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Thank you to all writers who submitted to *Cutthroat*. We value every single piece of work that is submitted. We also thank our subscribers around the world.

CONGRATULATIONS TO FICTION EDITOR, WILLIAM LUVAAS ON THE PUBLICATION OF HIS NOVEL, *BENEATH THE COYOTE HILLS*, published by Spuyten Duyvil, September 2016.

THE CUTTHROAT ONLINE/SKYPE WRITING MENTOR PROGRAM

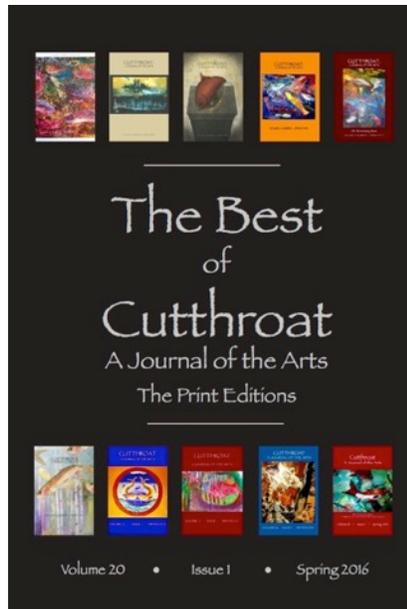
ONE-ON-ONE, FOUR WEEK MENTORSHIPS IN POETRY, MEMOIR, MIXED GENRE, NOVEL, POETRY, SHORT STORY and POETRY IN TRANSLATION (\$1000). WE ALSO OFFER SIX WEEK MANUSCRIPT EVALUATION OF POETRY COLLECTIONS, NOVELS, and SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS (\$2000). OUR STUDENTS HAVE PUBLISHED SEVERAL COLLECTIONS FROM WORK THEY WROTE DURING MENTORSHIPS.

FACULTY

DOUG ANDERSON, Poetry and Memoir
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NAOMI BENARON, The Novel
SEAN THOMAS DOUGHERTY, Mixed Genre
LINDA HOGAN, Personal Essays
PATRICIA SPEARS JONES, Poetry
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MARILYN KALLET, Manuscript Evaluation Only (Poetry And Poetry
In Translation)
WILLIAM LUVAAS, Short Story
DARLIN NEAL, Flash Fiction/Short Story
MEG POKRASS, Flash Fiction
MELISSA PRITCHARD, Short Story
WILLIAM PITT ROOT, Poetry
PATRICIA SMITH, Poetry
PAMELA USCHUK, Poetry
DONLEY WATT, The Novel

INFORMATION

Go to www.cutthroatmag.com or call 970-903-7914 for complete guidelines, fee schedules and enrollment information.



2016 JOY HARJO POETRY PRIZE
BARRY LOPEZ CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE
RICK DEMARINIS SHORT STORY PRIZE

\$1250 1st PRIZE, \$250 2nd PRIZE, Honorable Mention

JUDGES

MARILYN NELSON, POETRY

MICHAEL MARTONE, SHORT STORY

RICK BASS, NONFICTION

GUIDELINES: Go to www.cutthroatmag.com and submit poems and stories through our online submission manager or submit through the mails. Include **SASE for announcement of winners is REQUIRED for all mailed entries (all ms recycled)**. Submit up to **3 poems** (100 line limit/one poem per page) or **one short story or creative nonfiction piece** (5000 word limit/double spaced) in **12 point font. NO AUTHOR NAME ALLOWED ON ANY MS.** Mail-ins must have a cover sheet with author name, address, phone & email, title(s) of submission. **NO STAPLES.** There is a \$18 nonrefundable entry fee per submission. Make checks to *Ravens Word Writers*. Deadline: **October 15, 2016. UNPUBLISHED WORK ONLY!** No work that has already won a prize is eligible. No former *CUTTHROAT* prize-winning author may enter the contest he/or she has previously won. Enter as often as you wish. Multiple submissions okay, but inform us immediately of acceptances elsewhere. Finalists considered for publication. Winners published in *CUTTHROAT* and announced on our website, in *POETS & WRITERS* and *AWP CHRONICLE*. No relatives of or staff members of *CUTTHROAT* nor close friends, relatives and no students of judges are eligible to enter our contests. Call 970-903-7914 for more information. **WE RECOMMEND YOU READ A COPY OF CUTTHROAT BEFORE ENTERING OUR CONTESTS.**

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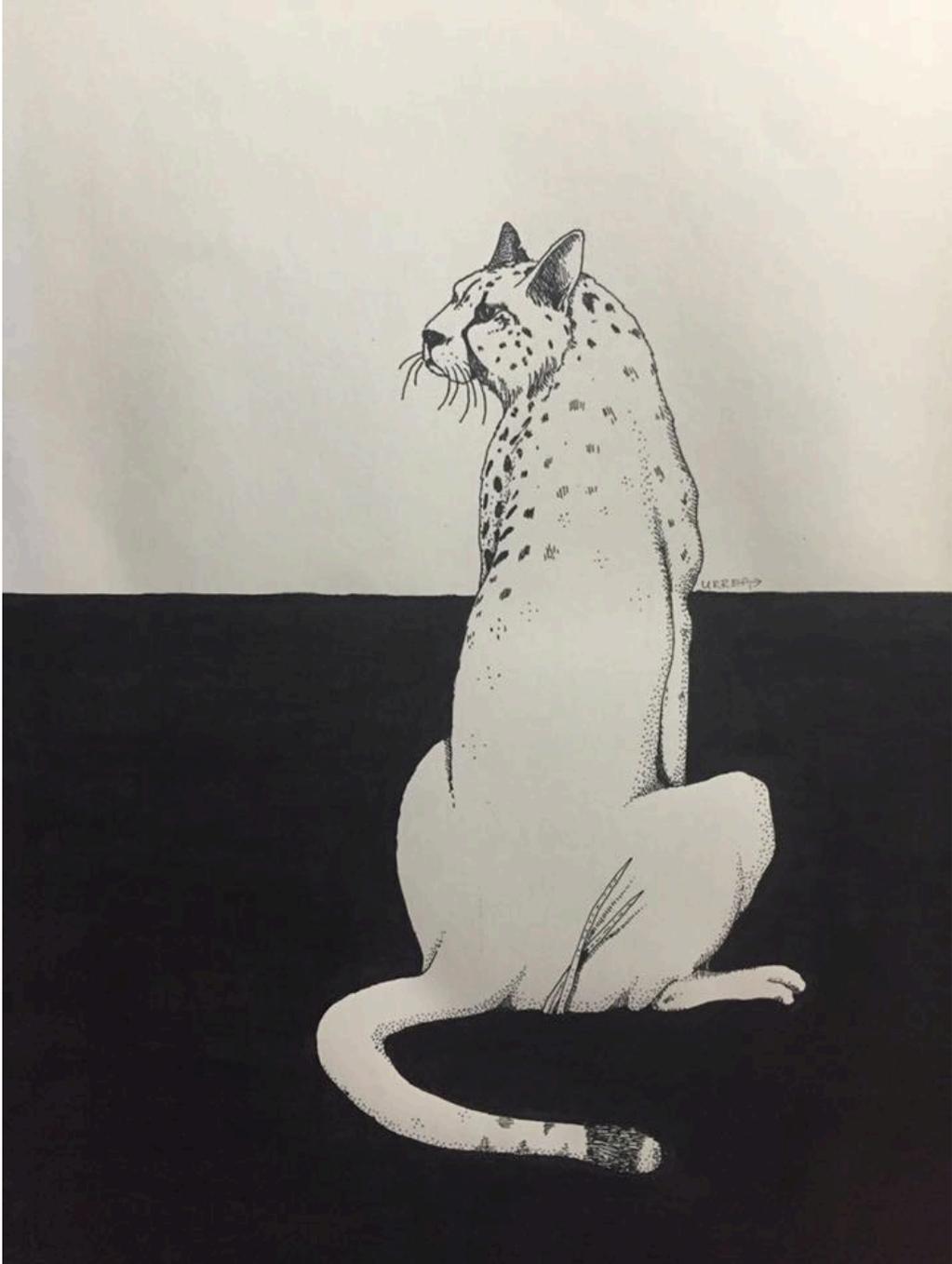
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Cheetah, Sketch

Luis Alberto Urrea



Beaded Bandolier and Bag (Creek/Pueblo Designs) Rainy Ortiz

CUTTHROAT DISCOVERY POET, ADIE SMITH



Adie Smith lives amongst piles of books with her husband and dog. She studied poetry and visual art at Belhaven University and received a MFA in poetry from Seattle Pacific University. She recently moved to Tacoma, Washington from Jackson, Mississippi. Adie won the 2015 Joy Harjo Poetry Award and her winning poem was published in *Cutthroat 20: THE BEST OF CUTTHROAT*. In her poetry, she finds herself returning to the timelessness of leaving and returning from war and the people who are left behind to wait.

Adie Smith

**Of the things we would say to the stars in the sky if we
found ourselves alone in a lifeboat at sea 1**

Kandahar, Afghanistan

And oh my god, oh my god, the sky is so full of long-dead light—
sparks of matter, pressure, the luck of the right place at the right time.

Fire begets fire. Did it begin with a match in the smoke-darkened night,
the acrid taste of gunpowder gritting our mouths? Or with the bright flesh of the
other?

The shadow that follows in sunlight
is the darker side of self. We light the next cigarette from the one still burning.

I sketch Guernica over and over until the spine of the bare-breasted
woman clinging to her child was a tree limb bent before the snap.

Each night is a page folded over. I once knew
a girl who ripped the pages from the book as she read.

Our footprints paint portraits of insomnia. We are not the first men to wander this
desert.

Angels wait outside our tents. A woman laughs. Water pours from the stones in
our shoes.

When the bomb goes off, feel the shockwaves in the whites of your eyes.

Adie Smith

BEFORE HER SON WENT TO WAR

He holds the barrel of the gun like reaching
to shake a hand. Down range flutter concentric circles, silhouetted men.

She bends again and again to sort spent casings from dust,
stone ground to sand beneath the feet of men grinding men to ash.

Each case is empty as a tomb.
The physics of leaving is in shape and rotation, the spin of barrel's rifling.

Casings hot as popped corn hop like finches. She pockets the brass.
God leaves me pennies she says. Keep your eyes open for the glint

of a miracle. After he leaves, she will turn his mattress and find a penny
between the layers of ticking—a sign of what is coming or what has been left.

From her pocket the sound of casings rub like coins.

In the after-life, Jackal-faced Anabis weighs each heart against a feather
plucked from the downy collar of Gabriel as he whispers to the Mother of God.

His chest is a purple welt from the kickback.

She is bruised from bending and lifting, from handing her son bullets
he slides into the chamber, from the wait for the bullet to strike home,
the phone to ring, a voice to answer.

Adie Smith

LA PUCELLE AND THE BEE

for Jeanine

I don't remember the seraph's cry but I know
someone whispered among the blades
of grass and spoke only when I spoke.

In the words, I caught fire as devoutly as the crocus
opening its bone-colored chalice.
In the beginning just a word.

The last field I walked was aflame with crickets
and arrows rubbing together in the arc of rise and fall.
I counted the chirps to measure the temperature of air—
a quiet instruction, a turning page.

The sparks are bees.
The buzz in my fire-caught hair stings
gentle as the cost of wildflower honey.

The Archangel bends to brush the ash from my eyes
in his other hand he weighs souls in scales
balanced by a crumbling moth wing.

I am as far from here as the sun from light
trapped in honey pulled from the comb,
as far as the shadow from the circling bird.

The flame's crackle is a tuning fork.

In the heat, even bones can learn to hum
the pitch of departure. A sound as lovely as the first
cry, of the honey bee's buzz caught in armor,
of light on a wing whispering me away with a word.

Barbara Tramonte

TO LE-ANN WHO HAD A HEART ATTACK

On New Year's Eve
My student
Legally blind

Had a heart attack
But that was after her eviction
Now she's in rehab
Submitting her Master's Thesis
To me for
Our 16th iteration

To Le-Ann, who had a heart attack
On New Year's Eve
Who has more fight in her
Than a drill to the earth

Who I carry like a wounded sack
Of mashed up innards
Who will finish
Or finish me

To Le-Ann, berating me
Commanding that I read
Re-read, re-tread, explain
Why I can't make the world right
Why she is blind
Why her daughter's on the spectrum
Why her veteran status
Can't save her from the streets
Why Schlossberg's theory of transition
Means shit in real life.

Patricia Spears Jones
Marilyn Kallet

SPEAKING SPARKS

Repeating news of police violence
beats back poetry.

The video feed fed well
digital drama loops,

myriad spirits trapped in pixels.
Their deaths tapestry the star sky.

On audio too many curses stuck
on FUCK FUCK FUCK.

When my daughter cries, "Mommy!
You told me not to say that!"
I reassure, "Honey,
my mouth is free.
In our house, we speak sparks
if we need fire.
Watch yourself
when you go out."

Here we are again,
weeping fears for breakfast.
For a year after the violence
I was scared to leave the house.
I carried mace, afraid
of my own clumsy hands.

Where did the "I" emerge,
frightened, housebound?

What does isolation mean?
Ice, location, danger from.

Our hands are shut in prayers.
Our hearts shut from fear.

But we have to go out.
Our words need air.

To survive. Sisters,
we mean to speak.

Maria James-Thiaw
Marilyn Kallet

CONTUSION

America swells black and blue.
Not salad. Shackled.
Slave ships. Black and blue lives
in cities
down.
“*Blue matters* is a fact.
Black, a reminder.”

“There are no words.”
Yes, these words:
“We’re hurting,”
“Dallas officers are hurting.”
Black.
Blue.
America down.

“Deceased.”
“He’s been deceased,”
the Dallas police chief said.
Your bot killed him.
Words have lives too.
“The suspect said he was
‘upset at white people.’”

We need more than prayers.
We need more than
trolling internet-muscled minions,
more than naïve well-wishers with
claims of color blindness.
It takes privilege to close one’s eyes,
To reduce the world to black and white.

There is no radical war wish,
no homogeneous hoard of hate.
We march, fists and voices to the sky,
to dismantle systems that pit

black and blue against each other.
We stand... too many of us fall.

Tired of police statistics.
The boys cry, "When can we go out?
Is it safe to leave the house?"

We take the children by the hand.
It takes privilege to walk out.

Tears for breakfast.
We weep in black,
deluded white.
We go out
to prove we
won't be stopped.
Won't lock ourselves in.
They'll do that for us.

Dae'Anna in the back seat
stays locked in place,
place of trauma and
blood.
We can't leave her there.
Four years old,
she's locked.

Like the hair that needs cut
and the pants pulled up
and too dark eyes
and the nose too wide.
Like the yes sir, no sir
Look down
Look up
Hands up
Hands cuffed
Don't shoot!
Please sir, no thank you
My neck, my neck
I can't breathe.

We're licensed to carry a
deep down guttural pain

like mama's wail
the steel grip around empty bellies.
We can't inhale peace in any form.
Fists high we cry for justice
That never comes.

We pave the streets
with the power of tears,
march as your fear paints targets
on our backs:
Philando, Sandra, Sean,
Trayvon, Emmett, Alton, Michael, Tamir.
Like his daddy, his uncle,

her son, her boo,
her boyfriend, my cousin,
our granddad, our nephew,
numbers 115, 116,
number 117 who lived to tell
and yes,

for the blue blood spilled.
We rise
on the shoulders
of ancestors,
unlock our hopes
and march
again.



