

# SANTA ANA RIVER REVIEW



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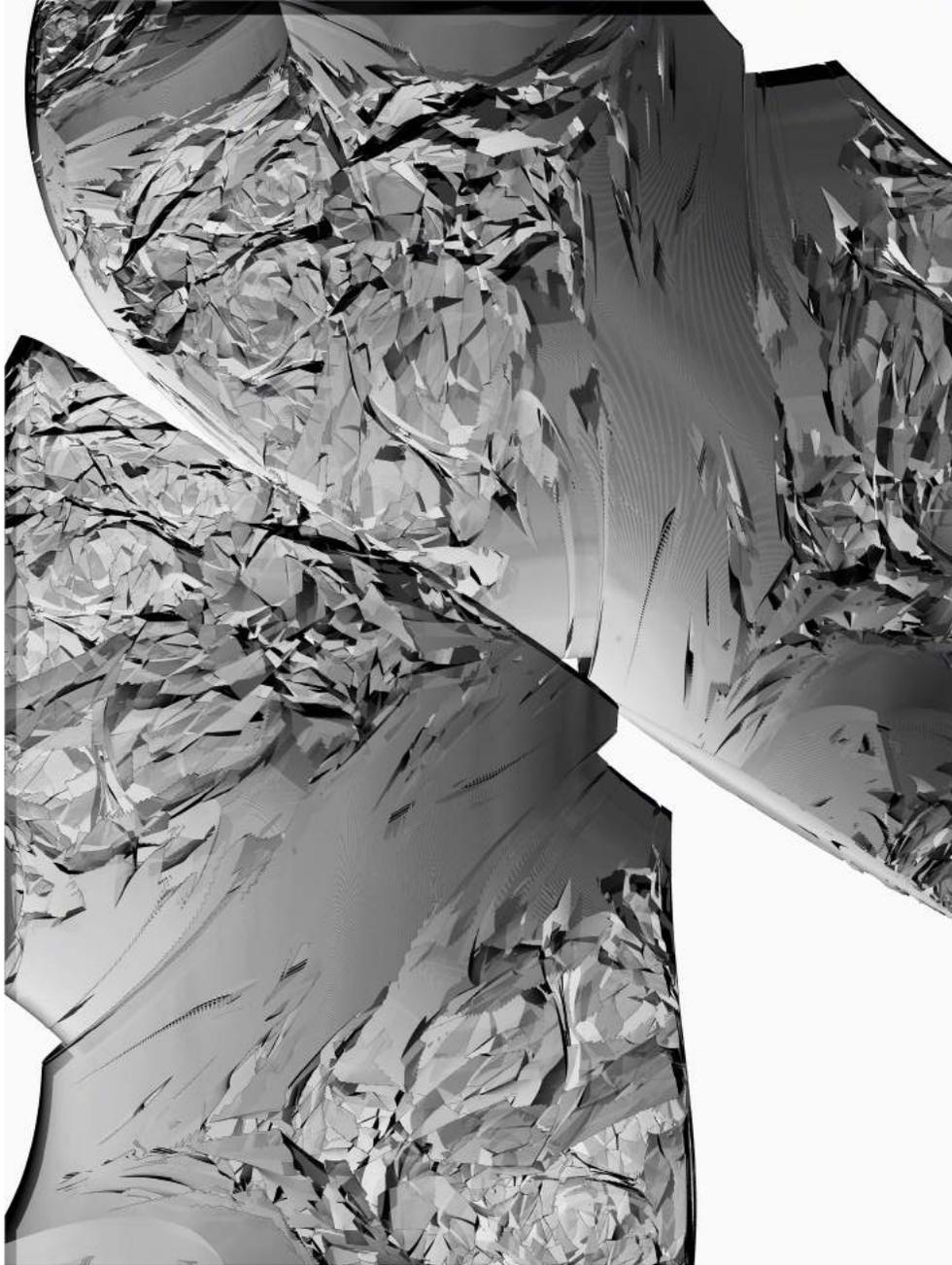
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# DRAMA



*Last Kiss* by Terry Wright

CHARACTERS

AVERAGE AMERICAN: Female or male. In the depths of poverty.

BULLY: Ruler of America if not the world. Impossibly wealthy. Despicably egocentric.

JOSEWULF: A citizen of Mexico. Courageous. Fearless. Heroic. Honorable. Strong. Wise. Good.

TIME

The future.

PLACE

Washington, D.C., and Mexico on the U.S. border.

~

AT RISE: Dawn. The mall in Washington, D.C. AVERAGE AMERICAN, dressed in rags, speaks to us. BULLY sits on the Lincoln Memorial marble chair. The Lincoln part of the statue has been removed.

AVERAGE

Lo, honor the Bully

or suffer

wrath.

He brooks no nonsense

suffers not

detractors takes

not prisoners.

Bully bathes in the glory

upon his head

hair-of-amazing-substance

lighted by ego

bright as the sun.

He is the sun, the moon, the stars,

planets, asteroids,

black holes, northern lights, you name it --

Bully is all.

BULLY

Over my bed hangs The Motto, framed in gold:  
I am All.

(SOUND: trumpet salute.)

AVERAGE

Indeed this trampled earth  
is his;  
indeed the rights to  
diamond mines,  
oil wells  
and miscellaneous mines of everything else  
are his.

BULLY

Bully owns all.

(BULLY polishes his nails, combs his hair, admires himself in a hand mirror as AVERAGE comes  
downstage to speak to us.)

AVERAGE

How did this happen?  
was it ever  
otherwise?  
Peasants whisper  
the question, but  
the answer  
has been lost  
across ages.  
How did it happen that an Evil lord  
owns every  
scrap  
of land, of sea  
owns every animal  
and bird  
owns us.  
How, the peasants ask,  
but quietly 'lest  
Bully hear.

We suffer,  
sleeping little;  
slaving day and night for naught.  
Children in rags  
bellies empty  
cry into pillows at night or  
would if  
they had pillows.

BULLY

(laughing, to no one in particular:)  
"Build! Build!"

AVERAGE

He gestures toward the southern border.

BULLY

"Build, you dirty devils!" I'll send the bill by U.S. Post.

(JOSEWULF, apart, is on the U.S. border in Mexico. He wears a Mexican warrior outfit with traditional weapons such as a chimalli [shield] and macuahuitl [staff with obsidian blades]. He shakes a fist in BULLY's direction.)

JOSEWULF

Like Midas of old  
rubbing  
hands  
piling  
wealth upon wealth  
that is never enough;  
grinding all in  
your path  
beneath  
unfeeling boot.

Die, American monster!

AVERAGE

Why or when it began

we do not know  
only that judges were named  
laws changed --

BULLY

Bully is Ruler for Life!

JOSEWULF

The Days of Bullydom are numbered.

AVERAGE

Unbeknownst to the  
Power-That-Is  
a king  
of another sort  
compassionate sort  
a ruler  
to the south  
amasses troops.

JOSEWULF

Come all ye downtrodden,  
demeaned, dismissed  
trod  
spat upon  
join me in a Battle for Good.  
Not one more bill will  
I accept  
for The Wall  
he has constructed with the blood  
of my people  
and those to the north  
suffering  
beneath his stupendous ego  
Pay for his  
intolerance  
ignorance  
ineptitude?  
No more!

(SOUND: a call to arms.)

BULLY

(admiring himself in the mirror:)

I'm the richest, most  
successful businessman in the world. Everybody loves me.

AVERAGE

They come  
they gather,  
farmers, laborers, craftsmen  
fishermen, potters  
peddlers, mothers  
fathers  
from hills  
town  
cities  
seacoast until  
all of Mexico stands beside noble Joséwulf.

JOSEWULF

North, my friends!  
Right marches beside us.

AVERAGE

The army surges forward  
north, toward The Wall.

(The sun is overhead.)

BULLY

Lunchtime. Service please!  
American cow patty  
American cheese  
American bun. Caucasian er vanilla milkshake  
Side of non-French fries.  
The Frenchies love me but I don't trust them.  
Smart move, tearing down the Statue of Liberty.  
Frog woman. Can't have that in New York Harbor!

AVERAGE

Unaware of the approaching host

Bully dines.

JOSEWULF

The Wall.

AVERAGE

Josewulf and his thousands are over The Wall

like flood waters over a dam

aided by Americans on the other side

in Texas

starving for education,

medicine, food, justice,

equality, the vote. One vote for

a leader who cares.

JOSEWULF

Join us, *Americano amigos*

together we march

as one we destroy Evil!

(SOUND: a rousing cheer from a large crowd.)

BULLY

(yawns, stretches:)

Naptime.

AVERAGE

As Bully naps

the army heads

north.

Women washing rags

in polluted streams

look up;

children

too weak to play

look up;

men scratching for berries,

for beetles,

for something for dinner  
look up  
as The Army of the Righteous approaches.

JOSEWULF

They join us  
they march with us  
strong at the thought  
of conquering Evil.

BULLY

Dinner time. Service!

(BULLY tucks a dinner napkin under his chin. Dusk approaches.)

AVERAGE

Dallas, Memphis, Nashville, Norfolk --

JOSEWULF

Forward!

(SOUND: cell phone rings. BULLY answers.)

BULLY

What's that?  
Advancing northward?  
Ridiculous. They couldn't  
get over  
The Wall.  
Besides, they're Losers  
brown-skinned  
ignorant Losers  
everybody  
knows that.  
They love me,  
but they're Losers  
America doesn't want Losers.

AVERAGE

A short lesson on Losers is necessary before continuing. If you have the notion that Losers are small, nasty, or un-pleasant in anyway, get rid of it right now. That is propaganda spread by media -- controlled by you-know-who. Wipe it from your mind. Losers are often courageous, strong, wise, heroic, and they smell like honeysuckle. Got it?

JOSEWULF

Forward, to Washington to  
the White House —

AVERAGE

(correcting him:)

Castle. It's called the "castle" now.

JOSEWULF

The big white building  
emblazoned with  
letters  
in flashing lights.  
Forward  
to boldly breach  
his wall  
find  
the Evil king in  
his lair  
and disappear him.

(BULLY holds out a wine glass.)

BULLY

California, New York State, anything but French or Chinese.  
Do they have Chinese wine?

AVERAGE

José's plans could not  
one mistake make  
nor one slip up  
nor one small  
moment skip.  
Years went into planning,

top secret,  
all out,  
no holes barred  
now or never  
planning.

(BULLY has finished dinner. He is wiping his mouth with the napkin.)

Word gets out of the fateful  
night.  
People gather  
up and down Pennsylvania Avenue  
would-be voters  
if there was voting anymore, now  
taking bets  
(though they have nothing  
to bet with),  
praying  
(though praying is not  
allowed) --

JOSEWULF  
Hoping, for they have not forgot hope.

AVERAGE  
You have resurrected hope, Joséwulf!

(SOUND: crowd cheers. JOSEWULF holds up a finger for silence, but too late BULLY has heard the mob.)

BULLY  
What's that?

AVERAGE  
He flings wide the door to his chamber balcony  
sneers at us below.

BULLY  
"Stupid idiots!"

AVERAGE

His mouth a hollow cave.

JOSEWULF

Orange hair electric.

AVERAGE

Silken robe

tied tightly below

well-filled belly.

JOSEWULF

No idea that others

have brains

can come up with

plans

carry through.

Sees himself as the only

ever,

complete,

be all and end all

of everything.

AVERAGE + JOSE

So he is not afraid.

BULLY

I know you love me I love your love

be quiet

I've had a hard day.

AVERAGE

Plumps his pillow and

is soon asleep

dreaming

of eggs Benedict and latte laced

with brandy

French -- it's a dream

dreams of

morning paper filled

with news of  
him  
and his  
grandiosity.

(Silence. Silence. Silence. Night falls. JOSEWULF cracks his knuckles. BULLY snores in his marble seat. AVERAGE AMERICAN has a weapon now. SOUND: suddenly a rousing warcry as the peasant army attacks. BULLY sits up, calls:)

BULLY

911! Everybody to the boardroom! Department of Defense.  
Department of Anti-Immigration. FBI. CIA. Get in here!

(JOSEWULF faces BULLY.)

Throw him out.

JOSEWULF

I am Joséwulf.

BULLY

I don't give a damn if you're the Mona Lisa. Deport him!

JOSEWULF

I do not like you.

BULLY

Everybody loves me.

JOSEWULF

Name one.

BULLY

There's...

And...

And whatshisname

and here and —

I don't have to answer to you, disgusting poor person. Loser.

(BULLY grabs JOSEWULF. A fearsome struggle follows between them.)

AVERAGE

I was ready to fight  
ready for --

(SOUNDS of raging battle: gunfire, screams of horses, shouts, bombs, cannons, chaos.  
AVERAGE cuts off the sound. It stops as quickly as it began.)

Bully's followers  
fled like  
mice  
pursued by  
tigers before  
a shot was fired.  
Only these two  
Good and Evil  
fight  
to the death.

(JOSE and BULLY are locked in a fearsome struggle. First it looks like JOSE will win, then BULLY [who of course fights dirty]. Just as it looks like BULLY might win, choking the life out of JOSE with his foot upon JOSE's throat, JOSE lunges up, grabs BULLY's arm, and wrenches it loose from the shoulder socket. JOSE waves the torn arm above his head victoriously.)

JOSEWULF  
Power to the People!

AVERAGE  
Bully  
slinks off  
to hide  
mortified  
never to be seen again.

(SOUND: crowd cheers. JOSE and AVERAGE embrace. BLACKOUT.)

- END OF PLAY -

CHARACTERS:

GINA: protagonist, early twenties

PAUL: ex-boyfriend of GINA, also early twenties

MOTHER: of GINA

MARGOT: best friend to GINA; we only hear her voice

MIDDLE-AGED MAN: balding, with a paunch

I.

Lights up on a mostly empty stage. Center stage is a bed. GINA sits on the bed beside PAUL, who lies facedown, turned away from her.

GINA (to audience): Scrolling back through the worst moments of your life, this is at the top. Up there between the rejection from Brown and your dog Sammie being hit by a car in fifth grade. Sitting here in your bra, pressing a smushed bloody tissue against your nostrils—you always get a bloody nose when you're nervous—while your boyfriend—er, ex-boyfriend—lies face-down on the bed beside you, clutching a pillow and sobbing into the twisted sheets. (Looks over at PAUL.) You didn't think he would take it this hard. Oh, this is worse than Brown saying no. Worse than Sammie dying. This is the worst.

(GINA looks at PAUL for a few silent moments, pain evident on her face.)

GINA (to PAUL): I really hope we can still be friends.

II.

(PAUL has stopped crying and is now trying to change GINA'S mind, convince her they should stay together.)

PAUL: Why? I just don't understand why.

GINA (to audience): You don't know what to say. There's not an easy reason why. Is there ever an easy reason why?

PAUL: I mean, we were so happy.

GINA (to audience): It's true. You were happy. Most of the time. As happy as most people are.

PAUL (earnest): You're The One for me, Gina.

GINA (to audience): There. That's the reason. He's so certain the two of you are Meant To Be. He's been talking about A Future Together. There was a time when you thought about A Future Together, too. A time when you were giddy with Future thoughts. The two of you, old and gray. Wedding anniversaries and mortgages and diapers and wallpaper and vacuum cleaners and joint checking accounts.

PAUL (grabbing GINA'S hand): I can't imagine being with anyone else.

GINA (to audience): The real problem—the palms—sweating, stomach—clenching, claustrophobic insomniac problem—isn't really the Future. It's the Future with him and only him. It's the two of you together always. What a cliché, but you can't help it. At some point, your relationship stalled, then rolled backwards, like a car parked on a steep hill without a parking brake, out of Love and back down into love. Lower case. (Slips her hand out of PAUL'S hand.)

PAUL (angry/frustrated): Why? Just give me a reason why.

GINA (finally addresses PAUL): I don't know. I'm sorry.

III.

(GINA'S MOTHER enters, holding a crock pot and sheets. As the scene progresses, she spreads the sheets on the bed and dishes out some chili into a bowl for GINA.)

GINA: Your mother comes over with turkey chili and freshly laundered sheets.

MOTHER: You did the right thing. At some point you've got to either stop fishing or cut bait and move on.

GINA (to audience): You don't say anything. You pick at a scab on your knee from when you cut yourself shaving.

MOTHER: This isn't a dress rehearsal. This is your life.

GINA (to audience): You don't say anything. You grip a hangnail between your teeth and pull.

MOTHER: Never settle. It's not fair to you, or to him. (Hands bowl of chili to GINA.)

GINA (to audience): You don't say anything. You spear a clump of turkey and onion with your fork. You worry no one will ever love you as much as he did.

IV.

GINA: All day long, you make lists:

- Things You Would Tell Him About If You Were Still On Speaking Terms.
- Things That Make You Think Of Him. (You Can't Help It.)
- Inside Jokes That Are No Longer Relevant, Which is Unfortunate Because They Were Pretty Damn Funny.

V.

GINA: You do not call him. You call Margot instead.

(GINA picks up the phone and dials.)

GINA (into phone, to MARGOT): Will I ever be able to call him?

MARGOT'S VOICE: Just wait a few more days.

GINA: But I said I'd call him in a couple days, not a few days. And it's already been a couple days.

MARGOT'S VOICE: Just wait a few more. Till you're ready.

GINA: Will I ever be ready?

MARGOT'S VOICE: Just wait till tomorrow. (Beat.) You're not ready yet. I can tell.

VI.

(At the grocery store. GINA pushes a shopping cart.)

GINA: Instead of calling him, you go to the grocery store. It is a place with lights and people. Things to buy. You're not out of milk, but you can pretend to be. And bananas. You should try to be healthier. You should start putting sliced bananas on your cereal. You pick the greenest bunch in the pile because you like bananas with a bit of green at the tips. Not this green, but they'll ripen. Your boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—likes bananas yellow and spotty. (Beat.) All of a sudden you're thinking about his banana and how at one time you had thought his was the only banana for you, the only one you would ever really know, ever really need. You put the green bananas back on the shelf. Try to think about his bellybutton, the way it was always lined with belly-button lint.

VII.

(PAUL enters and lies under the sheet on the bed. GINA lies down beside him but still addresses the audience.)

GINA (to audience): The last time the two of you did it, your roommate knocked on the door halfway through.

ROOMMATE'S VOICE: I have to come in and get something. Right now. It's an emergency!

GINA (to audience): So your ex-boyfriend, who was still your boyfriend then, pulled his banana out of you and the two of you hurried to dress.

(GINA climbs out of bed and walks towards front of the stage, talking to the audience. PAUL follows her, clutching the sheet around him.)

GINA: I mean, what else could you do? After your roommate grabbed her iPod and gym key off her desk and left, you and your ex-boyfriend watched *Arrested Development* on DVD, because neither of you was in the mood anymore.

GINA (to PAUL, who is standing beside her): I wish we had done it once more after that. It makes me sad to think that was our last time together. Unfinished.

(PAUL exits, leaving GINA onstage alone.)

VIII.

(GINA pushes her cart up and down the grocery aisles. MIDDLE-AGED MAN enters, holding a shopping basket.)

GINA: Up ahead of you in the grocery aisle is a middle-aged man, paunch like a bowling ball beneath his white T-shirt, considering Frosted Flakes versus Lucky Charms. He is balding and carries a basket instead of pushing around a cart. His basket contains chocolate ice cream—two cartons—and a box of macaroni and cheese. Tears prick your eyes at the sight of him. So many lonely people in this world. You leave your cart in the middle of the cereal aisle and make a beeline for your car to beat the tears.

