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LIVING PROOF OF THE DAMAGE HEARTBREAK DOES

Susan Jardaneh

PROOF BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT

Walter says "asshole" when the truck cuts you off on the one lane road heading to Walter's first Saturday morning meeting. It's Meeting #208 for you. You haven't said "asshole" for two years, not since Father Virgil shared that Samuel was never your child alone and you paired the vulgarity with a fist across the Father's jaw. You felt lucky the Father was in street clothes and you both were in the church's Bingo room. You were euphoric because it was you, Newton, who was laying one on God himself and it was time someone stood up to him. Father Virgil spat blood and said, *Anything can happen in a church*. Father Virgil then suggested you both further the conversation next week. He would bring baked goods and a catcher's mask. Walter says, and you say to watch the language at the meeting. Meeting #2 and the Father talked his story: always drawn to God, like his Mama, but they went to the Catholic Church that his white daddy liked, kept going even after Daddy passed. Virgil stuck out being the only black altar boy in his Catholic parish until high school, then he skipped church to hang with his friends, got into drugs, alcohol to hang with his friends, after high school got arrested like it was his occupation, used his family, slept around and around, made and stole money, all to not hear God's call of being a black priest in the Catholic church as if he were a boy not heeding the dinner bell. Walter bangs your car's dashboard, trying to make the truck in front of you move faster. You notice a dad in the Chevy truck with both his hands on the wheel in front of you. The little boy in the front hops around like a grasshopper captured in a shoebox. Then he pats his dad on his head and, afterward, pats his own head. Meeting #10, Virgil explained he burnt down his mama's house after leaving a cigarette lit while sleeping off a bender. He got out, but his Mama

didn't. Died of a heart attack at the hospital. Virgil sat in the church he had grown up in for three days listening to the priest do the daily mass, telling and retelling the story of Eli and Samuel. Walter yaps about why you even invited him to this meeting and you're not sure now either. Meeting #47, you asked about the story of Eli and Samuel, and Father Virgil explained Samuel was a miracle child, born to Hannah after praying for a child God would use in his life. *Great,* you had said, *so since God already has a Samuel, maybe he could give me back mine.* Hannah promised Samuel to the Lord, so she gave him to the priest Eli, who mentored him, but also was slipping in his devotion. Father Virgil had said, *Eli's words when he finally heard God: He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes, made me wet my pants right there in the hospital pew.* Your focus is on the truck veering off into the gravel when Walter yammers, *What in Heaven's holy name am I going to get out of some guys crying a river. I mean,* Walter says, *it's pretty clear why you would go. Just being honest,* and he goes hands up like he's being arrested. *Because you knocked your wife down in my restaurant, Walter*, you say, and you put your own hand up to block Walter's repetition of it was just an accident and she knows not to bring you creamed spinach, it's the smell you were trying to escape. *It's not your restaurant,* Walter says, and sulks. *Close enough,* you say. *I make the rules.* Walter starts with his *how would you know*, and *who are you to* and you know he's a whisper away from saying just because you, your wife and your four-year-old son went to the Strawberry Festival on a sunny Florida June day two years ago and a man who wanted his girlfriend back, shot up the girlfriend and the festival along with five other people including your four-year-old son, that doesn't make you some kind of anger expert, so you veer your truck in the gravel too, and Walter, instead, has to slap his John Deere hat on the dashboard and say, *Watch the damn road*. The kid in the truck slowly pounds Daddy's head into his shoulders. The scene is one of endurance, you recognize, but you notice how your head is tilted, like you can't view the scene straight on. You watch the boy leave his hand on top of Daddy's head, then move it back and forth, like he's stroking Daddy's hair. *God ripped my son apart to take him back*, you had said during Meeting #47, *so I guess God just couldn't use him?* You watch the boy stretch over and lay his head on Daddy's shoulder and place his other hand on top of his own head.

Christ sakes, Walter says, and he jerks the steering wheel, making you turn down a street where the corner house has a *Garage Sale Today* sign in the front yard to get away from the truck.

WITNESS TESTIMONY #1: NEWTON

Weekend mornings were for garage sales. You are eight years old and you wake on Sunday morning and grab your treasure hunting toolkit, which was a canvas bag swallowed in Star Wars stickers. Last week your flashlight helped Mom find the navy rayon fabric with a pink and green floral design that she made a dress out of and the magnifying glass helped spot the handmade Polish cereal bowls that she won't even let you use for cereal. So, you finish packing your pencil erasers, flashlight, measuring tape, old newspapers, screwdriver, rope, pad and pens, sunscreen, Chapstick, and gummy bears and walk out of your room with the bag around your shoulder, but in the kitchen your father has overtaken all the space making Shakshouka with your mother's pots and pans. Then you remember Mom saying your father was only here for a short time, so let's hold off on the garage sales. You were supposed to be hunting for dishes, fabric, and Star Wars toys, but, instead, you and Grandpop eat while watching He-Man, and you smile when he slaps munchkin donuts on your plate while your mother and father eat at the table, leaning into each other, talking like spies. The truck you all pile into later on belongs to Mom so when your father says he can drive to church, you wait for protest. Your mother—sugar white with freckles like Magic Marker dots on her arms and sprinkled across the bridge of her nose—can fix that truck like it was her own kid. But she's now in some flowery dress handing over keys with the *Don't Mess with Mama* key ring to a man who left the day you were conceived and has visited three times, including this one right after the balloons went down for your birthday. Your father has thick black hair and dark brown skin, like you. As he drives past orange groves and tractors working open fields he's holding your mother's hand. He brought you a glass bottle with a picture of a camel made of different colored sand inside from Jordan, where he is from and where he says the family name is very important and how you have many, many cousins. Your mom smiles her it's-okay-I-am-with-you smile she has given when you first went to school

and when you lost your favorite Batman figure at the bus station, but she is still holding the man's hand, and the contrast between his dark and her white skin makes your face itch. Walking through green wet grass toward the red paint-chipped *Welcome All* sign above the church doors, your father reaches for your hand, and you think of the *Pinocchio* story your mom read at bedtime where Pinocchio goes to Pleasure Island only to discover it has a terrible curse.

PREPONDERANCE OF EVIDENCE

Walter started his Meeting #2 cursing the priest, voicing his displeasure with dessert. You are the only one startled. Others treat Walter like a toddler in a temper tantrum, ignored so the tantrum loses air. Walter requested pecan pie at the end of his first meeting, so Father Virgil made snickerdoodles. Walter doesn't know snickerdoodles. You do. Snickerdoodles were a lifetime ago along with bedtime stories and crashing Hot Wheels, piggyback rides, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles battles. It's a time you have to repeat. Annie is pregnant. Annie is pregnant. Annie is pregnant, you said at Meeting #62 and cried all over Father Virgil's brownies because God was forcing your anger out. Who would be angry at a second chance with a new baby, you knew would be the question. Annie wasn't angry. Annie praised God. Annie felt lucky. She thanked God for the opportunity to replace all of Samuel's memories with this new baby until Samuel's memories ran out, and the last memory—where the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Samuel clutched throughout the Strawberry Festival that flew up as bullets obliterated his small frame—could be suspended forever. You try to open Walter's Meeting #2, but there's Walter with: *Here's what you do: have the garage sale. The wife prices everything. Get a beer and put the crap out early morning. Eat donuts and have another beer while sitting in the garage and you won't even hear the wife haggle over crap you can't use.* The Teacher's head shakes and Father Virgil coughs, while PJ the cook takes out his earbuds, but Walter launches into his *Another lifetime ago I was a truck driver in Eastern Oregon*. You remind the group they are just about out of time, but the Teacher reminds you they just started. You've heard Walter's *another lifetime ago* story and you're amazed at how his wife disappears when Walter starts with those words. *I'm going to tell you how a problem solv-*

er works, gentlemen. I used to drive trucks in the northwest and one day I was in Eastern Oregon, just coming out of the Pendleton Mountains. I was hauling cattle and thought I had it made when a truck in front of me blew a tire. The thing swerved like a snake and tail whipped my truck, tipping it. Walter's growing up with a mother who preferred drinking to him and a father who believed hard work was a substitute for conversation has formed Walter's perspective. *There's no problem hard work won't help you forget,* he told you about Samuel. But that God chose you to nurture this black hole inside of you that uses gravity to keep light a prisoner feels strangely natural to you. *All we are going to be able to do is mourn,* you told Father Virgil in Meeting #87. *I'm not going to start a foundation and I'm not lobbying Congress. I'm not the person to make speeches about how a gun taller than my four-year-old that is only used in the military ripped through his forty pounds so that we found different parts of him in the green, green grass of a Strawberry Festival. All I know is to give air to loss.* Walter's story is on the part where the highway is in chaos: cows overturned, some meandering, others injured, Walter's head is bleeding, people screaming, horns blaring, and you get up to move away. *Traffic is stopped,* Walter says, *and the fire engines and ambulances can't get through because of cows mooing and shitting. Newton, come hear my story,* Walter says, but you say no. *You can't let a problem linger, I'm telling you,* Walter says, *so I'm the only one who knows to take action.* You turned around—*So, he shoots them,* you say. *He takes the rifle that he illegally has in his truck and shoots them. Because he thinks stopping a problem ends it.* PJ the cook drops his cookie and says, *Well, fuck.* When you see Walter flip his chair over and say, *That was my story,* fever swells in your body like an inflatable pool filling with air. With more than 200 meetings, you know anger isn't a primary emotion—fear, injustice, anxiety are its brothers in arms. But Walter can't get to you fast enough, and you see it now, why he chooses this way because your blood is alive, muscles flexing—the mind cleared to one simple solution. To pass the time before Walter gets to you, you're flipping chairs, and as you're about to throw a chair over Walter's head, PJ the cook tackles you at the waist and to the ground you go. The Teacher has Walter and Father Virgil says—*we all need a prayer,* and there you are, again, back into yourself.