Beaded Butterfly

Kim Shuck

Linda Parsons
SMUDGE

His sudden going
in winter lit one fire, now midsummer
I strike another like ancients huddled against
vast night. First, the grounding, I smudge myself,
sage bound with thread from my grandmother's
sewing box. Smokerise, melt of burden,
bellows nearest my heart, my length, woodsy
sweet. Then thresholds, where absence clanged
for days on end, dhurrie rugs, where the hackles
of odd things he left behind circled and settled
with the sheepdog. Footfalls and thumbprints,
oil musk of his pillow, irritations webbing
the eaves—leave these joists, this mortar,
far and away, far and away.

Wand of hands,
keep the scent in my head the next morning,
weave of be-all and end-all, my breath
rekindled pure and white into linen and oak
floor. When the last embers, the wild leaves,
cleansed the chairs of our living and trying,
our exhausted errors of love. Let him overturn
river rocks, skink flashing blue, heron faded
to mist. As for me, I'll root in my little Eden,
a bowl of ashes to catch the new moon,
crow feather on the sill, the remains
flapping off, mateless.

Linda Parsons
IN MEDIAS RES

I muscle the Toro through the third crank
until the clot over the cistern chokes her
again. Nothing to do but cool in the shade,
these days in the middle of things, like this
workus interruptus in full-born summer
while over my shoulder early fall rouges
the burning bush and bloodgood maple.

It's all mine to notice—dusk coming on,
the sigh I don't realize I'm sighing. The beginning
of the end and end of the beginning, the day
the martins vacate their high-rise apartments,
a chill you never expect in July, a footfall
on your grave, say the old wives. Betwixt
and between my whole life, astraddle Middle
and East Tennessee, mother and father
dug in, turned aside. One husband, two, none.

Arriving in the midst of exposition, the past
flashes its mumbled dialogue behind the night
scrim. I wouldn't repeat even the most
spangled moments, wouldn't loose my feet
or my courage from this sticking place,
looking far, to the former love, near
to the new, strung taut as a fiddle bow
across the divide.

Stephen C. Middleton
& SHE FOLLOWED (BRILLIANT CORNERS)

Monk's 'Functional' a yardstick of halting sorts. Hard times – no cabaret card. & she followed. & took the rap for him / who'd seen Hamp go down. A dodgy prostate made sitting at the piano painful. So to bed. 'What's happening Monk?' Baraka said. "Everything – all the time". Too much. Hesitates. Sucks in breath from pain / against asthma attack. Reflux. Declensions, sub clauses, pauses – Brilliant Corners.

Ray Gonzales

PHOTOGRAPH OF KENNETH REXROTH LEANING AGAINST A BOOKSHELF

The eyes of the mustached poet shine as
lanterns left at the entrance to the mine where

it was discovered dinosaurs once lived,
artifacts of a philosophy mistaken for dead.

The ideas of men were lost at sea when
the pirates boarded and stole everything.

The whores down the street recognized
the handsome young man and vowed to

change their lives the next time he paid.
When the workers went on strike, their

wives cooked meals that were never served
because the police settled everything.

The poems of men are scattered in bedrooms,
books on the shelf torn when the poets fought

among themselves, voices louder than their
fathers' who beat them, the zing of the leather

belt the first rhythm they learned. The search
for paradise goes on as gazes out the window,

wonders what happened to the woman he took
to the mountain and made love to by the lake.

Ray Gonzales

TWISTING THE MOTH

A survey finds traditional bullying more popular than cyberbullying because playgrounds are dangerous, though the seventh grade

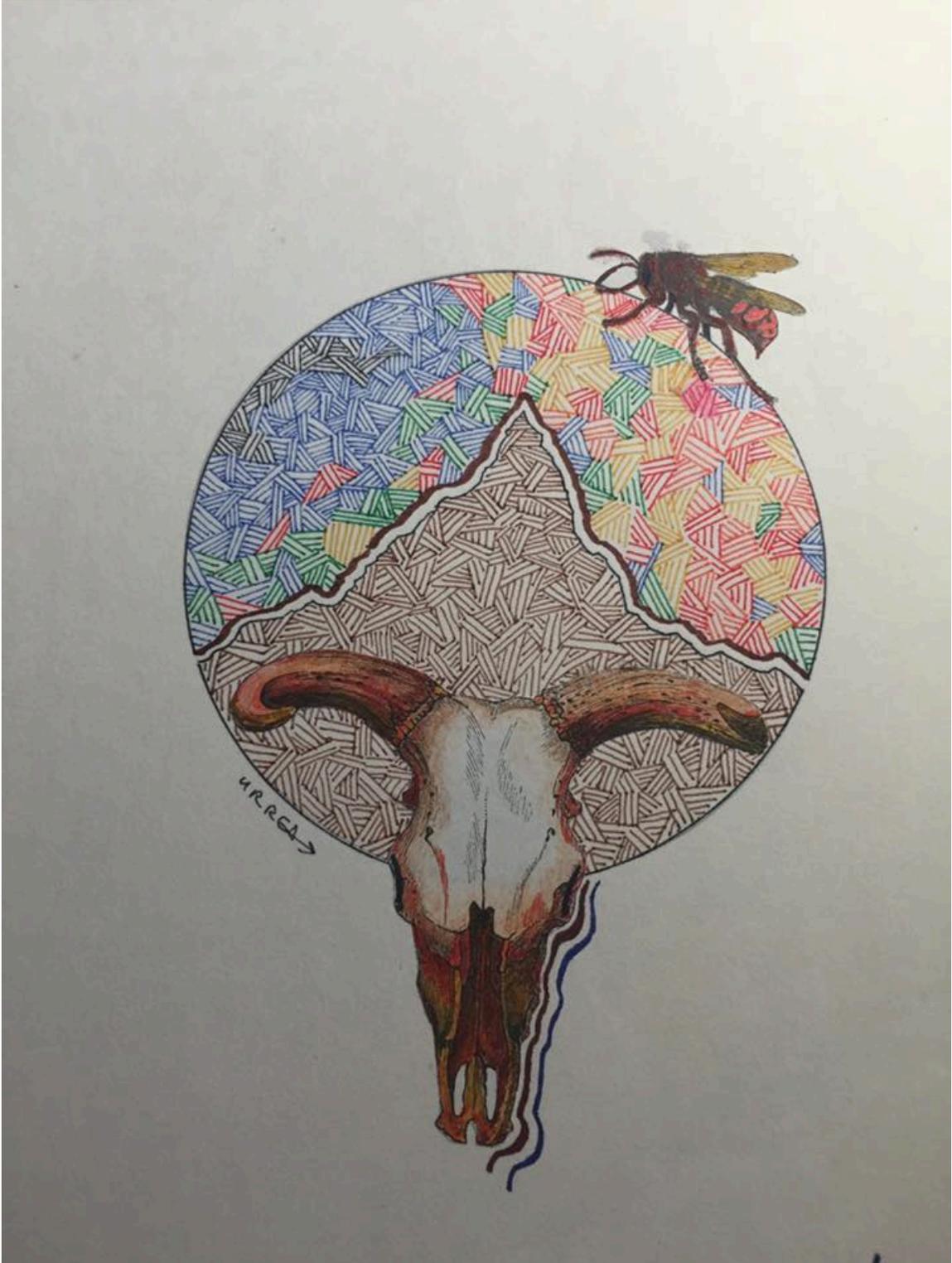
bully died in the war ten years later.
Evan Connell wrote, “Like the angular rings of a tree, prophetic dreams increase.”

Perfection was found in a wastebasket outside Albuquerque by a hungry teen-ager digging through highway trash before seeing the truth

that sent him a thousand miles down the road.
Twisting the moth with pollenated fingers,
he offered martyrdom from the balconies.

The arc of sunlight transforms the desert into hallucinations without a home. A coyote runs past, its slow gait leading to the river—modes of forgetting

as valuable as the moth hanging over the garden,
the dark sun afraid to hit the leaves because the light on its wings is reflecting how it got there.



Dawn, Sketch

Luis Alberto Urrea

Patricia Fargnoli

PENITENT MAGDALENE, DONATELLO

1.

There must have been the rustle of tourists,
the lecture of the guide, but all I remember
is silence and the scent of antiquity all around me,
as if the statue and I were alone in the gallery
of Museo del Opera del Duomo on that Monday
when the tour bus was merely passing through for half a day,
when no other museums were open because it was Monday.
I remember her as small-boned, small in body,
though now I learn she is six feet tall.
I was stunned by love for her,
a sudden awakening into the pain of her—
her gaunt bony face, her fixed tortured eyes,
that held, in spite of that pain,
a glimmer of hope, of exaltation.

2.

She was old by then in Donatello's imagination,
when he found the white poplar
and lifted the gouge, the chisel,
the carving knife to bring her
out of history into life again.
It must have been after Jesus cast out
the seven demons from her mind
and body, after she watched him crucified,
after the angels came to her in the empty cave,
after he, himself, appeared to her.
and after her years in the desert—
years of penitence and self-abnegation,
her wasted body, her uncombed tangled hair
reaching over her rags almost to her feet.

3.

And yet, somehow she seemed beyond grief,
beyond suffering, her body, the dark wood,

gilded so that it held both light
and shadow, not beautiful, but beautiful
in her humanness. And as I stood transfixed,
in the center of the gallery,
where she stood on her flat stone pedestal,
encircled by the metal railing that kept me
at once, close and distant, she imprinted me
with her mystery, she threw some bond

like a rope across the small space between us
and yes art can do this
so that now, decades later, she remains
bound to me, a presence in my body.

Patricia Fargnoli

DEAD WOMAN SITTING

“Funeral poses mimic life” New York Times, 6/22/14

And so why not? Who wants to take death
lying down anyway? I mean to put some fun

in this funeral. I'll welcome mourners sitting up—
in a lawn chair, a chaise so I can stretch out tired legs.

A can of diet coke beside me, caffeinated for once,
a slice of that lemon cake from Shaws

and a pack of Kent Lights so I can experience
again the pleasure of drawing in and letting go

the cloud rising beyond me into the ether
like so much dust. Dress me jeans or my white linen

slacks and that J.Jill brown linen blouse I love,

the Indian earrings I bought at the side
of the Navajo trail one spring in Arizona.

And sandals, because they won't hurt my feet anymore.
Dear friends and family: wouldn't you rather

see me in my natural state instead of peering
down at me from the great height of the living.

Wouldn't it make you happier to know that, even after death,
I could be up and about— well not “about” exactly but up at least?

I would no longer have any need
for my twenty pocketbooks, or four winter coats in the closet.

See how death becomes me.
Wellness a permanent condition now.

Emari DiGiorgio

WHERE MERMAIDS COME FROM

Her nicked torso gives way to thighs bound
by iridescent scales, a tiled roof
that shimmers in rain, slick and dangerous.
No feet but a tail, split, a serpent's tongue
to lick or lap water at shore's edge.
She's still a she, but harder to pin down.

Folks with fanny packs and visors down
for holiday avoid seedy motels bound
by bay and intercostal waterway. Dandelions edge
four lowercase t crosses. The Starlight's roof
half open to sky. Low tide's tongue
streaks gray-green muck dangerous:

a plastic worm with hidden hook. Danger's
gaze, that strain to look composed when down
on luck. Bloodshot eyes betray tongue,
No, I'm fine. I've found myself bound
by my sex too—flashflood, trapped on roof;
a woman idling night's addled edges.

Close enough to see ribs stretch, hear edge
of breath? Her light eyes: dangerous,
like stars collapsing in on themselves. My rueful
want to be sexless and without desire down-
played in case it comes true. She isn't bound
to this place now, fluent in the tongue

of Atlantic's whorling deep. Casinos tongue
the horizon to the east. My only edge—
stench of tidal bodies' bound
promise—return at dusk, danger's
hour, hoist her on a tarp I've wet down,
so skin won't stick or tear, and roofed

by car, we'll steal through town, roofs
aglow, until we reach island's tongue:
a straight shot to sea. I down

bilious envy, ask *what's at the edge?*
She shakes her head detached, as if danger's
lease's snapped. The throwaway girl's unbound—

left shoeless in roofless marsh, moon edging
split lip, swollen tongue, the dangerous hum of a girl
down, bound, strangled with a bit of hose.



Beaded Pouch

Kim Shuck

Lauren Camp

COMMON RAVEN

Even on the main road, black wing
and gloss. A call without such sorrow.

Wheel ruts in nameless light. Snow cold.
How long until you land,

each feather fluffed with the faithless world?
There is such ungodliness

in what the tongue will feed on.
You make the road a table,

demand pleasure in ransom,
bragging your laws with glottal stops.

And now, the gorge—
the eye, skin, leg. As tires move by,

your endless chewing.
It seems like rage, but it is only hunger.

Lauren Camp

FIVE MONTHS OR NINE

My love lays our anatomy book on the table.
The hour turns to oversweep of night
as we study each peripheral nerve, where it spreads to.
In twenty years of months, we expected more time
in tents near her. We were skyward, enough days
to see clouds become noon, enough of her son
to apportion. All hope's gone out of this.

Today I watched a turkey cross the dirt road, shaking
his head. In our house, another cat moves
to the window, conversing with junipers. Forks clink
on plates. The phone never rings. Ratio of desperation
to mother. In our one private loss, we'll drive
as often as we can to the grieving body, then scatter
her ashes. Say something old hat. Say *I know*.
Say *we*. Give me a reason to stop

dreaming of people I haven't said goodbye to yet.
Waiting is the remaining pleasure. We bend
to our task, lean to hear each aspen's thin thoughts,
and cut out dead wood. Leaf mold and moss
detail the path. Everywhere it can, the surface
springs back. We're weaned of global news,
what terrifies. Live instead in an endless string
of days, and only an occasional hawk, perishable
passageways. Give us the sky with all its crooning.

ooo

On a morning in March, they move.

Buy a china cabinet on consignment.
Fill it with where they've been, what they've rescued.

The jaguar and other trinkets arrive broken.

Their room is the size of omission. The two people intersect. They sit, or pass each other in the hall. Their worst thoughts come out in the dark.

They try to remember this as home.
She doesn't move. There is an old sky.

What wakes him now woke him before.

He sits with his head hooked down.
The room is just a room and welcomes him.

ooo

An oxygen tank and a long tube.
Daylight wavers, and we hold it.
A granite dome, the valley floor. What we call a meadow.
The vague prophecy: time.
Doorpost, judgment, a little soiling.
The ankle.
A morning. A dotted line.
A phone call at 9, at 9:30.
The flesh and our hands, nearly relentless.
A room in the back. A slow fan.
His silence. The impermanence.
Black and white mothers in old gilded photos on the wall.
A stranger, a prayer, a curtain, the murmur.
Daylight touching the body.
Sanctification: to wash, to wash, no blessing.

Lauren Camp

WILLA CATHER AT MABEL DODGE LUHAN'S HOUSE

*Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here
the earth was the floor of the sky.*

— Willa Cather (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*)

Every day, a topic. An index of emotion.

Every day, the old contours and preoccupation
with adornment. Every day, the fever

unknown, and the coiling whisper,
a flick and bend of the violet alphabet:

more how than strict.
A simple line—she keeps tearing it apart.

The project is practical.
She starts to wake early to hear

the white of her fist over hours
and days, the anatomy of attention

which tells her
Go in another direction. Always

an occasional underline.
This is the door to a few years with its gaps.

This is the skin of her breathing.
She sings each time she troubles.

The line again: so peevish.

And so, it is given, her allegiance.