(GINA abandons cart and crosses stage, walking quickly.)

IX.

(GINA struggles with the key, finally opens the car door, sits down in the driver's seat and slams the car door closed. GINA collapses into tears for a few moments before sitting up, wiping her eyes, and addressing the audience.)

GINA: There's something about crying all alone in your car in a half-empty strip-mall parking lot at night. If you were a character in a movie, this would be the Low Point. Which means that in the next scene something would change. Things would only get better from here. (Beat.) You slide the key into the ignition and blast the heater.

(GINA slides her key into the ignition.)

GINA: "Eleanor Rigby" comes on the radio.

("Eleanor Rigby" starts to play, softly.)

X.

(LIGHTS FADE to a single spotlight on GINA.)

GINA: Driving home, it starts to snow. Darkness hugs the car close. It would be easy to get lost here. You turn your high beams on and hope you're headed in the right direction.

(SPOTLIGHT FADES TO BLACK.)

Character Breakdown:

WOMAN, 40s

MAN, 50s

MASTODON, either gender, 20s

Setting:

The Harvard Museum

~

A recorded voice, which sounds like the mini-lecture accompanying certain museum exhibits, announces:

RECORDED VOICE

The Harvard Museum: Phanerozoic Eon, Cenozoic Era.

A MASTODON stands on prominent, and almost grisly, display. In this section, its voice sounds like an exhibit narration.

A "Quiet please" sign is posted in the gallery. The MAN, a museum guard, monitors the space. A middle-aged WOMAN in heels comes click-click-clacking into the gallery. The guard barely notices her as she stares at the mastodon.

WOMAN

(Reading the exhibit plaque.)

Mastodon: Extinct.

(Pause.)

It looks like an elephant.

MASTODON

The mastodon is related to the Eozygodon and Zygolophodon.

Pause.

WOMAN

...Know what made it kick the bucket?

MAN  
Hmm?

WOMAN  
Do you know how it...

She drags her finger across her neck, as if slitting her throat.

MAN  
I'm new here.

WOMAN  
I was wondering if it was a gradual process, or in a sudden dust cloud. Or something.

The man shrugs.

MASTODON  
They were solitary creatures that did not roam in herds.

Long pause as she stares at the mastodon.

MAN  
Would you like a map?

WOMAN  
Huh?

MAN  
There are a lot of other exhibits, down that way. Probably more interesting.

She takes the map but doesn't look at it.

WOMAN  
Thanks.

Pause. She sneaks a snack out of her purse as she continues to stare at the mastodon.

MAN

No food in the galleries.

MASTODON

Mastodons weighed approximately five tons.

WOMAN

What's your name?

MAN

George.

MASTODON

Its primary food was shrubs and branches.

WOMAN

(Re: the food)

George, can I please, just this once?

He shakes his head no.

MASTODON

The name "mastodon" means "nipple teeth."

She puts the food away.

WOMAN

Okay, okay.

MASTODON

Because its molars have little protrusions that look like nipples.

The woman starts to cry. The guard is very uncomfortable.

MASTODON

The tusks exceed five meters in length and were used to fight.

The woman's crying gets louder. The man points to the sign "Quiet Please."

Suddenly, the two people become their own exhibits. The mastodon's voice no longer sounds like an exhibit narration.

WOMAN

Yesterday my husband left me for his dental hygienist.

MAN

I was laid off from Arcelor Mittal Tubular Products. Steel mill.

WOMAN

I'm not sure how you can strike up a conversation while you're in the chair, showing a mouthful of mercury fillings. But something must have sparked under the glow of the ultrasonic device.

MAN

American steel has gone the way of the dodo.

MASTODON

Dinosaurs are the celebrities of extinction.

MAN

I moved to Boston to live with my son.

MASTODON

Toddlers come waddling in, looking for triceratops, plateosaurus, and even edmontonia.

WOMAN

They say people who floss are three times more likely to stay married.

MASTODON

No one comes in specifically to see the mastodon.

WOMAN

He left so fast he didn't even pack his toothbrush.

MAN

My son recently graduated from Northeastern University with a degree in journalism.

MASTODON

A group of third graders from St. Anne's came to the museum and gawked at me.

MAN

Twenty years ago, I would have said, great! You get to build paragraphs instead of drawn-over-mandrel mechanical tubing.

MASTODON

One of the nuns said I was a trick that God placed on earth to test their faith. The other penguin told the kids they could believe I had evolved, as long as God had ordered it to start.

WOMAN

I know how I am supposed to feel in this situation: full of anger or despair.

MASTODON

The nuns started twirling the rosaries that hung from their belts, casually, then as if they were gonna hurl them like a numchuck.

WOMAN

Some wives would pound him into a carcass.

MASTODON

The guard almost had to break them up.

MAN

Newspapers are down in circulation, people want info for free.

MASTODON

I'm surprised that ten thousand years after my death, I could still cause a stir.

WOMAN

I read about the symptoms of heartache, and it says it feels like you have a piano on your chest.

MAN

He has an entry level at the Herald. Monitoring the police beat.

WOMAN

I keep waiting for it to hit me.

MAN

Writes little blurbs for the "crime watch" local section.

WOMAN

I thought at first I was numb from shock.

MASTODON

The moment before I was speared to death was both terrifying and freeing.

MAN

My son thinks I'm a fossil.

MASTODON

You know you won't have to flee ever again.

WOMAN

I thought I hadn't reached the appropriate stage of grieving.

MAN

You wouldn't believe some of the music he listens to.

WOMAN

Where my ache should be, there is a void.

MAN

One of the bands he likes is a group called Mastodon.

MASTODON

Some of the museum visitors must be descendants of the hunters who slew me.

MAN

New wave heavy metal, apparently.

WOMAN

It was like reading a newspaper headline - you register that something unfortunate has happened, but no one cries reading the world's latest woes.

MAN

If this band is supposed to be new, why name yourself after an extinction?

WOMAN

I want to feel something. To know that my rib cage is not as empty as that beast's.

MASTODON

I'm exposed in front of nearly 300,000 people per year.

MAN

People his age think they're invincible. He stays out late, runs up his credit card.

WOMAN

If I'm not in pain, then the breakup must be my fault.

MAN

That'll catch up to you.

MASTODON

The hunters consumed me, without knowing I was the last.

WOMAN

I must've driven my marriage to the point of extinction.

MAN

How long can I survive one paycheck away?

A roar from the mastodon. The guard and the woman become primal humans hunting the mastodon. The process is raw and angry, as if they are ravenous and this is the last prey they will ever see. The mastodon runs, fights, but is finally killed with a spear. It brays and finally dies.

The two humans dance the dance of extinction, which is sad, and also beautiful, in a strange way. The recorded voice plays as they dance.

RECORDED VOICE

Extinction occurs when the last remaining organism of a species perishes. Alternatively, it may be said to happen when the group's possibility to reproduce has extinguished. Sometimes, species change and evolve to escape extinction. That process is called speciation. But, according to scientific estimates, ninety-nine point nine percent of all species which ever roamed the earth are now extinct.

A dust cloud created by light and sound.

Finally, all three have become extinct.

Then all return to normal again. The guard is where he left off, pointing at the sign, as the woman cries.

MAN

Um... quiet... please? I'm uh, supposed to enforce that. Not that I really care about that rule but... I don't want to get in trouble, so I-

The woman puts her wedding ring on the mastodon, like an offering.

MAN

Please, no touching the exhibits.

She exits. He retrieves the object and notices it is a ring.

MAN

Ma'am?... Ma'am? You left your...

Beat. He puts the ring back on the mastodon and returns to his post.

End of play.

**BELINDA**, elderly woman, never married, a nurse.

**MAJORIE**, her sister, also elderly, in sixties or above. Uses a cane. Also never married. A retired bus and farm truck driver.

SETTING: The front porch of the two sister's shared trailer house. Two rocking chairs, potted plants that clearly need some TLC, a stack of paperbacks by each chair. Light is sunny and bright. Time is now.

~

[ Belinda sits on one of the chairs, checking her heavily made up face in a mirror. She shakes her head, her hair elaborately fixed. Marjorie dozes in the other chair, wearing sweats, a big sweatshirt, a book open and resting on her chest. Her cane is within reach. Belinda tries to be very quiet. She puts the mirror down on the floor of the porch, checks Marjorie, sets her shoulders as if for a very hard duty. ]

**MARJORIE**

Where ya going, Belinda?

[ Marjorie sits up, yawns hugely, the book falling to one side. Belinda sniffs, but makes a show of going through her purse, a giant purple affair that could house a city, the proverbial old lady purse, if you will. ]

That's my purse. We need some eggs. Throw these plants out! Why do you have my going-to-town purse? Where are you going without me?

**BELINDA**

None of your beeswax, you nosy cow. Those plants are fine, perking up, you let them alone.

[ Marjorie makes a grab at the purse but Belinda steps just out of reach. ]

**MARJORIE**

Gimme back my purse! If I have to get up, you are not getting your cup of Lipton tonight.

**BELINDA**

I might not be here tonight...so...so there. And we share this purse. I'm sharing it. So go back to your nap. Maybe I hate Lipton, maybe I've always hated it.

MARJORIE

Where are you going? Hate Lipton? Pig's whiskers you do. You don't have night shifts anymore. Are those bruises on your cheeks?

BELINDA

[ Rubbing at one cheek, a deathgrip on the purse with the other. ]

It's just not blended in yet. I never wear makeup. I'm not very good at it. I'm taking the car. I'm taking the car and might be out all night, all night! So. Don't call the police. I'll be out all night, and, the police do not need to be called.

MARJORIE

You are not taking the car. It needs oil. And tires.

BELINDA

I'm stopping to get tires. It only needs one new tire. You're so negative! And...and I put some oil in this morning, when you were still in bed. I've always put the oil in, ever since we've had that car. I'm going.

[ Marjorie picks up her book from floor, looks through it for her place, then bends the page. ]

Ignore me all you wish. I'm going to do this.

MARJORIE

No, you're not. I'm a year older than you. I'm still the boss here. What exactly are you NOT going to do? Wearing clown makeup.

BELINDA

Marjorie. You can't tell me what to do anymore. I'm...an old woman now. You're my sister, not...not my mother. I've decided to have a one night stand, if you absolutely must know.

[ Silence. Marjorie gropes for her cane, and then gets to her feet. Belinda backs off. But still rather defiant. ]

MARJORIE

But. You've hated men since Jack Klingerholfer broke your heart when you were sixteen.

BELINDA

Well, better late than never. I'm going to a bar and...picking someone up.

MARJORIE

What is this, mating season for flying monkeys??

BELINDA

I have no idea what that even means, but I am not a monkey. I have my best nightie and that perfume I got at the Dollar Store. I am ready for love!

[ Gets behind chair as Marjorie advances. ]

MARJORIE

Belinda, have you gone plumb stone crazy? They cut down on your hours at the hospital, so what. Learn to knit. Good women don't go to bars, or go home with some stranger.

[ Stops, begins to smile. Goes back to chair and sits carefully. ]

Cause we're old witches, we should have flying monkeys. You're plumb stone crazy.

BELINDA

I'm not crazy. I am headed out to...follow my heart.

[ Belinda sits in the other chair, purse on her lap. ]

And it's not a man...I'm not looking for a man. I meant that. Never again for men.

MARJORIE

Then what are you blathering about? Maybe you just need some sleep.

BELINDA

I'm...queer.

[ Marjorie coughs, chokes, bangs her cane on the floor as she tries to get her powers of speech back. ]

I must be. I've hated men since I was sixteen. I live with my sister. I like women. Are you okay? Do you need some water?

MARJORIE

I just swallowed wrong is all. What's got you so stirred up? Did you take my heart pills again?

BELINDA

I have never taken your heart pills, that was a dream you had.

MARJORIE

You took them, you hid them and then ate them like candies.

BELINDA

I am a nurse. I know better than to take your blood thinners like candies. You're starting to think what you dream actually happens.

MARJORIE

I'm starting to think you think I'm crazy. I know you're up nights sneaking around the house.

BELINDA

Of course I am. You don't like me drinking milk before bedtime.

MARJORIE

You fart all night. I don't want to smell your farts all night.

BELINDA

It settles my stomach. You know I can't stand the taste of Pepto.

MARJORIE

Who can? You drink it because it works, not for the taste. You don't pour it over ice cubes or...

BELINDA

Fine fine fine! I'm taking this purse and going out. I won't stand here and argue about Pepto. I won't.

MARJORIE

So you can find some queer gal and...and...what would you even do with her?

BELINDA

How do I know? I just know I want to.

MARJORIE

It's sick.

BELINDA

Oh now, things have changed. People have changed. No, they haven't. I drove truck for almost thirty years, I got called names. I would have been perfectly happy cooking pot roasts for any of those guys I drove beets and onions and taters to the sheds for. Any one of em! They looked at me and went, ugly bulldyke queer, cause I cut off my hair that one time, I saw it in a magazine, I thought it looked cute.

BELINDA

Oh. That short hair did not look good on you. I never knew they made fun of you. You were better than most men at driving, so what? You were happy driving.

MARJORIE

I was. I could change my own tires, too. Was I supposed to wait around? Worry I'd break a nail. Goddamn it.

[ Both women smile. ]

It's a rough ole world sometimes.

BELINDA

I was once told, by mother, that it was good I didn't have children.

[ She sits, hugs purse to her stomach. ]

Cause I didn't have patience.

MARJORIE

I think she really wanted grandchildren. She should have had prettier daughters.

BELINDA

Yes, she should have. But. I never thought you were ugly. Or I was. Not everyone is meant to marry and have all that. That's all. And we've had good lives. Fun ones at times. We can eat whatever we want, any time we want. We're not being bossed to death. Well, you're a bit bossy, but that's just you, Marjorie.

MARJORIE

I'm the oldest, I'm supposed to be bossy. Don't take my purse. What's wrong with your little yellow number?

BELINDA

It's not big enough for my good nightie, my slippers and my reading glasses, plus my perfume, toothbrush and...

MARJORIE

Good heavens, why not just take a suitcase?

BELINDA

It would look awful strange to be lugging a suitcase about.

MARJORIE

I didn't mean it. I didn't mean you should go and pack a suitcase for your night out with...with the funny women.

BELINDA

I know. I was making a little joke. I tried fitting everything into my yellow purse.

MARJORIE

Why are you doing this?

BELINDA

I told you, your purse is three times the size of mine.

MARJORIE

You think, in all these years, I didn't want to find some stranger and..and find out what all the fuss's about? But it never happened. It wasn't supposed to.

BELINDA

Well then...come with me.

[ Silence. Marjorie makes a sound like a snort. ]

We can go pick out a new tire and...drive somewhere nice. A nice clean friendly bar. And we could have fingersteaks, you love fingersteaks. With honey! And...and take our chances. Have a little fun. We're old now, nobody cares what we do. We're the only ones who care what we do! Come on, sister. I already put oil in. All you have to do is put on those nice slacks you got and you can borrow my silver necklace.

MARJORIE

I do like that necklace. It was on sale.

[ Belinda touches her hand. ]

Oh now...no. I'm not foolish anymore. And my leg hurts. It's going to rain.

BELINDA

My knees say it is, too. Let's be foolish. It could be nothing much will happen tonight...but what if it could? Umm?

MARJORIE

Because we're not foolish women. We went to work when no one would marry us, like you're supposed to when you're ugly and poor. We toughed it out, lived here in this trailer for, what, almost thirty years now. You're still young, you still think life will turn out wonderful...

BELINDA

I'm a year younger, I'm not twenty anymore, you still think I'm twenty. Life is what it is! I know that. But. I want to...to know a few things before I get slapped in a coffin. What it's like to kiss someone and have them want to kiss you back. I want to eat a mango. I've been too afraid to eat one! I look at them in the store and go, what do you taste like? I dream at night about eating mangoes.

MARJORIE

They're not a real fruit.

BELINDA

Why does it have to be an orange or an apple or a banana to be a real fruit??

MARJORIE

Maybe this is how you act before you have a stroke.

BELINDA

Oh stop. Every time I disagree with you, you tell me I'm sick or fevered or about to have a stroke.

MARJORIE

Your cheeks are all flushed and you're yelling at me, what am I supposed to think? And you're not serious about going out and finding some floozy, maybe that's a joke, too.

BELINDA

I always yell at you. I'm not joking about this.

MARJORIE

Of course you are. You're not going anywhere. You don't have the nerve.

BELINDA

I do. I have just enough nerve.

MARJORIE

No, you don't. Anytime anything goes wrong, you just give up. Look at Jack! One bad time with a boy and you...you gave up until now.

BELINDA

He broke my heart.

MARJORIE

So? You get over it. You never got over it... in fifty years? Has it been that long?

BELINDA

I loved him. I'm not shallow.

MARJORIE

No, you're a scaredy-cat.

BELINDA

I am not. I'm a romantic.

MARJORIE

That's another word for scaredy-cat. You were sixteen. Nothing sticks when you're sixteen, it's not the end of the world, ever, when you're sixteen. You never grew up. Other people...

BELINDA

I grew up. I took up nursing even though I hated it. I worked. I saved my money. What about you? You're not exactly blazing the trails. You've never even been in love. A few men make fun of you and you just...give up. Scaredy-cat!

[ Silence. The two glare at each other. ]

Everything sticks when you're sixteen. Everything gets remembered years later. That's the point. You're supposed to live and love and have adventures so you can remember them years later. Well. I want to have my adventures. I want them. At least one adventure! At least one. And then...and then I'll settle down and drink tea and play canasta with you until I die.

MARJORIE

If you hated nursing so much, why didn't you go back to school?

BELINDA

And do what? Teach?? Oh I hate those horrible monsters, I'd have been arrested. I wanted to be a singer, but I can't sing. I took lessons once, long ago. The lady was very nice, but she told me outright I couldn't sing and it would be a waste of my money. Every dream I've had...has been killed.

MARJORIE

Do you think I wanted to drive trucks and school buses? It was just something I could do until my real life started.

[ Stops, does not look at Belinda. ]

But it never did.

BELINDA

You've had a good life! You always seemed happy.

MARJORIE

I made the best of things. They don't teach that so well nowadays.

BELINDA

They don't teach gumption, either. I have to go out and...see what's out there tonight. Make this your best day ever. I read that phrase in a book yesterday. It...it stayed with me.

MARJORIE

So every day that follows will be terrible or you supposed to do crazy things every day?

BELINDA

I don't know. I just know I want to go out and see what's what.

MARJORIE

Cause of a book. What book?

BELINDA

Just a book.

MARJORIE

You never read. You do puzzles. What book?

BELINDA

I read.

MARJORIE

What book?

BELINDA

A book I found at the Dollar Store. Life Strategies or something like that, okay??

MARJORIE

You read a few pages in this book and...and turned all queer?

BELINDA

I don't think they say queer anymore. I'm not queer. I don't know what I am.

MARJORIE

Belinda. You are giving me a headache. And give me back my purse.

[ Grabs it, Belinda holds on. ]

It's my purse!

BELINDA

You never go anywhere! Let go!

MARJORIE

Mine!

[ Has managed to wrest the purse away from Belinda. Wraps her arms around it. ]

BELINDA

I will hit you with your own cane if you don't give that back. You know I'm not a peaceful sort.

[ Picks up cane. Marjorie makes a face. ]

MARJORIE

Oh. Oh fine.