WITNESS TESTIMONY #2: NEWTON

At your kitchen counter with your treasure hunting toolkit spread out, you tell Pop that your father didn't pray like everyone else in church. Pop tries to fix you lunch after church and you explain your father didn't sing or make the sign of the cross, and everyone stared at him. *Well, he is a different religion,* Pop says, and he looks different from everyone else here. *Then, so do I?* you ask and you spoon out grape jelly then mouth-shovel it. Pop says it's different because you were born in Imagone, Florida. You belong. Pop explains your father is a Muslim and he prays in a mosque at least five times a day. You tie some rope around your G.I. Joe action figure and lower him over the counter, tape the other rope end and leave him hanging. *Holy moly, guacamole,* you say, *five times.* Pop layers peanut butter on the bread and says they are shorter prayers. You would still rather get all the praying out of the way. Your mom hates it when you keep coming back and asking her for things. You've asked Mom why your father left, and she says he was never really here, so you can't call it leaving. Pop says your father was a university student in engineering and your mother was a junior in high school who liked older guys. He got a job in Orlando right after college and sent money, Pop says, but your mom had a lot to deal with being alone and pregnant in a small town. You take your pocketknife from the toolkit and whack at the crust and ask if she got sad, like Grandma. Pop watches you and says your mom had her darkness, but she knew clothes and how to make them, so Pop kept her busy. *Why is he staying so long,* you ask. *Two weeks is forever.* Pop cups your chin in his hand and says, *You look like him and your father notices. Your father, Newton, might want you to be Muslim and show you the other half of where you come from.* You ask: Will he leave? *Yes,* Pop says and cuts your sandwich crust off with a knife. *It's good of him to come, but he has a job and will eventually find a wife and have children.* You ask: *Does Mommy know that?* Pop cuts the sandwich in half rather than a triangle and says, *I think so, but even adults play pretend now and then.* You try to reshape the rectangle into a triangle with your pocketknife. *She won't get sad, will she,* you ask, *like Grandma did?* Pop stares at the framed hand drawing of Imagone's old train station on the wall. Your mom was really mad when Pop told you about Grandma, but Pop doesn't lie, especially to you, so he told you

Grandma was always sad and tried really hard not to be, especially when your mom got pregnant, but one night when the air was hot and mosquito-thick and your mom was showing and was sick, and Pop was exhausted and snoring, your grandmother walked out of the house in her slippers and nightgown and stood on the railroad tracks when the 2 am train came and for the first time ever, the train whistle jolted your grandfather awake.

CLEAR AND CONVINCING EVIDENCE

You show up at Walter's third meeting to say you won't be at the next meeting. PJ the cook says, *but you've never missed a meeting,* like you're losing out on an award. *So you're having a garage sale next Saturday morning?* Father Virgil asks and the Teacher nods for you and you flick powdered sugar off your lemon bar. *I'll be in Samuel's room if my wife needs me,* you say. You want someone to haul the stuff away, but Annie wants a transaction. She wants someone to pay. Samuel's room has become your room, even your bedroom lately, you think, but at eight months pregnant Annie wants the future. *I used to fall asleep with Samuel in his room,* you say. *We'd play Ninja Turtles in his bed and read about knights and dragons,* you say. Walter sits with three lemon bars on his plate: *Have the garage sale so you can move forward.* You're not allowed to sit next to Walter anymore and you don't bring him to meetings. PJ the cook brings Walter because PJ works for you and you told him to. PJ the cook's knee shakes because he brought you the bottles he stashed at work and asked you to not let him have them. Last week the Teacher took PJ the cook to his first AA meeting, but PJ the cook says the Saturday morning meeting is all he needs. *How many times do I need to confess my sins,* PJ the cook asks, but you look at the doors on the far side of the Bingo room that PJ took off in his house so his current girlfriend couldn't slam doors because that is what PJ thinks triggers him. *I hit my last girlfriend,* PJ says, *I was already drunk, and she knew it and she kept at it and at it and at it and I said stop, and it's not like she couldn't stop. She just wouldn't.* Walter nods his head and just keeps nodding like a lazy cheerleader. It's when PJ the cook sees the Teacher that he wells up. *She wouldn't. I couldn't hear anything,* he said, *I could see her mouth moving, but I couldn't hear anything. I was all feeling.* And the Teacher walks over, stands PJ the

cook up and hugs him and PJ the cook sobs like the son the Teacher has no more. *Oh, holy crap,* Walter says, and goes for more lemon bars. You boww your head and remember Meeting #62, where after you announced Annie was pregnant you said you started sleeping in Samuel's room and the Teacher said that was fine. The high school math teacher had been your neighbor for five years and when he said, *At least when I lost my son, he was already grown,* you shouted how could you not know. *Because it was a different world ago, Newton,* the Teacher had said. *My son was twenty-two and was shot because he gave a gang member's girlfriend a ride home from work.* You told the Teacher they did go through the same thing, that the Teacher must know how you feel, but the Teacher stared into his Styrofoam coffee cup: *You didn't read about my son in the newspapers, Newton, and he wasn't on the TV news. People didn't leave teddy bears and flowers on the site where my son was murdered. People didn't stop me on the street to say how sorry they were or send food to my house or send me and my wife condolence cards. You can't know how I feel. I had to go to work the next day as if I had no problems.*

WITNESS TESTIMONY #3: NEWTON

There is a problem, you think, when the man outside of church bumps into your father and the man says, *Oh, excuse me,* and opens his jacket so the concealed holstered gun shows, and your father touches the man's shoulder with a *Not a problem*. He moves you behind him as he speaks, then takes your hand after your mom stands under the *Welcome All* church sign and calls you both. You wait for him to kneel to you, to talk, like your mom does when you need to really understand something. Your father just pulls you close. You notice the man sits in the pew behind you and sings louder than everyone and doesn't shake your hand when the *Peace Be With You*s are given, but for the first time your father shakes hands, saying *Assalamu Alaikum* and the man glares. When the kids go to children's church, your father holds you back and when Mom insists, your father says, *please, not today,* and she nods. You think about squirming because they give candy out at the end, but your father reaches into his pocket and pulls out a brand-new Leonardo Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figure and he beams at your smile. After the service you are in the pew and you ask your father why the man showed you his gun and your mother

gasps, but your father turns to the man and says, *My son wants to know why you wanted me to see your gun, sir,* and the man drops the Bible and it lands in your pew while he closes his jacket. Your mother: *Jesus, Randy, I will skin you alive,* but Randy: *I hope you have a safe trip back home.* Your father picks up the Bible in the pew and says, *It's not a long trip. I live in Orlando,* and he holds out the Bible: *Is this yours?* But Randy walks away. Outside your mom's truck has four flat tires, and she's jumping up and down, while you get your Treasure Hunting Toolkit from inside and rummage for something to fix the situation. Your father reaches inside the toolkit for the gummy bears and your baseball caps and says those will help on the walk home. You and your father stand by the oak tree watching your mom say about $50 worth of quarter-in-the-jar words. Your father says, *A'udhu billahi min ash-shaytaan ir rajeem. I seek refuge in Allah, Newton. Anger is always about covering up.* Your father puts your baseball cap over your head, then lifts it up. *Like fear or sadness or anxiety.* Your mother screams she's not moving the goddamn truck. The next day your father leaves, and a new truck is delivered to the house, just as if Santa existed. It's the last time your father will visit Imagone. He will get that wife and kids and you will visit some and go to the beach and Disney World. That day you walk home, and your father puts his arm around you and says, *Anger is feeling powerless because you don't have God rather than acting in the name of God.* You smell the cologne that makes you crave strawberries and turn to see mom following you both, smiling at what's in front of her. *In Islam, Newton,* your father says, *we are servants of God, and we submit to his will without question.* You ask if that means you just accept Mom is mad and you don't have a truck and your father says, *Bismillah Al-Rahman Al- Rahim,* which makes your forehead wrinkle. *In the name of Allah,* your father said, *always in the name of Allah.*

CLOSING ARGUMENT

You didn't know he was a Bible story when you named Samuel. *Your mother loved the name,* you say while in the rocking chair in Samuel's room before morning breaks on garage sale day. After Father Virgil baptized Samuel and your family's picture was put up on the church's website, your father stopped communicating with you. Your father said you come from a line of those devoted to serving Allah

and you would be embraced when you embraced Allah. Your mom was famous for saying that God was a father who would not desert you and you felt that, you told Father Virgil, until he took your son. *Maybe it was a mistake naming you Samuel,* you say, and your four-year-old shows himself, wearing his favorite Mutant Turtle shirt, bouncing on his bed, two toy dragons in his hands. *Your grandmother named me after the cookie she craved while pregnant. I'm relieved I wasn't named fig,* you say. Samuel bounces and says, *I love Fig Newtons.* Samuel asks where all his stuff is and you tell him they have to make room for the new baby, a boy, just like him. Samuel smiles and says he understands. *Why do you still have all my clothes?* he asks. Annie packed most of Samuel's clothes in a chest in the attic, so you move from the impulse to ask how he knows that to, *Your mom wanted to hang on to them.* Samuel says in mid-bounce: *She wanted to hang on to me,* and you say *Well, who wouldn't,* and Samuel agrees. Meeting #42, you ask Father Virgil how Samuel knew God was talking to him and Father Virgil says at first, he didn't. *He thought it was Eli, but Eli ignored the signs as he was already tuning God out. After the third call Eli told Samuel God was calling him and he should answer.* Samuel, then, walks over and hands you both of his dragons. You say thank you, but you can't take his dragons. *You need them, Daddy,* Samuel says. *Grandma, Pop, and I play with real dragons.* Instinct kicks: *You need to be careful, Samuel,* but Samuel says, *Really, Daddy, I don't.* Out the window, the stars are God's shimmering mapped messages in a language you can't read. *Speak Lord, your servant is listening,* Father Virgil had said was Samuel's prayer upon hearing God. The night's lights glow as black acquiesces to pinks and blues and, like a vision, you see figures walking your driveway. *Ghosts,* you're thinking, but then you see Walter's John Deere cap, and Samuel says, *Daddy, I didn't know you had friends*, and you say you didn't either. *The message Samuel had to deliver was not good,* Father Virgil said, *but Samuel spoke without falter and Eli accepted it.* Because we are God's servants and must obey without question, you had said, but Father Virgil said, no, because we are his children and we must accept with gratitude the world of God's love for us, even when we don't understand. The garage door goes up and the men set up tables for the garage sale. *In your grief, Newton, God is asking you to help others who will grieve, because now you know.* They are shadow men drifting