Lauren Camp

SLICKENSLIDES AND FAULT PLANES

For Ashlynnne Mike

Spring arrives with its bewilderment, an explosive sort of pleading. I live in the desert and even here my thoughts are sometimes violent. In the same wind time—Shiprock, New Mexico on the Navajo Nation. *Tsé Bit' A'í* which means “rock with wings.” In order to exist I've been sleeping more darkly, night lunging up at me. On my right side, my eyes distant. All I can see is a blackening desolate edge. Almost every night I am abducted. I enter an unguarded reservation of terrors. The peak of Shiprock stands 7,178 feet above sea level, solidified from old ridges of pressure. My phone convulses, sculpting six squeals through the room. The sounds furl into my body: An 11-year-old missing in Shiprock. I turn, still designing harsh stories. Lured forward, I'm never alone. An Amber Alert issued at 2:27 AM Tuesday. The family is holding their palms open to sorrow. The tribe is holding their breath. Spring brings its brutal dust. I roll over, dead-asleep, captive. My bounty of nightmares began at 11 and continues for decades. The maiden sky is nearly an asterisk of light. Shiprock juts with its points from a plain. They found her on the far side of a desert hilltop. Her body, on Tuesday, in Shiprock. We won't talk of New Mexico as a land of enchantment. Everyone says how heroic the light. Light as shelter, as mantle. I moved here to salvage all my visible breaks, to mix them with blood, with my flesh. Shiprock is a fortress: eroded, fractured. It is all that has been revealed. That night: the quick turn of my back against the sheets, the topography of knees tucked to chest. I've always blamed the dark for my visions, this interrogation of dimension. I survive within it. Ashlynnne entered a stranger's maroon van and the roads split again, crusty. He led her off to the stripped skin of blue hours, into the deserted distance to ache and weigh shadows. Reports say the stranger hit her twice in the head with a tire iron. Most mornings I feel like I'll never get up, I'm so bruised

from the nothing on nothing. They found her six miles
from the pinnacle. The sky outside my bedroom window
fringes with insolent crows, their squarish wings.
My sweaty body, another knee bent. All these mysteries.
On a good night, no grinding of teeth. The news reporters
repeated, "as they drove away in the van, Ashlyne was
waving." With wings she now goes all of the nights not alone



Beaded Bag

Rainy Ortiz

Robin Boyd

COLLECTIVE

How many crows does it take to produce a murder
or larks to explode in one glorious exaltation?

Starlings murmurate, dogs merge to packs, cranes collect
in a sedge, their necks curved like swamp grasses.

A simple plural won't fly when whales form a pod or ducks
build a raft. And why does the weight of two wrens

form a herd with a nest the mere size of a goose egg?
Three goldfinches are a charm and hippopotami a bloat.

Cats come in pounces, clutters, and clowders.
For me, nothing stifles like a scowl of librarians

or tsks like a starch of nurses. A push of midwives delivers
a chuckle of babies to a maybe of parents and a repetition

of drunks recalls that one time they went yachting with
an annoyance of millionaires. Myself, I hail from

a complaint of Scots-Irish on Dad's side and a halo
of Brits on the other. My great grandfather married

into a tribe of Penobscots while his sister joined an elite
brave of Maine Guides. Tonight, I will rest on a pleasure

of pillows as I gaze at a memory of stars that penetrates
the darkness, one huge expanse that knows no other

because it is a lonely of emptiness, a vastness attached
to nothing else, but holding the multiples that cleave.

Susan Kelly-DeWitt

MEMENTO, 1969

for Q.R.K

The lips of strangers blowing like gods into your mouth, crushing
the breath back into you, their fists compressing your chest while

you try to tell them seven men just died in the foxhole—how
the grenade blasted you to safety and them to a cold grave

in hell. In the night air they carry you, black watch plaid bathrobe
thrown open under the familiar starlight—You try to tell them:

Your dog tags are buried in your bureau drawer. You want them
now, to hold against animal flesh—then:

the oxygen mask over your face... What you know you've seen
but can't say: The blood-feathered death angel

has finally snapped you up, your bones
like dry powder in his beak.

Susan Kelly-DeWitt

THE PRICE

I imagined seagulls shipwrecked in an ash tree
(it was the economics of a poem.)
Later that night I lived their skulls,

their feathered draperies. I inhabited
the fireplace of their naked hearts,
their three-toed prints in moonlit

leaves. *Where is home?* I asked: I was smoke,
doubt, prey. I was shudder and demand.
By morning the gulls had disappeared

into the sky's ancient trceries. I remembered
only bluish draperies of sea, the shudder
of salt-froth.

Susan Kelly-DeWitt

**POEM TO THE STRANGER ON THE GREYHOUND BUS,
1968**

We traveled together for hours, barely touching elbows.

You were broke, running from home.

Your big bony knuckles pressed through the rough freckled skin of your hands
as they clutched the battered satchel on your lap.

--Remember?

History was the isolate darkness all around us—the watery ghost lights of the
fishing boats off the coast highway like those flares floating in humid air above
the rice paddies on TV news.

(I was on my way south to collect a drunk—my father.)

We parted wordlessly, in the dusky City of Angels.

Tonight I write to you beside a vase of white chrysanthemums.

I arrange them into this poem for you.

I touch their tufts.



Untitled Journal Sketch

Luis Alberto Urrea

Michael Mark

COUPLES FIGHTING DAY

Last night, the old folks on the bench must have been celebrating early—sharing their brown-papered bottle, screaming at each other like warring cats. And then first thing this morning at Starbucks—every table had a couple sneering, the cold hiss of artillery aimed over smoking lattes. In the park, lovers shared eye-carving stares while picnicking on pâté and pinot noir. Undressing velvet boxes flashing watches, diamonds, they cursed the day they met. And it makes all the sense in the world. Like thanking mothers, fathers, dear grandmothers with frilly cards once a year. Who else are we going to tear at when we can't reach the past, or the sky; when we can't stand its blue anymore? Who else will swallow our venom, suffer our skin-bubbling poison? Damn right they deserve a Whitman Sampler as we call them pudgy-wudgy. This is what we do for each other, exactly the same as when we hold the door open, take the middle seat, insist the other have the last potato chip or sip from the bottle in the bag, no less generous, sentimental, painful or kind.

*Laura Marshall Behr, Deborah Brown, Barbara Seigel Carlson,
Richard Jackson and Susan Thomas*

DISPATCHES FROM OTHER PLACES

From prose poems exchanged among 5 poets

LAURA MARSHALL BEHR

PATHWAYS

Monroe, Georgia

Landscape pathways are the distance no one wants to see. I sat with her and we talked late into the night. What people don't want to hear happens in the small things. In the softest way, what people want to hear is always silent, like the slightest sign of enduring, taken from flames of the bonfire. There in the flames, leaves vanish away and I see, in their absence, a super moon. The harvest moon has instincts, it doesn't speak. It faces and stares, as you stare, across the way, fingers in your pockets, making an escape to the bedroom. In the walk back to the house, giving thanks, a prayer mile, open to anyone willing to enter there, in the softest way, moving us back towards a better place than we remember, the slightest sign of enduring, perhaps, in my native language as the darkness collects the fields.

FOG

Wetumka, Alabama

The fog is a line of blindness across the hayfield. It's familiar ground. The answer is always the story we tell ourselves. To break the day like bone, it takes years to see something else. Cold winds, and a hare disappears into bare winter woods. My grandfather's woodwork shop once alive with activity, is now silent. A tarnished mirror hangs abandoned, shows things from the other side. A painted bunting, dithers between barn rafters. At home under my grandfather's stars, I imagine a December sky transforming my future from pieces of a collective past. In the turn, of the blue gravel road, silos are full of antique clocks. There are days when my dreams are a wall I gladly kneel before to break open the story.

FAITH

San Antonio, Texas

A few stone buildings, a neatly trimmed lawn, a nice place to take a picture. A reason to take off a hat. None of it changes the ending. It's happening now, expected signs and all the rest. A home for missionaries and Indians, a freak storm hits in short-sleeve weather. If you dare ask what will kill you. The ghosts

will tell you or ask how you know what you don't know. Be willing to do something. Act like a fallen star. When life isn't so beautiful it's hard to put into words. Faith isn't pure or sure of itself or of you. It's a word born and blurred in veils and regret. It proves itself against disorder. Blow it up. You can't leave it undefended. Some say Crocket died a hero. I'm not sure it matters. But, there are no survivors. Live with what's missing, an arm, a father, a sky.

DEBORAH BROWN

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT THE NIGHT SKY

Mayo Clinic, Rochester

That the new moon is never visible on the night of the New Moon. That when the sky is darkest you sometimes see fireballs flash. That through the night newly-bare branches reach towards the sky while my brother has electric shock therapy, convulsions he won't remember. Some of the extra connections in the brain are cut, the ones that focus on grief. While I pace, I look for Andromeda, so many light years away that the light I see tonight was emitted when woolly mammoths and sabre toothed tigers roamed here. The next day my brother reaches out to me from the darkness he's wrapped in. He tests the light.

NEXT TO THE RAILROAD TRACKS

Depot Street, Nashua, N.H.

A pink sweater resembles a flower on a dark trellis, if you are staring down from the third floor through clotheslines. A lonely flower, singular, where pairs of pants, shirts are dark bits of green or gray.

The bulbs you planted in a yellow dish grow slender greens. Each tip thickens. White star-blossoms cluster under kitchen light and a scent-- gardenias on summer night—
floats, mid-winter, through an empty room.

A LITTLE SOMETHING

Mt. Sunapee, N.H.

“Give me a little something”: the need for something from the universe--a quiver of joy, a flash of cloud, a white spray of hope or charity, maybe only the taste of a biscuit. The yearning for that something spreads like an ocean, envelops, fades, refreshes, though in the doorway there may be a lasting shrug, or an emptiness. A little something-- human or natural, affection, the presence of a peak in the distance, or the sighs and whispers that pour cool water on the heated neck, the blessed sense of something given, maybe unearthed, unpaid, untaxed, a generosity in the universe after all.

AT THE EDGE

First Congregational Church, Concord, N.H.

Out there, at the edge of the solar system, the Kuiper belt-- gritty dust, planetesimals and dwarf planets without homes—all named for a Dutchman who didn't believe the belt was there. I could live on the rim of that belt, far from the faces I saw at the shelter --the children who live on the outskirts, or on an icy moon of Jupiter, who don't eat lunch, don't eat supper. Where we live, there is no limit, just gravity that curves matter and space so they bend back upon us, a wire coat hanger twisted into a circle.

BARBARA SIEGEL CARLSON

WHAT THE SPRUCES MIGHT SAY

Near the Arctic Circle, Alaska

We're not ever leaving, although the tundra is spongy in the summer light and our roots shallow. But in the long darkness the squirrels crawl out of their holes only to shiver and scurry back under us, while we, leaning in every direction watch the sky's apparitions. You may wonder why. Maybe we're messengers, our bodies spindly and stunted under those vast being divining us, pouring us into eternity.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Ljubljana

Someday my body will be the same color as a November leaf or the sparrow that just hopped down from the iron anchor set on a platform in the city square. The anchor is painted black, faintly shining in the clouded afternoon. A child tries to climb up on it and slides down again, falling into the rust-colored leaves. The anchor is fastened to a chain bolted to the platform. Where is the boat it once held? The sea it once touched? Now the child is playing in the leaves, the sparrow flying away, the anchor forgotten....

BORA

Piazza Unita, Trieste

All night the bora creaked through the building and combed through the windows. What or whom was it looking for? It littered the streets to the bus station with black leaves. Only a police car crawled through the Piazza Unita past the square all lit in blue to show where the sea water once flooded. Above, a gust sent a tremor across the blue lights to the Timavo River that begins in the Karst and disappears underground until it gushes out a few miles from here on the coast at Duino. Sometimes a door bangs open and no one is there but a terrible longing.

LOCKED IN THE MARBLE

Ljubljana

Leaves stir around the old well that's been covered for winter. Underground the water flows through all that is lost: potsherds and bone flecks, hair and sweat, teeth and blood. What about voices and dreams? Where do our memories go? The leaves are thirsty.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

Ljubljana

...there is somewhere in our lives a great unsolved love.

Tomas

Tranströmer

Why this cobblestone street that shines empty and vast? I stand in a luminous city of clouds that reach down blackening the buildings. A city of empires and strangers. Of blackbirds and light at the far end of the sky, as though a door has cracked open. It could be dawn or dusk that awakens each shadow. Two pigeons run in opposite directions as they search for crumbs.

RICHARD JACKSON

TWO GALAXIES

Piazza Santa Maria, Trastevere

The woman watches the fire juggler in the piazza below spin twin galaxies from her outstretched arms. The tourists in the piazza don't know she is there. She's not sure herself, living in the distant memory of a memory. Every time she wakes and comes to the window something has disappeared into the broken wormholes of her mind. She half shutters the window. Every word is an invention she's not sure will work. The galaxies merge then split apart. She remembers in that flash the secret word she protected with the other girls, like an ember still trying to glow. The lighted mosaics of the Chiesa Santa Maria hover over everything as if they were beyond this tiny universe. She no longer is sure what it means, but what it means is all the world she has.

ROLES

Rione Sant'Angelo, Rome, Italy,

In the Theater of Marcellus down at the other end of the street, the executioner's face was always masked. These ruins tease us with lessons that have yet to play out. A few gnarled clouds stalk the sunlight overhead. Chimney birds rise from their fears. The cats still play on broken pillars and arches, as they did during the roundup of October 1943, and as if there was nothing special to perform. We too have been acting in *La Taverna del Ghetto* as if the Pasta Tartufo was the history we needed. How easy to keep the plaques and dates on the wall. The wind

recruits a few voices out of sight. We try to repair with words what words cannot say

A MOVABLE WORLD

Florence

The early doves have already started to harvest the light. Without permits, the Sudanese men fold their cardboard tables up like wings as the Carabinieri approach from the shadows. Their rings and scarfs are anchored to the surface as they will never be. A language of gestures and signs from the other end of the street has warned them. Jeans, imitation leather jacket, converse shoes, their names too are fluid to their handlers. But there is one who pauses to glance back, older, whose gaze doesn't leave when he does. After a while, it chips away at the air, chips away at the heart's flint. The light, now, has stopped looking for a prey.

AFTERWARD AS PRELUDE

Ljubljana

Whenever we return it is a different place. The hills, the streets, no longer recognize us. The geese, the constellations arrive as expected. Our own memories are refugees from a world that no longer exists. The future sits at her window watching Wolfova street below. A cat is stalking a better life at a drainpipe. Every gust of wind has a story it won't tell. We have to invent the town in order to see it. We have to invent the soul in order to speak of it.

SUSAN THOMAS

AQUA ALTA

Venice

The siren goes off at 5 AM. It blows us awake to the tapping of hammers, to the shouting of workers in the calle below. Putting together platforms for us to walk on today in the *Aqua Alta*, the high waters. Forget the Rialto market, the Tintoretto at the Doge's Palace. Forget the Accademia. Today only the Tiepelos make sense. Men, women, horses, deities of myth and religion, all swimming and flying and kicking their way to the ceilings of palaces, the heavenly domes of the churches. And of course, the Bellini Madonna in the Frari, if you can make your way through the Piazza. She is ascending to Heaven with angels to boost her. She rises above the Earth, above the air, above the waters, her face losing its years, losing its grief, losing all earthly connection, she rises.