[ Tosses purse at Belinda, who drops the cane to catch it. ]

Please use my purse when you're out making sure you go to hell.

[ Sits down carefully, snorts. Belinda sighs, makes a face. ]

BELINDA

You're an old crank. You were born an old crank. No wonder the men left you alone.

MARJORIE

Best be careful. This trailer is in my name, missy.

BELINDA

I'm your sister. You'd make me leave?

MARJORIE

I'm a very evil old witch, try me.

BELINDA

If I stay here...I won't ever change. Nothing will ever change.

[ They look at each other, look away. ]

MARJORIE

You do whatever the hell you want.

BELINDA

Marjorie.

MARJORIE

You're the only friend I got.

[ Belinda walks to her, after retrieving the cane. Marjorie takes the cane when Belinda hands it to her. ]

BELINDA

Come with me. Borrow my silver necklace.

MARJORIE

I have to do the dishes.

BELINDA

[ Kisses the top of her sister's head. ]

Thank you for letting me use your purse.

MARJORIE

You'd have beat me with my own cane if I hadn't.

[ Belinda laughs, walks off as the lights dim to black. End of play. ]

The room is dimly lit. Most of the light comes from two spots on the actors. At downstage left, CELIA and LYMAN sit across from each other at a small table set for three. At each place setting an oversized menu. At upstage right, a DARK-HAIRED MAN stands casually, his back against a thick wood pillar. He holds a large, silver-toned serving platter under one arm and scans the room continuously, his eyes stopping frequently, anxiously, at Lyman and Celia's table.

CELIA

I long for the days when I ate fat black grapes and spat out the seeds wherever I wanted. Never had to worry where they fell, whether or not they took root, when the next bunch would come.

LYMAN

'Spat'?

CELIA

Why am I doomed to carry the bulk of the world's hunger in my belly?

LYMAN

'Bulk'?

(CELIA picks up her menu; scans it perfunctorily.)

CELIA

There's nothing on this menu.

(beat)

There's never anything to eat anymore.

(beat)

Let's go someplace else.

LYMAN

We're getting a free meal here.

CELIA

Free? Is that all you care about? That it's free? We're getting a big free nothing so far.

(looks around)

And we're practically the only ones here. Just one inattentive waiter and us.

LYMAN

Hunger isn't free. It makes you pay.

CELIA

You just said it was free.

LYMAN

'Free' is relative--in the appetite of the consumer--in a manner of speaking.

CELIA

Free or not free, related or not, manners or not, I'm hungry. I want to eat. I came here to eat. Isn't that why we came here? To eat? Why else come here?

LYMAN

How much do you have to offer to relieve your hunger? They take cash, plastic, barter. Whatever you've got. And the hungrier you are, the more they'll take.

(His comments stop her short rant. She looks at him for a moment, probing.)

CELIA

So ... we're not going anyplace else, then? We're eating here.

(SHE scans the room, peers into the dark spaces.)

CELIA

(disappointed, but resigned)

Here.

LYMAN.

This is the place--the right place for people with appetites like yours.

(CELIA looks around again.)

CELIA

And yours?

(HE seems about to answer but instead just shrugs. SHE peers into the dark corners.)

CELIA

(slightly sarcastically)

Not much on ambiance.

(beat)

Oh, I'm so hungry.

(looks around for a waiter)

Can we get some service?

LYMAN

It's self-service. You order from the menu, signal your order number, then go pick it up at the counter when they call your number.

CELIA

Food by numbers. It's probably disgusting food, too. Well, if it's self-serve, then what's he for?

(indicating the Dark-Haired Man)

LYMAN

He's waiting.

CELIA

He is a waiter, then? Not some performance artist?

LYMAN

In a way.

CELIA

He's a waiter. Call him over so we can order.

(sarcastically)

By the numbers.

LYMAN

He's not that kind of waiter. He's waiting.

CELIA

Well, what's he waiting for, then? I mean, he's scoping out the room, holding a serving tray and all, like waiters do.

LYMAN

That's his plate. He's waiting for scraps and leftovers.

CELIA

Leftovers? Why? The food's free here. You just said so.

LYMAN

For us. Not for him.

CELIA

He's waiting to eat scraps? Like some dog? That's disgusting. So what does he do? Gobble it off customer's plates?

LYMAN

He serves himself. But he has to beg for it first. He's not allowed to eat indiscriminately.

CELIA

(sneaks a glance at the Dark-Haired Man)

That's good. He looks kind of scruffy. I'm not sure I want him anywhere near my food.

LYMAN

What's the difference between the food you eat and the food you leave on your plate?

CELIA

Is he homeless? Oh, God, he's homeless. They let a homeless person in here to beg customers for their leftovers!? That's--that's filthy. Probably violates some kind of health law. Someone should report them. God, it's almost enough to kill my hunger.

LYMAN

I hope not.

CELIA

Are you sure we can't eat someplace else?

LYMAN

It's too late to go anyplace else. This is the only place open that still has food.

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN shifts his weight from one foot to the other and in the process loose his grip on the platter. It drops with a loud clatter and startles CELIA.)

CELIA

My God! What is his problem? I'm going to go over there and tell him to leave.

(She starts to rise but LYMAN grabs her by the wrist before she manages to stand.)

LYMAN  
You can't.

(She plops back into her seat as the DARK-HAIRED MAN reaches down to pick up the platter.)

LYMAN  
He can't leave.

CELIA  
That's stupid. Why can't he leave? They should actually throw him out. He's bothering the customers.

LYMAN  
All he did was shift his weight from one foot to the other. Otherwise, he hasn't moved. The platter dropped by accident. A twist of fate, you might say.

CELIA  
Well, he bothers me. Now I won't be able to eat when our food arrives. I'll gag on it thinking about him eating my leftovers.  
(beat)

And what do you mean he can't leave?

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN squirms, bends and contorts his body to pick up the platter, but he's tethered to the wall and can't manage to reach it. He grows frantic--whimpers softly as he thrashes about in frustration, unable to reach his tray. His frustration turns to anger, then rage. He kicks hard at the platter. It skids across the room and crashes into Celia's chair. The DARK-HAIRED MAN howls. CELIA jumps up from her seat and turns to face him.)

CELIA  
Stop that!

(SHE stomps to stand in front of him, just out of arm's reach.)

CELIA  
Stop that noise this instant!

(At the table LYMAN raises five fingers on one hand, and three on the other. The DARK-HAIRED MAN continues to howl.)

CELIA

I said shut up! All that howling's not going to get you a thing! Not food, not water, not friends!

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN's howls ratchet down to whimpers. He starts to cry.)

CELIA

That's better. But you've got to stop crying, too. It's so unattractive--and bothersome--especially when people are trying to have a nice meal in peace and comfort.

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN continues to cry softly, as if he'll never stop.)

CELIA

You don't listen, do you? Why don't you listen?

(Still crying, the DARK-HAIRED MAN reaches his arms out to her. She jumps back.)

DARK-HAIRED MAN

My plate. My plate.

CELIA

Your plate?

(SHE looks back at the platter next to her seat.)

CELIA

You want your plate?

(HE nods.)

CELIA

Well, I'll get it for you but you're going to have to stop crying. Otherwise there won't be any leftovers for you. We'll take home doggie bags and give them to the dogs. That's what they're for. Right?

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN growls.)

CELIA

What was that? What a horrible noise. What does it mean? Are you disrespecting me? Is that what that repulsive noise in your throat is?

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN growls again, louder.)

CELIA

Again? After what I just offered you? You throw it back in my face?

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN howls.)

CELIA

All right. Have it your way.

(SHE walks back to where the platter lies and stomps on it-- over and over, as the DARK-HAIRED MAN's howls intensify. Using her hands and feet SHE twists and bends it until it's no more than a scrap of useless metal. Then SHE flings it offstage left, out of sight. The DARK-HAIRED MAN lets out an anguished cry, then slumps against the pillar, defeated.)

CELIA

So there.

(A VOICE calls out.)

VOICE

Number Three. Number Five.

(LYMAN rises from his chair and crosses upstage. CELIA sits in her seat. She picks up her menu, smirks at it, then tosses it away. It slides upstage out of sight. LYMAN returns with two covered plates of food on a large silver-toned tray and sets it on the table.)

CELIA

Oh, good. Food at last. I certainly worked up an appetite. But at least we can eat in peace. You know, sometimes a body just has to stand up.

(SHE reaches for one of the plates.)

LYMAN

That's not for you.

CELIA

Oh.

(SHE reaches for the other plate.)

LYMAN

That's not for you either.

CELIA

You didn't order for me? They're both yours?

LYMAN

I ordered them.

CELIA

What about me?

LYMAN

You need to make your choices and place your order.

CELIA

I already threw away the menu.

(SHE grabs the third menu and reads it.)

CELIA

It's blank. There's nothing on it. Let me use yours.

(SHE grabs LYMAN's menu.)

CELIA

It's blank, too. How did you order from a blank menu?

LYMAN

They're customer-specific and single-use. It's what this place is known for. Besides, I come here often. I already know every item that's on the menu.

CELIA

Well, how am I supposed to eat if I can't see the choices to order?

LYMAN

Guess you're not.

CELIA

Not what? Not supposed to eat or not supposed to order?

(LYMAN shrugs.)

CELIA

You could share yours with me. I don't care what you ordered. I'm so hungry I could eat a yak.

LYMAN

No, I can't. There are consequences.

CELIA

Oh really? Consequences ... Such as?

(LYMAN glances for a long moment at the Dark-Haired Man, who's still slumped, dejected, against the pillar.)

LYMAN

You know, you weren't very nice to him.

CELIA

I can't stand crying. Or begging.

LYMAN

You could have given him his plate back. But instead you destroyed it. Why?

(CELIA squirms and shifts her position on her chair. She looks down at the tray of food on the table and touches the cover of one, then the other.)

CELIA

(surprised)

They're cold.

LYMAN

I know.

(beat)

Answer the question. Why did you destroy his plate?

(SHE stares at him, trying to decide something. HE returns her stare, silently demands an answer. She opens her mouth to speak but stops. Starts again.)

CELIA

(forcefully, her voice rising)

Because I didn't want him to eat my leftovers. Because he'd make me leave enough on the plate for leftovers. Because I wouldn't be able to eat everything on my plate because I knew he'd be waiting for leftovers! I'd leave as hungry as I came--even though I ate. All because I couldn't have everything I ordered!

(SHE pauses for a moment and looks speculatively at Lyman. Then realization dawns.)

CELIA

And you knew it! You picked this place on purpose knowing I wouldn't be able to eat my fill!

Knowing he--

(indicating the Dark-Haired Man with her head)

would be here, waiting with his stupid platter! A platter, for god's sake! Not a simple, regular plate!

(SHE screams.)

CELIA

I'm so hungry! Why can't I eat!? What is it with you? You bring me to this place to eat then keep finding ways to keep me from eating! You bring food you say isn't for me and I can't have! Why?!

(SHE stops ranting suddenly and looks intently at Lyman.)

CELIA

Why?

(LYMAN takes the covers off the plates of food. The food is wrapped burrito-style in butcher paper.)

LYMAN

Take one. Number Three or Five. It doesn't matter.

(CELIA hesitates, unsure.)

LYMAN

Go ahead. Help yourself.

(CELIA reaches for the one closest to her. Gingerly, she unwraps it. She's puzzled by what she sees and opens the paper fully, spreading it flat. The food is gorgeous-- colorfully, artfully

arranged plastic. She stares at the display for a long moment. Behind her, the DARK-HAIRED MAN moans softly and moves as if to stand up.)

CELIA

(rising from her chair; to Lyman)

You bastard!

LYMAN

It was my chance. My first, last and only chance. I only had three, you see.

CELIA

(pacing back and forth)

You used me? For some mysterious, perverted quest of yours?

(beat)

All I wanted was to eat! Everybody eats! It's basic--human survival. Why did you need to go through all this--this--? What's the point? What were you after? What do you get in return? You're clearly not hungry. You don't seem to need to eat.

(SHE stops pacing.)

CELIA

And just what is this mysterious last chance of yours? Why is it so important that you had to put me through all this?

LYMAN

I thought it would work. I had faith in you--your voracious hunger. You'll do just about anything to ease your hunger. Feed mine in the process. Release him--

(indicating the Dark-Haired Man)

from his.

(CELIA struggles to understand and respond. She opens and closes her mouth, tries to get words out, but she can't seem to figure out what to say. She pushes.)

CELIA

Feed yours in the process ...? what the hell does that mean?

(LYMAN hesitates.)

CELIA

Are you going to tell me what's going really on? Or should I leave now--and forever? Take this starving body and march it decisively out the door. Never again to have even the slightest contact with you. Or even care.

LYMAN

You still haven't figured it out, have you?

CELIA

(annoyed)

Would I be asking if I had?

(LYMAN rewraps the plastic food in the butcher paper and places both bundles in his pocket. He stands.)

LYMAN

You are my food--or rather, your ravenous hunger is what feeds me--what you do in its name. It consumes so completely. It's so intoxicating--voracious, never satiated. And it feeds me completely—fills me--so I don't have to be hungry.

(LYMAN stares for a long moment at the DARK-HAIRED MAN.)

LYMAN

So I don't have to bleed. Or cry. It's that I can't stand to be hungry. I can't stand to be in such want. That's all.

(CELIA falls back into her chair, stunned, seeming not to understand. The DARK-HAIRED MAN mumbles something unintelligible. LYMAN walks stage right, stops and turns back to Celia.)

LYMAN

By the way, about your leaving, now or ever. This place is open for starving customers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, always. But it'll be a while yet for you. You haven't eaten yet.

(HE exits. CELIA sits for a long moment, confused, still trying to understand. She gets up and crosses to stand before the Dark-Haired Man. HE rises to a fully standing position, straightens his clothes, looks uncertainly at her. She glances at him but doesn't seem to see him, then looks around the place as if searching for something she lost but can't quite remember what it is.)

CELIA

(to no one in particular) We could have been friends.

VOICE

Number Seven. Number Nine.

(The DARK-HAIRED MAN perks up. Looks around, searching. LIGHTS DIM, leaving only a low-level spot on the platter on the table. BLACKOUT.)

END OF PLAY

# NON-FICTION



*Bubblewrap, 15in x 11in Oil on Paper 2015 by Rachel Longstreet*

I understood—instinctively, if not denotatively—the word ethereal before I stumbled across its definition during junior-year SAT prep. Ethereal: extremely delicate and light in a way that seems too perfect for this world. Ethereal: it’s the silver ribbon of sound that threads the air when Elise reads her lines for Pandora’s Box; the twist of Lauren’s hair in its ballerina bun; the cowlick in Meghan’s hair, the one that sets off her heart-shaped face like a shower of sparks. Ethereal is the China-doll skin of Emily’s neck when she bends over her algebra homework and the thrill of my sister’s Clinique Happy perfume. You call a girl ethereal when her eyelashes dust her brows, the way Julie’s do, or when a glance at Ella’s limbs makes you think of willow trees.

All my girlhood, I wanted to be ethereal. I wanted that watermark—that one perfect freckle, that dainty wrist-flick, that *je ne sais quoi* so many girls wear like pearls—as much as I wanted to be loved by the girls who had it. I thought of Carrie Ann’s cerulean eyes and Raquel’s electrifying laugh and wanted to cup that beauty in my palms like a lightning bug. Long before I knew I loved girls in a romantic way, I knew I loved them in an important way. The way that I loved the smell of changing leaves, or the crunch of a perfect Honeycrisp, or taking that big breath before blowing out the candles on my birthday cake. The way that I longed to love myself.

One day in second grade, I stumbled across a white hardback book in the nonfiction section of the library. *Witches & Magic-Makers*, the cover hollered in red block-script. Beneath the title stood a robed man with a long white beard, one hand contorted in a wizardly way, the other holding open a spellbook. Beside him were a cauldron, a broomstick, and a black cat. The book, chock-full of incantations and potions, was my custom-made birthday present from the universe. It was my chance to bid adieu to the piddling magic of Sabrina and Harry Potter and enter the clandestine, cobwebby portal to *real* magic.

~

Brimming with anticipation, I dimmed the lights in my bedroom and hunkered down cross-legged on the carpet. After hours of painstaking indecision, I decided that the first potion I’d attempt would be “Aromatic Magic.” The book hailed it as an old favorite for attracting love, and I had a lover lodged firmly in mind. Scott Nichols was the most popular boy in Mrs. Roberts’ class—he beat all the boys in gym class, no matter the game. *And* he had gelled hair that gleamed under the fluorescent classroom lights. Plus, with Scott Nichols as my boyfriend, I’d automatically be the most popular girl in class.

I followed the book’s instructions as well as I could: I gathered sage, rosemary, and thyme (all McCormick’s brand, all pilfered from the kitchen cabinet) and dumped them in a green plastic bucket (after all, I didn’t have a “satchel bag” in which to keep my herbs) and sloshed in a few cups of water (the instructions didn’t call for water, but how, I reasoned, could a potion be *dry*?) and stirred the mixture with my mother’s best wooden ladle. I didn’t have bergamot oil to drop into the potion every seven days, and I couldn’t very well keep the bucket under my pillow or next to my skin, the way the instructions said to, so I just sat it under a pine tree in the backyard and hoped for the best.

Days blurred into weeks as I waited for Scott Nichols to realize his dying love for me. I figured it must be buried way down deep in his heart—it *had* to be, since it was taking him so long to find it. (Sixteen years later, he still hasn't discovered it.) I waited for Scott Nichols all autumn, and all throughout the slush of winter, and then I unclenched my hopes and let them stagger away. When I rediscovered my green bucket the following year, it was brimful with rainwater and speckled with mud. I dumped it out lest the standing water attract mosquitoes.

So *Witches & Magic-Makers* wasn't my key to ethereality—fine. I turned to my imagination for magic, certain that if the ever-so-wise narrator of *Matilda* was to be believed, *we only use a tiny portion of our brains*. If I could break out of that tininess, I knew I could be as powerful—maybe more powerful—than my hero, Matilda. All it'd take was focus.

My best friend, Nadia, became the tortured bystander to my quest to ethereality. First, I told Nadia that I had the rare and marvelous ability to see invisible people. In *fact*, certain people could actually *choose* to become invisible, and they liked to hang out with me. Aaron Carter was one such person. After a few days of meeting Aaron on the playground during recess, I confessed to Nadia that he'd asked me to be his girlfriend.

"There he is," I'd whisper, pressing my palm against the window of our second-floor classroom. "Don't you see him? On the jungle gym? He's waiting for me."

Nadia, bless her soul, always kept a straight face when she said that, no, she couldn't see Aaron, but *boy* did she wish she could. And I would sigh and smile—with only a modicum of smugness—and tell her that if she focused, she could develop my special powers, too. It's a testament to our BFF-ship that we kept up the Alaina's-seeing-invisible-boyfriends ruse for months.

Eventually, though, Aaron and his antics grew stale. When winter suffocated our town, leaving the playground patched in frost and mud and the sky the color of stainless steel, I knew Nadia and I needed an extra dose of magic in our lives. So, one recess, I led Nadia under the big oak tree in the corner of the schoolyard and told her I had a secret.

"This tree," I said solemnly, placing one ungloved hand on the cold trunk, "is the Tree of Life. It's the portal to another world."

How Nadia didn't roll her eyes, I'll never know.

"Place your hand on it like this," I said, nodding at her, my eyes wide. I waited until she complied. "All right, now, close your eyes."