in dimming stardust bringing forth Samuel's life as silently as memory: one adjustable crib, one changing table, one elephant decorated stroller, a child's yellow dresser with different colored knobs, one white rocking chair with footstool, seventeen stuffed animals, three playsets, one Winnie the Pooh picture frame, one Winnie the Pooh lamp, three picture frames about how much a baby is loved. Your father showed up in the restaurant parking lot as you got out of your car one morning after Samuel. You said *hello* but he embraced you, knocking you back, and you felt sobs from his face onto yours. He pulled apart and said, *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un, he is returned to God, my son,* but you turned, opened the restaurant's back door, then closed it. Samuel bed bounces, then bounces and does a flip, which you always hated. You hear a knock on the door and Father Virgil's voice saying *Annie wants the toddler bed.* Meeting #97, you said to Father Virgil that *no one should treat his children this way,* but, *He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes,* Father Virgil responded, *that is how we serve.* You see your son the way he should be. You cry. You finger the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figure in your pants' pocket that Samuel had brought to the Strawberry Festival and you found in the green grass next to him. You stab your finger on it until the weapon breaks your skin. Father Virgil knocks again, and it's meeting #97, where he says what most people forget is that Samuel's story is also Eli's, for we are all Samuels letting no words fall to the ground, and we are all Elis not accepting when God calls us by name. Samuel says he is going to go play now. Samuel crawls into your lap and gives you a kiss and a hug, but you hold on as if love were a stone, solid and unchangeable rather than Play-doh that Samuel molds and shapes into something new with every touch. *Samuel, can I believe this is really you?* you ask, and Samuel puts the two dragons in your hands. *I don't know, Daddy, can you?* Samuel asks and the knocking comes again followed by Father Virgil opening the door.

DRAWING THE RIGHT STRINGS TOGETHER

A Conversation with Susan Jardaneh

James McNulty: Hey, Susan! Welcome back to the pages of *Driftwood Press*. You're one of only a very select few who have had a second story published with us, and this story is just as stunning and heart-breaking—if not moreso—than the first, which we published back in issue 6.2!

Susan Jardaneh: Hey, James! Well, it's great to be back. And I'm really grateful and honored to have another story published. I knew when I finished this piece that *Driftwood Press* would be a perfect home for it.

JM: I often like to open these interviews with a question about the structure, and boy, is there plenty to talk about when it comes to the structure of "Living Proof"! First, let's talk about your decision to weave two fairly distinct stories here, both focusing on the POV of Newton.

SJ: Yeah, I was specifically aware of structure with this story, mainly because I knew it was a very heavy, very emotional story. So, I was thinking that I needed a structure that could kind of withstand the weight of emotion rather than contribute to it. At least, for me, writing in this structure helped me not to dwell in the emotion but let the situations carry the weight on its own.

JM: Please further explain the difference between a structure that can "withstand the weight of emotion" and one that can "contribute to [the emotion]." What do these look like in practice?

SJ: For me, what this looks like in practice probably comes down to showing versus telling. The piece already has inherent emotion, so I don't want to say how the characters are feeling, which is tempting being in their thoughts. But I want to show the feelings and the complexity and even contradiction of feelings in their actions and

speech, which, now that I think about it, is hard in this type of story because there aren't traditional scenes. But it's always a balancing act between showing and telling, scene and summary in order to get the emotion so that it's authentic and really coming from the character rather than from the author. What I always remember is Raymond Carver's story "A Small Good Thing"—the father comes home after his son had died from being hit by a car on his birthday. The father is in the garage and sees the bicycle his son was supposed to get for a birthday present. The father's action of awkwardly hugging the bicycle shows all the grief the father feels without having to say anything.

JM: Keeping with the topic of structure, how did you settle on single blocks of text within each section?

SJ: I guess, for me, the block style helped in writing the story because I also had backstory for each character that was necessary because it went along with the idea that what and where you come from shapes you in ways you do and don't realize, which I wanted to develop. At first, it was a technique for me, as the writer, not to run over authentic moments and let them be. Also not to go too much into the backstory for each character and stay focused on what details were needed to move the story forward.

JM: At risk of breaching a sensitive topic, may I ask about the research that went into this story? The group sessions read as far too real, too lived-in to not have some research or personal connection with.

SJ: Ha, sure, I can see that. I don't think the answer is going to be that entertaining, though. All these characters, also, are ones I've been writing about for a while, so I am beginning to understand what makes them tick, which is a real treat. They certainly came from combinations of people I've known and worked with when I was younger when I was working odd jobs. But I was also inspired about the rash of mass shootings we've had in conjunction with how anger and grief works and how it works in men particularly. My husband comes from an Arabic background and has an estranged relationship with his father, so I think all of those tensions intermingled in this story. I did also do research on therapy groups specifically for men and the issues involved in starting and maintaining them. And my

nephew who was only twenty-two passed away from a sudden brain aneurysm three years ago. I think it's the suddenness of something so good and young and beautiful just being destroyed that has stayed with me and has certainly haunted his parents.

JM: Navigating topical subject matter can oftentimes be very difficult to get right; what consideration and research went into tackling the scene where Randy intimidates Newton's father in the church?

SJ: It's funny because for the longest time I didn't have a way to get to the ending of this story. The beginning and the middle were written, and I could see the ending of it, but I didn't have a way to get there. And I think it gave me problems because of the topical subject matter and I didn't want it to be a story where characters could be labeled as the "wrong" or "bad" character. So, the choice I gave Randy was to pick up the Bible, to embrace it, to claim it, but he can't or won't because it's not about faith or religion for him. It's about appearance. So, I kept reading the story and kept reading it and it's the Bible image that came first and then I knew I had to raise the stakes in the story in consideration with the gun, but in a way that fit with the story, so I hope that's how it came across.

JM: Speaking of the ending, the conversation with the ghost of Newton's son could easily come across as cheesy, but every second of it here feels heartbreaking, authentic, and earned. Talk to me a bit about the craft elements and effort that went into getting that right.

SJ: I really love that you say it's "authentic" and "earned" because that is the goal with a story's ending. I saw the ending with this story early on. I saw Newton and his son having a conversation and Newton being left with some choice in the end, so, then, it was a matter of how to build the story to get there and create the scene. By the end I knew that the choice was Newton's as to how he decided to wear his grief. Hopefully by the end of the story there are aspects such as details, tensions, and characters that are so entrenched into the story's fabric that it's the story that tells the author how the ending has to go. And that's how it ran with this story as I was uncomfortable a bit writing it, because I knew how wrong it could go. But I had to believe that work the story did previously was enough to make the

ending as heartbreaking as it had to be. With the ending, for me, it's trusting that the foundation I have already set down will do its job, so at the end I'm drawing the right strings together and then getting out of the way so the story can hold itself up. That's the hope.

JM: Considering the structure, the vignettes of grief, the emotional punch, and the two narratives that happen here, I have to ask about your outlining practices. This story doesn't seem like something that could be intuited through a draft without some sort of outlining present to guide you. Please talk to me about the inception and early formation of this story.

SJ: I had this story brewing for a long time. The characters are ones I've written about previously, and after I wrote "The One You Love," I knew I wanted a companion piece in a male voice, I mean, just to see if I could do it. I really started with the focus just on Newton and tried it that way, but Walter was too much of a character for me and so was the Teacher. So, I tried it again giving them sections, and then I realized Virgil the priest needed fleshing out. The sections for Newton, though, were so wildly disproportionate that I played with sections going backwards, like a block of flashback, again to show how things that happen in the past can shape us.

JM: So there was a ton of trial and error, lots of drafting and redrafting, playing around with structure and moving things about while adding and cutting. Did you work with any sort of outline? What sort of work do you do before you begin drafting the story itself?

SJ: I keep one of those little notebooks to write down things that strike me, things that I just get a feeling about that one day, some day could be put into a story. So those things are anything from bits of conversations, to phrases I hear, songs, ideas from TV or movies or art, etc. Usually, some ideas will group themselves together for me and start to shape a sketch of an idea, usually a situation. When I feel a have a hold of a few good idea pieces, I'm a big fan of writing a whole draft out, as ugly as it's going to be, so I feel like a have something tangible. Then I'm able to outline to see where the story might be going, where the holes are, what the thing is actually about.

JM: Talk to me, too, about the process of landing on a title.

SJ: Yeah, the title was the first thing I had. And I had it for years. I tried to write a story for it several times, but it never worked. The title is from a line in an Allison Krauss song "Ghost in This House" which is about loneliness of being left or left behind. And the line caught me thinking about—well, how does someone get to be the "living proof"? What happens that causes someone to be an example of "damage" that heartbreak does; it's the "damage" that was the trigger for me. I'm not sure what that says about me, but it fit really well for the characters I had been writing about.

JM: The breadth and pacing of the writing—aided by the long sentences and even longer paragraphs—can spin the reader in a bit of a whirlwind. At one point in particular, you utilize confusion to your advantage in a very interesting craft move. (Bolding mine.)

> The high school math teacher had been your neighbor for five years and when he said, *At least when I lost my son, he was already grown,* you shouted **how could you not know.** *Because it was a different world ago, Newton,* the Teacher had said. *My son was twenty-two and was shot because he gave a gang member's girlfriend a ride home from work.* You told the Teacher they did go through the same thing, that the Teacher **must know how you feel**, but the Teacher stared into his Styrofoam coffee cup: *You didn't read about my son in the newspapers, Newton, and he wasn't on the TV news. People didn't leave teddy bears and flowers on the site where my son was murdered. People didn't stop me on the street to say how sorry they were or send food to my house or send me and my wife condolence cards. You can't know how I feel. I had to go to work the next day as if I had no problems.*

When the bolded phrase is first dropped, readers are confused as to what Newton means. *How could you not know what?* You delay the understanding here for emotional punch. Craft moves like this—where the craft amplifies the emotion—are moments that highlight how important good writing—good craft—can be. The story as a whole—the dense paragraphs and structures—I'd argue heighten the

emotion of the piece. The density, the drudge of those big meaty paragraphs that don't allow you to breathe mimics the grief of the characters contained there. How conscious are you when crafting these formal elements, and how do you search for formal elements that can mimic the story's themes or emotions?