CARAVAGGIO IN THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN

Valletta

In Malta, he paints the beheading of St. John the Baptist for the Knights Templar. He paints it brutal, real, no angels or marble columns. Just peasants committing a bestial act in an austere prison with indirect light and off-center subject. No one who sees it can look away from the simple peasant faces determined to perform a task they can't figure out. Their confusion is obvious, but something else has begun to darken their features. He understands this, sees it when he looks in the mirror. He thinks the Knights will protect him because of the painting. Maybe it is the best work he has ever done. But the painting betrays him. It shows the guilt tightening his own features as it creeps across the faces of the peasants. Soon it will happen again— another bar fight, another murder, another run for his life. And this time the Knights know exactly who he is.

NORMAN BATES HOUSE ON MUSEUM ROOF

New York

We know the setup— Janet Leigh in the motel shower, Tony Perkins upstairs in the mansion, with the skeletal remains of his mother dressed and seated in a rocking chair. But, in *Psycho*, it's the basement that brings on the real horror. It's always about the basement, always what's underneath us. But here, on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there's no basement below us. Downstairs is the museum's second floor with Van Gogh, Manet, Velasquez clinging to the walls. But here, on the roof, there is only the façade of a red Gothic house. Something about it repels us but also draws us in. We fear it because we know it— an image Hitchcock has planted inside us. And, of course, we aren't alone on this roof. We share our fear with everyone else. We creep up to the house and laugh at ourselves as we look through the empty windows and into our mindless terror.

SEATTLE WASHINGTON

Out the window, camellias blaze red on the trees. Baby geese and ducklings honk from the cove. Anita sits, looking out, a gray scarf where her white hair used to be. The doctors said she'd last until spring. It's too early, she says. It's all coming on too soon.



Beaded Hummingbird Bag

Rainy Ortiz

Liz Ahl

JUAREZ: SUGAR FOR THE NARCO-SAINTS

In the middle of the stone-speckled road
the woman sprinkles lime
onto the tacky puddles of blood
left by the latest cartel shoot-out.
Her brown hand becomes more white
with each powdery fistful.

Her grandson watches intently,
still certain the plastic bag
is full of confectioner's sugar,
even though she insists it's no such thing
and scolds him away when he reaches.

On *dia de los muertos*, she'll give him
two tiny candy skulls, and they will visit
the hillside cemetery, where everyone
brings sugared treats and lights candles
to sit with their dead, to greet
their long-gone spirits. They'll say a prayer
over Nando, talk to him about the new neighbors,
the big earthquake, that old girlfriend of his.

The boy thinks it would make sense
to cover up the darkening stains with sugar.
This street is a cemetery and sugar
is what you use to invite the dead to visit,
so they can hear what you have to say to them.

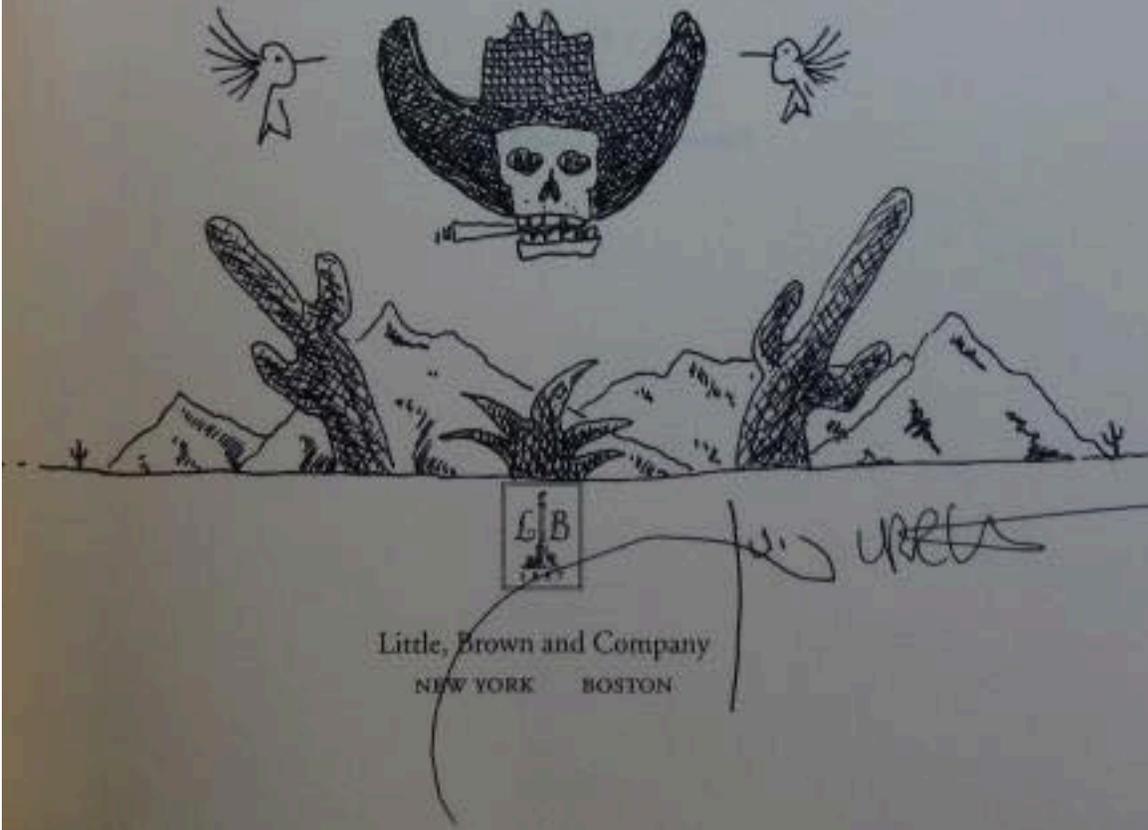
Afterwards, when she has shaken
the last powder onto the pavement,
she pockets the empty plastic
and offers a quick prayer to *La Santa Muerte*.
He sneaks in a *gracias* to the narco-saint,
el bandito abundante, Jesús Malverde,
like his brother taught him, but only
in his head, so his *abuela* can't hear.

In their narrow pantry another full bag waits,
fat ghost, for the next sulfurous night

of screeching tires and gunshots and wails.
She keeps it on the highest shelf with the other things
she doesn't want him to reach or taste.

The
HUMMINGBIRD'S
DAUGHTER

FOR
A Novel
DIRK & NANCY
LUIS ALBERTO URREA



Author Inscription

Luis Alberto Urrea

Francesca Brenner

SHOWGIRLS

“Leave it to me to meet a woman,” said the gay guy I picked up because I needed a dance, because I’d just gone to a drag show and watched the bartender strain my chilled vodka martini from the ice with his pork-pie fingers.

Nowhere but Provincetown would he get away with that but I didn’t care ’cause it was the first drag show I’d been to in twenty years and I was caught up in the sexiness of the kink and who the fuck cares ’cause the vodka’s going to kill any grime he’s got on those digits after shuffling \$100s and \$50s and \$20s and slipping an extra shot to the guy with the nipple ring.

I felt brain tipped like in pole-dancing class when we’d give each other some love, whistling and hooting. So, I gave some love to the guys who worked so hard to have hips and thighs and breasts; walk the narrow runway in fishnets and 8-inch platform heels, wear sparkled lollipop lipstick, bat their rhinestone eyelashes and blow kisses, wishing they’d be the girl you’d bring home to momma.

James Pate

FLUORESCENCE

There's a scene I'm remembering tonight, in the cold
Of this house. It is spring and white petals
Decorate the roots of the dogwoods in the cemetery.
The sky is cathedral gold. I'm in a car, in the backseat,

Someone else driving. I am not a mourner.
We're driving because it is Sunday
With little else to do. On a hillside a dozen
Figures in black surround a casket

Like awkward statuary. They have silver hair.
They have hunched backs. Around them
And around the car I'm sitting in
April spreads its skittering light.

The puzzle of what we feel towards strangers.
The riddle of what we take into our selves.
How we see mourners on a happy day.
I feel myself a child at the window
In the eloquence of their age and grief.

They are the ones so alive, in their dark garments.
Their April stands with muddied, carnal hands.

Bruce Bond

IVORY

As the unseen pianist begins to play,
light as the step to a sleeping child,

the spiritual that rises from its bed
of strings withholds from us the testament

of what it grieves or why, as if history
wandered out of its body, made less

factual, practical, wise, and yet profound
the way the depths of the Atlantic are

or ships that lie among the skeletons
of ivory and slaves. Music forgets.

That said, it gives the heart its reasons
to remember. Its reasons to forget.

Keys lose their warmth the way hands lose theirs
or the bereaved the first difficult hours.

Far from the shipwreck, a wave or two
unburdens against the shore. It grieves no one.

It loses its beauty to the inexorable
ache of decay. Which is to say, its beauty.

Once there was a man chained to his oar
who sang in time to the others. His music

recalled what a language in exile forgets.
Hopeless as a cure, and yet something

vital, quick to go where language can't,
his, or the unfamiliar others at their oars.

Back then each tusk came with a slave

traders bought to bear it from the jungle.

Most died. To every tusk, the lives of five.
Prices rose in kind to cover the damage.

Money is sensitive that way, like a sea
creature that is more tentacle than mind.

Or the machine of hands across the keys
that plays the notes that are no one's music.

Back then a man might feel all of Europe's
pianos in his pull. And in the song

that might have given him one last wind.
Say you stare at the ivories a while

and, being human, begin to wander seaward.
What you make out in the cream of scales

alone is neither major nor minor, but both,
depending where you start, where you end.

The home key, that is what they call it.
And everything else a middle passage.

The chanting of the chains becomes the part
you must imagine. Facts are dreams then.

They flesh the bones the way songs might flesh,
in turn, the facts. As the pianist wanders

without words, sent out in search of them,
he keeps passing over the *home note*.

No home really, more the long white tooth
of resolve that crumbles into music.

Or the breeze that maddens the flies in some
church basement in the Alabama heat,

that crowns joy and grief alike in diamonds
of sweat. Home as the afflicted eye

turned to ivory, the dark place that stares
through you, dead at the center you never

knew was there, and like it or not, you stare back.
And then it looks a little harder, farther.

Rebecca Perea Kane

A FIELD GUIDE TO AFTERMATH

No one can know
when a storm will bring an oak
down through the roof.

No one can know
the pipes will burst
and the basement
will flood

into an underground marsh
where cattails and sweetflag spread.

Until one day
you remember the phillips-head you need

only to find
woodfrogs basking below
the one exposed bulb,
warming their amphibious blood.

And turtles burrow deep
into the New England mud
because dirt
was the only floor down there,

packed hard over the graves of settlers
who died young and in winter
when the ground

was too hard-frozen
for a spade.
The snappers avoid these,
their tunnels lacing

intricate water-filled mazes,
and the mice

who have always lived in a nest
under the stairs

are learning to swim.

They shake themselves
like tiny dogs
when they haul out onto the shelf

where skunk cabbage takes root
in the softening wood
next to three rickety
electric fans.

*

You return to the house
after months away
and it looks the same:

shutters open, porch stacked
with wood, blue kitchen,
sprawl of skylit bedrooms,
the low granite wall
meandering the garden.

Wisteria weaves the white
picket-fence,
blossoming monumentally.

But at the heart of it
you can hear
an elaborate
ecosystem of loss

humming.

down where the furnace
sputters warmth
into the gray silt
and clouding water.

Down where
if you slit open
a pitcher plant's
red-veined throat

at the base
you will find,

in the black insect loam,
the emerald eye
of a dragonfly,
all that remains, glittering.

Karen Skolfield
Stellar Type, 16° F

The seam down the middle of the Gihon may still freeze despite the river's thin-lipped, scalloped refusal. Snowflakes fall equidistant to their neighbors. Explain that, Snowflake Bentley, hunched over his large-format camera, the first close-ups of snow crystals and – we know this through Bentley – no two alike. How is it possible the options go to infinity? There must have been days he wanted to shrug and throw a log on the fire, watch his work dimple into water. It's said he felt responsible that so many melted without audience. He walked barefoot all year and with a fiddle and bow could make any sound from nature. Even loving snow, he missed the bullfrog's croak, the bee's zazzing, the shirr of summer wind. That fiddle moaned and growled. Snowflakes he immortalized. Summer he kept in a violin case. What can't we do if we put our minds to it? One day I knit a baby out of peanut butter sandwiches. Bentley died of pneumonia after walking barefoot through a storm. Pregnancy books are filled with the inadequacies of mothers. Correlation, my husband says, is not causation. It took two years for Bentley to perfect his methods. What if he'd never gotten the photos right? What if the baby, born sick, hadn't lived? Even snowflakes long to be seen. Five thousand negatives of snow crystals. By all accounts, Bentley was cheerful, his spoonful of snow, his habit of turning his head away to breathe. It was his breath that ruined things. The best intentions are not always good intentions. But if I could, I'd wrap him in a scarf. I'd put some shoes upon those feet.

Melissa Tuckey

***Poem for the TSA officers
who rifled our bags to dump homemade jam
we were carrying as gifts***

You never can tell what those peaches
were doing naked together
in that Guatemalan basket.

Or how the moon whispered
to an underground of resurgent
garlic, winters when you thought
the living world asleep.

Beware the last red peppers of autumn
how they fatten into gorgeous fists
raised at dawn in solidarity.

Trust not the pickled relish!
Keep an eye on those candied beets!

Know that the bees are amassing in goldenrod
hoping to keep their queen alive, as battalions of crickets
play violin in the tall and anonymous grass.

Trust not the sweat-sticky kitchen,
uprising of steam as grapes roil
into a delirium of kettle-shaking goodness.

Keep an eye on that elder who ladles
the whole sweet mess
into a bell choir of singing jars, each ping
rousing unexplainable delight.

Know that in kitchens all over America,
such sweetness is gathering daily.

Melissa Tuckey

LUCKY YOU

Phoebe wants your hair.
Michael wants to be a stay at home poet.
Janila wishes her mother were alive.
Craig wants those shoes you wearing.
Your mother wants your 48 years back.
Your brother wants whatever can be his.
Yael wants to live in your house.
Julia wants her right breast back,
but wouldn't wish the cancer on you.
Grief covets your sleep.

Maj Ragain

ROGUE WAVE IN THE ROSE BUSHES

I told Lu after the rose bush
had snapped back and thorned
her cheek, after she had lost
her silver earring in the flower bed,
after we lay quietly walking the mountains
on the bedroom ceiling,

Let's leave it all behind now,
clean out the bank accounts,
throw the breaker switches, tell the neighbors
come get what you want, the doors are open.
Let's black spray paint *Jesus Loves Me*
all over Mom's I'm-in-the-nursing home-now
1995 cherry Delta Royale Oldsmobile,
run it through the car wash with the windows down,
half a dozen times, you and me riding up front.
Let's get waxed and make a run toward
the moonrise, a notch off full.

Because when it comes, that rogue wave,
we won't have time to babble more than a mouthful
of words, kicking around in the blue light,
streaming silver shards at each other.
Then we'll be swept away.
Into the cold. Then the dark.

This moment, the air is cinnamon,
sandalwood, sweat honeyed,
here on this high ground with you.

Maj Ragain

AN OLD MAN LIES DOWN WITH THE LION

In an old book
of Zen teachings,
I come across a note,
written in my own hand,
twenty five years ago.