When we opened our eyes, we were in an alternate universe. Yes, everything *looked* the same, but it wasn't: the skies were grayer, the air was more billowy, and we were witches. We could control the weather and cast spells that our classmates couldn't see and wage wars against invisible monsters. We adventured over the barren, windy hills, pretending to be battered by storms no one else could sense, and we cast away demons that swooped down from the clouds and banished rival witches who lurked in the woods. We tried to topple power lines via telekinesis so our school would get an early dismissal. We avoided ice because it was infested with Blizzaks (which were, incidentally, the name of my dad's snow tires, but Nadia didn't need to know that)—shape-shifting black demons that would rise out of the ice and devour us.

But eventually being witches got boring. Spring came and suddenly the playground didn't seem the least bit eerie or enchanted. The grass was thickening and the birds were returning and everything looked depressingly suburban, depressingly normal.

And then I happened upon the book *Ella Enchanted*, and my sense of magic was renewed. I hurried to find Nadia.

"Nads," I squealed, "I have a secret! But you *can't* tell anyone."

Nadia, now older and wiser, raised her eyebrows.

"I'm cursed." I waited for this confession to trigger an avalanche of emotion on Nadia's part. After a few moments of her non-reaction, I forged ahead. "I have to obey any command anyone gives me. Like, if someone told me to do a...a *backflip*, I'd have to do it."

Nadia's mouth hardened into a flat line. "Then do a backflip," she said in a monotone.

My heart stalled.

"What?" I blinked at my best friend. "Here? You're really gonna make me do that here?"

Nadia nodded. "Yup. Right here. Do it now."

I dropped my eyes to my laminated desk. I didn't do the backflip, and I never brought up my "curse" ever again.

But my nagging need to be ethereal, like a stomachache that wouldn't go away, sat with me through all of my schooling years. My vision of ethereal changed from wielding magical powers to simply having clear skin and fitting into a size four at American Eagle. Ethereal meant observing and obeying the social order. It meant watching the track team's sprinters shoot around the track like the arm of a human Ferris wheel and admiring the girls' chiseled stomachs and metallic bras and taking notes on how to be more *them* and less *me*.

I realized I would never be as enchanted with myself as I was with the girls around me, and for the first time in my life I felt truly cursed. Why did *I* have to be a laundry list of flaws and shortcomings? And why was I so blah, so *me*, when every other girl got to be silhouetted with starshine, dappled with charisma, candied with the scent of September?

I brooded through the beginning of my college years, hawk-eyeing other girls' bodies—always better than mine, scrutinizing their personalities—always more bubbly than mine, and festering in self-pity. My therapist attributed my fascination with other girls to low self-esteem, and I figured that since she had three diplomas, she must be right. So I kept pining after the girls around me, now not only adoring their bodies and minds and hearts but also their well-developed *self-esteem*, and I resigned myself to a life of miserable adoration.

And then, fast as casting a spell, I was stolen from my sorry world and dropped into what felt like an alternate universe. The magical ending came when I was sitting at a laminated desk, eyes down, trying not to look as inferior as I felt—a girl walked in and showed me a magic I couldn't ignore. I looked at her and I thought: *oh*. She answered questions I hadn't realized I'd posed.

What separated this girl from Elise and Lauren and Meghan and Emily and Julie and every other girl who'd ever sent shockwaves through my soul? Nothing. Everything. She wasn't as pretty as Emily or as lithe as Lauren or as sweet as Meghan. To be honest, she wasn't pretty or lithe or sweet at all, and yet one glance at her confirmed that my life was rewriting itself.

You see, this girl was openly queer.

Just by existing she showed me how to locate my own ethereality. She didn't come from ivory-sidewalked suburbs where the biggest scandal around involved which families had skipped Easter service or whose parents were considering divorce. She didn't shop at Hollister or Abercrombie in meek deference to her better-liked peers. She had short hair and look-at-me biceps and a smile that made my insides feel like a bottle of champagne just uncorked. Truthfully, I knew nothing concrete about this girl, didn't know if she'd break my heart or remake it, but I wanted to find out. I wanted her magic, but mostly I wanted her. And I dared to wonder if she might want me back.

If there is anything ethereal about me, it's my queerness, it's my ability to see a brown-haired girl and suddenly understand the definition of *sacred*, it's the way I can read a map of the stars in my girlfriend's fingerprints. I will never be as enchanted with myself as I am with the girls around me, but I will always be enchanted by the way my girlfriend's lips undo me and remake me in the same kiss. And maybe I'll never master telekinesis or harness the wind or concoct a potion, and maybe that's okay. Maybe those aren't the brands of magic I was missing, or was wanting, at all.

On average, the adult human skeleton is composed of 206 bones weighing 30-40 % of the body's total weight. Water accounts for half that figure. Desiccated, then, the skeleton weighs 15-20% of a body's original weight at death. So if my father weighed 170 pounds when he died nineteen years ago, his skeleton—marrow dried, flesh gone—weighed between 25.5 and 34 pounds when my sister dug him up this past July. I wasn't there to see how the blue pine coffin had collapsed on him. I didn't watch the forensic anthropologists (two couples from the University of Montana and two graduate students) search for his bones in the dark earth. I didn't see how they dusted each find with a fine horsehair brush. I didn't see them hold each one to the light or hear them identify the flat bones that shielded his brain, heart, lungs. *Skull, sternum, ribs*. I didn't hear them identify the long bones that tethered muscle, skin, and held his weight for 71 years, just one longer than he believed Psalm 90:10 promised. *Humerus, ulna, femur*. I missed how, finally, they sifted the complex bones from their bed. *Vertebrae. Sacrum*.

It was after 10 p.m. when they finished counting and cataloguing their finds. Midnight, by the time my sister Bobbie drove the ninety miles to Missoula, a cardboard box of bones strapped into the back seat of her Honda Civic. She took them to the crematorium the next day.

\*

Three weeks later, she calls to tell me.

*It took ten hours for them to find all his bones.*

*I can't believe you dug him up without telling me, Barb.* My sister changed her name to Bobbie several years ago. We both know I revert to Barb as an insult.

*Why would I want to tell you?* Her tight tone confirms the sting. *You wouldn't have wanted to be here.*

\*

My father died Father's Day, 1996. Or the day before. Another twenty-year argument between my sister and I. She insists he died on Saturday, the day before Father's Day. I say he died on Father's Day. I prefer the symmetry of it, the way it carries the hint of a cosmic wink. Plus, I'm a lawyer. I tend to defer to written proof.

*Look at the funeral program. It says, Passed Away, June 16, 1996. Father's Day.*

Every lawyer knows how unreliable eye-witness testimony is. Still, her account casts doubt on mine. *I was there, remember? I'm the one who watched him die.*

He was working on a new house the weekend he died. It would have been his fourth in twenty years. The baby of the family, I was the only one still living at home when he built the first one. We'd been living in a trailer on twenty acres of scrub, and while he'd talked about building Mom a house someday at the far end of the property-line where the Smith River pooled algae-green in spring, it seemed little more than a fantasy to keep him going. He was fifty-one. I was three months away from turning eighteen. As far as I knew, he'd never built anything other than a screened porch once,

but there he was, standing in the charred rubble of our burnt-out trailer, saying, Guess I'll go ahead and build that house now.

A man with no education, no money, nothing to make you believe he had any rational basis for thinking he could build a house. But he did. No architect. No drafting table or blue prints. Just some men from church and a six-sided carpenter's pencil he'd sharpen with his pocketknife while staring into middle-space, calculating next steps on slabs of sheetrock. There were mistakes. He didn't treat the wood properly. For as long as we lived there, red and black box elder bugs crawled out of the logs oozing red juice on every flat surface, flying at us, clinging to our clothes and hair. There were injuries, too. One of his friends lost a thumb in the power saw and Dad couldn't find it in the corner where it had flown, not thinking to sift through the piles of sawdust lining the wall until it was too late to reattach the shriveled stub.

I spent the day before my father died dragging my husband and five-year-old daughter through a drizzly day of open houses I'd seen listed in the Atlanta Journal Constitution that morning. We weren't in the market. I'd just started a new job, my first at a silk-stockings law firm. While I hadn't yet exposed myself as wholly unsuited for the position by nature and nurture both, I was beginning to sense that nub of truth, beginning to suspect I wouldn't be around long enough to jump into the senior associate ranks. Or earn their salaries. Still, I felt compelled to spend the whole afternoon opening the doors of strangers I'd never meet, traipsing through places I'd never belong until the realtors waded into the rain to retrieve the last limp balloons from their *Welcome!* signs.

When we got home, the phone was ringing. My sister, calling with a message I didn't want to hear.

*Dad. Hospital. Unresponsive.*

The only time I'd ever prayed harder was four years earlier, February, 1992. I'd taken my nine-month-old daughter Rachel on her first visit to see my parents in Montana. Dad had finished the house in Plains the previous year, his third since that first one thirteen years earlier. Tongue-in-groove floors, refurbished brick fireplace. He'd built a barn out of weathered wood, a dozen sheep grazed on snow-covered thistles while two furry burros stood guard. They had peacocks, chickens, everything he'd wanted. Bobbie still lived two states away.

A few days before the end of our stay, Dad invited their pastor over for lunch. He was right out of my childhood—an unctuous man courting tithers like my parents. Dad was at the island fixing sandwiches. *Baby? Would you make us a pot of coffee?* He stood behind me chatting with his pastor while I filled the Mr. Coffee pot with water.

The air went out of the room.

I turned to see my father clutching his chest. His face, grey. *What? Dad? What?*

He said *I kicked the baby on the hand or head.* I am still shamed, twenty-four years later, by how I turned to him instead of Rachel—how I didn't even notice her at his feet, flat out, arms wide, her breath held that long moment until I knelt and she screamed louder than I'd ever heard her scream. He had on his cowboy boots, the ones I bought him just out of law school. I saw a quarter-sized dent in the side of her head, the precise imprint of his boot's toe. Its depth drained my blood,

because your blood really does drain when you believe you're losing the only one you've ever fully loved.

I picked her up. Stood, dazed. He told me he'd thought she was one of the dogs nuzzling his feet, he hadn't looked, and anyway, said Mom, I was her mother, why wasn't I paying attention? They blamed me. As if I needed help with that. I said *let's go, we have to get her to the hospital.*

Dad's pastor stood. *Wait, let's just pray for her,* he said.

I had enough of my wits about me to know that if I said, no you fucking asshole, I need to get her to the hospital, it wouldn't make things go any better. Dad could get stubborn. It was embarrassing enough for him to have his pastor see what little faith I had, for him to hear me say, *Dad, you can pray on the way to the hospital.* He drove me to the Plains hospital where the ER doctor, even more incompetent than I'd feared, chuckled, *that's just a goose egg.* It cost me another chunk of my tongue when I didn't tell him he was fucking asshole too, and instead said to Dad, *I think he's wrong. I need you to take us to Missoula.* We sped the 90 miles to Missoula, where the ER doctors were marginally more competent.

It's true, as Carson McCullers observed, that the most loved one holds the power in any relationship. As between us, my father held the power. Until that drive, when it shifted forever to the one I held in my arms.

Yes, it was dent. It looked bad. She'd need a CAT scan, twenty-four hours of observation. The next day the doctors said she'd *dodged a bullet.* Despite how bad it looked, the dent hadn't been deep enough to intrude into the brain-sac. No bleeding on the brain. No concussion. It would have been a different story if her skull hadn't still been pliable. *All good,* they said. But even they could see it wasn't. For me. One of the nurses pulled me aside. *It was just an accident, honey. You've got to forgive your Dad.*

I couldn't. Her injury conjured a past I'd pretended to forget: the casual violence and negligent nurture of my own early years.

\*

The anthropologists were friends of friends of Bobbie's. I can't say I would have been able to make the trip to Montana, even if I'd known. Seen most magnanimously, my sister's decision not to tell me in advance came from a protective prompt. But she'd lost that instinct decades ago. And now I can't help seeing it from another angle, seeing it as a grudge. She seemed to believe that as the baby, I'd found a way to wedge myself into our father's mercurial heart. I believed a more difficult truth. I believed our father's love proportionate to our professed adherence to his faith.

And yet. I remember: I am six. Flu sweeps over me, and I cannot get to the toilet fast enough. Clots of vomit in my hair, diarrhea on my legs. Dad cradles me, cleans me with a warm washcloth, changes my sheets while I'm still in his arm. He spoons ice chips into my mouth and smooths my sweaty head until I sleep.

Or, I am five. He comes home from traveling all week selling farm equipment up and down the Coachella Valley. I run to the door to meet him, put my bare feet on top of his polished wingtips, and we spin across the celery colored carpet while he whistles "Waltzing Matilda."

Or, I am four. We are at the San Diego zoo, a splurge, I know, even at that age. When he places me on the back of Speedy the tortoise, I clutch the smooth hardness and intricate geometry of its shell. It leaves a pink imprint I still see.

I don't know whether Bobbie got what she was looking for when she moved back in with our parents. From my angle, all I could see was my 40-year old sister immersing herself again in their faith, the only way we knew to stake a claim with him. As a testament of faith, she opened a Christian bookstore in Plains, a town of 300 souls in a county so rural it didn't have a single streetlight. When I said the idea seemed crazy, Dad's eyes narrowed. He believed it was God's will, was certain she'd be blessed for *rededicating her life to the Lord*. Something I ought to think about.

The fissure between my father and I grew when he called to tell me he wanted to build a house for Bobbie on the property, wanted me to give her 80 acres.

*Your sister needs a home. She's promised to live there with your Mom if I go first.*

I had a three-year-old and was still in debt nearly seventy-thousand dollars in student loans. They'd lost their home in a shady deal while I was in law school, and I'd offered to buy them 300 acres Dad found in Plains, a place he could build on, he said, one last best place. I'd been paying for the property with plastic, digging my own family deeper into debt so I wouldn't have to retract an offer I'd come to regret. But in Dad's book, fair meant providing for the daughter *walking with the Lord*.

Later, I learned that he'd starting seeing visions the year he turned 70. He didn't say anything about them to me, though. Instead, he said, *My three-score and ten years are up this year*. I ignored the message. Or didn't recognize it. Or maybe I'd forgotten how literally he relied on every written word in the Bible, the one he'd carried with him for decades, its brown leather cover worn smooth, the pages of its onion-skin paper thinned nearly transparent in places. All I could see was how easily he broke faith with me for the promise of a future I didn't believe. Focused on the wound, I ignored the worry. For the first and last time in my life, I said *no* to my father.

As the baby, I'd been spared most of his wrath. But I was grateful for the continent between us when his voice turned mean. He told me he'd just sell the place. If that's how I was going to be about it, he didn't want to live there anyway. Okay, I said, sell it. We were hurting each other as much as ourselves, but we didn't know there wouldn't be time to repair the damage before he'd die. Eighteen months later.

\*

*Was his skeleton intact?*

*What do you mean?*

*Was it like you'd see in a movie or science class?*

*The lid of the coffin had caved in, Sis, get it? No, it wasn't intact.*

That last statement makes me cry, softens Bobbie a little. She says all that was left of him was bones, boots and his belt buckle. She had them toss the boots into *the oven* with him, but the buckle got lost somewhere between Paradise and the crematorium. I don't believe her, but I understand the lie. I would have kept the buckle, too.

He died building the new house, the one he'd designed with an attached apartment for my sister to live in *forever*.

\*

*It's just the machine breathing.*

*Please don't unplug him until I get there. Just wait for me.*

I called Bobbie the next morning to check on Dad and give her our schedule. I'd missed a late night plane, squandering time with my brain fused, unable to manage the simplest tasks—the bank I'd used for two years disappeared for hours, the clothes in my closet blurred together, Rachel and David hovered at the door, unsure of the woman with the glazed eyes, blotchy face. The most direct flight would take us through Salt Lake City the next morning.

*I can be there in eight, nine hours. Wait, please.*

They didn't. While the rest of the family saw him still breathing, warm, the look of sleep instead of death on his face, my last sight of him was his rubbery embalmed body. They'd dressed him in Levi's, his pink-and-blue plaid dress shirt with the pearl snap buttons, the cowboy boots I'd given him the year I graduated from law school, soles worn through.

My parents believed in a literal resurrection of the body, a belief that proved a barrier to cremation as early as 6000 B.C., when the Egyptians began preserving their royals through embalming and mummification, conserving the body for the soul after its return from a 3,000-year journey, *the circle of necessity*. If, after the soul's journey, the intact body awaited, the two reunited and lived as one with the gods.

Even with decades of distance between my parents' beliefs and my late middle-age, when I start to consider my own death, I research *burial + green + not cremation*. I may not believe in the body's literal resurrection or the soul's reunification with the body. I may believe even less in the lake of fire my parents feared. Still, something in me recoils at the thought of my mortal husk turned to ashes in a crematorium's fires.

I don't know if the hope of resurrection prompted my mother's decision to bury my father on the small hill, barely ten yards from her back door. Maybe it wasn't even her decision. His unexpected death left her catatonic. She'd never spent a single night alone. Had never written a check. Had no idea how much, or little, they had in the bank. I can see her sitting at the kitchen table, with her three oldest children hovering nearby, staring out the window at the muddied yard with his tools scattered around an empty sawhorse, see her ceding all decisions to her other children. Coffin, funeral, burial site—all decided by my older siblings before I could even manage to get from Atlanta to Paradise, the day after Bobbie called to tell me he was in the hospital.

Part of it had to be money. Turned out they didn't have enough in the bank to pay for the funeral, let alone a plot in a cemetery. The blue pine coffin built by my parents' pastor was a simplicity Dad would have appreciated, but didn't plan. My older siblings must have calculated the costs, convinced my dazed mother how nice it would be to keep her husband close. If she buried him on the hill in her backyard, he'd always be there for her. She could still see him every day. Talk to him. And she would. Over the years, Bobbie said it wasn't unusual for her to walk in on Mom sitting

at the kitchen table talking to Dad. *Oh, honey*, she'd say, going on to tell him about a friend from church, a need for prayer, or how the house was progressing without him there to do the work.

After the funeral, everyone ate fried chicken and potato salad that ladies from the church prepared. People talked about how healthy he'd looked. What a shock his death was. He'd worked all morning on the new house, spent the afternoon helping Bobbie move furniture for a garage sale. No one noticed his breathing go ragged. His face wince. Mom might have noticed, if she'd been there, but she was eight hundred miles away visiting my oldest sister.

When Dad called Bobbie late that afternoon, all he said was, *It's bad baby*. She heard it, then, asked if he needed to go to the hospital. His *maybe so*, sent her into a panic. Dad hadn't been to a doctor since he'd joined the Navy in 1942. She raced to the house, the ambulance two miles behind her. She found him in bed, gospel music on his tape player, his t-shirt wet with sweat. He asked her to put his boots on him. She told me later that was the last thing he said before blood leaked from his nose, mouth, ears. *Even his eyes. It looked like he was crying blood.*

Six men lowered his casket into the ground. We tossed red roses and fists full of dirt on his coffin before staggering inside the husk of a house only my parents could consider habitable. Blue and red electrical wires spilled from the walls, dun-colored sheetrock hung in their bedroom and bath, between the main house and the apartment for Bobbie, his writing on it, figures for floor and ceiling joists written in the thick lead of his carpenter's pencil, messages from a ghost. Outside, a light rain. We stood at the window watching ochre rivulets drizzle down the mound of fresh earth.