SJ: I'm really happy and I have to admit, relieved, to hear that passages like that are doing the work they were meant to do. I say that because, just for myself, I have to go with what I feel the story wants and trust in my own style and the dense paragraphs, etc., are meant to give that emotional heft and impact readers in the right way instead of being a mess of confusion, which is never my intention. I will confess, though, that I am not as smart as the story itself. I let it go where it wants and I knew from the start this story wanted me to write about things that I don't typically write about. So, I was very uncomfortable because I usually don't focus on topical subject matters, but once I knew I had to for this story, I knew I had to really have something at stake. So, I used my own children's names in the story: Elijah and Samuel who are still young. So, every time I had to write about Samuel, I really had to push through it.

What I was aware of is that I do appreciate being succinct and that's because I tend to overexplain, I am more aware of how I can trust the reader and the story and, instead, focus on the tension between the characters. So, I'm a believer that if you put thematic elements in the story—that upon getting to know your story, they are going to come out organically. It's more of in the re-reading and the re-writing that I can start to see connections and potential thematic elements that might work together. It's in the re-writing that those thematic elements start to show themselves.

JM: I love that you had to somewhat emotionally manipulate yourself to get emotional about the writing—by inserting your own sons' names. This shows how committed you are to the story, to the art, to authentically living inside your characters and their grief. You've put a lot into this, clearly. Have you used other similar strategies in the past to get yourself into a character's mindset?

SJ: Well, this is the first story where I've had to do this sort of emotional manipulation to such an extreme. I've always told myself I

wouldn't write about children or extreme violence, but then you're asking yourself if that could be holding you back. I like getting into a character's mindset, but there is a point in story where I do have to intentionally ask myself what the character is hiding—what parts of the character I haven't explored.

JM: "Living Proof of the Damage Heartbreak Does" is a novel excerpt. Please tell us more about the novel, as well as how this chapter plays into it.

SJ: Thanks so much for asking about it. Yeah, so this story is early on in the novel as it details Newton's early life and backstory. The chapters alternate throughout the novel between Newton and Sydney, who is the narrator in the other *Driftwood*-published story "The One You Love." The novel focuses on Newton and his relationship with Sydney and how they depend on each other, sometimes in negative ways, to deal and cope with the tensions of their work environment, the monotony of a small town, and the destructive choices of the people around them.

JM: Do any other art forms or mediums influence your writing? In what way?

SJ: I think music has always had an influence. I'm afraid to analyze it too much in fear that I'll pick apart the magic of its influence. But there's something about rhythm and beat that I think I tend to link to the balance of scene writing and the tempo of a story. I'm a lover of theatre, too, which I guess fits with my style. I really like the drama in moments, and I think I can find that in music and theatre.

JM: What other writers have most influenced your writing—and "Living Proof" specifically?

SJ: Well, this style was certainly influenced by Lorrie Moore and her book *Self Help*. I was in bit of a writing slump before this story, and I tend to go back to authors that I've loved for a love time, sort of my comfort writers. So, Lorrie Moore, Raymond Carver, Toni Morrison, Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor and her ideas about spiritual grace often find a way into the writing, especially this

story. I think from Raymond Carver it's this idea of characters who quite can't articulate what they are going through that comes into play a lot.

JM: What other projects are you working on?

SJ: I'm really trying to put this story collection behind me right now. I am sketching out ideas about a new piece of work about ugly animals.

JM: Do you have anything else to say to our writers—about writing or "Living Proof of the Damage Heartbreak Does"?

SJ: Just that I'm very thankful for writers being able to read this story. I'm very grateful, and I hope people like it.

SELF-PORTRAIT

Kate Finegan

as hagfish—

a truck of them, which overturns like any other—because it swerves. In this case, to avoid hitting the possum, though folks didn't care much why it lost control. They fixated on the slime. The cameras couldn't catch the smell. Think of earthworms after rain, only thousands and much bigger. Also think of salt. And death. Because what bothered me so much was the death of all those hagfish. I learned everything I could about them afterwards. They have four hearts and up to sixteen gills. Their one and only bone: the skull. So many gills to breathe from, but not a one that works on the hot asphalt of US-98. No jaws, so it's not like they were gasping, but I didn't feel like laughing, not like my cousin Colin. He laughed and laughed and picked one up. It oozed slime over his hands and wrists and arms. He tried to sling the suffocating thing at his sister, Shea, who didn't flinch. High school seniors were another species. Boys would come over in their cars to pick Shea up at sunset, spread their mouths over her face, her neck, like they could swallow her whole, and once, as a boy sucked at her shoulder like he was thirsty for some water it might give, she'd rolled her eyes at me, like *I'm so bored*, then turned the key in his ignition. They drove off to who-knows-where. Boys were yet another species. Colin couldn't swing free of the slime. He called me over, said, "Hey, Jennifer, come get your first kiss," and I felt a bit like crying but also a bit in love with him—maybe not love, but I wanted to impress him—so I picked my way across the slimy road, stepped over all those bodies, and looked the thing straight in the mouth. I already told you this creature has no jaws, but I'm not sure I can paint a picture of the mouth. Imagine flames shooting from the gaping pit of hell and I guess you're on your way, just make it greyish-pink. No way I would kiss it. See, that was when I thought it was up to me. I didn't know yet how even saying no to start and standing rooted to my spot may not have saved me. Its thrashing slowed, giving in to

death. "A good Christian girl would give it mouth-to-mouth," Colin said, and smacked me across the mouth with it, then smooshed the dying thing against me. He said, "Calm down, Jennifer." I wriggled until I didn't. I can't describe the taste. Go suck a slug from the dirt of your own grave after a downpour. Hold it between your tongue and cheek. Know the taste will linger.

as watermelon seeds,

which I'd swallowed that morning, so as I closed my mouth against the slime-eel drowning in the summer air, I wondered how long until the vines inside would choke me dead. And why'd I go to Colin and the hagfish, after what he'd made me do that morning? That's what Shea asked later, just before we found the possum. I couldn't tell her how Colin had this pull on me, somewhere in my gut and sweaty palms and thighs. I mean, he's her brother. Of course she wouldn't understand. Colin would spit the seeds from watermelon and say, "Look, Jennifer, how far they go. Bet I'll hit the shed." And he always did, *ping ping ping* against aluminum siding. One of many sounds of summer, when Dad sent me away to be with family, these cousins and their parents, their parents who were always gone. So in summer, we mostly raised ourselves. Thirsty, we wouldn't turn to water. No, Colin would wave and thrust a knife at us then cut into hard rind to find the brightest pink. But that morning, Colin spat the seeds into his palm, and when he said, "Dare you to eat these, Jennifer," I liked the way he said my name, how the *r* lingered on his lower lip, and I remembered how, when Josh drank from Xavier's water bottle in the school gym, everybody said it was just like they'd kissed, so I held my hand out. He pressed his hand against mine and slid it slowly to unstick the seeds, all that saliva. To start, I swallowed them one by one, but Shea said, "That's disgusting," and held her phone up like she was going to start filming, so I sucked them down at once. They stuck in my throat. I had to swallow five times to force them to my gut. I remembered Shea in some boy's car, idling, the way he pushed her head down into his lap and how she came inside soon after and spent an hour in the shower. Shea always acted so damn lonely, always tugged at the hem of her shirt, knotted it around her fist, especially that time I walked in and she was slumped over a toilet full of blood

and said, "I took a pill, that's all." She wrung my hand out as I sat with her, as if it were all skin and no bones at all. I clenched my jaw. Later, after I ate those seeds, I kept gulping, swallowing hard the summer air so full of water, a girl could drown in it.

as the possum

Shea and I found when we went back to the highway. Firefighters had washed the hagfish to the shoulder. All still now, no more breathing useless air. I've learned that hagfish produce slime when they're attacked. The road was plastered in defenses. I've learned they tie their bodies up in knots and wring their own selves out like laundry. The possum lay there, all encrusted. We peeled hagfish from its fur. I said, "Could be playing possum." Shea just looked at me. "You know there's probably babies in there," she said. *Babies that are dead*, I thought but couldn't say. Shea always bit her nails so short they bled. I watched those nails as she knelt beside the possum, stroked its slime-coated belly. Then the belly opened up, a melon-pink slit, still looking so alive, like lips. I thought the possum would jump up, but there was all that blood. I didn't ask what she was doing. I never did. Instead, I acted like I knew, like I had the exact same plan. I guess that's how I know we're family, after all these years. *Come close, and I'll let loose my slime, tie myself in knots to slough it off*. Now I know that pill, those clots, that slump; it doesn't strike me as so odd now, digging in a dead thing. Crouched there beside the possum, I was sure a melon patch would grow inside my stomach. That's what Colin told me. So I guessed Shea would be the one to call to cut the stalks back down, to keep this body running. "Jennifer," she said, that first *Jen* heavy, a command. She wanted me to stick my hand inside that pouch, but I really didn't want to. Or I guess I sort of did. The possum's skin was cooler than the air, cool with death, like when I touched our grandma's face inside her casket, and Dad looked at me like I was the heart attack that started with a seed of dread sunk deep inside rich dirt, but it was her back that hurt, so Dad told her *calm down, it's not your arm*, so she made herself calm down, calmed down until she died. I didn't know her well, but I'll tell you—that's how I know we're family. I jumped, pulled back my hand. There was warmth inside, and movement. Shea shushed and slid her hand out, grasping a little

body. A possum, pink and wriggling, eyes shut, tiny. "They can live in here for days," she said, and I'd have thought it was a lie if I couldn't see it breathing. Breathing right there in her hands, that heavy air. Together, we saved ten of them, bottle-fed them in the barn, until Colin with his twelve-gauge. Shea heard shots and didn't shrink at all, just aimed her phone at him and pushed record then walked right past the barrel. The boy-with-gun had shot all but two. We brought those two inside, swapped Shea's doorknob for her parents', the only one that locked. I remember the road that hagfish-day was busy, but no one stopped to ask two girls what they were digging for inside of death. Now, when I pull over for a possum and slide my hand inside, I taste watermelon, feel tendrils tangled up inside my throat. I see my girl-cousin's short nails and how she held death in her hands and somehow turned it into life.