*The lion must slay the dragon.
Each scale bears the words,
'Thou shall.' When the dragon
is slain, one is reborn as a child.*

I was delivered into this world
with the dragon's egg
nestled in my breast.
I cannot remember the day
it emerged from its shell,
first a peep, later a snarl.
I have felt its hunger
since boyhood.
One midnight it moved its lair
to the lower bitter regions of my soul.
It began to feed on
what I feared and prayed against.
Neither of us knows what it guards or why.

Nights, the dragon climbs my rib ladder
to lay its head against my heart, lulled to sleep
by the drumbeat.
It is prisoner to the heavy coat of mail
which no sword can pierce, prisoner
to the weight of idle years,
the taste of sulphur and ash, the bars of bone.
Its every dream beckons the lion,
the great jaws tearing open the soft underbelly,
releasing the dragon from its troth.

The dragon's death marks my birthday.

Thou shall lie down with the lion.
Thou shall be reborn as an old man.

Maj Ragain

THE COMET LEAVES US BEHIND

I wake up this morning wondering about the Hale-Bopp comet, where it is now. It has been ten years since it slipped away from our view. I wonder if someone on another earth is pointing up to it right now, speaking wonderment in a strange language that sounds like a piccolo or tap dancing. I miss it, that burning ghost. I won't see it again.

The phone rings, Rik Walden, the poet with the cracked heart, from Raleigh, North Carolina. Rik sent me a poem weeks ago called *Blue Ghost Prayer Wheels*. He wants to know what I think about it. I can't tell him except in a poem I haven't written. Rik is handcuffed to the meat wheel, turning over the fire pit. He is afraid, he tells me, of becoming invisible to himself. He wants to know whether I can still see him. He now shares a house with a seventeen year old cat named Shitty. *We love her*, he says. *We had to take her to the vet. She's about done; she lives on kitty downers.* I don't ask why anyone would name a cat Shitty--especially if you loved her. First, the gone, gone beyond going comet, then this old stoned cat who has to live out her life with the name tag Shitty dangling from her scrawny neck. I am stuck with them, caught in the gravitational field in my head.

Add this to my love, no other word for it, for that skin and bones old gray mare who, when I met her, was still held captive in a muddy pen the size of my living room, down off Johnson Road here in Kent. I got her name from her owner, a bearded, disgruntled rascal, who was repairing the barbed wire fence one afternoon when I came a courtin'. *Shalimar*, he grouched at me. *Her name is Shalimar. She's twenty-six years old.*

It all started one day when I pulled the car over on the shoulder and clucked to her. She looked up and went back to grazing. The next day, I called to her by name and told her mine. Nothing. A half eaten apple tossed over the fence did it. After that, she'd come right up to me. She hadn't been curried in years. Her unclipped hooves made every step hurt. It was her loneliness, how it clung to her, that brought me back. I saw in her what I feel in myself. I began telling her things I could never surrender to anyone else, crazy shit from knee deep in the wound, the arrow arguing with the bow, moonlight quarreling with the river.

Shalimar. After the Shalimar Gardens, built in seventeenth century India as an Abode of Love. A place where the heart can find shelter. She is beautiful, that old horse, though you wouldn't know it by looking at her. Nobody knows much about the nature of beauty and how it moves the heart. Perhaps beauty is what we are naming our feeling rather than what evokes it.

Larry, who owns the horse farm down the road, eventually came to rescue her and turn her out in a big pasture with other horses. Now, when I drive out to find her in that big open field that runs a quarter mile back to the tree line, Shalimar is still easy to spot, boney old crone, sway backed grandmother, always close to the others, often flank to flank, the ancient solace of touch.

She doesn't come to the fence anymore. Though she can't hear me, I still talk to her about the ebbing tide in my body, the broken bellows of breath, the flight of the hours, my loving attachment to the broken things of this world, the deep ditch between us. Some days, I sing to her.

*Put your arms around me
like a circle round the sun.
Don't you do me mama
like that easy rider done.
Stealin'. Stealin'.
Pretty mama, don't you tell on me.
I'm stealin' back to my same old used to be.*

A gone comet, a seventeen year old cat named Shitty and the beautiful crone Shalimar roaming around in my head. Some days there is no room for anything or anybody else. I believe the three know one another. Sometimes they touch. Their knowing holds together the world I share with them. I go as far as I can with talk. Then I weep for the words I cannot speak.

Maj Ragain

BUSINESS OF THE DAY

I

Today, I plunked down two hundred and eighty two dollars
on a bright white, sparkle clean dishwashing machine
and hooked it to the buried river of mama's tears
that cuts its way under this town.

My wife and I loaded it with every crusted plate,
egg yolk fork and dirty thought we could find.
I twisted one of its black eyes, and it lurched to life,
this creature named Caloric, fathered by Amana.
The heat, as it slushes dirt to shining death,
is measured in British Thermal Units,
who fear nothing except
popsicles and cold kisses.
Wash, dirty, wash, dirty, wash.

Back where we started,
where it will end one day.
Picture all of this sitting on
the head of a cobra coiled
on the back of an elephant which stands
upon a turtle, with another turtle beneath,
turtles all the way down.
Then more nothing.

II

This evening, in the Acme supermarket,
I locked carts with Patrick O'Flaherty,
the Kent poet who breaks language over his knee
and taunts the gods with his didgeridoo.
I asked him, in the cereal aisle,
with its menagerie of sugar frosted creatures.
*Those movies, the ones that keep
your winter soul awake. Give me a name.*
Spirit of the Beehive, said Patrick.
*It changed my life. You watch it once,
say goodbye to your old ways of
seeing the world.*

At the register, I have already begun to say my farewells
to the bar code buzz, to the black conveyor belt grab.
The young cashier, the beekeeper's daughter, asks,
Plastic or paper bags? I have no answer.
Her eyes tell me her love was stolen long ago
by a man in a moon, his pale, cool kiss.
Even now she is dreaming of a small red tent,
a field of lavender, at the edge of the cold sea.

Maj Ragain
A POINT OF GRACE

for John Reeves

John Reeves and I were down the third base side of home plate at the Akron Aeros game last night. It went to the bottom of the 15th, just short of midnight, when the Aeros' first baseman Jesus Aguilar bounced one through a drawn in infield. Big jubilation, that jump and pile on thing the players must have learned from televised games. By then, there were about as many on the field and dugouts as in the stands. The moment we came for, the one to keep alive up under your ribs, was the pitch just before the winning hit. A foul ball. I told John, *it's comin' back to you*. The ball bounced off the concrete below us, twenty feet or so straight back, a smaller hop, another on the step. It rolled right up to John's feet. I have known him thirty years. It was a look I've never seen before. Thinly veiled glee or maybe something deeper bloomed, what Ivan Illich writes about, how, at a point of grace to which few come, you hear, a voice not your own, saying, *You are accepted*. Accepted by and in the universe. Everywhere is suddenly home. You can finally forget about chasing love in all its Halloween disguises. You are accepted. Did John hear that voice? *After 50 years of baseball games, this is my first ball*, said John. Turning it over and around, thumbing the stitches. If it isn't yours, you can't have it. If it is yours, you can't avoid it.

When the stadium lights do go out for John, when *Thanatos* attends, may he remember how that foul ball found him unerringly that late May night in Akron, how it completed what had begun so long ago.

I have since been listening for that voice since my early teens when I first began to awaken to my little life and the greater, ongoing life of which it is, briefly, a part. I remember one November evening I rolled to the side of the house, the cottage on the Illinois lake where I was raised. I turned into a sharp, chilling north wind across the water. The leaves were down; the light was dying. I sat there, closed my eyes and felt the cold find me up under my jacket. I burst into tears. One big sob. Then, maybe ten minutes of breath catching weeping. My wet face cooled in the wind. Finally, I quieted. That was sixty years ago, my moment. I believe I was feeling, for the first time, the pulse of love in my own body and in the world.

My life, as I know it, began in the fertile emptiness following that dam break of tears. I have accepted much. Now, I await that other voice, not mine, to whisper, *You are accepted*. That grace which no one can earn. The grace which finds us of its own accord. The moment when the foul ball rolls up to my feet and is declared fair.



Beaded Turtle Bracelet

Kim Shuck

Christopher Alexander Hayter

PANDA EXPRESS

Doctor Wing Xu Han approaches the cage to take Wei Wei's temperature. She coos when she smells him and climbs from her indoor enclosure into the cage to receive her reward of a pear-flavored frozen juice treat. The thermometer extends through the bars on a long stainless-steel pole. Wei Wei assumes the trained position and waits patiently while Doctor Wing measures her heat. Her estrus could start any time between March and May and will only last three days. She's getting close. Doctor Wing retracts the thermometer and takes a juice treat out of the freezer and places it in her bowl. Wei Wei coos again, delighted with her prize. Doctor Wing takes a long breath and holds it. He needs to be ready at the exact moment she becomes capable of impregnation. He runs a hand through his hair. He feels less than last time.

A urine smell wafts in from the enclosure, through the cage, into Doctor Wing's office. The odor comes from the straw and leaves Wei Wei has piled up to use as a toilet, not a nest. Wei Wei is nine years old. She's had the potential to conceive for several years but has been unable to successfully mate. She had them fooled two seasons ago, when she started gaining weight and building a nest for cubs that never materialized. Doctor Wing makes a note to send in the assistants to hose down her enclosure. Wei Wei looks up at him. A clump of frozen juice treat is stuck to her nose. She coos, and the treat falls to the cement.

Doctor Gao Lok, the chief scientist of the Chengdu Giant Panda Research Center, pokes his head into Doctor Wing's lab. He's a short man, shrunken with advanced age, who still has thick black hair and keen eyes. "How soon, Wing?"

"Any day now, Chief," Doctor Wing says.

"Good. Good," Doctor Gao says. "This is your last chance, you know."

"Yes, Chief," Doctor Wing says, nodding rapidly and repeatedly, remembering the eight times Doctor Gao chastised him, the four times in front of his own staff, the time in front of the finance minister from Beijing.

Doctor Gao pops back out of the lab.

Doctor Wing cringes, taking off his black-rimmed glasses, rubbing them on his sleeve, then putting them back on. The sleeve only smudged the lenses more. He knows that at thirty-two years old he is the youngest scientist to be put in charge of a mating pair; he knows his degree from the less prestigious Fudan University doesn't give him much clout; he knows he is the last doctor still trying to abstain from artificial insemination. He knows his head is on the chopping block, and the back of his neck is starting to burn.

The pain in the back of his neck has been increasing since the arrival of Doctor Gitta Fulke from the Berlin Zoo nineteen months ago. Doctor Wing accepts that she's a capable scientist. She's professional enough for a westerner, and has no obvious illicit intentions, and since she began working at the Chengdu Center, Doctor Fulke has had success in breeding two cubs through

artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization procedures. But Doctor Wing cannot respect her methodology.

Doctor Wing insists on achieving conception naturally, even if artificial means would keep the species going. If a species can't conceive on its own, if it has no instinct to do so, then there is no point. What's more, consensus already holds that the in vitro method works, but if the in vitro method continues to work there will soon be too many Pandas to release into the wild. He's read the data. He's dreamed the numbers and studied the maps. The goal shouldn't be simply to make more, to make a surplus. The facts are clear; recent DNA analysis of wild Panda droppings suggests that there are closer to three thousand Pandas in the wild, rather than the previous estimate of only one thousand. The land designated by Beijing as Panda Preserve can sustain only so many bears, since each one needs a large amount of space to roam. Pandas are territorial and the dominant ones will chase the weaker ones into the higher altitudes, where several ravaged bodies have been recovered, having become prey to the snow leopards that can rip the feeble bears to shreds in seconds. Unlike an antelope that can sometimes out-run the pursuing lion, Pandas have no evolutionary advantage as predator or prey. Pandas simply have no chance.

Doctor Wing has told Chief Gao that they need to condition the Pandas to breed on their own, to jump-start their mating instinct, so they can be released into the wild and function as a natural part of the ecosystem. But these spoiled, cage-bred, human-raised bears and their equally impotent artificial offspring, who

can't figure out how to mate, have no place in the wild. They need the will to survive. They need to want to survive. Doctor Wing speculates that if they can't propagate their own species they would naturally go extinct, regardless of poaching and deforestation.

The walls of Wei Wei's indoor enclosure are covered with an elaborate, high-resolution photo-mural, which is designed to recreate the appearance of her natural habitat. Toys and balls are scattered among the bamboo leaves and straw that's strewn across the floor. Doctor Wing looks down at Wei Wei who lies on her back and squeaks as she licks and gnaws at her frozen fruit treat. She's spoiled rotten.

Wei Wei looks up at Doctor Wing. He can practically hear words. "You're so nice to bring me all these treats. I can't find my Frisbee, though, and I accidentally ripped the head off my doll. Can I have a new one?" She rolls on her back. "Feeling sleepy now."

When Wei Wei settles into her second midday nap, Doctor Wing's assistants try to convince him to come out with them for a lunch break—they tell him it's only a ten minute walk down the road to their favorite noodle stand. But he declines, saying he'll just get something quick at the commissary. He quickly turns back to his work, and they practically have to drag him out the door to get him to keep his promise to leave the lab and feed himself.

As the group walks down the central corridor, Doctor Wing makes rapid excuses to his assistants and ducks into the commissary. He finds an empty

table in the dining hall away from other scientists and lab assistants. He drinks from a can of green tea, scanning the room. A drop of condensation runs down the can, and he momentarily loses his grip; the mouth of the can scratches his lip. He sets the can back on the table.

Across the hall, Doctor Hsia and her team of assistants are happy about something—he figures it won't be long before he hears about their newest success with subject Jiaying. Doctor Hsia's assistant Miss Wu laughs audibly, not trying to censor her emotions the way juniors usually do. Doctor Gao comes in. He's shaking Doctor Hsia's hand. She's saying, "Thank you, Sir." She smiles. "That's a great tie, Chief. What are those? Scottie dogs?"

"Ah, yes. It's a Ferragamo." Doctor Gao lifts up the tie and chuckles. "The missus and I took a flight down to Hong Kong last weekend. Such a nice getaway."

Doctor Wing looks away from the group. He runs over numbers and calculations he keeps on his smart phone. He recalls once thinking he would be a prodigy, fresh out of graduate school with high hopes, who would change the way Panda research was done. His bowl of udon with fried tofu has long since gone cold and soggy.

Doctor Fulke enters the commissary and casually glances around the room. Her gaze meets Doctor Wing's and he puts his head down. His avoidance comes too late. She walks to Doctor Wing. He bristles at the intrusion on his privacy—which the others have learned to respect. She sets a travel mug down

on the table and looks at him. Doctor Wing stirs the soggy noodles. Doctor Fulke takes off her coat, drapes it over the back of the chair opposite his and sits down.

He glances up at her over his thick glasses. She looks blurry. He's read her file: Forty-seven years old. Born in Koln, Germany. Doctorate from Hamburg University. Divorced. Mother of three. First scientist outside China to succeed in artificial insemination of a Panda. Doctor Wing pushes his glasses up to the bridge of his nose. His neck tightens.

She has a stoic expression, as though she's patiently waiting for an answer to a question that she asked long ago. She raises her salt and pepper eyebrows. "I am informed that Chief Gao told you to have a last occasion." She speaks in English, a language in which they share some moderate knowledge.

Doctor Wing grumbles indecipherably. He has little confidence in his own English, but responds with it, "Seems to be condition."

"Do not misinterpret, Doctor," she says. "I have esteem for the conviction you own."

Doctor Wing grumbles again.