\*

The Christmas before Dad died, I was in a Blockbuster Video store with Rachel. She was four, and it had been two years since we'd gone back to Montana. Half a lifetime, for her. She was playing in the aisles while I looked for videos. *Ma'am? Is this your daughter?* An African-American man waved me over. He was about Dad's age, but taller, his smooth face and neat grey Afro nothing like my father's peppery hair and white beard.

*Rachel, what are you doing?* I took her hand. *I'm sorry.*

His eyes were a French roast color, so dark you could barely see the pupils, nothing like Dad's sea green eyes, the kind that changed color with his mood.

*It's not my business, honey, but I'm wondering how long since this baby's seen her grandpa?*

She beamed at him while I said, *It's been a minute*. He smiled back at her, told me maybe it was time for me to take her to see him again. My father was in perfect health. He was building a house. He wasn't going to die anytime soon. But some shadow must have crossed my face, because the man laughed. A big-throated laugh. My father's laugh.

*Don't go looking like that*, he said, *I'm not psychic. She just asked me if I was her grandpa, said she'd been looking for him everywhere.*

Six months later, I picked out a few of Dad's favorite gospel tapes to send for Father's Day: Doyle Lawson, the Bluegrass Cardinals, the Carter Family. Someone had stolen the shoebox of tapes he kept in his van and I knew he'd love getting new ones. I sent the package from my office's

mailroom, deciding against the extra postage even though the clerk told me it wouldn't get to Paradise until after Father's Day. I didn't think it mattered, that wasn't the kind of thing Dad worried about. But as the day wore on, the image of the man in Blockbuster kept appearing. I couldn't get his words out of my head until I went back to the mailroom and paid the extra postage for a quicker delivery. Bobbie told me he got the tapes on Saturday. He was listening to the Bluegrass Cardinals sing *I'll Fly Away* when she got to the house and found him in bed.

In the weeks before he died, my father had two visions. He saw the first one on a stretch of road between Hungry Horse and Polson. It was early light when he stopped to pee at the side of the road, and as he looked across the field he saw Jesus standing there, arms extended. He told Mom the wounds in Christ's hands were *big enough for a grown man to slip into*.

He saw the second vision at church, the Sunday before he died. He was praying, when he looked up and saw a field unfurl in front of him. He watched as bearded wheat sprouted and grew to maturity, watched as wind carried the ripe seed across the field. The stalks shriveled. He stared at the dead stubble until he saw, all over the fallowed field, scattered shoots like tiny green threads undulating out of the ground.

I don't know whether his visions were like William Blake's, appearing *infinitely more perfect and organized than anything ever seen with a mortal eye*. Dad's poetry only went so far as to say they were clearer than anything he'd ever seen *wide awake*.

After a few weeks of grieving, I called the Plains hospital, asked to speak to Dad's treating physician. Without an autopsy, it was impossible for him to say with certainty, but he conjectured a comorbidity: internal carotid occlusion and an aneurism. Heart and brain went at once, he said. *Your Dad had a massive blow out*.

It made me wonder if his visions had been triggered by something as unspectacular as a small stroke or the early stages of dementia. Lewy Bodies are known to goo up the brain, trigger hallucinations. On the other hand, neurologist Oliver Sacks found that ten percent of the population—perfectly healthy, no brain goo, no explanation—have one or more hallucinations in life. One third of those are religious or ecstatic in nature. I didn't want to discount God's hand coloring on his cornea, but I found some comfort in thinking my father's moods and decisions those last few years, the ones that stung me almost as much as his death, left me nearly as bereft, might have had a physiological explanation. It made sense, too, when I thought about my last trip to Montana, two years before he died.

One afternoon, he drove us to Ravalli for Buffalo burgers and homemade Huckleberry pie at his favorite spot off Highway 41. After we ate, he pulled out of the gravel lot and into traffic, misjudging the speed of an oncoming semi. It missed us, but barely. This was a man who'd never had an accident in his life, despite spending the bulk of his adulthood as a traveling salesman, routinely putting fifty, sixty thousand miles on his cars every year. I'd driven with him thirty times or more from Montana to Colorado, believing in the protective bubble that never popped while he sped down I-25 at 110 miles per hour, the hood of his LTD trembling, until we reached the Wyoming border and he'd pull back to 80, 85 the rest of the trip.

For a moment after the big rig blew past we just sat there while he stared out the windshield. Quiet. He looked, although I only see this now, like a man who'd lost something too precious to bear.

\*

Bobbie never lived in the house Dad died building, or the future they'd planned. Within months of his death, she closed the bookstore, remarried, moved to Missoula. She tried to teach Mom how to use the checkbook, how to budget her Social Security, but it frustrated and frightened Mom. A few years ago, Mom told me she'd given Bobbie a power of attorney over the house, that they'd taken out a reverse mortgage to pay some bills, finish the house, travel. I'll never know the details, how much went into my sister's failing business, how much went to the church. By the time I found out about it, they'd rented the house to some people in a last-ditch effort to keep from losing it. It didn't work. When they sold it, the buyers only had one condition: they didn't want Dad's grave on their property.

\*

*I wish I could have kept a bone.*

*Why would you want a bone?*

*Just to have something of him.*

*Which bone would you want?*

*I don't know. Were his bones white?*

*Yeah. But broken up, Sis. Scattered, like I said.*

After we hang up I think about how our family is like that, too. Broken up. Scattered. Although my sister and I let years of mean deposits calcify soft tissue, and occlude familial arteries, the way our voices soften at the end of that conversation, the way we call each other *Sis*, conjures the time we shared a less frayed connection.

Her question, unanswered, echoes long after the line goes dead.

*What bone would you want?*

At first, I think I'd choose a rib, imagine the smooth curvature of the one that most closely cradled his heart. But the coffin had caved in. Most likely, the earth's weight crushed his empty cage of bones to shards. So then I think, a finger. Something small. Intact. I could polish it. Paint it. Slip a silver chain through it. But I tend to lose small things, and I couldn't carry it with me or wear it around my neck. Although I long to save some impervious part of him, I'd fear wearing a bone might carry a whiff of necromancy repellent to my father's spirit. Finally, I settle on his sacrum.

Sacrum. From the Latin *os sacrum*. Literally, sacred bone. The sacrum's Latin etymology derives from the Greek, *hieròn osteon*, holy bone. The Egyptians associated the sacrum with Osiris, the god of the dead and the afterlife; Hebrews and Arabs believed the seed of resurrection resided in the almond-shaped bone at its base; and Mesoamerican Indians considered the sacrum a portal to the spirit world.

It truth, the sacrum isn't actually a single bone. It's five bones fused into sheath, a fusion that turns it into the strongest bone in the body, makes it the hardest to break, the last to disintegrate. To me, it looks like a mask with eight vertical holes, four on each side. If I had that strong bone of his, I'd thread the holes with red silk and hang it on a wall painted pale yellow, a color he loved nearly as

much as rust or turquoise. Over the years, I've collected a small cache of folk art for this wall. Only now do I notice how many times angels appear in this art: a guardian angel painted on particle board; the silhouette of a flying angel cut from plywood, the resurrection trumpet held to her lips; Jacob kneeling in front of the angel he'd wrestled into blessing him, the artist's caption, *A vision from an Angle*, printed below in black Sharpie.

This is where the flat, animal-like face of my father's sacrum would rest. I imagine what it would be like to spend years with that relic hanging there. Tucked among angels. I imagine tracing the fastened seams with my finger, admiring its fractured strength. But mostly I imagine how, years from now, I might see it in a certain angle of light, how it might reveal some translucent shred of his soul shimmering there, poised at the edge of eternity, bearing witness to his obscure faith.

It begins with something sharp, a smell forced up my nose and down my throat. A vision flashes, just a snap of memory, so vivid I feel its edges: I am back in St. Louis, running my pre-adolescent fingers through freshly cut grass; in Mesa, walking among succulents and mangy coyotes in clay-sided storm drains; in Philadelphia, lighting a Camel Filtered with matches as I wait for the bus in the breath-freezing air.

For a moment, I can time-travel. The person next to me—friend, colleague, stranger—might be able to see me, but I am not there. I am five hundred or two thousand miles away: watching Lambchop on my parents' scratchy Fairfax sofa that smells like hand-me-down furniture, studying Amarillo tumbleweeds in the high school parking lot as I try not to choke on the smell of cow shit that punctuates the air. In my favorite, and most infrequent hallucinations, I am back in a Kaunien sauna, skin broiling in wooden humidity as I wait, just one more minute, before running outside naked to roll in the snow.

The memory dissolves like a Listerine strip, leaving me disoriented. The taste of abandoned homes clouds the back of my mouth.

"What's it like moving around so much?" someone asks me at a bar or a college party or in a classroom. Cologne reflected off his—their—cheekbones, a musk that is always the same.

I have never known how to answer this question. How do I explain hallucinations without sounding schizophrenic? How do I tell him—them—that it's like being lost?

I take a drag of a cigarette, exhale a cloud. "Moving means never really knowing where I am," I say, and change the subject.

"Hey Amber," I call up a café's oaken stairs that smell like dust and unground espresso—the way all cafés smell. "Amber!"

Ashlie emerges, thick black eyebrows pursed together in a frown. "You mean Ashlie?" She asks, irritated.

She thinks I mean San José Amber, our ditzzy strawberry-blonde coworker whose ample cleavage erupts over a low-cut crop-top. San José Amber almost got fired for improperly cutting apple strudel, for ruining coffee drinks, for texting instead of prepping the panini meat. Her job was saved when another employee was killed by a drunk driver. The store couldn't afford to lose both of them. I didn't mean this Amber. I meant San Diego Amber, a different coworker at a different café in a different California city, who, in my memories, shares Ashlie's black hair, pumpkin hips, and general fuck-off demeanor.

But Ashlie does not want to hear that she is not the original, that the reason I felt immediately comfortable around her was because I'd met another version of her before. "Shit, sorry Ashlie," I say, an easy apology to replace the difficulty of unwanted explanation. It took me two months to stop calling Ashlie Amber, to erase the files of previous friends and make way for their new resemblances. Most of the time, erased friends stayed in the past where they belonged.

“I’m starting a new business venture with Dom,” Jon, an old buddy from college says, two states and six years later. He’s looking worse for wear, a steady diet of heroin, alcohol, and cigarettes written in bruised circles under his eyes.

*I used to fuck him?* I question silently, churning my memories for images of the devilish smile and nonchalant six-pack—the guy who cut me off because he worried I was getting too attached. He dropped out of school that semester. I hadn’t seen or thought about him until he showed up in San José.

I squint my eyes, as if I can reboot deleted images. “Who?”

He cocks his heavily-angled jaw at me, cigarette dangling haphazardly from the side of his mouth. “Dominic, you remember, sophomore year, short guy with the big pick-up truck—we used to go on beer runs?” He laughs. “Except you only drank wine coolers.”

I run through the Dominics I remember: from high school in Philly, short with coarse black hair and a penchant for dead baby jokes; from the café in San José, short with fine, almost blonde hair and a baby face to match. But San Diego Dominic?

I close my eyes, trying to force the shimmer of memory. I see the shiny white Ford pickup, the two thirty racks of Coors Light in the back, me leaning out the window to smoke a Camel Crush, Jon in the passenger’s seat. But I can only make out a hairstyle driving: close cropped, steel-wool brown, the kind that would get curly if it was allowed to grow long.

I open my eyes. “Wasn’t he in the military, or something?” I ask, pretending I can see the face.

Jon shakes his head. “Wow, Kym,” he says, not bothering to mask his disappointment. “It would hurt his feelings to know that you didn’t remember him. He had a pretty big crush on you back in the day. Wow.”

*You mean, back when we were fucking.* I smile at Jon’s inability to see the hypocrisy in the larger picture. *Some things don’t change.*

Most things don’t change. The people I befriended at USD resemble the people I know now as an adult in San José; the friends I had in elementary school in St. Louis were interchangeable with those who lived in Mesa or even in Finland, except that the Finns knew more languages and the kids in St. Louis had more money.

When I left a state, I imagined I left it and its populace for good. I didn’t take pictures, not necessarily because I was trying to hide anything, but because it never occurred to me until it was too late, until I was already in the process of erasure. As far as I was concerned, the only evidence of relationships or actions remained in those memories that blurred with each mile I put between my past and myself.

But sometimes the people from past lives showed up where I least expected them. Sometimes the people I knew in high school in Philadelphia were among the fifty other recent college grads I ended up living with in Boston during a yearlong tutoring residency.

“Holy shit! Dylan!” I said, hugging the same football shoulders I sat behind in Honor’s Spanish four moves and six years ago. “Remember me?” I asked, immediately wishing I had rephrased the question.

I was out of my element. Philadelphia Kym, the one with a penchant for blowing coke in bathroom stalls and dropping acid or x on the weekend, hadn't existed since I left eleventh grade. When I move, I shed personalities like a snake, picking up one with less baggage as I cross the next state's lines. I have never worried about my reputation, or the consequences of my actions because I could always leave. Where my peers were fettered with their pasts, I was free.

And yet there was someone from my past to remind me that the world was not as infinite as I thought, that my actions in high school could influence relationships with future coworkers, that I could never fully live without regrets.

Dylan's blue eyes narrowed under a mop of ginger waves. He smiled, uneasily showing still-crooked teeth. "Yeah, I remember."

It took self-control not to ask: how much? But I've learned I fare better with statements than I do with questions.

"What place was your favorite?" asks someone with thickly batting eyelashes. It's the ubiquitous female question; girls want to know how their hometowns stack up against the rest of America, the rest of the world, as if I possessed the authority to rank these places.

I answer the opposite, evading the pouting mouth's desire for geographic fidelity. "I hated Boston; it snowed from October to May and the people kind of suck. Amarillo was pretty awful, too. I mean, it was the panhandle of Texas and smelled like cow shit when the wind blew from the South, which was about half of the time."

This is a rehearsed answer and varies little in diction or intonation. It comes out of my mouth before hers has stopped moving, a question I can anticipate, like the non-gendered: "Why do you move around so much?"

I sigh at this point of the conversation, controlling myself against the defensive retaliation I feel building at the base of my neck: *why don't you?*

Instead, I breathe deeply to get out the short version. "My dad works for Boeing selling airplanes to different militaries, so we moved whenever he got a promotion."

I move on.

A longer version: a whirlwind of chaotic, half-nonsense narratives against the backdrop of a middle class family, whose stay-at-home Catholic matriarch had to raise six feral children.

The real answer: *I don't know.*

I never questioned my parents' choice to buy houses the way other families leased cars. Even as a child, I knew that moving was our narrative. I never decorated the rooms I lived in because they were not my rooms, as the houses I lived in were not my homes. Every house felt like a prolonged rest stop, a motel on our way to somewhere else.

When I moved to San José, my roommate was disgusted at the institutional whiteness of the fake stucco inside our new apartment. I barely noticed.

"It looks like a prison in here," she said, wrinkling her freckled nose. I nodded as though I understood. "I can't believe they won't let us paint even one of the walls."

I shrugged my shoulders when she turned away.

I accompanied her to Cost Plus and Ikea to look for curtains and furniture for our barren living room. “What about this color?” She asked, caressing thin linen the hue of Mesa sage after the yearly rain.

“Sure. It looks nice,” I replied in the same tone I used to imply empathy after she told me that her parents had sold her childhood home.

“Jesus Christ, Kym! You have to have some kind of opinion,” she chastised after the color of our future futon elicited the same response.

*Normal people decorate their rooms*, I thought. We spent a hundred dollars on Salvador Dali posters to accompany the new charcoal futon. *Our Wall of Dali, or Wall-I*, I laughed to myself, hanging up my most expensive décor project to date.

Now, my partner gifts silk-screen printings from his father’s photography studio to hang in my apartment. Instead of waiting for me to put them up, Ernest brings a nail and hammer to accompany his presents. “Here,” I say, arbitrarily pointing at empty wall space, smashing his portraits of Shakespeare and mountain sunsets up against robot cartoons.

He smiles, teeth delightfully crooked, having long since understood my aesthetics to be as erratic as my moods. It’s as difficult for me to be consistent as it is for me to control spaces I know aren’t mine in the first place.

“What do you need for your birthday?” My mom asks over the phone.

I anxiously look around my room. Clothes spill out of drawers onto the floor, assortments of climbing shoes, ballet flats, and motorcycle boots collect in corners, papers and essays amass dust on wire bookshelves and in cardboard boxes, pennies sit on my windowsill, two quarters and a nickel stick to my bedside table. But the mess does not bother me; it comforts me, it seems a natural extension of my own contradictions.

Rather, it is the thought of moving all of this nonsense that infuriates me, that makes me tear through my belongings every month for a sweatshirt I can sell to a thrift store or useless jewelry I can pawn. The thought of not being able to grab a few boxes, pack a few suitcases, and go leaves me trembling over roots I didn’t know I was planting.

“I don’t need anything, Mom,” I say, forcing my voice to relay humor in place of anxiety. “I have too much shit as it is.” I think of my motorcycle, and how I’ll need a U-Haul to move it along with my car, and I press my calloused fingers against the bridge of my nose to lessen the thrumming of my brain.

She laughs. “Look, I know you love this minimalist lifestyle. But really, having more than one pair of sneakers isn’t the end of the world.”

“Why would I need sneakers? I don’t run,” I reply, rummaging through my shoe corners for any pairs I haven’t worn within the past month.

“You know what I mean,” she says, more amused at my obtuse response than irritated. “It wouldn’t kill you to have some nice things.”

My mother never forbade me from decorating; in fact, I’m fairly certain she viewed my residential apathy as more worrisome than anything else. She would spend weeks planning the artistic layout of each room, waiting until my father returned from a three-day or two-week business trip to

painstakingly organize, level, and hang each family portrait or school photo or incongruous art installation.

In each house, she set up her collection of Arabia glass sculptures, finding new whitewashed niches and oak mantles to accentuate their Finnish blue. After an icon painting class in Finland, she began collecting richly colored, gold-sheathed wood squares of her patron saint or the Virgin Mary. In each new house, my mother had to find a new space of worship for these holy relics, spending hours praying over the perfect burgundy wall or wooden fireplace to appropriately accentuate their sanctity.

Two or three years later, she would pack them away, folding them in brown recycled paper and bubble wrap, gently placing them in boxes caustically marked, FRAGILE; THIS WAY UP, in black Sharpie on five sides. She does not trust hired movers to understand the delicacy of her past.

My eldest brother, Chris, shares my mother's accumulated identity. Each piece of art on the walls of his neat SOMA apartment reflects his affinities: a wooden plaque of St. Christopher coiled in bronze snakes, a Carnival mask and a Real Madrid fútbol scarf from his semester abroad. For my brother, every decoration is a narrative, a root snaking its way deep into the earth, something he can hold onto if he slips and falls.

Chris files friends the way I file smells: he travels to Chicago and Frankfurt to hang out with college buddies and old exchange students. Even my closest friends fade into memory, shades of people I once knew or will meet again, each new acquaintance an amalgamation of the past.

In spite of our differences, we both must face the inevitable question: "Where are you from?" We have learned not to dread this question, simply by answering in half-truths.

"Long Beach," Chris answers without pause—his birthplace, where he lived for no more than two years.

"Nowhere," I say with a flatness that makes people stare. Or, "Zimbabwe," I lie, not caring if I get caught. The lie isn't even mine; it's a lie I stole from my older sister, Jeanette.