SYNTAX ECHOES SENTIMENT

A Conversation with Kate Finegan

James McNulty: Hey, Kate. We're so in love with "Self-Portrait" here at *Driftwood*, and I can't wait to see it in print.

Kate Finegan: Thank you! I'm excited it found a home in your beautiful pages. It's always such a treat to have commissioned artwork to really bring a piece to life.

JM: Likely the first thing readers will notice about this story is its literal shape on the page. The scaffolding holds three sections, all broken by centered subtitles, meant to be read after the title in each case. Please talk to me about the evolution of this structure during the drafting process. How did you land on these three sections, these three nouns?

KF: This is one of those rare stories that came out in roughly its final form. I read a news story about a hagfish truck overturning, and around the same time, I came across a plea to recognize that a possum hit by a car might still be carrying live babies. I had no idea this could be the case. These two arresting images merged with a humid, rural summer to bring up the sticky feeling of watermelon seeds. And there you go—three parts!

JM: Along similar lines of discussion, why did you settle on single paragraphs, rather than allowing for line breaks within each section?

KF: I feel like I'm constantly referencing the opening monologue from *The Glass Menagerie*, in which Tom says, "The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic." I'm not sure I would call this story sentimental, but I guess it is sentimental in the sense that it's organized around sentiments rather than chronology. In memory, this day wouldn't be neatly di-

vided by time markers. It would instead be a space of overlap, organized around these three central images, and those central images would call up memories of other days. Long paragraphs were, to me, the vehicle for conveying how we think and how memories overlap, casting shadows and creating strange composite images when a particular memory is viewed through the lens of another.

JM: We spoke a bit in revision about clarity of time and place. What do you make of the balance between clarity for the reader and this verisimilitude to the experience of memory?

KF: I think there's a meaningful difference between a reader feeling lost about what actually happened vs feeling lost in the way that our own memories can make us feel adrift. Just last week, I went back to Toronto, where I lived for six years, and I really got a sense for how disorienting memory can be, especially when you're physically back in a particular place. I kept having the strange feeling that time had collapsed on itself, and I had never left. I think in a sense, Jennifer has never left behind this particular day and the constellation of memories it conjures.

As for how to achieve this effect without losing the reader, I think the answer is really to get some trusted readers to let you know if they're confused. In this case, Paola Ferrante read a few drafts and gave me her honest feedback, and then of course there was the editorial process with *Driftwood*.

JM: Very often at *Driftwood* as of late, we've been drawn to stories with extreme compression happening—stories that say so much in such a small space. I think "Self-Portrait" fits within that recent trend. Very easily, you could have looked at the initial outline for this story and crafted a twenty-page story, utilizing more scene-based structuring and a more traditional approach to storytelling. Why didn't you go that route? Why did you prefer here the compression tactic?

KF: I do want to start by saying that I can easily envision this being a story that I revisit in longer form at some point. I'm all for using a

story as a seed for something longer—in fact, I'm currently working on a novel based on a different, much longer short story. But at least for this first exploration of these characters, I saw compression again as a way of mirroring the rush and compression of memory.

I think that's why I settled on the name "Self-Portrait" quite early, too. I wanted this compression of memories to be a portrait of a moment in time, and the overlapping details are one way that Jennifer makes sense of who she was then and how she's carried elements of that self into who she is today.

JM: At risk of getting very in the weeds, please talk to me about the decision-making that went into dropping the punctuation between "hard" and "the" in the following beautiful sentence:

> All day after those seeds, I kept gulping, swallowing hard the summer air so full of water, a girl could drown in it.

KF: I probably had a comma there initially, but I am one of those authors who interrogates every comma and reads the work out loud with an ear toward rhythm. I liked this rhythm and how the strange syntax almost mimics the feeling of a seed stuck in the throat: the word "hard" separates the verb from its object, which creates a sense of getting stuck in the sentence.

JM: Folks often ask what *Driftwood* is interested in, and it's so difficult to say: we publish such a wide berth of diverse stories. But your answer above creates an easy arrow for me to hand out: writers who interrogate rhythm and syntax. Of course, this isn't easy. I know you mentioned that this story went through very few revisions, but how long do you end up spending on this interrogation, and please explain in more depth what that process looks like?

KF: A huge part of revising a work like this—one that's compact and language-driven—is to read it out loud. I'm listening for rhythm, but I'm not always looking for the smoothest rhythm. Surprising

punctuation can be a bit like enjambment in poetry, where you play with the reader's expectations about where a line should end. I find those moments for surprise primarily by reading the work aloud several times. In the case of this piece, that process was pretty quick, although I had to revisit it as I incorporated feedback and revised the story's events and structure.

JM: While working through our usual editing process, we spoke a bit about temporal transitions. There's one transition here that might throw readers a bit. It's intentionally muggy and embraces the clever tactics of stream of consciousness.

> The body was cooler than the air, cool with death, like when I touched our grandma's face inside her casket, and Dad looked at me like I was the heart attack that started with a seed of dread sunk deep inside rich dirt, but it was her back that hurt, so Dad told her calm down, it's not your arm, so she made herself calm down, calmed down until she died.

When you switch to "but it was her back that hurt," the reader might become slightly confused—but to good effect. This almost replicates the feeling of the moment: not understanding what's wrong until after the heart attack has happened. Many writers these days might be fearful of this sort of transition, the lack of clarity, though intentional, that it presents.

KF: Williams again: "Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart." That poetic license often comes in the form of a loop. Here, we move backward from the funeral to the moments preceding the grandma's death. I think this is how my thinking about death tends to go. When I think about someone being gone, my brain immediately goes to the moments before their death, particularly if I was present for those moments or have heard them played out on

loop by those who were there. I'm sure in this case, Jennifer's dad has rehashed these moments because he likely feels guilty for dismissing his mom's concern, so I think Jennifer would naturally go from thinking about the funeral to thinking about the death story that she's heard so many times, and in her mind, there wouldn't be a clean break. She wouldn't think, "Okay, now I'm moving further into the past." Instead, it would just happen.

I'm a technical editor by day, so I spend most of my time making sentences shorter and less complex, removing any possibility of confusion. But I fall in love with others' writing when they can write incredible sentences with syntax that surprises me. In this story, there's plenty of conflict, but the narrative itself doesn't necessarily follow a three-act structure. Even though it has three sections, it's not built around a chronological move toward a climax. Instead, it swirls around these memories of passive and active violence that are tethered to this one eventful day. The tension here is in how memories intersect, and so the sentences had to mirror that same energy, that work of making meaning out of where memories crash into each other.

JM: Ah! I couldn't agree more: surprising syntax is perhaps what I'm most interested when I'm working through our queue of submissions. So rare I speak to another editor. How would you say editing has strengthened your writing? Has it negatively impacted it at all?

KF: I was actually just having this conversation with a cohort of fellow writers at a Saskatchewan Writers Guild virtual writing retreat. Our facilitator, Jenna Butler, read a passage from Anne Lamott in which she discusses the "monkey mind," that internal voice that gets in the way of creativity. We were discussing it as an editorial voice that gets in the way of generative writing, that chides you for misplaced commas when you're trying to get words down on the page.

In some sense, my entire job is putting that monkey mind to work. Editors are people who question their own knowledge of the English language professionally, double-checking every single hyphen and alternate spelling in a piece of writing. Their job is to take

no unconscious choice for granted. Strangely enough, I find it quite easy to churn out a garbage draft in which I don't get hung up on language and syntax. I believe being a professional editor has given me a strong sense that editing is an entirely separate process from the writing itself, and I have confidence that I can take a messy piece of writing and make it shine. Knowing that I'll be able to put on my editorial hat later in the game gives me freedom to just write in the early phases.

In terms of negative impacts, I do think that my keen editorial eye held me back somewhat when I was just starting to write seriously. When you're able to produce a piece of writing that's technically sound, you can bypass the big questions like "Is this interesting?" and "Am I pushing this story to its full potential?" I would write a draft then make sure it all made sense and sounded good, then I'd submit it and get rejections left and right. Lots of people can write work that makes sense and sounds good! I needed to learn that what set good writing apart wasn't its technical correctness.

JM: What do you make of the Colin character?

KF: You know, what he does is terrible, and several readers have noted that it's hard to read about what he does to the possums. I'm an ardent animal lover who carries bugs outside instead of killing them, but I also grew up in a family of farm kids. On a farm, nature is up close, and death is constant, including death that's doled out for purposes of farm management. I don't think Colin is necessarily a psychopath, although there's certainly a lot of toxic masculinity and dangerous showmanship at work in his young psyche. I think this is a kid who has shot pest animals without any particular malice or pleasure, and here he uses that same trigger finger to get a rise out of the girls. In the moment, I don't think he fully realizes how cruel he's being. If this story were told from the perspective of an adult Colin, though, I do not think he'd be proud of what he did.

JM: This self-portrait is written from the future; speak to me about

what this added to the story. What risks did this tactic present, if any?

KF: Every portrait is preserving a moment of the past, even if that past only happened a few seconds ago, so I think this needed to be in past tense. But the challenge of a piece written fully in past tense is technical: it can get messy. It's way more straightforward to have the main timeline in present tense and all the flashbacks in past tense. Then the verb endings do so much work for you! But here, putting the childhood events in past tense allowed these moments to collapse on themselves like memory, and I enjoyed playing with a few lines illuminating how Jennifer understands herself in relation to these events now that she's an adult. I don't think those lines would have the same impact if they were in future tense. I don't think we'd have the same sense of Jennifer actively looking back on this day, and that looking back is the heart of the story. That's what makes it a memory story.

JM: Do any other art forms or mediums influence your writing? In what way?

KF: Oh, definitely! The most pertinent example in my current work is that I'm writing a novel that's one-hundred percent inspired by Joanna Newsom's album *Divers* and its exploration of how time moves. Music is an influence for sure. That novel also deals with dance, so there's another influence.

