates portraits of writers for *Fjords Review* and sells his work through galleries and the web. www.KellyMcQuain.wordpress.com

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with over 1,600 poems published internationally in magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle* and the *North American Review*. His books are 'The So-Called Sonnets' (Silenced Press); 'An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy'; (Cawing Crow Press); 'Like As If' (Pski's Porch); 'Hearsay' (The Poet's Haven).

Catulle Mendès (1841 - 1909), a French writer of Portuguese descent, was allied with Parnassian poets who advocated restraint and technical perfection in writing, using fantastic tales to criticize bourgeois values. Mendès was a great creator of fairies, producing among

other writings a number of original and reworked fairy tales.

A. Molotkov, born in Russia, moved to the US in 1990 and switched to writing in English in 1993. His poetry collections are *The Catalog of Broken Things*, *Application of Shadows* and *Synonyms for Silence*. Published by *Kenyon, Iowa, Antioch, Massachusetts, Atlanta, Bennington* and *Tampa Reviews, Hotel Amerika, Volt, Arts & Letters* and many more, Molotkov has received various fiction and poetry awards and an Oregon Literary Fellowship. His prose is represented by Laura Strachan at Strachan Lit. Please visit him at AMolotkov.com.

Dana Shepherd Morrow earned BA, Lindenwood University, St. Charles, Missouri, and was awarded the 2002-2003 Howard Barnett Essay Award for, “The Privileged Daughter.” “A Glimpse, Six Times,” tied second at 2016 Lindenwood SRSE Symposium. She earned her MFA May, 2016 and served as assistant editor for seventh edition, *The Lindenwood Review*.

Richard Newman is the author of three books of poems and a novel. He lives and teaches in Vietnam and Japan.

Joey Nicoletti is the author of four poetry books and chapbooks, most recently *Boombbox Serenade* (BlazeVOX, 2019) and *Counterfeit Moon* (NightBallet Press, 2016). His work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. A New York City native, Joey teaches at SUNY Buffalo State. He’s on Twitter @JoeyNicoletti and Instagram @joeynicoletti.

Dion O’Reilly’s book, *Ghost Dogs*, was published in 2020 by [Terrapin Books](http://TerrapinBooks.com). Her work appears in *Cincinnati Review, Poetry Daily, Narrative, New Letters, New Ohio Review, Rattle*, and *The Sun*. She facilitates Zoom workshops and is a member of the [Hive Poetry Collective](http://HivePoetryCollective.com) which produces podcasts, and events. (dionoreilly.wordpress.com)

Robert Okaji is a displaced Texan seeking employment in Indiana. He once won a goat-catching contest, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Vox Populi, North Dakota Quarterly, MockingHeart Review, Taos Journal of International Poetry & Art, Panoply* and elsewhere.

Eric Pankey, who received his MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1983, is the author of many collections. His poetry, essays, and reviews have appeared widely in such journals as *The Iowa Review, The Harvard Review, The Kenyon Review, The New Yorker, The New Republic, The New Yorker*, and *The Yale Review*. His work has been supported by fellowships from John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and the Brown Foundation. He teaches poetry workshops and courses on modern and contemporary poetry. He is Professor of English and the Heritage Chair in Writing at George Mason University. He lives with his wife, the poet Jennifer Atkinson, in Fairfax, Virginia.

Faith Paulsen's work appears in the upcoming Ghost City Press, as well as recent *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Evansville Review*, *Mantis*, *Psaltery and Lyre*, and *Terra Preta*, among others. Her work also appears in the anthologies *Is it Hot in Here or Is It Just Me?* (Social Justice Anthologies) and *50/50: Poems & Translations by Womxn over 50* (QuillsEdge). She has been nominated for a Pushcart, and her chapbook *A Color Called Harvest* (Finishing Line Press) was published in 2016. A second chapbook is expected in 2020.

James Penha, a native New Yorker, has lived for the past quarter-century in Indonesia. Nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry, his work has lately appeared in several anthologies: *The Impossible Beast: Queer Erotic Poems* (Damaged Goods Press), *The View From Olympia* (Half Moon Books, UK), *Queers Who Don't Quit* (Queer Pack, EU), *What We Talk About It When We Talk About It*, (Darkhouse Books), *Headcase*, (Oxford UP), *Lovejets* (Squares and Rebels), and *What Remains* (Gelles-Cole). His essays have appeared in *The New York Daily News* and *The New York Times*. Penha edits *The New Verse News*, an online journal of current-events poetry. Twitter: @JamesPenha

Kasey Perkins completed her MFA in poetry from the University of Missouri–St. Louis in 2014. Her chapbook, *When the Dead Get Mail*, was published through Finishing Line Press in 2019. Her poetry and poetry book reviews have appeared in the *Chattahoochee Review*, *Chariton Review*, *Digital Americana*, and many more.