"Oh god, I hated it when drunk frat guys would try to hit on me at parties," Jeanette declared over mojitos at a bar in Austin. "It always starts the same: where are you from, as though that question is the end-all be-all of identifiers. It's like, first off, I don't even want to talk to you, and second, I know you don't actually give a shit about my life story; you just want to get into my pants. Not going to happen." She paused, pale thin fingers swirling the black straw in her cylindrical glass. "So I tell them Zimbabwe."

She shrugged flippantly and hunkered down into the cool fizz of minted seltzer and spiced rum. "At least now that I'm an adult I'm no longer subjected to the Zoo Animal Syndrome of being the new kid in school."

In grade school, I reveled in the stares that being 'the new kid' elicited. The fourth child of six kids, I basked in attention, too young to differentiate between curiosity and genuine interest. My experiences were too myopic to realize that I was being asked the same questions, that I was giving the same answers. Instead, I was entertained by how original I appeared to my peers. They didn't realize that I had appropriated words like *rad* and *actually* from Jeanette or that my other older brother, Russ, was behind my penchant for dark clothes and piercings.

“Say the word, ‘room,’” friends in middle school asked me, exaggerating the vowels in the middle.

“Rooooom,” I tried not to laugh at their earnestness.

“Good. Now say, ‘I went to my room.’”

I smiled, truncating words in my own personal joke. “I went to my rum,” I said, and watched their hands fly up in exasperation. I didn’t understand why my pronunciation was the subject of so much attention, just as I didn’t understand where “my accent” came from in the first place. But it made people pay attention to me; it made me special so I allowed friends to try to teach me the right way to speak.

The novelty began to wear off in high school, after a boyfriend’s younger sister noticed, her eyes round as globes: “You’re not from around here, are you?” Then in Amarillo and Boston, even in San Diego, the observation shifted: “You don’t belong here,” they would say in drawls or nasal tones or valley-girl inflections. I shrugged, not bothering to ask them where I did belong.

This sense of belonging—the desire for some sort of geological foundation—is why Chris’ answer, “Long Beach,” is both true and untrue. It shows more about his character than he would like to admit.

I remember when I visited Chris in Chicago shortly after I graduated from college. He woke me up at 8am to go watch fútbol in a wood-covered bar. The yeasty smell of beer made last night’s rum turn in my stomach as I choked down cheese-covered tortilla chips, miserable, a headache thrumming in the back of my skull. *Why the fuck are we here?* I thought, shrinking back into the booth as the bar erupted with: “GOOOOOOOAAAAALLLLLLL!”

I looked at Chris, his angular face shining with equal parts excitement and perspiration. He hugged a few friends, clapped some strangers on their backs, jumped up and down with a topaz pint raised above his head. He belonged in this dank, musty bar lit exclusively by television screens. He belonged in this city of industrial metal and congruous, flattened skies.

But he didn’t stay: he left the home he made in Chicago for Cleveland, a place that was never home. Two years later, he moved to San Francisco, a city he resents for not being Chicago. He works on a California visa; his heart beats, chokingly, awaiting his return to his chosen home.

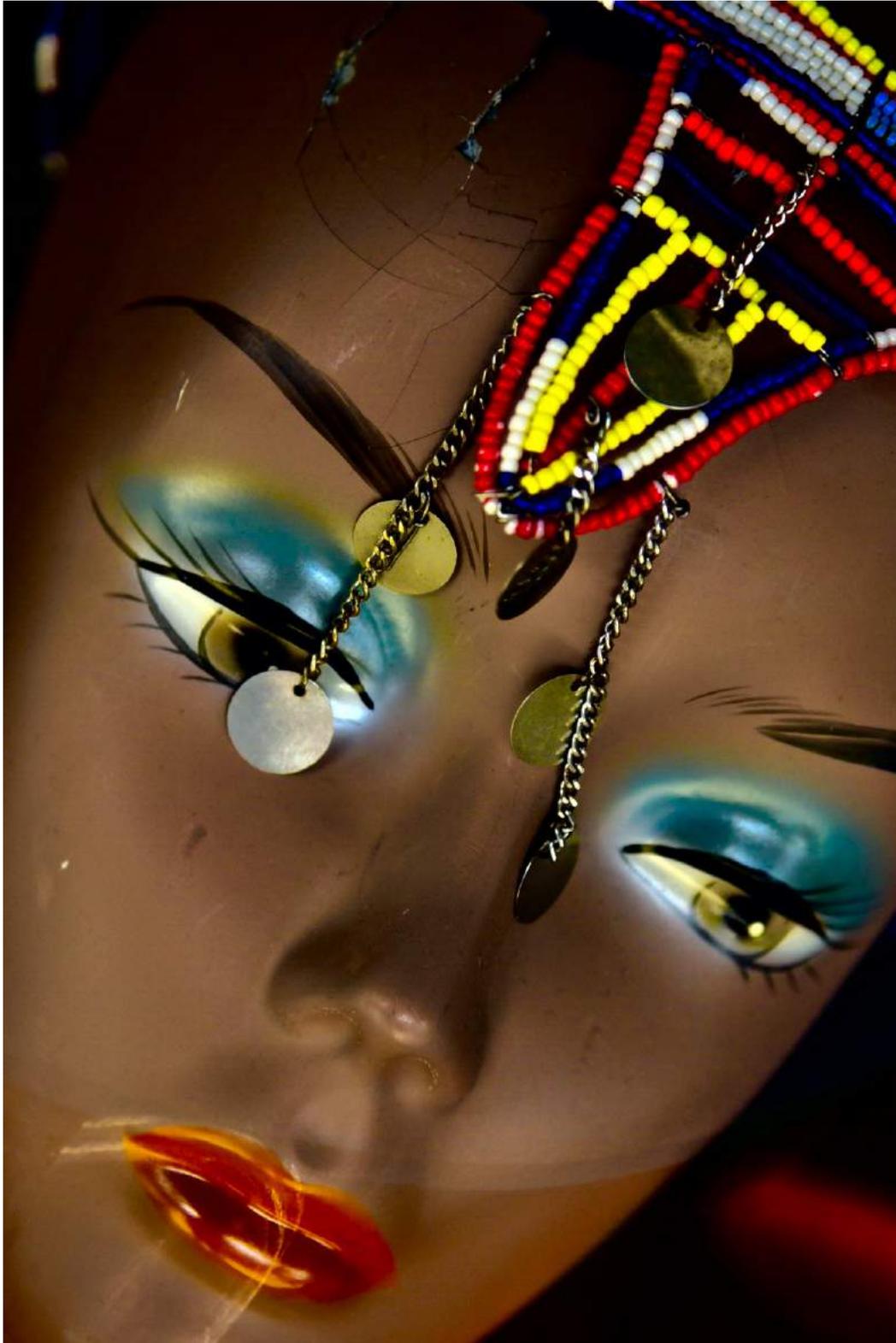
I, too, am waiting. The night before my partner left to attend grad school at UC-Irvine, we lay in my too-small double bed, silent after weeks of conversation. We had been talking about everything—our childhoods, people we hated, embarrassing adolescent sexual experiences—anything to make up for the void we knew was coming. My vocal chords are stretched almost to breaking; I press my face against his armpit’s black coils. His eyes are glazed, staring my ceiling into abstraction. I close my eyes, breathing in the smell of black soap on warm skin and Old Spice deodorant.

Picture-smells flood my brain: birch trees and snowfall and exposed wooden beams, reflective lakes and worn stone buildings, the wind over warmed deserts. Too many to catalogue, too quick to understand, the hallucination is over as quickly as it began.

But it sears a word, etched in light, in the back of my throat.

Home.

# FICTION



*Gypsy Woman* by William C. Crawford

The woman I love comes back from the war with part of her face blown off and a surgery scheduled for Tuesday. I get drunk in a hotel room down the street from where she'll be medevaced tomorrow, then type the words face and reconstructive and IED into the Google search bar. I vomit nine mini bottles worth of whiskey after the first image loads.

The doctors are elaborately poised. They are unfazed by my wife's injuries, almost eager in their enthusiasm to build her a custom-made face from her own spare parts. It's a godsend, one doctor says, that she lost the parts she did and kept the hardest ones to surgically recreate like the nose, eyelids and tongue. I nod fervently, tamp down my desire to reach out and yank those dirty words right out of his throat. I learn quickly that there are degrees of awful when it comes to having shrapnel pilot its way through the softest parts of the body. She's lucky not to need a whole new face inherited from a whole new person. The doctors nowadays are demigods with robot parts and they are saving everyone. Peel off and suture on, pleat and tuck until the mask makes for a convincing fit. If my wife were here, awake and not in desperate need of leftover parts, she'd be fascinated. We'd be fascinated together.

This is all good, one surgeon says. Yeah, good, I say and the word tastes like broken vows in the full of my mouth. The most impressive medical advancements of the decade and they are born of incinerated bone and evaporated flesh, an angry nation, and the public's incessant fascination with the catastrophic effects of the IED. This war has turned out medical titans, true pioneers, trailblazers of reconstructive surgery and all it cost was one soldier's face and then a hundred more. Our son is fifteen and today I decide he will not grow up to do his mother's job.

Yesterday, in a German hospital, a chemical wash was used to scrape my wife's face and prepare it for surgery. The likely audio of the event bats itself around my skull, presses in on the cavities behind my eyeballs and pulses with my every breath. I want to hurt someone: the U.S. Military, jihadi extremists, the punks who underappreciate my wife's job, the political thugs who keep sending her places, the very woman I love who feels a sense of duty I was not built to understand. I'm carrying a photo of her in my pocket but no one asks to see it. There is an enthusiasm that is radiating off the doctors and it is settling around me. I shrug it off but consider it a necessary trait for successful navigation of the inside hollow of my wife's face. I ask if they need anything from me. I mean my mouth or my eyes, my skin or rapidly beating heart, but they think I mean my consent to which they enthusiastically nod and lead me to a room with HR.

They put my wife under anesthesia for the helicopter transport, and so it's best if she goes right into surgery. I haven't seen her for eleven months, and yet I feel a zealous relief over skipping the part where I have to look into the black crushing hole of her face and be grateful more wasn't taken.

During the surgery, I sit in my rental car and cry far away from the measured eyes of the commanding officer that escorted her stateside.

Afterwards, the gauze and the bandages cradle her face like a tire swing. The new parts of her are bright red and tight like a sunburn or the innermost cut of a beef steak. She's got slabs of her thigh and calf nestled and hydrated along the planes of her face. Her fibula has been sawed, sanded and perfectly fit to the missing space where her jaw once was. She is the grown-up edition of the erector set, the almost bionic woman, yet still a vet whose face will be kept out of the spotlight and off posters.

Obviously this is a better version than the one right before. Even with the swelling, she looks like a person. She's still under the anesthetic, but one of her surgeons tells me she did well. I tell him how much she hates to be given credit for things she didn't do. He suggests instead we give her credit for her brave acts before and with that I can hardly disagree. The doctor walks over to her, closer than I've gotten, and peers at the wires holding her jaw shut. He's already onto the part where she is one day able to speak normally and eat normally and breathe normally, and I'm still on the part where a hazy dust in a desert I've never been to is now full of the parts of her I like best.

I still haven't told our kids.

When he leaves and it's finally just the two of us, I stare. She looks different. Underneath the hinges and newly sewn on parts, there is an unfamiliarity to the structure of her features. I knew she might lose things in the war. Here we are nearly at the end of it, so I've read up on the modern military family and gotten familiar with the side-effects of a spouse returning alive, returning dead, with arms and without. The decade-long PSA on PTSD, the introduction of the prosthetic that allows a soldier to remain on duty, the constant news coverage that keeps even the most removed viewer informed, and not once did I think to prepare myself or my children for the return of a woman who looks remarkably different than the one we sent away.

When she wakes up, we stare at each other. The space between us is wide and deep until she hits the morphine drip and is swept away into whatever dreamland the lionhearted belong.

I am not inclined towards brave acts. I feel no obligation to save all the children instead of just mine. My version of benevolence applies mostly to those within an arm's reach. I'm ill-suited for martyrdom, and if at the end of my life my kids and wife are the only ones to consider me brave, I'll have won the big prize.

I fly home a day early and prepare the kids for a mother they sometimes forget. My youngest suggests we take down all the pictures so Mom doesn't feel like some other mother was here before. Her homecoming is rich with unintentional slights, everyone's sensitivities high and active. She makes a

cyborg joke but her speech comes out a forced, awful hiss through her wired-shut jaw. I watch my daughter's face as she realizes things will be exactly as hard as I promised.

At home, my wife starts a regimen geared towards fixing, stabilizing and reintroducing her to a world not filled with improvised explosive devises. More surgeries are scheduled for later dates and I wonder if each one will take her further from the original prototype. I watch her watch herself. She pries with uncertain fingers, traces the foreign dips and planes that don't match up to memory. For weeks I get phone calls from people I hardly remember. One is confused, thinks she made it out of Afghanistan fine but then got shot in the face or bombed on the interstate. I tell him we still have thousands of troops deployed. He tsks like he doesn't believe it, and I shout all the things I've not been saying into the recess of the dial tone. The mantles are empty and the walls are full of rectangular 8x10s where the paint has not been sun-bleached. The home feels barren and unforgiving; my son has amassed all the removed pictures and is hoarding them underneath his bed.

I think of her face, the one that she's missing, even though I know I'm not supposed to. So many soldiers return without whole body parts, big chunks of them that cannot be drilled in, glued back, licked and stuck together. I chose to stay home. I chose not to suit up and gun up and protect everything I love. I sent my wife to do it instead, and everyone called us progressive even though their faces said otherwise.

Occasionally, going to and from the bathroom in the dead of night, we pass each other. The light from the hall will catch the slope of her cheek, the angle of her chin, and the difference is just enough to startle me. I'm being intruded upon by an intruder. She is unrecognizable and I think maybe they gave me someone else to take home. Maybe beneath the hints of her, the buried contortions that remind me of her is some long marred, mournful stranger.

Underneath the cool sheets of our bed, she lets me touch her, just barely. With shaky hands I discover the curve of her hip is exactly as I remember it. I interlay the image of the stranger face and the familiar hip so they are right on top of one another. If I wait and am patient, eventually they are bound to fuse.

Ralph knew that it wouldn't last, but he liked how her hair hung blonde to her waist, the bones of her face, all the curves of her. They came together in spouts, at the end of the day, after long talks on the phone about prom and graduation, and all those things that were passing and they never even knew it, and the only logical thing to do was share their bodies, in sunlight, in the heat of their room, the little old fan whirling, the kick of denim at their ankles. Then came a baby, a manifestation of all that, the sex of that little boy on the screen; they were able to trace out his baby profile, trace it out with their fingers, naïve frantic fingers with cheap white gold they had bought from a pawn shop. No one could have told Ralph that it was a shotgun wedding. He loved the bones of her face.

It was the sunshine. Henry's car hummed old school, I watched her from my mirror, spelled my name R-A-L-P-H in the bit of window that crept up, a tiny triangle of glass, the trees cut by like blades, cool sunshine, and my mom smiled sweetly, faintly, my china doll in the mirror.

Ralph was back there again, back in that same place where he started, where he knocked his girl up, only that old bed was gone. His mother had replaced it with a futon to save space, and now, now he was taking that space once again, that space de-sexed, the hope to make it the same again hung in the air. He had argued with his wife the day before. His bones and all his flesh ached, his eyeball sockets even felt the weight of her, the legality of wife weighed the pain of it. He had kissed his infant son on his chubby brown cheek, said bye in a sputter, watched him off in the night, then cursed the one who bore him. And as Ralph got ready to go out that first night back, he took that promise, that new promise of sex and dressed up in it, shaving his jet-black stubble in the mirror, he noticed that his mother was watching him from the hallway. She smiled faintly, sweetly called him baby, she said Baby I'm so glad you're back here with me, even if it's just for a little while.

Henry was a good neighbor. That was one thing I had been sure of. Henry had come to us in a flicker. We must have been living in this apartment complex for months, going in and out of our little apartment. Mom walking me to school in the hot morning sunshine, in her tight jeans and tank top and her beat-up huarache sandals, and her hair sprayed liked some spider web. I asked her to let me walk to third grade alone, but she refused, said I was her teddy bear, and she would fall apart if something happened to me. She said I was still small enough to pick up and throw in a trunk, so we walked in the sunshine together. Henry came first in flickers. We would see him climbing out of his little white car, or unlocking his mailbox, or pulling sheets from his laundry room. There was always a smile, a how's it going, how's it going, a sort of singsong that would only last a few footsteps. Henry has a pretty wife who goes to work taking care of old people. She goes at all different times of day, in a scrub top and pants, in Easter egg and cartoon colors. I used to watch her swish to her car, watch her glide, her kind smile. The lines around her eyes held her hellos in them.

Ralph planned to meet his wife at the beat-up burger spot on Clinton and West, and when he walked in, he saw his little boy there, sitting on the tabletop, chubby brown hand tugging on his mother's hair and another pulling on a blue straw in a strawberry soda. The little boy looked at him, and he smiled and laughed at him until his girl looked up at him with large brown empty eyes and he remembered she wasn't his girl anymore. She asked him if he got the papers and he said, yes they had come to him only a few days before, with a knock on the door, a young white man in khaki pants and a polo shirt, that big manila envelope was still sitting on his mother's kitchen table. He could smell the perfume on her, powdery and sweet, but then it stung when he saw the red half moon on her neck. He wanted to think that it was something else, that red half moon hickey on her neck. His son, dark eyes large, tugged hard on his jacket and then let go.

The first time Ralph gave us a ride, it was chilly out. The wind was whipping us, whipping through my mom's hair and jacket. It burned, and I thought my mom would fly away. Henry pulled up in his little white car and asked us if we wanted a ride, and I jumped in the front seat without even asking her if it was ok, and she jumped in the back, and it felt good. The heater was on, and the car was clean, and Henry smelled clean as soap, but still smelled like cigarettes. His smell matched my mom's smell. Clean and smoke at the same time. Except his skin wasn't white like hers, it was brown like mine, but more like sun-beat leather. He drove us to school, and I jumped out without even saying thank you, my mom yelling bye baby, and I didn't look back until I was far off, and then I looked back to wave at her, saw her tiny little body, black jacket and jeans, saw her wave at me and climb in the front seat of Henry's car.

Ralph used to think that his mother was a china doll. He used to think so because of her curly black hair and the way she used to line her eyes dark and because her face was so pale. He used to put his chubby brown arm next to hers and compare the skin of them, and she would smile and laugh and kiss his cheek; she would smile and laugh and look him close in the eyes and smile and blink. And now she wanted to talk with him about the cute girl he had met at the club. She fixed him coffee and breakfast, and they sat in front of the television; the sun up and bright in the window, she laughed, the rasp of her voice, the clang of her coffee cup, all of it hung there in the walls of that little living room. Another knock on the door, another young white man with an envelope, this time asking Ralph to sign his boy away, and he felt his mother's voice fall off those walls and shatter.

The day we went to buy a Christmas tree, Henry wasn't home, so we couldn't get a ride. We picked out a really small tree, and mom paid extra so that the kid at the tree lot could spray it with some frosty glitter spray to look like snow. He gave me a handful of itty-bitty candy canes, and I stuffed them in my pocket. We walked down Clinton Avenue, with the cars roaring by, my mom shook and pulled her hood over her head, walking backward down Clinton, we carried the tree, her hair flying in the wind, a china doll in her black hooded sweatshirt. She flipped off some guy who drove by and stuck his tongue out at her, and I laughed so hard I peed my pants. When we got home, I made a bath, so I could soak, and I lay there in the strawberry shampoo soap, and I traced the lines

of our old bathtub, and wondered how long those lines had been there, felt the warmth on my face. I floated. I wrapped a towel around myself and had to open the door because I couldn't take the steam of my tub, but their steam was a chemical, colorless like water. My mom yelled at me to go to my room. Their steam was heavy and sweet. Sweet chemicals. I lay naked on my bed and pulled my sheets over me. I heard Henry's laugh tangle up with my mom's laugh, their highs and lows, they came together, dragged across the hallway. I got up and got dressed in a white t-shirt and sweatpants, went to the living room, switched on the stereo, and started dressing the tree. It was all chemicals. It smelled clean, and it glistened like snow.