In my own creative process, I often turn to collage to play with ideas and imagery. For my novel project, I made several collages that bring together images of the characters and themes I'm exploring. Collage is an art form that puts disparate elements into conversation with one another. Sometimes the effect is harmonious, and sometimes it's jarring. This is bringing me back to the conversation about punctuation as enjambment at the sentence level. I guess collage is a way of "reading aloud" my themes and ideas at a macro level to see where they blend and where they're in some sort of opposition. I keep these collages on the wall over my desk so I can refer to them as I write.

Finally, I can't talk about art in an interview that largely focuses

on rhythm without noting that I'm a knitter. There's a rhythm and ease that comes with years of knitting, and I have to think that has helped me get a better sense of rhythm as a writer. I'm not a musician or dancer, so this is perhaps where I find my sense of rhythm or flow. On a practical level, it's really helpful to keep a piece of mindless knitting close by during a writing session. If I get stuck on the writing, I can reach for the knitting, and moving my fingers can often help me get unstuck. Maybe it's similar to how people get unstuck when they're running. Knitting is like running with your fingers!

JM: What other writers have most influenced your writing—and "Self-Portrait" specifically?

KF: When it comes to my writing in general, the big ones are Tennessee Williams and Louise Erdrich. I also draw a lot of inspiration from the teeming worlds of Lauren Groff's short stories and the speculative, embodied work of my critique partner, Paola Ferrante. Whenever I'm writing about longing, nostalgia, and memory, I go back to the work of Dina L. Relles, and in writing about the natural world, I reach for Aimee Nezhukumatathil's poetry and essays. I'm very much influenced by nonfiction about the natural world—Sy Montgomery, Lyanda Lynn Haupt, Camille Dungy, Erica Berry, and others. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* by Elisabeth Tova Bailey is undoubtedly one of my desert island books. It's a masterwork in paying attention to the small things we share this earth with.

JM: What other projects are you working on?

KF: The main one at the moment is a novel about estranged friends meeting up on a hot, muggy May weekend in Toronto. It explores the ways in which we are shaped by our environments and the people we view as mirrors of our desired selves. I guess those themes are also present in "Self-Portrait"!

JM: Do you have anything else to say to our writers—about writing

or "Self-Portrait"?

KF: That's a big question! I guess I'd just like to encourage writers to embrace the messy first draft and to listen to their curiosity. If something troubles or fascinates you, it's probably worth writing about, even if you're not quite sure how to go about it. Freewrite until you find your way, and edit later.

BEWARE OF SHARKS IN LANE SIX

Abigail Waters

My brother is the one who told me that when great white sharks are held in captivity, they'll swim into the wall that contains them until they die. I never verified this, but it seems true. I trusted my brother to be right about those kinds of stories because he loved animals that other people are afraid of—though I guess *predators* would be the other word for them. My brother hated most people because they want to kill what they're afraid of. When we found the wolf with its leg caught in the coyote trap our neighbor set, we brought her to the vet and said she was our dog, and she was our dog after that—even our mother agreed. I collected facts in the same way my brother did, but mine were for me. I'm selfish like that.

Facts like:
Odds of getting bit by a shark: 1 in 5 million
Odds of dying on a roller coaster: 1 in 750 million
Odds of dying in a car crash: 1 in 107
Odds of dying in a bicycle crash: 1 in 4,919
I ride my bike a lot more than I drive, even now.

When our mother moved us to the coast, to the Atlantic Ocean, we watched the great whites get closer and closer. When we saw a fin appear on the news, our mother told us to hurry and get in the car to go see it. We took the dog with us. We didn't even put our shoes on. We couldn't see the shark from where we parked our car, but we sat in the blue Volvo station wagon and imagined it swimming under us, swimming towards us, just the same. We always loved making games out of scaring ourselves like that, and we were still young enough to believe that sharks were what we should be afraid of.

When we lived by the ocean, our mother said we should learn how to really swim. We only knew how to swim enough to stay alive. How

to find air. When we signed up for swim lessons at the YMCA, we were the oldest kids in the pool. I pretended I couldn't see the other parents standing together while our mother sat alone. My brother pretended to swim full speed and then smash into the wall over and over again.

At the beach I watched my brother run and dive into the waves while I stood in water just above my knees. One day he swam back to me and said, *You know, most shark attacks happen in only a few feet of water, so you might as well swim out a little deeper.* I didn't believe this, but I swam out with him anyway. We both watched the horizon line for fins, hoping to see them and not see them at the same time.

We got older and I kept swimming, but my brother stopped. The dog died. We moved further inland. There are different predators there—predators that we can't give names to.

I still think, even now, of watching the sunrise over the high school from lane one of the outdoor pool and smelling the rotten egg stench of sulfur, a product of the pool's heat being turned on. Swimming in a warm pool is nice, but it makes you swim slow. When I think about swimming in high school I think, specifically, of lane one. Never mind that I was demoted to lane six by my senior year. I was the only swimmer that I know of to get slower with time—at the age when we were supposed to be getting faster and faster. If there is a perfect temperature to swim in, that pool never had it. In August, Coach would dump coolers of ice over the pool deck and into the shallow end. We put the cubes in our mouths, under our swim caps and in our suits. The Florida heat baked chlorine into our skin while the water magnified the sun's rays and baked those into our backs and legs. I tried to quit the first week, but coach wouldn't let me. My best stroke is still the breaststroke, and it's the slowest stroke you can swim.

When you're a kid you think everyone is an expert in what they do. When the swim coach with the bowl cut told me to give it two weeks and then see if I still wanted to quit the swim team, I trusted her to know that two weeks would make a difference. I trusted her

belief in my abilities. I trusted that she didn't think I would drown. I never thought to ask if she actually knew what it was like to swim four lengths in a pool of boiling water in a swimsuit that is too tight while trying not to swim into anyone else in your lane.

The high school pool had the highest concentration of chlorine, and when we rinsed our suits out we tugged on them to see if they would turn white and unravel. I loved when mine finally did. I would stretch the whole thing out and then put it back on. I wanted to see my body in its warped shape. I wanted to see what the suit looked like once it couldn't hold me or itself together anymore. Then I would throw it in the trash.

The women I swim with now are decades older than me. They remind me that the odds of living a long time might be pretty good. I still swim in lane six, and I have no intention of moving. When practice ends, all the women shower with their swimsuits on. And then they change with their towels draped across their shoulders. I take my swimsuit off and, without showering, put my pants back on with no underwear and then my sweatshirt or shirt back on with no bra and go home. I spend the next few hours lifting the insides of my wrists to my nose before I rinse the smell of the pool off. Letting go has always been a problem of mine.

What initially drew me to this swim group was the coach, who I spotted setting up lane lines at the public pool while I was reading in one of the lounge chairs with faded and broken straps that pinch my butt and back whenever I try to move. She had the same haircut as my high school swim coach. I walked over to her and signed up. I keep meaning to ask her if she knows my old coach, but I don't think she'll understand what I mean.

When I first joined the group, I wanted to impress the new coach, so I swam the warmup as fast as I could. But then I was too tired to swim the actual set, so I got out of the pool and laid on the deck and tried to leave a perfect outline of my wet body on the hot cement, like a crime scene chalk drawing. The outline dried too quickly, so

by the time practice was over the other swimmers just got out of the pool and walked over me like I was never even there.

Sometimes, at night, I think I see our old dog standing at the tree line with a metal trap around her leg. Whenever I see this, my response is to run to her. I don't even put shoes on first, but she is always gone by the time I get to the edge of the yard. I wear my wet and dirty socks to bed.

After I see the dog for the first time, I imagine what I am seeing is my brother, and in my imagination he steps out of the trap and walks into the yard, into my house. I practice showing him inside. I open the door and say, this is mine, I made this. I walk from room to room and envision how he might see me based on my home. I pretend he's walking behind me. That he's picked up the piece of driftwood on the dusty pile of books. That he's reached down to pet the cat who is rubbing her side against the banister. When we're back in the living room I give him the good seat—the green plush swivel chair. And I'm real again. I remind myself that when I was young I let a wolf inside. And I wasn't afraid. We weren't afraid. I leave the door unlocked before I go back to bed.

I'm still swimming. And I'm getting better. I'm remembering what it feels like to really stretch my body, to really reach my arms out in front of me to get to the other side. Now I can swim the warmup and the main set, but only if I go slow. Coach says she can help me get faster if I want. I don't want to get faster, but I want this coach to tell me what to do.

A shark can only ever be itself—can never stop swimming.

Don't slow down at the end, she says: *swim like you're going through the wall.*

THE NATURE OF SHARKS & WOLVES

A Conversation with Abigail Waters

Rachel Phillippo: Hello, Abigail, and welcome to the pages of *Driftwood*! "Beware of Sharks in Lane Six" is such a lovely, emotional, and understated story. I'm looking forward to learning more about the story and your process!

Abigail Waters: Thanks, Rachel!

RP: In this intimate story, the confessional tone of the close first-person voice immediately invites the reader to lean in closer, as though to accept a secret. Can you speak on your decision to use this close point of view, and any challenges you faced in maintaining or working around this fairly close psychic distance?

AW: I've spent a lot of time, in fiction writing, trying to distinguish myself from my narrators—for fear of having my stories read onto me, especially in writing workshops—but this seems to happen no matter what. A lot of my favorite writers use a kind of close-to-self narrator (Sigrid Nunez, Sheila Heti, Rachel Cusk), which I find really compelling, and yet I still felt somehow like I wasn't allowed to try to do anything similar.

I wrote this story in the last year of my MFA, at a point when I really started playing with this close-to-self narration in a series of short stories that I was planning on including in my thesis. Regarding this story specifically, the closeness of the narration felt suited to a story whose concerns are rooted in memory, fear, trauma, confusion, etc. I didn't want to give myself the space to "explain" this narrator, and in that way I was hoping to write my way into a story that gave the feeling of a person's fear, memory, and confusion in a zoomed in, close up way. I was hoping for an internal experience instead of an outside observation.