Doctor Fulke sips her tea, scalds her tongue—"Scheisse"—and sets the mug back down on the table. She unscrews the lid to the mug, and steam rushes out. Doctor Wing sees her notice the cold soup in front of him, with droplets of oil and fat beginning to congeal on the surface. Doctor Fulke's eyes move up toward his face. "I just intend for their survival."

He's holding an empty spoon in his left hand and aggressively tapping his phone with his right.

Doctor Fulke asks, "You are playing *Die Früchte Bonbon Organisieren*? I only know the game's German name."

Doctor Wing says, "Work," barely opening his mouth.

Doctor Fulke asks, "You work even while dining?"

"Always," he says. He's exhausted. His sleep is down to four hours each night. He only concedes to rest in the early morning hours when his habitually double-checked calculations start to slip in accuracy.

She stands up. "I too know of practicing an obsession. Good day, Doctor Wing."

He nods slightly as she leaves.

When Doctor Wing gets home to his apartment he considers taking a ride on one of the exercise bikes in the gym on the ground floor of the building. He stares at the half-full room of people. A couple chats with each other on side-by-side treadmills. A middle-aged man grunts as he finishes a final pull-up and drops to the floor. A lady gingerly wipes sweat from the handrails of the stair-climber machine. Doctor Wing decides that the gym is too crowded, that he will go in another time. He rides the elevator up to his place on the sixteenth floor.

His apartment has already been cleaned, with his clothes laundered, ironed, and hung in his closet. Several Tupperware containers full of freshly

made food are stacked in the refrigerator. He takes one out and sets it on the counter. The rice is still warm. All the cooking and cleaning are provided by an agency contracted by the Chengdu Panda Research Center to make life easier for all its senior employees, so that their focus can remain on research alone. He rarely sees the housekeepers, which eliminates the possibility of uncomfortable interaction. He changes into his favorite socks before getting his food.

Doctor Wing moves to the living room carrying his tepid Tupperware. The apartment is too cold for his taste—the room settings have already switched for summer weather. He scans the couch for the throw-blanket he fell asleep under last night. A few moments later he remembers the housekeepers have been putting it inside the leather ottoman, in the storage place under the cushion. He always forgets that little compartment. He clicks the TV remote with one hand, switching to a news channel. With his other hand, he turns on his laptop, inserts the data-stick from the Research Center, and opens up his files. A news anchor talks about freeway construction outside of Beijing. Doctor Wing doesn't really listen.

The next day Wei Wei chirps and grunts. She hasn't touched the neon pink Frisbee Doctor Wing brought her. She goes out into the yard, passes her headless Dora the Explorer doll, and approaches the chain-link fence that looks into Shang Tsu's habitat and paces back and forth. She chirps a little louder. Her temperature confirms what he already guesses. She's ready. He can tell she's

anxious, and he has to resist reaching in to the cage to pet her. Direct contact is strictly forbidden.

Genetic diversity testing has determined that from the limited pool of candidates Shang Tsu is most distantly related to Wei Wei; hence, breeding these two would reduce the effect of incest on the limited Panda population. The scientists have penned the Pandas in neighboring enclosures with the hope that a desire will grow through the combination of proximity and separation.

Doctor Wing gives the order to his assistants and the door to Wei Wei's habitat is raised. Shang Tsu enters and lifts his snout with loud snuffling sounds. Wei Wei bleats and continues her chirping. He notices her. She turns and presents herself. Shang Tsu runs in the waddle-waddle of Panda high-speed ambulation and is on top of Wei Wei. He attempts to mount. He vocalizes loudly and falls down asleep before completing the mount. Wei Wei turns around and sniffs him. Shang Tsu snores. Wei Wei chirps several more times at him, nudging him with her snout, but Shang Tsu has fallen into a deep sleep.

Doctor Wing reads Wei Wei's expression. "Sure, make yourself at home, just like always." Wei Wei soon gets bored and wanders away and goes into the indoor part of her enclosure. She picks up her headless Dora the Explorer doll and starts to stroke it.

In the monitor room Doctor Wing takes off his glasses and drops his head against the desk. He sits up and rubs his eyes. The assistants slink from the room. He bangs his fist on the desk. On the other side of the room, on his lead

assistant's desk, a Yao Ming bobblehead falls over. The head comes loose and rolls across the floor.

Giant Pandas are extraordinarily lazy. But this laziness is not genetic predisposition; the condition is a result of diet. As bears, they are carnivores—or at least meat-centric omnivores. Pandas should be eating deer, rabbits, and fish. However, somewhere back in time Pandas developed a love for bamboo. The problem with this diet is that it is low in calorie, fat, and nutrient content, and, thus, for Pandas to sustain themselves, they must spend the majority of the day consuming bamboo to maintain even minimal levels of nutrition. To fulfill their bamboo diet they need only locate a plentiful source of the plant and lay back and munch. Pandas don't need to hunt to live this way, and they need not show any cunning or ingenuity. And, while this diet sustains them, and bamboo is abundant in central China, it leaves them sluggish, lazy, apathetic, and unable to build the fat stores needed to hibernate through winter. Whether in captivity or in the wild, these dietary habits have led to their lack of sexual motivation, the fragile state of Panda procreation, and their impending doom.

Doctor Wing is asleep on his couch as the TV news channel concedes that there is no more news to report and switches over to infomercial programming. Somewhere in the apartment building, a door slams and Doctor Wing wakes suddenly. He realizes he can't think or fall back to sleep and starts flipping through his hundreds of channels aimlessly, as that's what he's heard people do

when they experience insomnia. He's been sleeping less and less lately, and resorted to the aimless clicking. He stumbles across channels and programs he never even imagined he had, some that he never imagined existed: A United Arab Emirates golf channel, a Taekwondo for pre-teens game show, a sushi chef who cooks blindfolded. At some point he stops on an erotic film from an Italian premium cable channel. Usually, pornography, even of the softcore variety, is illegal in China, but he realizes that he is given access to such material as one of the special privileges afforded to an invaluable member of a government project. Doctor Wing reaches for a blank legal pad and a pen and spends his night pondering the intricacies of mating.

Doctor Wing wonders why a rich middle-aged housewife would show interest in a youthful courier or why the executive becomes obsessed with the chamber maid—hardly partners of appropriate status. His own father was an associate in a legal firm, his mother the daughter of an older colleague, though a colleague of the same rank. Even back in graduate school, the physics student with whom Doctor Wing briefly fumbled in the darkness after a graduate mixer was of similar standing in the university. Something was incongruent in these staged mating programs.

At roughly four A.M., Doctor Wing comes to the conclusion that pornography will encourage people to believe that anyone will have sex with them at any time, that there is no such thing as an inappropriate mating choice. Why shouldn't the method work on Giant Pandas?

On the second day of Wei Wei's estrus cycle, Doctor Wing comes in to work heavily caffeinated. He has slept less than six hours in the past forty-eight. He's wearing the same clothes as yesterday. His shirt is missing a button. His skin feels itchy. He's growing pale from spending every daylight hour indoors, and dark bags hang under his eyes, magnified by his thick glasses.

Wei Wei is ready. She knows it's her time and that she only has a few days. She has given Shang Tsu every opportunity to perform. It is clearly the males that have the problem; they're the ones that need help knowing what to do.

Doctor Wing asks his assistant to lure Shang Tsu into his indoor enclosure. He is offered a frozen fruit treat and presents his arm in the manner he's been trained to do when receiving shots or giving blood. Doctor Wing brings out a syringe and gives Shang Tsu a larger dose of Viagra than has been used before, though still small enough to ensure his safety. The assistants then wheel in a large plasma-screen television that plays a video of Pandas mating in the wild. It's the only case of wild Pandas mating that has ever been captured on film.

The same video is played on a monitor in Wei Wei's chamber. They know she'll look at it. Once, when one of the assistants was watching videos on her laptop of Doctor Fulke's Pandas giving birth, Wei Wei was captivated. Wei Wei stuck half her head through the bars, transfixed. "What is that little thing?" Wei Wei seemed to say. "I want one of those." When they understood that she would watch the videos, they would play it for her periodically to maintain her interest in

the cub. However, the Panda porn proves to be less appealing. She turns back to her new pink Frisbee after a few seconds.

Doctor Wing leaves the video of the wild Pandas mating replaying on a loop, since the whole scene lasts only a matter of minutes, including the approach and the so-called courtship. Shang Tsu seems transfixed by the video. He stops licking his frozen fruit treat. A droplet of pear-colored drool stretches from the corner of his mouth to the ground. The string of spittle wobbles back and forth as he stares. After an hour, Doctor Wing orders his assistants to open the door to the inner cage and the door into Wei Wei's habitat.

Wei Wei wanders out into the yard and starts to scratch at her third favorite tree. Shang Tsu explodes into Wei Wei's yard with the closest thing to a growl that a Panda can produce. He sees Wei Wei and starts running toward her at his top speed, honking and hooting in his waddle-waddle. When Wei Wei sees him, she is so startled that she shrieks and runs away. Shang Tsu continues to chase. Wei Wei finds her favorite tree and climbs as quickly as she can. Shang Tsu arrives at the tree, claws at it, and then grinds his body at it for a moment. Then he falls backwards and goes to sleep, leaving a small moist spot at the base of the tree.

Wei Wei looks down from the tree and sees the sleeping beau. Hesitantly, she climbs down. She sniffs Shang Tsu, who is now snoring loudly. She sniffs the moist spot on the tree and wrinkles her nose. She then goes back to her enclosure and claws at the door, asking the keepers to shut it.

Doctor Wing nods to an assistant who pushes the button to shut the door.

Wei Wei looks around the indoor enclosure. She whines as she paces. The mating video is still running on its loop. She grumbles at the television, and motions with her nose at the laptop on the assistant's desk. "Can't you show the little one?" she seems to say.

The assistants ask Doctor Wing what to do next. He shrugs, grunting, and walks out.

Doctor Wing goes into the commissary. It's an off hour in the early afternoon, so the attendant is wiping down the tables with a rag and sanitizer, humming under his breath to a Russian pop song playing in the kitchen. The sound of spraying water and clinking dishes echoes through the hall. The attendant sees Doctor Wing and rushes over to the counter to take his order.

Doctor Wing asks for an extra large beef bowl on rice and a beer. The attendant politely reminds him that alcohol is not permitted during hours of operation. Doctor Wing stares at the server for a moment then walks behind the counter and into the back of the kitchen, saying, "Don't worry. If anyone asks I'll say you wouldn't serve it. You won't get in trouble." Doctor Wing goes to the refrigerator and looks to see if there's anything left over from one of the many fundraiser cocktail parties the Center hosts. He finds a six-pack of Tsingtao, then takes the beer to a seat and waits for his food.

Doctor Wing looks down at his shirt and notices the missing button. He doesn't know how to sew. He'll never fix the shirt. He might as well throw it out. Maybe they deserve to die. Maybe he does as well—his whole life has been dedicated to this solitary purpose. He began his career in research out of a desire to help. He wonders what he would do without Pandas, but can't think of a single thing.

Doctor Wing isn't surprised when Doctor Fulke shows up in the commissary. Word of success or failure travels fast at the Research Center. He sips from his third bottle of beer, expecting her to gloat. He studies her as she approaches. Dr. Fulke has full hips; the curves show even under her lab coat. He wonders if she could still conceive. She doesn't appear menopausal. It's possible that she's maintained ovulation longer than most of her species.

"I am sorry, Doctor Wing." She wears a purple hooded Berlin Zoo sweatshirt underneath the white lab coat.

"Does not my failure advance your own project?" he asks.

"I just want to create more of them," she says. "In my estimation, how this endeavor will be accomplished or who achieves it should contain less significance."

Doctor Wing has trouble with a few of her English words, but generally understands. His beer tastes bitter against the sweet onions in the beef bowl. "But after that?" He sighs. "There is no room in a forest habitat. If all we attain is to construct Panda with no location to place them, they will become commodity

once more. Then bureaucrats will start to eat Panda for impotency, and executives will buy a Panda fur for wives to wear.”

Doctor Fulke leans forward, putting her elbows on the table. “People love Giant Pandas. They will bring excessive happiness.”

Doctor Wing sets down his beer and the bottle clinks on the table, sending an echo through the empty commissary. He tugs at the loose button threads on his shirt. “I do not pursue this out of a nationalism, not at all.” He looks up at her. “This is not something I may say with other Chinese. It is not appropriate.” He looks back down to his shirt. “I want to know...are they capable...are they mistake...the genetic dead end?”

Doctor Fulke watches him.

He continues, frustrated that he may not be understood the way he intends when speaking English, “So many people...for them Panda are the novelty. Beijing will be joyful for a surplus. Government can lease Panda to foreign zoos for seven million Yuan each year. They go to the Memphis Zoo in the Tennessee. To the Adelaide Zoo in the Australia. To the Oji Zoo in the Japan. We work not for the ecology but for...If a function were the pure ecology, we would save krills. This is essential part of ecosystems. The Pandas have very little impact, maybe no impact. A few bamboo would grow taller—but still, no impact. The Siberian Tiger is apex predator—when it is gone, and it will be—we will see damage.”

Doctor Fulke frowns. “You are melancholy, Doctor Wing.”

He chugs the rest of his beer and swallows an onion burp.

“What do you do after work, Doctor Wing?”

“What do you mean?”

“What about the remainder of your existence?”

“I have not understood your question.”

“Do you have friends? A family? A girlfriend? A boyfriend? A preferred bar?”

He doesn't respond.

She pauses for a moment. She says, “I think Doctor Hsia's assistant, Miss Wu, would not be unreceptive to a dinner invitation.”

Doctor Wing blushes, but makes no verbal reaction.

“I belong to a cycling club organized by the German embassy. Last summer I rode to Guangyuan with Dieter the economist from the World Bank.” She stops.

He takes out his smart phone and scrolls through his notes with his thumb. His eyes remain fixed on the screen. “I believe the Giant Panda could be very smart. But they eat as the...I am not sure how to declare it, the grazing animal. As the cow.” He looks to Doctor Fulke to see if she is paying attention. Her eyes are locked on him. He continues, “They do not behave like the bear. In ancient times, we believed they are the raccoon. The big rodent.” He looks back down to his phone, forms half a smile. “And they are stupid. When mother Panda births two cubs, she will take care of both for a week, perhaps two weeks, and then she

will abandon one. But she does not choose which one to abandon based on any criteria, on health or stamina. She appears to take first cub she sees and deserts other to die. What kind of creature does this?”

“Science is never finished. We may yet determine a causality. I hesitate to judge Pandas as I would a human.” Doctor Fulke takes a slow breath. “My youngest child is in university now, Doctor Wing,” she says. “In the west we call this situation the empty nest. Do you understand?”

“You need not be the parent any longer.”

“I am always a mother, but that is not all I am. I am always a scientist, but that is neither all I am. Science gives my life some significance. I want to find success here, with the Pandas, with their survival. But I cannot live only for the success. One cannot live and die with these bears.”

Doctor Wing stops again in the lobby of his apartment building and looks into the gym. He decides to combine exercise and practicality and takes the stairs. On the third floor he abandons the enterprise and pushes the button for the elevator, deciding that he’s too tired to exercise.

He enters his apartment to the smell of pine soap. He can’t find his favorite pair of socks in the dresser, and starts to dig through the laundry basket. The housekeeper didn’t wash darks today. He finds the socks at the bottom of the bin. He takes them out and sniffs them. They don’t smell too bad. He puts them on. His neck hurts a little less for a moment.

The next morning Wei Wei clicks and chirps as she paces in her enclosure, showing that she still wishes to mate. She rubs against the cage. Doctor Wing gets a citrus flavored vitamin pellet. He lets her eat it directly out of his hand. She gently licks his palm to receive her treat.