Ralph met a cute girl at the nightclub named Nikki. She told him right off that she was taking classes at the community college. She wanted to be a nurse, and he even helped her study with flash cards and helped her color pictures of muscle and bone. He liked the way she laughed. The first night they slept together, he took her to the burger spot on Clinton and West and then he took her home. Her name was Nikki. He asked her not to laugh at his futon, but she did anyway. The futon squeaked with the weight of her body, that metal skeleton, the bones of it taking her into it. Ralph crushed against that girl, her laugh; her kiss crushed against him, and as he lay tangled, done, all he could think of was that red half moon and the tug of his little boy's hand on his jacket. As he made his way out to take Nikki home, he found his mother in the living room, laying half up, half down on the couch, Cleopatra-style. He introduced Nikki, and she looked up the girl, rolled her eyes, and then began to flip channels.

It made my stomach go when my mom and Henry went in the room. It took hours; it took infinity. I didn't know why it was so quiet. I would even creep down the hallway as far as I would dare and then step back. I would go outside, sit on the white wall, wait for Henry's wife to drive up in her cartoon colors, wait for my mom to come out and beg me to come back inside, out of the cold. It cut my face, my ears, my hands, the fade in my hair, the black gravel of the beat-up driveway, the patches of sky. I wanted to taste the sky.

Ralph saw his wife when he happened to be with Nikki. He saw her in another guy's car, her arm propped up in the window, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, and she didn't even see him with his new girl. He watched them drive off, and Nikki grabbed his hand, and he saw her eyes. He saw her dark hair, the dimple in her face, her eyes large and knowing. She smelled like petals, pink petals and he felt himself crush against her. Nikki smiled at him, and he pulled away and let the car glide.

My mother was a fistful flower. My mother bled; she cried down the hallway, curled on the carpet in a tiny crescent; she bled. I grabbed all the towels I could find and held them between her legs, her tiny legs thin and pale; she shivered; her curly black hair strawberry clean and tangled, clumped in her tiny brown bud mouth, my mom, she bled. One day, she told me what that was, a tiny

seed, an almost was. But then, I only felt the warm red on my hands, it seeped through, smelled salty, felt warm.

It was the sunshine. Henry's car hummed old school, I watched her from my mirror, spelled my name R-A-L-P-H in the bit of window that crept up, a tiny triangle of glass, the trees cut by like blades, cool sunshine, and my mom smiled sweetly, faintly, my china doll in the mirror. At the hospital, they let me stay as late as I could. When my mom woke up, she held her gown in a tight fist so that her white skin would not spill out. She called me to her and held me close. I had eaten everything on her yellow hospital tray. The chocolate, the graham crackers the little juices, the little milks. I realized that I had left nothing for her to eat, and I hunched over her tiny white shoulder blade, and I began to weep.

The day before Ralph got married, Henry knocked on the door and asked him for a jump on his car. Ralph put on his slippers and made his way out, the screen door bumping behind him, found Henry over his little white car; brown skin beat against metal, quick brown hands on clamps, the engine woke up and came alive. Ralph shook Henry's hand and got two cigarettes, one for him and another for his mother, went inside and lay with his girl on his mother's polka-dotted couch. He laid his head on her lap, wrapping her dyed yellow strands of hair around his fingers while she flipped channels, the stereo blaring, his mother walking in and out of the apartment with boxes and garbage bags, in tiny shorts and a tank top, her tiny pale frame humming, singing, and then Ralph felt his boy kick from inside his girl, that rounded out part of her; his boy kicked him on his head. His girl laughed clear as a bell, and Ralph laughed, and the TV screen glowed, and his mother was going in and out of the tiny dark.

My mom is chemicals. She twirls around, and smokes that rock, she smokes that shit. My mom puts on the old school station, and she twirls in the mirror, and she listens to "Candy Man" by the Mary Jane Girls, and she lights the tip of her cigarette, and she still smells like smoke and soap. My mom and Henry were like twins, but only for a little while. I still watch his wife and wonder. Once in a while. Watch her swish to her car, while I sit on the wall, with the cold blowing from my mouth, sometimes she smiles and sometimes she doesn't. Henry always says what's up to me, though. The other day, we smoked against the wall. He laughed at me and said that my voice was changing. It's good that my mom got that car, so now we can go anywhere we want to. She's teaching me to drive, even though I'm only twelve and can't get a license. Made me sit on last year's phone book and cussed out every person on the road that gave us a dirty look. But most of the time she drives, and I watch her tiny white hands on the wheel, watch her tiny feet pump the pedal, watch her huarache, the chipped pink polish on her toes, she smiles at me when we get to the light. I smile back with the green light, and she lets the car glide.

Ralph had asked Nikki to meet up at the courthouse, and now he was trying to count out the time it took his ex-wife to get to her car, count out her tiny steps, her blonde hair pulled back severe. They had only caught eyes a few times, her lawyer a small woman too, a small brown woman in a

navy blue skirt set. Ralph sat outside the courthouse, sipping the soda he bought from a truck, people walked by like tiny insects; he felt the soda buzz in his throat; he could not figure out why he bought that soda; the outside air chilled him, and his hands played with the aluminum. His fingers crushed that soda can, the same fingers that signed away his only child. His only child he signed away, in black ink, in curvy script, those same fingers he opposed, those same fingers had betrayed him, they crushed that can like a wad of wax. Soon, he thought, soon it would be so cold that you could not see.

He watched the people walking by, lawyers and county workers, vendors selling things from bicycles and cardboard boxes, and that air cut him, and he began to remember the time he stood outside his apartment shivering, waiting for his mother and Henry to drive up, so they could go to Christmas Tree Lane. That night they went, they rolled down all the windows, car after car humming down Van Ness, all those lights on big fancy houses, old houses, those houses glowed with the light, the greens the blues the reds. Ralph would not go unless he could sit up front, the three of them laughed in the cold black night, and Ralph felt he could claw out those lights and put them in his room, hang them in the ceiling sky. Ralph could feel Nikki walk up and he felt himself shiver, like when his mother said that night, let's go, when he heard Henry's car come up the driveway, felt its engine humming, she said Let's go, let's go, she said, she said, let's go.

# POETRY



*Sur-Object 62* by Duane Locke

"If you love enough, you'll lie a lot"

-- Tori Amos, "Jackie's Strength"

How many women do I know who, after marriage, live like caterpillars again, sucking their beautiful, brilliant hued (paper thin) wings back into their guts, walking around like they were never a butterfly to start. But I keep seeing it: girls on the cusp of blossom, just starting to show that iridescent sheen, and then, as if that shimmery purple will outshine the partner-- it disappears.

Perhaps male robins are so beautiful, so vivid, so the female can see a reflection of who they would be if they'd never met, if she weren't stuck on the nest while he, red-breast plump, goes out to make something of himself. Perhaps beauty means more in the mirror. But what I know is that it takes decades for a woman to disappear and come back: and it's harder still when no one knows she's missing.

“Susmaryosep.”

Eyes shut, old housekeeper  
pours the solution over me:  
Lagundi, bayabas, sambong.  
Riotous scent  
heady in roiling water.  
Maligno, spare your  
erring daughter.  
Diwata, relent.  
Aba Ginoong Maria,  
look down on me  
lying in bed, nursing  
fever, frame unmoving.

This morning the hens greeted me at the barn door,  
clucking and pecking along, checking my bootlaces  
for grain dust, while our four goats  
cried from their pen in the corner, climbing the woven wire  
gate, little beggars. It's just past Full Peach Moon—  
walking home on Christmas night,  
I will see a shooting star.  
Mars and Orion share a little patch of sky.  
I'll reckon you won't believe what I've seen,  
though I see it more every day—beauty lies  
down in layers. I saw it perched in the Osage Orange  
over the gob pile on Captina Creek. Coyote is dead.  
Every evening I leave the goats  
crying in the corner pen, the hens shuffling their knuckled toes  
roost-ways into their coop. I'm glad I'm not the morning star,  
living thirteen years in eight. I do recollect the snow.  
I do stop along the interstate, not to bury Coyote, but to brush  
my hand against his little stretched out paw.

Coyote wakes me up at 2 a.m.  
He taps his paw against my shoulder blade—  
he's never looked this old before.  
He turns away when I pull on my shorts.  
there's the shadow of his back against the wall,  
the flash of my white feet.  
We start walking  
with our faces lifted up.  
Coyote says our friend has thrown herself  
from her mother's van. She is dying. She will be dead.  
I think she must have turned herself  
into a kind of bird, a yellow one, extended  
tiny linnets wings to swim,  
to stretch their sleek pale length toward something dashed  
along the swinging curb, the endless curve  
of sky that dangled past the swept horizon.  
She must have seen her own shape, muscled, flexed,  
the body paused in arc as if a hex  
were placed there, paused the car's shock and jerk-swerve.  
She would have seen the whole world turning just  
beneath her elbow. There were her fingernails  
mooning white at the ends of her fingers  
she hadn't known could be so long. This girl,  
dark hair a curtain wind-dashed back  
to cover scabbed Cape Hatteras.  
Coyote doesn't touch me. He points  
to a fist-sized squid rolling in the water.  
Out there, just past the charcoaled pier  
the sky and water shade into themselves.  
No moon. No milk of cloud.  
She must have heard her bones hit road, the click  
of femur snapped. She would have seen the flare  
of pavement, sky, to pavement. Flare of white  
that scored itself into her cheek, arm, thigh.  
She leapt. She left  
us walking Hatteras.  
This is how we take the news.  
Another few hours, and we'll see the sunrise lighting  
up the water and that will be the end.

Before emojis were “hip” I used 2 be  
 told “u cruise 4 love / on all the  
 wrong ships” & I'd type secret  
 messages 2 crushes / YOU ☹️👉👈  
 👉👈👉👈, search 4 hearts / within  
 Wingdings but find “☹️” in “L” &  
 👉👈 in “me” & in computer class  
 in high school / I'd fill screens with  
 dingbats & wait 4 anyone to laugh /  
 they never did / so in my assigned  
 mast I'd Yahoo! search ways 2 talk 2  
 girls / bcuz my notebooks couldn't,  
 my heart hung from my chest on a  
 Playstation controller cord 📺 dipped  
 in dead sea / I struggled 2 find ways  
 2 say 🙌 ☹️ 📺VE without avatars  
 📺 the 1st time I went on a date /  
 my car slid into a ditch on my way 2  
 pick her up / later I led us 2 where  
 we danced in long silences 📺📺📺 / &  
 I had lots 2 say on my Xanga / things  
 like NKZQ / when I wanted “NY  
 YYU” / I'd fill more blogs with ding-  
 bats / & wait a lil longer 4 ur laugh

The bird in a hand. Two minds  
become anxious. The bird is a canvas  
of hearts. The hand is a Norman conquest.  
What use does hand have for bird? Neither  
in need of each other. Remember you hold  
a secret, old air in the lung  
you never breathe. Remember you hold a bird.  
And the bird wants to leave.

We overturn fertile silt  
for razor clams that spray  
their last thimble of sea,  
sometimes six feet high:

it's enough to startle a seagull,  
give the clam time to further drive  
itself into the sand: a shell-clapped burial.

With our buckets full,  
we are walking away from the beach  
when you worry about having a child  
born to a mother near forty;  
worry about how your spine  
bends and hips will push  
out of place; you worry about  
Down Syndrome, more anxieties  
than I will know.

At the campsite, cleaning  
the golden shells of our harvest—  
exposing the lines each grows with age  
like the lines of a tree orbiting its center—  
our thoughts continue slowly  
as the solar system moves  
in the Milky Way; we don't  
talk of children again.

The frustration of our age difference  
becomes frustration with each other.  
You tell me your friends  
don't think I am good for you, think

I am a boy, too young for you.  
The cigarette you flick sparks with the embers of stars,  
as it hits my face—an aggression I assume was needed  
to get you away from your first husband.

I think of how Voyager One launched  
two years after you were born. It is now  
on the edge of the solar system,  
entering a space forever midnight—  
where there are no dreams or displeasure—

away from the family of planets  
and the influence of our sun  
moving exponentially faster  
into the unfamiliar void  
that somehow seems understandable:

a lone bat vanishing in the night sky  
sending back its lovely pulse among the stars,  
sounds from the edge with a twenty-watt radio.

The field is full of campfires, galaxies of their own:  
ones we think we will never reach:  
circled children warming themselves  
eating and laughing, we try not to listen.

We sit with our saturated livers,  
our need for uptake inhibitors.

We are angry with each other, or about our lives  
or our space, I am not sure, but so much so  
that we are yelling.

We are like newborns  
crying because the world just hurts  
when it hits your skin, when there is weight  
that just keeps coming.

Is that sound grooved into the spiral  
of a gold record? How would another life-form  
understand the resonance of a kiss,  
the tone of a humpback whale, the significance  
of a baby cry—as if we understand them.  
We have never heard

the sound of our nervous system, maybe never heard  
hello in fifty languages. You howl in the night  
how weightless you feel, how scared you are,  
how easily you suffer—what sounds are needed

to turn you loose from the hay and mud we use  
to make bricks. How long have I let myself be  
treated like this, obligated to a person  
who directs all her anxiety as aggression  
toward the person she loves.

As we enter the nylon cove of our tent  
to lie down with no moon and no sun  
and only stars that are so far  
they never seem to move,  
we take cover in this night

that tells no time,  
in this life we begin  
to understand the darkness  
of our own arms.

i told her i was made  
from the fire  
and she  
from the earth  
i swallowed scorched grounds  
rolling the lumps of  
flesh  
from inside one pocketed  
cheek to the other  
pressing my face  
against the ground  
squeezing my fleshy cheek  
bone and dirt  
jaws on flesh until  
my hair  
(singeing  
an aureole  
from my back below  
my neck to the earth  
above my crown)  
fell away  
in smoke-fingers  
skies fingered by  
smoke and vapor  
dragging a word from  
inside one cutpurse  
cheek to the other and  
dragging it off  
my tongue and lips  
at the butt of  
a cigarette pushed  
pushed out  
with smoke-fingers  
steeped in  
repetitive geometries  
repeating geometric djinn  
repeated metrical din  
i told her

the fire made me  
reaching upward  
swallowing the wick  
with little lumps of flesh  
and a tongue i place  
on a shoulder  
or shoulders  
to turn them  
she told me the ground  
spit her up  
a loamy lump  
of flesh swallowing  
my tongue  
turned over and  
folded over  
cheek to bit lip  
to cheek and  
lying fallow  
a silence and i  
extinguished by  
a dragging tongue  
to become only  
a flickering  
acid taste

He wanted to hold on to the ephemeral joys  
that peppered his life  
“Not nearly enough,”  
he thought greedily.  
He sought to carve into onyx  
the balloon from the traveling circus  
when he was five,  
before the dancing bear set it free  
to float through the muted blues  
of an infinite sky.  
He slowly hewed the pop  
of the champagne bottle his agent held  
when he learned of his first and most  
surprising Oscar nomination.  
He chipped and polished confetti  
mixed with snow that softly dotted his hair,  
her shoulders as they shared their first  
New Year’s kiss.  
he tried to capture the power and pleasure  
in their son’s first cries,  
his declaration of arrival to this life  
overwhelming his understanding of love.  
He started to sculpt this, the burst of inspiration  
to make the fleeting permanent  
and did not stop even when  
her voice, her touch became  
an echo of a memory.

By then, his wife wanted to capture the way  
her heart leapt from stomach to mouth  
when they first made love,  
the way his breath on her neck  
made the hairs on her arms stand  
and the muscles in her legs weaken,  
the way she welcomed and ached for him  
when he was on location, when she was  
feeding their son at night, when  
she was balancing numbers under deadline, when  
she was in the shower still in love—  
before he turned toward the marble and granite,  
before neglect turned her heart to stone.

at 8 I dove into  
young colors of autumn  
rust and red green and golden  
like apples flat and fallen

I watched awe-filled as  
helicopter leaves rained down  
in spirals to meet cement  
on ruby avenue

I puckered from the bitter  
of blueberries, grown on the  
brick red fence dividing our  
yard from the lee's,  
not yet ripe but free of charge

I learned how to land with a  
roll, catapulting from swings  
like ranger from plane  
peach tree watching my aerial somersaults

I would sit with my father  
cool desert summer nights  
spitting watermelon seeds  
through our matching tooth gaps,  
looking at the stars, clear  
sierra sky

I planted marigolds and trimmed  
rosebushes voluptuous and fragrant  
silver bursts from ground to roof

at 8 I watched the ambulance  
pull away from 740 as I came home  
three blocks, walking, from school.

before I had the vocabulary,  
years before anyone would say,  
I knew she'd somehow tried  
to breathe free of her past  
and crawl away from  
the heavy beauty of the seasons

A river runs beneath his copper hide, shoulders  
of tight-bounded fibers bearing us forward,  
his chest reddening with eagerness  
under my own aching thighs, as the sun hangs still  
in a September-blue sky, browned grass  
crunching under us. This was his one prayer for his life,  
always bigheaded, blinding eyelashes,  
long nose pushing towards the wind. He forgets  
the rough ditches when we turn back,  
all hips driving us home.

How the ride was an act of my own forgetting;

how back home, your hand, soft against my cheek,  
is a comfort I almost cannot bear;

how it is all the times I've been wrong  
and all the times you've been wrong  
that make this so.

At West 58th and Bridge

an empty nest sits on the crossbar  
of the stop light,  
a patchwork bowl of  
mud, sticks and grass.

A few days later,

a robin fluffs her feathers while  
cars and trucks whiz-blam by.

Why so determined to settle here?

One-story frame houses crouch

next to new brick townhomes.

SUVs slide pokerfaced into garages

while cars not worth stealing sleep on the street.

Night is coming on:

the snarl of choppers, the yowl of cats,  
a bad breakup broadcast  
from the corner bus stop.

The unbirthing had you crawling back into her,  
and upon finding the old home too small,  
dried and unwelcoming,  
the thing that held together all the ladders in you ruined.  
Broke and then broke again.  
You are now at the bottom of this belly well.  
The Mother you need is so far drowned that you can't open your eyes.  
She's moved to California. She's doing big things at an education start up.  
She sends you photos of a salt water pool and you smile with a mouth full of fish.  
She leaves a letter with your grandmother and stamps begin to fall from your hair.  
You only know how to be what she needs.  
An identity of your own? What dumb luxury.  
What are you supposed to do with freedom like that?  
The same thing you do with anything gigantic and shocking. Kill it.

If he offers me a drink  
of water, I must remember  
to drink from the  
root & inhabit rain.

If seams wait for repair  
at whatever depths I must  
hand stitch them in place—  
it pricks, starts to bleed,  
I must lick it, follow & sew.

If I keel over in a church pew,  
next to the exit, I must endure with grace  
this penance & not kneel  
before another man's thighs.  
If he offers me a drink,  
I must not make it holy.