George Perreault has published widely in journals and anthologies in the US and internationally.

Carson Pytell is a writer living outside Albany, NY whose work has appeared in numerous venues online and in print, including *Cruel Garters*, *The Virginia Normal*, *NoD Magazine*, *Rabid Oak* and *Bluepepper*, among others. He serves on the editorial board of the journal *Coastal Shelf*, and his short collection, *First-Year* (Alien Buddha Press, 2020) and chapbook, *Trail* (Guerrilla Genesis Press, 2020) are now available. In December 2020 he is slated to participate in the Tupelo Press 30/30 Project.

Remi Recchia is a trans poet and essayist from Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University. He currently serves as an associate editor for the *Cimarron Review*. Remi's work has appeared in *Columbia Online Journal*, *Front Porch*, and *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, among others. He holds an MFA in Poetry from Bowling Green State University.

J.C. Rubin is from Bartlett, Illinois, and resides in Missouri, where he teaches English and film studies classes at an at-risk high school he helped start 21 years ago. His fiction and poetry have appeared in such publications as *Image Journal* and *New Orleans Review*.

Jeff Santosuosso is a business consultant and award-winning poet living in Pensacola, FL. His chap book, "Body of Water," is available through Clare Songbirds Publishing House. He is Editor-in-Chief of panoplyzine.com, an online journal of poetry and short

prose. Jeff's work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in many publications.

Michael Schmeltzer is the co-author of the nonfiction book "A Single Throat Opens," a lyric exploration of addiction and family. His poetry debut "Blood Song" was a finalist for the Washington State Book Award and Julie Suk Award. He lives in Seattle and is the President of Floating Bridge Press.

Chuck Teixeira grew up among anthracite mines in northeastern Pennsylvania. He holds degrees from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, Harvard Law School and the Graduate School of Law at New York University. Chuck worked for many years as a tax attorney in San Francisco, California. Now he teaches English in Bogota, Colombia. Chuck's stories have appeared in *Esquire*, *Permafrost*, *Portland Review*, *Jonathan* and *Two Thirds North*. Collections of his work are available at Amazon.com

Paul Telles's poems have appeared in several online and print publications, including *Rat's Ass Review*, *BoomerLitMag*, and *The Decameron: Stories from the Pandemic*.

Wes Trexler, anarchist, raconteur and birdwatcher is an expatriate but claims Brooklyn. Recent stories have appeared in the *Wisconsin Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Story|Houston*, the *New Haven Review* and elsewhere. Other stories have received some prize recognition from the *Rag Literary Review* and *Sudden Denouement*. Mr. Trexler was born in West Virginia. He studied writing in Spokane and Squaw Valley, and in Prague.

D.K. White-Atkinson is a student, teacher, and writer. D.K. holds a MFA in writing from Lindenwood University. Currently, D.K. resides in Ninety Six (yes, that's the correct name), South Carolina, and teaches English at Piedmont Technical College in Greenwood.

Megan Wildhood is an erinaceous, neurodiverse writer in Seattle who helps her readers feel seen as they interact with her words in her poetry chapbook Long Division (Finishing Line Press, 2017) as well as *The Atlantic*, *Yes! Magazine*, *Mad in America*, *The Sun* and elsewhere. Learn more at meganwildhood.com.

Patricia Worth has a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Art History and French, and a Master of Translation Studies. Her translations include George Sand's 1842 novel, *Spiridion*, (SUNY Press 2015), Jean Lorrain's 1898 collection, *Stories to Read by Candlelight*, (Odyssey Books 2019), and many translated stories published in literary journals.

Daniel W. Wright is a St. Louis writer. A longtime writer of wild nights and whiskey tributes, Wright is a poet of the no-collar workforce. His most recent book is *Brian Epstein Died for You* (Spartan Press, 2020). His work has appeared in print journals such as *BUK100*, *365 Days*, and *Gasconade Review*.