RP: Your use of white space cultivates an air of mystery and leaves the reader to fill in his or her own conclusions. One example: "I keep meaning to ask her if she knows my coach, but I don't think she'll understand what I mean." Some authors would feel compelled to continue by explaining what exactly it is that the protagonist yearns to ask, but you artfully leave this open-ended. I think this encourages the reader to look more deeply at the text. Is writing with this sort of restraint something about which you are very conscious and careful of in early drafts? Or is much of the white space created in revisions?

AW: Thanks for this question! I always want to explain as little as possible in fiction. That is one constraint that I'm intentionally working with. I start every story with a lot of space, a lot of restraint, and then the work becomes trying to stitch these pieces or scenes together. I had a teacher tell me once that he felt like my paragraphs were held together with the most barely discernible small pieces of tape. Once he reflected that back to me I took it as something I was and would always be trying to do. Some stories have more stitching than others though. This story has minimal connective thread because I really wanted to welcome the reader into the space between the narrator's present and her memory without explaining something like, "this particular thing happened to me and so now I behave like this...". And while of course fiction is different from life, I guess what I wondered with this story is how close can I get to the lived experience of loss, fear, and memory without totally losing or alienating a reader. While this attempt at "closeness" might not work for some readers, it works for me. I know from experience that this kind of story isn't always well received in an MFA fiction workshop—where every story is approached with the same set of standardized "craft" expectations as set by the tradition of, I don't know—John Gardner? And while it was super valuable for me to learn about these ideas on craft in fiction writing as an undergrad, I found the adherence to them almost a decade later made it difficult to find my own voice in fiction writing, or to even write the stories that I wanted to try to write. Fortunately for me, the last fiction workshop I took in my MFA program was with Jess Arndt. They introduced me/us to the Critical Response Process, and this way of workshopping created a space that was equipped to

receive everyone's stories. I will always really appreciate this—not having this story bludgeoned to death with a set of universally accepted expectations for what a story "needs" to be doing in order to be "working" for everyone. And maybe this story isn't successful to a lot of people, but writing stories that might be deemed successful by a fiction workshop isn't what I'm trying to do anymore (bless).

RP: On this topic of authority and growth: at one point your character philosophizes, "When you're a kid you think everyone is an expert in what they do." At the time of telling this story, the adult protagonist has come to realize the naivety in this childhood assumption, yet she still seems to yearn for that total trust and guidance. This is such a relatable theme that I think will resonate with many readers. Can you speak on this theme and what exactly it is that the protagonist is seeking?

AW: I think what she is wondering is what a lot of us are wondering: how are we supposed to live? Knowing what we know. Seeing what we've seen. Not just personal loss or fear, but the ambient anxiety that comes along with being a person in the world in this present moment. Having an endless supply of horror at our fingertips at all times. This isn't directly stated in the story, but the sharks moving closer to shore is a result of warmer water. So while the parents at the beach are worried about their kids swimming in anything deeper than knee-level water, the real fear should be the climate crisis as exhibited by rising sea temperatures. I was hoping this kind of layering would speak to the idea of: *what should one be afraid of, when there is so much to fear?*

RP: In juxtaposition to this theme of anxiety is nostalgia. Your character seems to long for the simplicity of childhood. You've so deftly illustrated the childhood exhilaration of fear and exploration in the family's shark-hunting. Later, of course, the protagonist herself becomes the shark in lane six. Can you talk a little about that transformation from fear and fascination over the shark in her youth, to (figuratively) embodying the shark herself in adulthood?

AW: The shark and wolf, or nature of these animals, stand in for a couple of ideas here: real/present fear vs. the things we are afraid of in our childhood: the shark as "predator" and how mythological fear of something can encourage violence towards it (thinking of the wolf here), how the shark can't survive in captivity—can only live if it keeps swimming. So by the end of the story the use of the "shark" as a device is supposed to highlight this idea that the narrator, by being stuck in time, memory, and grief, is essentially sinking. So while the coach is giving the kind of advice that might help a serious swimmer finish a few seconds faster, reading it through the lens of what we know about the narrator and the shark story from the brother, she is receiving this instruction not as a way to win, but maybe as a way to live. And I'm hoping that the shark as metaphor morphs throughout this story just like the formational stories we were told as children morph within us as we grow older, if we let them. And this narrator seems especially tender to the things she was told as a child.

RP: She does, and you beautifully illustrate those snapshots from her childhood. You also successfully use repetition throughout this story to draw threads between the past and present, and various themes and tensions. One of my favorite examples is your repetition of the character "not even putting shoes on" before running outside to chase the unknown—first when the family chases the shark, and later when she, alone, rushes outside to chase what she believes to be her childhood dog. Through the repetition of this very simple phrase, you draw a clear line between the first experience and the latter. Can you talk about the effective use of repetition in your work?

AW: One of the things I realized in writing these really sparse stories is that I needed to give the reader a little more at times. One of the ways I feel like I've been able to do this and still stay true to how I want to write short fiction is by using repetition. I came to this idea after a discussion with my thesis advisor where I confessed feeling apprehensive about some of the overlap between the fiction and nonfiction in my manuscript, and they suggested that I look at the repetition as an intentional device and see how these recurring

images, ideas, scenes can work to build and layer meaning—how instead of just repeating, maybe they're doing something more. This seemed like the perfect way to also build and layer meaning in the short pieces of fiction themselves and especially in this story where the narrator isn't going to outright say anything. I wondered: how can her actions, what she remembers and what she doesn't remember, give us what she can't put into language.

RP: One of those themes to which you harken back is the narrator's brother, though he is conspicuously absent from the story—both from the protagonist's life and from the text. We get a sense of great loss, grief, and on-going healing from the protagonist. There is a lot of story that occurs off the page, which is a definite strength of this short piece. What can the reader assume about the fate of the brother? And how did you weigh how much to conceal or reveal about the brother and their sibling dynamic?

AW: The reader can assume that the brother is absent from her present day life. It doesn't really matter to me if a reader assumes he is dead or estranged or missing because all scenarios have a similar impact: he is gone and she is grieving. I really wanted to maintain that this is about her, and I hoped by not giving the brother's fate a front role, readers would remain with her. Because no matter what happened or is happening to him, the whole story is about her and her inability to move forward in her life. Her inability to do this is also not just because of him. I hoped that through these flashbacks, readers would see that she's always been the way she is. Always a bit fearful, always trying to push against that fear.

RP: In such a short piece, you span at least two decades' time, from the protagonist's youth to adulthood. And yet, you cover the time very fluidly, maintaining a relaxed pace up until the climactic swim in the final scene. What is the importance of pace in this piece, and were there challenges to pacing the story while covering so much time?

AW: When I started this story I began with the scene of the narrator

starting to swim again and leaving the wet outline of her body on the pool deck. So I actually started the story in the present day with her. I rarely think about things like pacing at the outset of writing a story, but I do worry about making some massive leaps in time without any kind of setup—which is part of the challenge in writing a story that is so short. Ultimately I think that readers are smart and will make jumps like that with me without me needing to fill in these big blanks. Some of my favorite short stories move really boldly through time and I've always loved that. I still worry about it, myself, but this story seemed like a good place to try it out. Because the speaker is carrying her memories so close to her, it feels necessary to move through time in this way, a way in which all moments of time are occurring simultaneously, where her memories are as real and present as her current reality.

RP: Your bold moves have paid off in "Beware of Sharks in Lane Six." Is this story part of a larger collection? Do you have any other projects underway?

AW: Thanks for asking! It is part of a larger collection. I had hoped that once I got to the end of my MFA I would have a manuscript that was ready to go, but I didn't. I realized that I had just begun to find the narrative voice that I wanted to write into with fiction. I have a couple other short stories that were written after this voice/narration breakthrough. (I cringe saying that, but what else to call it?) These stories are connected in that they are all written with a close-to-self first person narrator in a moment of being somewhat offset from the world—all of them are similarly concerned with some aspect of meaning-making, selfhood, and devotion. So just chipping away at this collection one four-paged short story at a time—should be done in about 8-10 years!

Alongside these stories I've also been working on a book length essay for the last year and a half. It came out of my obsession with the "One Second Everyday" app for three years—it's about "memory, mortality, anticipatory loss, the motivation for documenting one's life and how writing and making art manage/respond to/complicate these ideas." I'm pretty bad at summing up what I'm writing about,

so I need to credit my dear friend Milo Muise for this short summary. But yeah, I guess everything I'm working on right now is circling around ideas of time and memory and how to live in both while moving forward (shark pun intended).

RP: I can definitely see those themes at work in "Beware of Sharks in Lane Six," and I look forward to seeing them brought to life in your upcoming projects. Thanks for taking the time to discuss your lovely story, Abigail! And congratulations again on sending it into the world.

AW: Thanks, Rachel! It's been a joy.

LITTLE EGYPT

Sarp Sozdinler

The dead dove is floating in the green-tinged blackness of the water tower like a cosmic shuttle on an interstellar freeway; maggots wiggle about and freckle the murky surface of the water in the same way astronauts float in outer space. Bobo leans over the hatchway door and pokes at the dove's bloodstained body with a hooked cane. Her throat burns with the metallic tang of gunpowder oozing out of the bullet holes on the animal's belly.

"Bo," Skyler shouts from the foot of the water tower. She gazes conspiratorially into the fine print on the black waste bag in her hands, one that she salvaged from one of the roadside dumpsters along the way. "Whatsss a fec-*kal* matter?"

High above, the crosswind ruffles the hair on Bobo's sticky forehead. "Go take the barrow," she shouts back at her sister, then yanks the collar of her blue shirt over her nose to protect herself from the foul smell. "Come on now."

Skyler stomps off with a scowl as Bobo leans her bony frame back over the hatchway door. The dove's crystalline fur looks shiny and unavoidable under the autumn sun, contradicting its gray eyes frozen in the past. If those eyes could slip a glance back up, they might be able to pick up on Bobo's failed efforts to cover her burn marks with pierced lips and paled tattoos. Likewise, if Bobo's eyes shifted down the stairs at that moment, they could have caught the contrast sparking between Skyler's minuscule body and the oversized wheelbarrow she's been obediently pushing toward the foot of the water tower.

Instead, they all pause and momentarily gaze up into the morning sky. The children of Little Egypt would do that from time to time and often find nothing for an answer; however, today, the sheltering grayness offers them a glimmer of change with its rainclouds and vultures hovering about.