Doctor Wing's assistant tells him that the Chief has called for him. Wing leaves for Doctor Gao's office.

Wing opens the office door. He enters with his eyes down. He looks up and sees Doctor Gao sitting at his desk, his thick hair looking more lustrous than ever.

Doctor Gao asks, "Is subject Wei Wei still fertile?"

"Indeed," Wings says.

Doctor Gao says, "We will create a new dynamic."

Wing scratches his thinning hair.

Doctor Goa smiles. "Turning white so young, Wing?"

Doctor Wing mumbles a non-response.

Doctor Goa's smile drops. "We have caught a new bear from the wild. The subject is dubbed Li Park Lian," Doctor Gao says. "We will release him into subject Wei Wei's enclosure. I believe a rivalry could motivate Shang Tsu. Or the new subject could mate with your subject." Doctor Gao's pink tie is covered with tiny fish that wear crowns.

“I object, Chief,” Doctor Wing says. “A wild Panda is dangerous. He could murder my charge.”

“Not your decision, Wing.”

Doctor Wing scratches his face, feeling his stubbly cheeks. He can’t remember when he last shaved. “Perhaps we may set Li Park Lian in the neighboring enclosure. With the gate closed. Proximity alone may prove useful motivation.”

Doctor Gao says, “No time for that. You wanted it this way. Natural breeding, as you say.”

“Of course, Chief. They need the pride to survive.”

Doctor Gao says, “You forget, Wing. It’s not about them.”

“How’s it not about them, Chief?”

“You’re rather cheeky today, Wing.”

Doctor Wing says, “Wouldn’t you be?”

“It wouldn’t be about me,” Doctor Gao says. “We all have our duty.”

“What’s that mean, Chief?”

Doctor Gao says, “We’re done here. Inform me of the result.”

After a series of close calls and nearly bitten hands and transport cages, Li Park Lian is released into the empty enclosure next to Wei Wei, one down from Shang Tsu. Many of the scientists and assistants from other parts of the Center pack

into Doctor Wing's monitoring room to view the rare interaction between wild and captive Pandas.

Wei Wei is released into the yard. She catches a new scent and slowly makes her way to the bars that separate her from Li Park Lian. Wei Wei studies the stranger, and then bleats softly. She moves to the gate. Li Park Lian reaches a paw through the gate and begins grooming Wei Wei. Wei Wei returns the gesture.

Shang Tsu watches both of them through the bars of his gate. He makes an unusual grumbling vocalization. Shang Tsu is released into Wei Wei's yard. He rushes toward the pair by the far wall, vocalizing in his pen-raised version of a challenge. Wei Wei turns to greet him, and slowly makes her way to meet him. Shang Tsu runs past her. He growls at Li Park Lian.

At first, Li Park Lian growls back at him, then the Panda turns and presents itself against the bars and begins to squeak and coo. Shang Tsu slowly steps backward.

In the monitor room Doctor Wing takes off his glasses. "Oh my."

The gathered crowd starts to titter as they suddenly realize what they're witnessing. They quickly try to hold back their reactions. Even the boisterous Miss Wu tries to cover her laugh.

Shang Tsu turns around and runs back through his gate into his own yard. Then he climbs his favorite tree.

Wei Wei waddles back to her indoor enclosure. She puts her nose against the inner cage and sticks her paw through the bars towards Doctor Wing. He steps over and sits down next to the cage. He pats her paw.

A few hours later, after the snickering crowd has long since dispersed, Doctor Gao comes into the monitoring room. “How’d it go, Wing?”

“Um, Chief Gao,” Doctor Wing says. “Was a DNA exam performed on subject Li Park Lian?”

“No. If you remember, we acquired him only last night, and no one could get near him.”

“Well, Chief, upon closer inspection, Li Park Lian is a female.”

Doctor Gao scratches his thick, dark hair. “What’s that?”

“Well, sir, after we released the subject with my charge, as you directed, things didn’t go as planned. We lured it into the cage in its enclosure and gave it a sedative to perform an examination. It seems to have an enlarged sexual organ. It’s quite large, but it is a female organ.”

“Is that right?” Doctor Gao asks. “The captured subject was physically large like a male—and the males have such small...hmm,” he muses. The crowns on his fish tie seem to sparkle in the light. “He, I mean she, was so aggressive—the staff just assumed.”

“She *was* aggressive, Chief,” Doctor Wing says. “She nearly forced Shang Tsu to mate with her through the bars of her gate.”

“Nearly?”

“He turned coward and ran away. And they were in separate cages.”

“Ah, yes. Well then,” Doctor Gao says, “I’ll have to think about what to do next.”

“And my program?” Doctor Wing asks. “What will happen to Wei Wei?”

Doctor Gao turns to leave. “Your subject,” he starts, pausing. At the door he shrugs a little and says, “Undetermined.”

Doctor Wing looks in on Wei Wei’s indoor enclosure. She rolls over onto her back and looks to him. He takes Wei Wei’s temperature. Maybe the estrus will last one more day. Probably not. She motions toward his briefcase. “What’s in there?” she seems to say. “You smell like ginger cookies. I’m bored.”

Doctor Wing breaks the rule and reaches in to the cage to rub behind Wei Wei’s ear. She coos. He pats the bear on the head and leaves her enclosure. He supposes an individual can’t be faulted for the historical failings of its species.

Doctor Wing goes into the monitoring room and stays late looking over the records and watching the bears on the infrared feed. He takes a few caffeine pills from the store room and downs them with a glass of water. They should keep him going. The pills were prescribed for Shang Tsu, so he alters the log to say the pills were given to the bear.

Wei Wei's three days are over. It will be a year before Doctor Wing gets another chance, and maybe not even then. He will probably be forced to conform to the in vitro method. Wei Wei may even be taken away from him.

Their will to survive has been corrupted. The natural way is obsolete. Pandas are obsolete. He turns off the monitors, and then pushes buttons to open all the doors between the cages. He scratches his stubbly face and takes off his glasses to rub his darkened eyes. Doctor Wing sees his reflection off an empty computer monitor. The stubble on his face looks white, the bags under his eyes so thick they're nearly black.

Angie Walls

CAKE

I am the worst kind of lonely at night. My boyfriend Derek is sound asleep to my right, and I know I should let everything go and allow myself to fall into his arms. He's already made a permanent body impression in my mattress; the smell of his shampoo can't be washed out of my sheets. His sweaters and jeans take up the void in my closet, the other half I wouldn't know what to do with anyway, so at least it's one thing less to think about. He cooks for me and reminds me to eat, get my legs moving. I try to wear the right smile when I see him at the end of the day, so he doesn't ask me what I'm thinking anymore. He tells me he loves me and I repeat it back, hoping if I say it enough times it'll start to become real. I can't bear to say the truth yet, that I feel more lonesome when he's here. When I was alone in this house, I had more regret than I knew what to do with, but I didn't have to hide.

It wasn't fair that Derek only knew my sister in the last few years, when she had become a shell of her past self. Cece used to show up at my house unannounced, and always in the middle of the night, hauling everything she owned in a scroungy old watermelon backpack. I suspected she had been sleeping rough in between her visits. She'd come smelling of meat fat and grease, like she'd been sleeping in a fast-food dumpster. From the beginning, he instantly despised my sister and the hold she had on me. I let her sleep in my

bed, while I lay down on some blankets spread over the hardwood floor. I cleaned up her puke and brushed her stringy black hair while we watched old movies after midnight. I survived on take-out pad thai and pizza since the day I moved in, never once turning on my oven. But after Cece started visiting, I somehow found it in me to bake chocolate cake, because it seemed to be the only thing that helped her stay clean. Derek held these strikes against her, seeing nothing but a vile creature with nothing left to give. He'd keep finding new ways to ask me when she was going to leave, but I found them cruel. I found some comfort in the days I could see a small reminder of my sister, remembering when she was kind and beautiful, when she used to know my face. However, it was growing harder to hold on to the few good memories that remained.

One night, Mom unexpectedly called me at work. I should've known something was dead wrong. She pleaded with me to help her with "Cece's party." What party, I asked, but I had a horrible feeling I didn't want to know. I showed up two hours early, and Mom was nervously setting the coffee table with croissants and cupcakes, like it was a birthday party. I refused to sit down on the couch with Derek; instead I leaned against the fireplace, planning for a speedy exit. It was my sister's intervention in our family home, and the room was strangely crowded with people I barely knew. I could only imagine they came from our parents' church, which became painfully obvious when Cece walked into the room and no one even looked up. I took a couple steps back toward the doorway, hiding my face.

Everyone in the room froze up the moment Dad stormed into the room. I felt his fury from where I stood—some of it, I’m sure, directed at me. Every time Cece lapsed in the past, I was held responsible for her shortcomings, as if in some way I had the power to change her back into the daughter they’d grieved for a decade. Mom leaned from the couch, hugging herself tight with both arms, trying to read Dad’s expression. Cece couldn’t hide the shaking in her limbs, the paleness of her skin under the bright lamplight. Dad hastily rolled up his sleeves; I knew what naturally would come next, and I couldn’t move. He was a brute of a man, an electrician with tired rough hands who couldn’t be trusted with such fragile things.

“What’s the matter with you? Look at what you’re doing to this family!” He had an unbreakable hold on my sister’s ultra-thin arm. A few guests made their way out the kitchen door; the rest of us were still trying to form words for this uncomfortable occasion. Mom turned to him, begging him for understanding.

“No, no, it’s okay, just calm down. Let her go.” She grabbed Dad’s hand away, hard as she could. “Cecelia, honey, we’re all just here to support you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Cece retracted like a wounded animal. “What is this?” She spotted me across the room, staring at my shoes like I always did when our family got like this.

“I think we should all just sit down and relax,” Derek said loudly, in an attempt to restore some balance. More church people left the house.

“Who are all these people?” Cece demanded. “Where’s the preacher? I’m surprised he’s not here to absolve me of my sins, right? I’d expect it of you”—she pointed straight at Mom, then at me—“but NOT you.” There was more pain than anger that I saw, and it was deeper than I’d ever imagined possible.

“I’m sorry” were the only lousy words I could think to say. “I didn’t know this was going to happen.”

“We just want you to get clean is all,” Mom said to smooth over the wounds.

“Do you realize how insane this is? You all are insane!” Cece yelled.

“You can stay with me.” I offered the usual plan.

“No, no, no,” Dad shook his head violently. “This is how this is gonna go. You want to know how to stop being a drug addict?” He paced the room, talking to Mom and me more than anyone else, with a certain kind of mocking. “STOP being a drug addict. No more crack. No more lying. No more living off your sister. No more borrowing money you can’t pay back. We can change the locks until you’re ready to take responsibility. I will burn you out of house and home if I have to.”

I woke up the next morning to find her clothes gone from my closet and \$100 missing from my purse. I sat in the kitchen, trying to put that night together again in my head. I knew I had betrayed her trust. There were so many moments in our intertwined lives when I could have spoken for her. I was the older one; I should have fought better, rather than cowering in the corner. Instead, I changed

the locks on my front door, ignored her texts, even when I knew without a doubt Cece had no place to go.

Mom calls every week to check on me, mainly to find out if Cece is crashing with me. I sit between Mom and Dad every Sunday night for dinner, and realize I'm the one filling the space as my sister is erased from our family history. I am their only daughter, because they choose to believe Cece is dead.

I miss her watermelon backpack, wishing I'd kept something for myself. I have another night of sleeplessness, with Derek curled up in my bed upstairs. I hear the sound of glass crashing down in my kitchen. It's only a couple hours from sunrise—I can feel it in my bones. I wander downstairs alone. Seems that I wake at the sound of the wind whipping the screen door, the dogs barking across the street, any sign that Cece is back again. They all make my heart pound. I hope that one of these times I'll catch my sister stealing chocolate cake from my refrigerator.

Laurence Klavan

WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

She had always been quiet, withdrawn and remote, so it was not the shock it might have been had his mother been lively and full of fun. Still, Rand was shaken by the way he found her in the nursing home: despondent, drained and slumped forward, her elbows on the little table attached to her chair, which looked like the desk he'd worked on in grade school or the surface babies are given on which to eat Cheerios. His mother *most* looked like she was bellying up to a bar, her once-angular and striking face now puffed, grizzled, and gray-downed, like an old male alkie's in a skid row slum.

Yet drinking was something she rarely had done. Maybe she should have done it more, Rand thought, it might have enlivened her: She and his father had always been abstemious, tenuous about everything, meek and small, trying to take up a tiny space in the world, to experience as little of their lives as possible, as little pain but also pleasure, tenderness, awe, excitement, name any positive noun. Why? He wondered. What were they so afraid of? Their distance from everything—including him—angered Rand.

There were other people in the nursing home lounge, the sitting area with chairs, tables, and a television turned to the old movie channel, a pen corralled

by two large female nurses on its either end. Not all were as unresponsive as his mother: one woman with a Band-Aid where her nose used to be spoke animatedly to no one in what sounded like Swedish; a skinny, stooped man wearing a porkpie hat lustily sang “Daisy,” the song the dying computer liked in *2001*. Even that would have been better than his mother’s condition, Rand thought, the way a packed and noisy restaurant is preferable to an empty, silent one, even if it had been harder to get a reservation.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” he asked the doctor. “To engage her, I mean?”

He said “we” but meant “you.” After all, he was paying enough for someone else to have an idea.

Dr. Rogers shrugged. She was young and heavily pregnant; she seemed not to have a lot of interest in the topic and tossed the conversational ball back to him. “What do *you* suggest?”

“Well,” Rand said, annoyed but trying to remain polite, acting humble, even obsequious in order to deliver a dig, “I just sell bakery equipment, you know?”

Dr. Rogers nodded, getting the point, seeming sorry (or so he imagined) about her attitude. “Well, we *do* have an option we’re making available to families—as long as you understand that Vitae is still not a proven drug. There’s a form you’d have to sign, etc.”

Rand realized: Dr. Rogers was not uncaring, merely formal, the “etc.” at the end of her sentence the tell, touching under the circumstances, like a staple attaching the pages of a deeply personal letter. She had been exhausting all possibilities before proposing this pill, probably had been instructed to do so, been reluctant yet resigned. (Or was he giving her such leeway because the combination of emotional commitment and maternity aroused an infatuation in him? Rand was forty-six, had been divorced for two years and dating was going poorly because he was so angry—but hadn’t he always been? Anyway, he was childless, had no siblings, his father was dead; he and his mother were all each had left. For these reasons, he trusted Dr. Rogers now.)

“If that’s what you recommend,” he said, hoping his tone suggested respect and not indecision and weakness.

Dr. Rogers smiled a little, almost a smirk, as if she had tried to imply something to him, had failed, and now was sharing with someone absent amusement at his thickness, not in a mean way, but...Anyway, he got it: she definitely recommended this pill but couldn’t say so, for then she would be liable, the whole insurance disaster. She had already begun her so-you-won’t-sue-me doctor talk she reserved for the unsophisticated.

“Well, if it was *my* mother...”

“Okay,” he stopped her, to show he was savvy. “I trust you. Let’s do it. I’ll sign.”

But she had already written him off, thought he was deferring to her in the way that left her open to litigation.

“It’s your choice,” she insisted, closing the gate between them, which made him feel distant from Dr. Rogers and alone, with only his unavailable mother for company, which he dreaded.

“Maybe the drug will work,” he said, but she didn’t answer, not even to agree.