& If each time at the call to prayer  
I am devoted to flesh,  
I must fight the urge to swallow  
what is not water.

As it runs down his thigh—  
just above my head this cross  
fixed around my neck  
resembles an anchor.

Goddamn you for taking  
all the blue bills we stashed  
in the Fleetwood House back  
when the packages were coming  
in weekly from San Francisco.

I know I fucked up. I know what I  
did was wrong. But that girl didn't  
mean anything and I was really counting  
on having at least some of that money  
and my life is a lot harder now that I don't.

Six-C motherfucker—you have a way  
of sucking all the oxygen out of a room.

Egyptians and Sumerians recognized you first,  
Lavoisier gave you a place at the Table.

We frantically measure your parts per million,  
but you don't care either way.

Hot button hustler, poised for escape  
at a bottle-popping party, you don't look back,

leaving everything flat. Can you be captured, traded,  
taxed, sequestered? Your miscellanea—

those dipoles of soft and hard, allotropes of graphite and  
diamond, ready to bond—ready for Controversy.

Recombinant shape-shifter, capable of creating nearly  
10 million compounds, of course you're unfazed

by our atmospheric pressure. With no melting point,  
reaction-resister, stoic solid—Is summer

your season? Squatting in peat, loitering in petro-  
leum, skulking in methane clathrates, cached in coal.

You really know how to heat things up.

At the time Chernobyl blew I slept on the floor of a mattress-sized room  
sharing a wall with a lab that paced and tamped his muddy dog run down

my landlords came home yelling and got high on the leather sofa while their toddler trailed  
after their teenager howling, I need you

days, I sped across the city in a beat Datsun delivering blueprints and fending off  
lanky proposals to hit Topless Night at the Cricklewood

nights, I crammed for bluebook tests on Kant and Aristotle who said the worst  
form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal

Chernobyl operator Oleg Genrikh slept on a cot in a windowless room  
opposite the controls until Anatoly Kurguz shouted  
everything is on fire

they dove for cool linoleum but found  
fire skin and crawling to the clean staircase  
Anatoly's skin fell away

Days on days in Paris clouded Becquerel-Curie's lab so they abandoned sunlight  
and tucked uranium in a dark drawer yet still it threw light on the cross  
and unearthed its shadowed twin

I move in to a tiny apartment in a schoolyard dreaming  
earthquakes are a dog  
hurtling to the end of his chain

false snow falls on film of the Pripyat kindergarten

Those mornings he walked the Scottish terrier along the ancient coastal hillside streaked with homes. Now and then he could see through a side yard, over low redwood fences, to the ocean.

All night the booms of artillery from Camp Pendleton, the flashes from the south lighting up the curtains. And now the destroyer twenty miles off shore. And now the daylight maneuvers, and the reports that reached him moments later, at the speed of sound, from the big guns on deck.

Those mornings, grief was the plum he placed in a brown bag and left to ripen in the dark. Grief was the narrow door he moved through moving away.

Past but not past Marie, past the six years of her medical bed, one good eye that did all the talking. Through a door, down narrowing stairs to a place suddenly outside, the flat top of a palisade above the sea, where children walked by on field trips and others introduced themselves as friends.

The horizon would sweep up every sound, he thought. The horizon, where brightness headed.

Pocatello, 1916. The tire of the Bistline Lumber truck caught the lip of the mountain road and almost pulled him over. The next week, he enlisted, spent the war building an air strip on North Island.

The dog rubbed his shin and ankle, leaned between him and the crumbling sandstone edge. My grandfather wondered what else he could say to the long end of sky.

Months after the miscarriage, I sat  
on the cracked vinyl of a corner booth  
in a local barbecue joint with my sister  
as she told me how she felt the blood  
leaving her body during a high school  
math class, excused herself in a panic  
and went to the bathroom. The next  
days were blurs of doctor visits, waiting  
for phone calls and test results, counting  
the clots of blood she lost and kept  
losing. She spoke over the noise  
of clanging smokers, bustling servers  
in sweat-soaked tee-shirts, voices  
tumbling across each other in the full  
room, and I inhaled the sweet scent  
of meat as she told me how our mother  
had said *I had a miscarriage once too,  
it's not that bad, I didn't even want  
a child*. The two of us laughed  
at the absurdity, realizing that the loss  
had come before my sister, and couldn't  
stop laughing. I pressed my palms  
against the sticky tabletop, closed my eyes  
as she said *it was my baby, you know*.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Kelly Beard** is a recent graduate of the Vermont College of Fine Arts (MFA in Creative Writing, July 2016). She works as an employment discrimination lawyer in the metro-Atlanta area where she lives with a poet (David Bottoms) and a dog (Jack). Her work was chosen as one of the top-ten essays in the 2014 Tucson Literary Book Festival Creative Nonfiction Contest and she published an extensive interview with Andre Dubus III in the literary journal Five Points.

**Heather Bourbeau's** fiction and poetry have been published in 100 Word Story, Cleaver, Duende, Eleven Eleven, Francis Ford Coppola Winery's Chalkboard, Open City, The Stockholm Review of Literature, and Tupelo Press. Her journalism has appeared in The Economist, The Financial Times, Foreign Affairs, and Foreign Policy. She was a contributing writer to Not On Our Watch: A Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond with Don Cheadle and John Prendergast. She has worked with various UN agencies, including the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia and UNICEF Somalia.

**Emily Marie Buehler** is an educator and emerging poet. Her poetry often examines our complicated relationships with injustice and responsibility, resistance and courage. She has a masters in international conflict resolution, lives with her husband and son on her family farm in southeastern Minnesota, and teaches at Minnesota State University Mankato where she is also completing her MFA in poetry.

**Abby Chew** spent a good many years in the Midwest but didn't find a second dog until she moved to California, where she currently teaches English at Crossroads School. Her first book of poems, Discontinued Township Roads, is available where books are sold.

**Lee Chilcote** lives in a 1900 Victorian in Cleveland, Ohio with his wife, Katherine, and their three children. He has worked as a community organizer, real estate developer, writer and teacher. He once read his poetry at the Slovenian National Benefit Society Farm in Kirtland, Ohio, where they served steins of beer and sausages and people danced to a polka band. He holds degrees from Oxford University and Cleveland State University and his writing has appeared in Vanity Fair, Next City, and numerous literary journals. In 2016, Finishing Line Press published his chapbook of poems, The Shape of Home. He is cofounder and director of Literary Cleveland. [leechilcote.com](http://leechilcote.com) /[litcleveland.org](http://litcleveland.org)

**William C. Crawford** is a photographer based in Winston-Salem, NC. [ForensicForaging.com](http://ForensicForaging.com)

**Kym Cunningham** will receive her MFA from San Jose State University with emphases in creative nonfiction and poetry. She is the lead Nonfiction Editor of Reed Magazine, the oldest literary magazine West of the Mississippi. She received the Ida Fay Sachs Ludwig Memorial Scholarship and the Academy of American Poets Prize for outstanding achievement in her writing. Her writing has been published in Drunk Monkeys and Reed.

**Soleil David** was born and raised in the Philippines and now lives in Los Angeles. She graduated with high distinction from the University of California, Berkeley. She is a 2017 PEN Center USA Emerging Voices Fellow and a recipient of the Julia Keith ShROUT Short Story Prize. Her poetry and

prose have been published in Our Own Voice, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, Pittsburgh Poetry Review, and the Asian American Writers' Workshop The Margins.

**Robert Evory** is a poet and musician from Detroit, Michigan. He is currently the Assistant Coordinator for the Creative Writing at Western Michigan University where he is the Poetry Editor for Third Coast; he is also the Managing Editor and co-founder of The Poet's Billow. Recently he was the artist-in-residence at Gettysburg National Military Park. He earned an MFA from Syracuse University. His poetry is featured or is forthcoming in: Georgia Review, Natural Bridge, Nashville Review, Wisconsin Review, Ghost Town, The Madison Review, Arroyo, Water~Stone Review, and elsewhere. <https://thepoetsbillow.org/>

### **Effy Fritz**

**Daniel Jackson**, a poet from New York, has received his bachelor's degree from Hunter College, New York and is currently an MFA candidate at Emerson College, Boston. He has studied with John Skoyles, Daniel Tobin, and Gail Mazur. his work has appeared in Calliope Magazine and other small journals. He is assistant poetry editor at Redivder literary journal and enjoys volunteering at various nonprofit organizations.

**James Croal Jackson** rediscovered his love of poetry while pursuing the film industry in Los Angeles, and his poems have since appeared in magazines including The Bitter Oleander, Rust + Moth, and Isthmus. After a 37-state road trip spent living in his Ford Fiesta in 2015, he chanced upon a home in Columbus, Ohio, where he won the 2016 William Redding Memorial Poetry Prize. Find more of his work at [jimjakk.com](http://jimjakk.com) or tweet him @jimjakk.

**Carolyn Kras** is a writer whose awards include the Hamptons International Film Festival Screenwriters Lab, Alfred P. Sloan Screenwriting Award, Visionary Playwright Award, and a Fulbright LUSK Grant to the United Kingdom. She has been a writer-in-residence at Ucross Foundation, Hawthornden Castle, Sell a Door Theatre Company, Ragdale Foundation, American Antiquarian Society, and Anderson Center at Tower View. Her plays have been produced or developed at Chicago Dramatists, Stage Left Theatre, Centenary Stage Company, Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre, 20% Theatre Company Chicago, Live Girls! Theater, Williams Street Rep, Theater Masters, and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, among others. She has a B.A. in Drama from Washington University in St. Louis and an M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing from Carnegie Mellon University.

**Duane Locke** lives in a city that is alien and unknown to him, Tampa, Florida. He dwells Heremetically near friendly alligators, ibis, egrets, herons, etc. In June 2016, he invented A visual art he calls "Sur-Objects," and already has a 107 published. He is also a poet, Having had 7,068 different poems published, 34 books, the latest (July 2016) VISIONS.

**Rachel Longstreet** grew up in a suburb outside of Kansas City, Missouri then ventured north to pursue a BFA with a painting focus and a BA in philosophy from St. Ambrose University. In 2013, she completed an MFA in painting at the University of Minnesota with a minor in art history. She and her husband packed their bags and headed south to be in the lively art and literary tradition of New Orleans. Her practice is primarily concerned with the celebration of looking at the world and the process of recording what is observed.

**Thomas Martin** teaches First Year Composition at West Virginia University where he is also an MFA candidate in fiction. His stories and poems have appeared in Kyler Martz's *Niteswimmer*, a few issues of *The Advocate*, the horror anthology *States of Terror Vol. 2*, and elsewhere.

**elena minor** is the author of *TITULADA* and founding editor of *PALABRA*. Her work has been published in more than two dozen journals and anthologized in *Angels of the Americlypse*, *BAX 2015* and *Coiled Serpent*. She teaches community-based creative writing to high school students.

**Katie Darby Mullins** teaches creative writing at the University of Evansville. In addition to being nominated for the Pushcart Prize twice and being the associate editor of metrical poetry journal *Measure*, she's been published or has work forthcoming in journals like *The Rumpus*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *BOAAT Press*, *Harpur Palate*, *Prime Number*, *Big Lucks*, *Pithead Chapel*, *The Evansville Review*, and she was a semifinalist in the *Ropewalk Press Fiction Chapbook* competition and in the *Casey Shay Press poetry chapbook* competition.

**Cara Murray's** poetry is included in the collection "*Systemic Crises of Global Climate Change: Intersections of race, class and gender*" (Routledge, 2016) and the anthology "*Only Light Can Do That*" (PEN Center USA, 2016). Her work also has appeared in *Obra/Artifact*, *Otoliths*, *Platte Valley Review*, and *shufPoetry*.

**Laurie Posner** recently returned to the San Francisco Bay Area from San Antonio, Texas. She works in the field of educational and environmental equity and inclusion. Posner holds a MPA from the School of Public Affairs at Baruch College and is an alumna of National Urban Fellows, Community Education Leadership Program, and Leadership Texas. Her writings and podcasts about structural inequity have been published by the Intercultural Development Research Association and the Esperanza Center for Peace and Justice; she is also a peer reviewer for the international *Journal of Community Informatics*. Posner is the recipient of the Philip J. Rutledge Award and Genevieve Mott Literary Award. She volunteers with the Poetry Barn/Rooster Moans. Her poems can be found in *Rockland Lit*, *Borders*; the *Squaw Valley Review*; and *Black Earth Institute*, 30 Days Hath September.

**Monique Quintana** holds an MFA in Creative Writing from CSU Fresno, where she was the president of the Chicanx Writers and Artists Association. She is a Squaw Valley Writers Fellow, and was the Senior Associate Fiction Editor of *The Normal School* literary magazine. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Huizache*, *Bordersenses*, *Mount Island Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Ragazine*, *Madcap Review*, and *Heather Press*, among others. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of [razorhousemagazine.com](http://razorhousemagazine.com).

**Robin Rice** is the author of 90+ plays (short, one-act, full-length), produced worldwide -- South Korea to Africa, London to Off-Broadway. Publishers include Samuel French and *Original Works*. The environment, social justice and realizing individual passions are frequent themes. Synopses of available plays: [www.RobinRicePlaywright.com](http://www.RobinRicePlaywright.com)

**Richard Robbins** was raised in California and Montana but has lived continuously in Minnesota since 1984. His *Body Turn to Rain: New and Selected Poems* is due in 2017. He currently directs the creative writing program at Minnesota State Mankato. His website is: <http://faculty.mnsu.edu/richardrobbins/>

**Anna Sandy** received her BA in English from the University of Memphis. She then relocated to Atlanta, GA, where she is now a third-year MFA candidate at Georgia State University. She currently teaches English Composition at GSU, and serves as the poetry editor for New South Journal. Her work can be found (or is forthcoming) in the Santa Fe Quarterly, Sun Star Lit Review, and Muse/A, among others. Most importantly, she is the owner of the world's most frightened cat. You can find her on Twitter and Instagram at [@annamariesandy](#).

**Jacqueline Smith** is a recipient of the UCLA Extension Writers' Program Scholarship. Previously her work has appeared in *The Writing Disorder* and *Hypertrophic Literary*.

**Alaina Symanovich** is an MFA student at Florida State University with a concentration in creative nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Sonora Review*, *Entropy*, *The Offbeat*, *Fogged Clarity*, and other journals. Damaged Goods Press recently published her book of poems titled "Fortune."

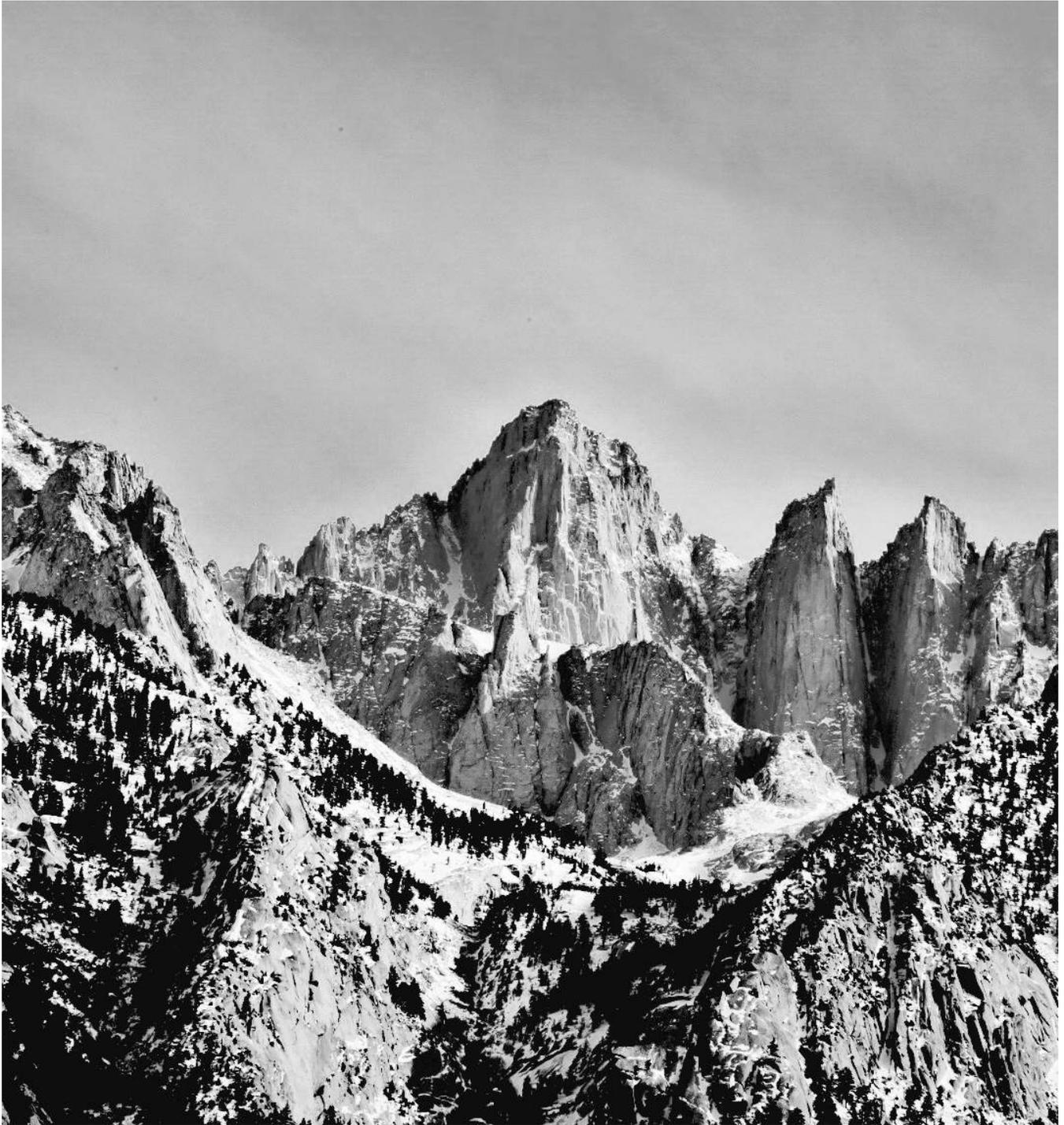
**Dallas Woodburn**, a former Steinbeck Fellow in Creative Writing, has published fiction and nonfiction in *Zyzyva*, *Prism Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, among many others. Her plays have been produced in Los Angeles, South Lake Tahoe, and New York City. Visit her online at [www.writeonbooks.org](http://www.writeonbooks.org).

**Terry Wright** is an artist and writer who lives in Little Rock, Arkansas. His art has been widely exhibited and has appeared in numerous journals and venues, including *Potion*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Sliver of Stone*, *Third Wednesday*, and *USA Today*. More of his art and poetry can be seen at his website at [cruelanimal.com](http://cruelanimal.com).

**Ann Wuehler** is a native Oregonian. She's lived in China, visited Bangkok and taught in Lithuania and Honduras. She received my BA in Theatre from Eastern Oregon University and her MFA in Playwriting from the University of Nevada/Las Vegas. A novelist for Kensington Gore, with *Oregon Gothic* out now and more to come.

**Zareen Zahra Zeero** is a currently-itinerant trans nonbinary woman and stimulus arranger from Los Angeles. Sometimes these arrangements are poems. She has previously appeared in *Lumen* and *Deluge*, and she also authors a semi-regular TinyLetter called *situationist taqiyya* — it's filled with oddities. You can find her other work and social media at [zareenzahrazeero.com](http://zareenzahrazeero.com).

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