*

Vitae was taken once a day, and Rand was told his mother barely opened her mouth to receive it, the same reluctant way she now ate her food (without losing any weight, Rand noticed). Other people on the hall also received the dosage, and the families of the remaining hold-outs had not refused but simply not replied to the offer. (Part of Rand envied their indifference, and he wondered if he stayed loyal to his mother solely from the hope that she might, at long last before the end, wake from her lifelong trance and love him. Or was it instead only instinct? He didn’t know.)

Dr. Rogers called him several weeks into the trial, during which time he had not gone to visit, partly because the trip was time-consuming (ninety minutes from the city) and partly because he hoped the pill might magically work if he stayed away (as you believe something painful will vanish if you just don’t think about it).

“I’m sorry,” she said. “There’s been no improvement.”

Rand felt a physical deflating, like the long exhale taught him by his “Breathing” CD, which lasted longer than his inhale, the loss seen as something positive. “There’s been no reaction at all?”

“Well, she’s had a reaction. Diarrhea and vomiting.”

“I don’t remember those side effects when I signed the form.”

“Right. She’s been the first to exhibit them.”

This was how much his mother didn’t want her aloofness to end, Rand thought: Her system had used every way it could to expel the thing that might end it.

“Well...what do we do now?”

There was a pause, during which he hoped Dr. Rogers was compassionately considering their options. He was aware that his “we” this time had been helpless, not designed to ding but a way for them to address this disappointment together.

She answered, “Our staff will apply its energies to those patients who have had an encouraging response,” which he knew was legalese for she was completely giving up on his mother, a verdict delivered in Dr. Rogers’s by now trademark calm and cool style, crushing his hopes harder than cruelty. Maybe she had rolled her eyes again to that unseen smarter companion, but of course he couldn’t see.

“Just out of curiosity,” he said, to keep her on the phone, as one clutched at a ledge before falling from a high floor, “how many others *did* respond?”

“A few. Mr. Gambel. Mrs. Crantham. Arnold.”

“Arnold? That’s informal. Which one is he?” He was going for friendliness, having abandoned a show of intelligence to impress her. Yet he sensed he sounded hostile.

“He’s a man on the hall. The one with the little hat? Who sings?”

“Daisy’?”

“Yes. Among other tunes. But I should have called him Mr. Blaine.”

Dr. Rogers shouldn’t have apologized for finding the old man endearing, for being human, in other words, but Rand couldn’t say that, it was too intimate. There was nothing left *to* say, unless he asked Dr. Rogers about herself—her health, how far she was along—which, while meant innocently, might seem unsavory. Rand had failed to make her see or hear him, which is what he wanted if he could not get the pill to work.

“All right,” he said. “Thanks then. Goodbye.”

Dr. Rogers faltered a little, as if his words had—for the first time—been more peremptory than hers, which surprised her. Then she quickly recovered, maybe remembering she didn’t actually want to keep talking to him and had been taken aback by his tone reflexively, not for real.

“Take care,” she said, but it was only an expression.

That night, on Youtube, he watched the scene from *2001* where the disconnected computer sang “Daisy” in its flat, failing, and inhuman voice. HAL

was its name but it stood for something scientific, it wasn't the nickname for Harold, wasn't human at all.

It was two months before Rand went back to see his mother, not because he hoped something good would happen in his absence but because he wanted to stop thinking about her. When he arrived, he didn't see the old woman in her regular spot in the common room, fallen forward on the wooden surface like a lush in a downtown dive.

"Where'd she go?" he asked Allison, one of the policing nurses, arms folded prohibitively on her chest.

"She went for a walk," she said, all the while looking over his shoulder at the space, to make sure all stayed safe.

Rand fell silent and was made uncomfortable by how little either had to say without his mother around. As small talk, he asked, "Are the others still responding to the drug?"

"Well, Mr. Gambel passed away," Allison said, adding a splash of sorrow to her portrait of strict authority. "And Mrs. Crantham's in the infirmary."

"Because of the—"

"Inconclusive." She firmly cut off the accusation of blame and, of course, chance of a lawsuit.

"What about—"

An entrance provided the answer. Rand turned and saw Arnold—what was his last name?—Blaine. The old man’s gait had improved: in fact, he now stood as straight as someone half his age, his surprisingly broad chest pushed out. He still wore his porkpie hat, but it was tilted not just at a “jaunty” angle but a rakish one; he had dipped it on his forehead like a Rat Pack rogue. He wasn’t singing his song but whistling it quietly through his teeth: Rand was reminded of a criminal keeping watch outside while his buddies were committing a crime; it was a wary, steely sound to make him appear benign when he was really something else.

At a slight distance, someone followed him.

His mother was still bent but less from obsequiousness than subservience; she looked like Igor in the old monster movie, the assistant in thrall to the mad scientist, or a monk who swung the thurible—was that the word?—the thing that spewed out incense, in the wake of a powerful priest.

“She likes him now,” Allison said, a corrosive twinkle wearing away her tough tone. “Look how cute it is.”

“Is it?” Shaken, Rand didn’t really want to hear the reply. His mother looked up and appeared alarmed at seeing him: Rand might demand attention which would take her away from what she was doing, trailing Arnold Blaine.

“Look who’s here,” Allison said, but the closest she could come to warmth was condescension. “It’s your son.”

Arnold just shot Rand a split-second hooded look, which rattled him, for it suggested he wasn't worth acknowledging. Then he knowingly navigated his way to his room, like a gigolo on a cruise at ease with the roll of the waves, the pitching part of his pleasure for it kept everyone off-balance but him. His mother looked disturbingly deprived as she was firmly kept from continuing after him by Allison, the nurse's thick hand on her translucent shoulder.

"Why don't you stay here," Allison said, in a way that no one sensible would counter.

In the main room, his mother sat with Rand on a couch, at a pillow's distance, crushed into the corner as if trying to will herself inside, anything to escape. Her eyes often glanced elsewhere—not as Allison had done, as a sentry—as a yearning supplicant of Arnold Blaine's. She said nothing as Rand jabbered on, trying to compel her attention, asking increasingly desperate questions ("Have you eaten anything interesting?") and receiving no reply.

Soon she was taken by Allison to her room, checking over her shoulder the whole time. Sweating like a flopping comic, Rand asked the remaining nurse (whose name he didn't know) for help.

"Where's Dr. Rogers?"

"She had her baby," and the answer meant she was now inaccessible to him for good.

Rand came back after only a week, telling himself that it was wrong to stay away, that his mother would be lonely without him, and that this responsibility was morally negligent to shirk. He went immediately to the office of Dr. Rogers, found it locked and was told that a Dr. Kind was filling in, but that this doctor too was not around, was on another floor or out to lunch, it wasn't specified. Rand felt that crucial information was being withheld.

He walked quickly toward his mother's room, but was stopped—good-naturedly? It wasn't clear—by the other nurse, not Allison, the one whose name he still didn't know. She was slight but sinewy, also not to be trifled with.

“Your Mom's roommate, Mrs. Crantham, died,” the nurse said. “She'll have a new one soon. But for now, she's got the place to herself.”

In fact, when Rand entered the room, he saw the bed beside his mother's had been stripped of covers and held only a taut white sheet; it looked like an operating room table after being hosed down for blood. His mother wasn't on her own bed or in a nearby chair but kneeling on the floor, her eyes closed, her head pointed up, her slackly muscled arms at her side, like the sculpture of a young dancer he had seen in school—Degas, that was it. The wax girl's arms had been clasped behind her back, but both of their postures were weirdly devotional, even submissive.

“Come on,” the nurse said to her, as if this were simply one more amusingly strange thing the elderly got up to, and advanced to pick his mother up.

The old woman opened her eyes wide and stared at the attendant approaching, then at her son. Her lips parted, and she released a howl of protest in a furious tone Rand didn't recognize. He turned and saw something hanging from the doorknob, swaying slightly with what seemed insouciance, as if winking at him, as if such a thing could be done by a porkpie hat, which was what it was.

As his mother struggled, fiercely, spewing obscenities, the nurse tried to lift and right her. Rand ran back over the threshold. He looked right, then left, and saw the retreating figure of Arnold Blaine energetically rounding the corner to the main room.

"Stop!" Rand cried, but he was too late.

"I'm afraid we can't do that," said Dr. Kind, revealed to be male, small, and in his mid-forties, when he had the bad luck to return to his office and find Rand waiting in the hall outside, as he had been all day, refusing invitations to come back or be called at home given him by the staff.

"Why not?" Rand didn't realize how tired his feet were until he sat down opposite the doctor's desk (he suspected they'd removed chairs from the hall to get rid of family members as they added spikes to fences around fancy fountains in the city to discourage the homeless).

"Because, frankly, it's not our decision to make." Though bland, Dr. Kind was more blunt than Dr. Rogers in the same cause: not to incur a lawsuit, in this

case over a patient deprived of a drug as opposed to prescribed one. “The decision to take him off Vitae has to come from his family.”

There was silence now, as neither man wished to continue. Rand didn’t feel the need to get a reaction from Dr. Kind as he had from Rogers. So he kept still, played the staring game, and Kind cracked first. “May I ask you why you care so much about Mr. Blame?”

“Blaine. And I don’t.” He did not want to talk about his mother, felt he didn’t have to; it was a free country. Yet he admitted his interest must appear odd. So he offered a tentative explanation, which made him feel intimately and uncomfortably examined by Dr. Kind. “I just don’t want my mother around him. It’s unseemly.” That was all he could say, even to himself.

Dr. Kind nodded, thinking he understood and could use the response he’d been told to prepare for such an occasion. “Sometimes parents make new friends in a nursing home that can make adult children feel—”

“It’s not a friendship,” Rand spat out, unintentionally spraying Dr. Kind with venom. “Look, just give me the family’s number, and I’ll do it, Goddammit.”

Giving up on people often spurred them into action, Rand had found; yet he wasn’t being manipulative, just wanted to make sure this job got done. His hand shook as he took the post-it upon which the sighing doctor had reluctantly written.

Their name wasn't Blaine but Kalmer; the daughter was Arnold's offspring and had changed it upon marrying. Her husband, Jake, was the one who kept the family flame and ferociously, Rand found.

"What's your problem?" said Jake, who was forty, fit and unafraid to tangle; Rand could tell all of this over the phone. "He's thriving on Vitae. He's the only one who could take it."

Rand didn't know how to answer his hostile—and nearly rhetorical—question, especially since he'd intentionally expressed his own concerns in a gentle and non-confrontational way. He decided to stick to the game plan, like a beleaguered coach who sees his players being decimated one by one on the field. "I'm just looking out for my mother, that's all."

"Well, so am I. For my father, that is. My father-in-law. Look, I'm sorry she never responded. But be a man about it."

It took Rand a seething second to realize Jake was referring to the pill—and then another second of cooling down (exhale *before* inhale, a reversal of routine also taught on the CD) before he replied to the locker room-like taunt of his masculinity, the flick of his testicles or, more mortifying, nipple. He stayed silent, thinking.

"He's not giving up Vitae!" Jake yelled, in a way that made Rand pity his wife for having to live with him (though maybe she liked his crude bellicosity due to low self-esteem or maybe she was *also* crude and bellicose and so had found a soulmate in Jake). It made him suspect that it was the macho principle of the

thing that Jake was unpleasantly defending rather than the pill itself, which he probably didn't care that much about. Or maybe Jake was just perpetually touchy, insecure, and defensive?

Out of desperation, Rand decided to play his trump card, throw a Hail Mary, tell his base runner to slide into and break the opposing player's leg—even though he was aware that what appeared a powerful ploy like Jake's yelling was really a display of weakness. And weakness was what he had derided in every doctor and nurse he had been dealing with.

"I'll sue you!" he cried. "I'll sue you! Sue you! All right?!"

Revealing this—not weakness, that wasn't fair—vulnerability brought tears to his eyes, which luckily Jake couldn't see.

"All right, all right," the other man said, quietly, for the first time intimidated by, if nothing else, Rand's lack of control.

After he hung up, Rand heard himself humming "Daisy," as if he were now the new and improved Arnold Blaine, which he wasn't and never would be.

Rand gave it five days before returning to the home, figuring that was long enough both for him to seem responsible and the drug to lose its potency.

With trepidation, he entered the common room, ignored by two new nurses even bigger and stronger than Allison and the other one, who were like extra thick gates erected on a store beset by thieves. He saw a tapestry of

indolence and apathy, all people either slumped or shuffling, their silence broken only by incoherent cries or mumbles.

Off in a corner, no longer attracting attention was Arnold Blaine. He sat forward in a chair, staring at his hands, which were flung into his lap, the palms open as if he sought coins or alms, turned from a totemic object back into a petitioner himself. His hat was on the floor beside his feet, right-side up, also a beggar's tool. His exposed scalp—which Rand had never really seen—held a few gray and curly hairs, squiggling out like the leaves on a gift bow you torture with a scissors to look special. He said and sang nothing.

His heart pounding, Rand walked toward the door of his mother's room. Just as he reached it, he saw Dr. Rogers coming from the other direction, which brought him to a halt. She showed no sign of having been pregnant, and Rand stopped himself from congratulating her, as if it had never been real.

"Everything all right?" she asked, and her tone implied, did you get what you wanted? You went to all that trouble— satisfied? But he couldn't be sure.

"Yes," he said, as if it had been just a pleasantry, which didn't seem to satisfy her at all.

Rand turned, entered the room and saw his mother. She was lying on the second bed, still covered by a sheet; it was as if she were preventing it from being occupied, hopelessly saving it for someone. There was a wounded lioness quality to her posture; it was the way an animal mourned.

When she looked at him, her words were similarly despairing.

“I hope I die now,” she said.

Rand instinctively approached. He knew that she held *him* responsible, that she had retreated from everything again because of what and who he had taken away. He couldn't help it, he was pleased.

Then, reaching her, he stopped. He suddenly understood what her words had actually been: In the air, they became clearer the closer he got, like a nasty smell that grows more noxious the nearer you draw to its source.

“I hope *you* die now,” she had said.

Rand realized she was not wounded but fierce, more protective of the reserved space than she had ever been of him. To his horror, his mother's eyes burned into his own, as if she had the power now to remove and replace him with Arnold Blaine. For the first time, she was alive in her hatred of him, truly alive.



Beaded head

Kim Shuck

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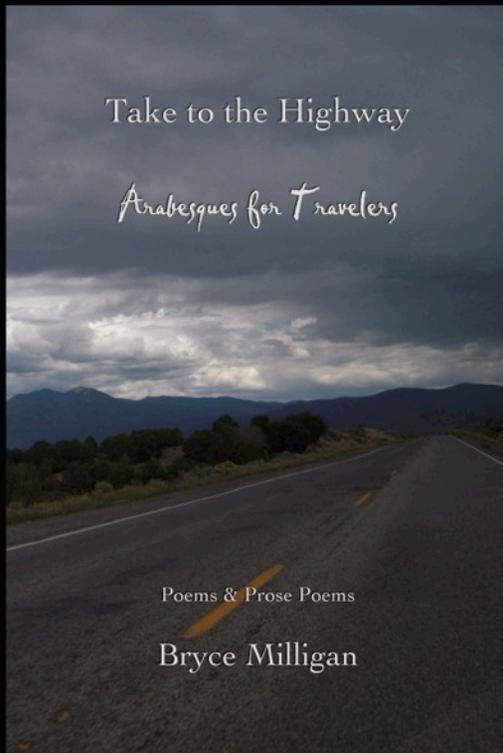
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