"I guess it's that time of year to pluck some winged birds, don't

you think?" Bobo says, shielding her eyes from the sun.

Skyler's scowl is thick but her memory is thin. "Is there a wingless kind?" Her last few syllables crack with childish wonder.

Bobo tosses her fuming cigarette into the water tower but turns around before watching its free fall. "Depends how you treat them, babygirl."

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"What did you have to go and carry it around for?" The mother locks her eyes on the dead fowl, whose head is dangling from the side of the wheelbarrow parked behind the screen door.

"Other mealtime plans are available if you're not interested." Bobo hauls the waste bag onto the kitchen counter. She rolls its handles outward and tilts the bag to show her mother and her sister—her other, older sister, Crush—the day's find. "Hickory Sticks, club crackers, pretzels—pick your poison."

"The Great American Food." Her mother crushes an egg in the pan.

"Are they even gluten-free?" Crush pokes into the waste bag.

"Who knows?" Bobo shrugs. "You won't believe what they take out to trash these days."

Crush stops rummaging through the bag and fishes out a half-full pack of pecan pralines. With its nameless species of plants, browned hardware, and threadbare walls, their kitchen is a testament to all the hardships Little Egypt has gone through over the past decade. Apart from the world maps Skyler lifted from her previous preschools and some crosses their mother hung here and there, there is nothing inside their singlewide that documents any sign of familial life—no dusty frames of an American family on the walls, no sticky notes on the fridge, and definitely not a father figure.

"I found two black cats in our office bin the other week," says Hotel, Crush's boyfriend, from the couch over. "And if you absolutely have to know, sweetheart," he rolls his eyes over to Skyler, "they looked so positively and convincingly dead."

"Sssounds like a lotta bad luck," Skyler chimes in from the other side of the couch.

"Wait until you see a celebrity director throwing a fucking moose in his trash." Hotel turns the volume off on the TV as the president's face gives way to a treadmill commercial. "The poor creature obviously picked a fight with this guy's semi and lost."

Bobo catches a glimpse of her reflection in the cracked mirror above the sink. Her hands meet along the curve of her belly and then retreat.

"Please save the disgusting crap for after dinnertime, will you?" Their mother turns down the heat on the stove as the true colors of the dish emerge. "Care to grab a bite?" Her eyes bounce between two ends of the table, between Crush and Bobo.

Bobo leans over the counter and inhales the steam. The white and yellow domains settle in their respective territories across the pan, like the districts of Little Egypt. On the other slots of the stove are pieces of leftover food from an unknown past, each rotting in plates or skillets.

"I like it." Bobo licks the first bite off her fingertip. "What is it?"

The mother wipes her hands off with her apron. "Definitely no moose."

Crush jabs her knife into the yellow half of the food and the yolk runs out in slow plash. She hauls a large bite onto her greasy plate with the help of her fork. She chews for a good half-minute before starting to appreciate the spicy nuances blending on her tongue.

"We're going to head back out on the road this afternoon," Bobo says after swallowing another bite. "In case you guys are interested."

"Good girl." The mother shifts her gaze from Bobo to Crush. "So what do you think?"

"I don't want to go," Crush whines.

"I was talking about the food," their mother says.

"What do you mean, *you don't want to go*?" Bobo shoots a glance.

"I don't want to go," Crush repeats.

"We can use sssome company." Skyler swerves on the couch to face Crush. "I promisss to buy you a roll, C. My treat."

"Whatever." Crush shrugs and takes another bite.

"You better soon start finding your place in the world, girl." Hotel shakes his head in disapproval as he turns off the TV. The reflection of the dead dove glints off the dead grains of the blank screen.

"Even if it sometimes takes diving in the trash."

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The sun is a glaring god, and Bobo and Skyler are her victims again. Another gust of October wind, and something rolls over in Bobo's belly.

"Where are we going, Bo?" Skyler reaches for her sister's wrist.

"It's all right." Bobo pushes on the wheelbarrow. "Follow me."

The rumble of a speeding pickup truck strums their ears, leaving a large cloud of dust behind. Little Egypt stretches out all around them like an empty canvas inviting anyone who cares to pay attention to make sense of it. The arrival of fall and flocks of migrating birds would mark the beginning of a festive season each year for Little Egypt, and Bobo can see it has been leaving its mark again. For an entire day to come, folks from all around the state will invade the marketplace and weigh up, both in fiscal and physical terms, Little Egypt's infamous game meat for a deliciously bacterial Thanksgiving dish. Brooders and farmers and unlicensed hunters in the outskirts will start orbiting the town in the pursuit of an extra buck. Not that anyone has much of a choice in this matter around here, for it is more or less Little Egypt's only claim to fame: the misdeeds of man, the good deeds of Jesus, and the simple deeds of the fowl.

It is still too early in the day for most afternoon people to care about, but the purple neon signboard of the chicken-sandwich place on Fitzgerald and Main flickers OPEN. Bobo parks the wheelbarrow at the graveled driveway and then leaves Skyler's hand to flip open the front door. As they file in, an instant breeze washes their sweaty faces and evaporates the steam creeping along the windows like ivy. The low-pitched bass of a song older than everyone inside the store tingles Bobo's sooty skin as they walk toward the register.

"Hey." She raises a hand, but no one waves back.

Behind the counter, Jericho, one year her senior, is busy explaining to a colleague what she understands to be the key differences between an alligator and a crocodile.

"Hey," she goes at it again, much louder this time.

Jericho stops mid-sentence to look at her. He apologizes to his

colleague and then approaches the register in slow steps, never once breaking eye contact. A heavy blend of curry and chicken grease sizzles in through Bobo's nostrils as he draws near, only to get muffled by her own stink immediately after.

"Look, you cannot smoke in here," he says in a small voice.

"Oh, shit." She flicks the unlit roll in her hand into her pants pocket. "Sorry."

Nothing moves inside the store for a while other than their flaring nostrils and the flickering inward reflection of the signboard.

"How can I help you?" Jericho is the first to break the short-lived silence.

Bobo is the first to look away; she stares at Skyler as if the answer lies there. The little girl is captivated by the handle of a gumdrop machine near the entrance door.

"Come on." Bobo taps twice on her sister's shoulder. "Say hello to Uncle J."

Skyler screams at the rolling gumdrops with a mixture of frustration and joy.

"It's okay." Jericho steals shy glances at a nonexistent audience. "That's really not necessary."

Bobo nods blandly. "Look," she says, turning back, "any chance you let me use the bathroom?" Her eyes flit to the hallway where the two of them made it the first time.

"Yeah, sure." Jericho shrugs. "Whatever."

Bobo steals one last glance at Skyler and then hurries to the hallway. She throws an involuntary hello at a mustachioed man stepping out of the restroom as she dashes to the nearest sink. She rolls open the tap and unloads the black waste bag in the basin to wash the dead dove clean. The creature's feathers turn mushy as they get wet and blend with the clots of dried blood. Bobo tears a roll of toilet paper from the side of the sink in the hope of drying the fowl's body. She feels something kicking about in her belly, but she doesn't pay attention to it; she knows it can't be real because she's still a virgin. Well, sort of.

There is a short line in front of the register when Bobo lulls back to the store. She skips the crowd from around the side of the counter and calls out to Jericho.

"Look, can we maybe make a trade?" She leans over the linoleum surface.

"What?"

"A trade." She holds up the waste bag in her hand.

Jericho says sorry to the customer in the front of the line and walks toward Bobo's end of the counter. He grabs her by the wrist at once and drills her eyes with a death glare. "Can you please just go?"

"Jesus." Bobo yanks her hand free. She shakes the bag in the air again. "Look, I just got the bird, okay? I got the bird."

"I don't care." He frowns. "I just want you to go."

Bobo flings the waste bag onto the counter and tears the knot open to show him and everyone else inside the store its feathery content.

"Jesus Christ." Jericho jumps back, covering his nose with the back of his hand. "Crazy fucking bitch."

"Look, I think we can maybe make a trade." Bobo reconfigures her face into a puppy look. "Two fries for the bird. One more for the bag."

Jericho looks at her as if he can't decide whether she's being serious or not. Skyler starts crying; Bobo exchanges glances with the customers.

"Look, maybe just one burger, okay?" She then shifts her attention back to Jericho. "Just one burger and then we're off."

A mountainlike man with arm tattoos and a nose piercing materializes behind Jericho. "Is everything all right?" he asks while tipping his head at the customers in an apologetic way. "Is everything all right?" the man repeats, turning to Bobo.

"Fuck you," Bobo shouts.

"Okay, off you go, lady." The man starts walking around the corner of the counter, but Bobo has long made her way toward the entrance door.

"Fuck you," she shouts at him again while dragging Skyler out. "Cocksucking motherfucker."

The bells at the door chime deliriously to announce their departure. Bobo looks to her left once they are outside, and then to her right, to remain equally unimpressed by Little Egypt. Their father has been right all along: everything about this place looks like bad luck.

"Bo," Skyler cries out.

"Let's hit Pops." There is a touch of tiredness on the underside of Bobo's words.

"Bo."

"He'll know what to do, okay? He can even sell the damn birdie, for all I care."

"Bo, I'm hungry."

Bobo stops and sharpens her focus on Skyler as if it's the first time she sees her. She leans over to meet her kid sister at eye level. "No, babygirl." She pushes away a comma of hair on Skyler's forehead. "You just *feel* hungry, is all."

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This time of day, the outskirts of Little Egypt smells like crocodile shit, although there are no crocodiles in or around this part of town. Also, no street signs or traffic lights. There is only a rusty placard with a black-and-white illustration of a bulldog that welcomes Bobo and Skyler out in their father's front yard. The red block letters under the animal's floppy chin read MIND THE PECKING ORDER for anyone who cares for the pun. The so-called pecking order consists of twelve empty coops standing ten feet apart from one another in a three-by-four lineup in the front yard. Their softwood roofs are patched with tin sheets and hard-wrapped foil and supported by a string of corbels the same shade of golden yellow their father once had on the tips of his now-graying mustache.

"Bo." Skyler pulls at her sister's wrist. "I wanna go back."

Bobo rides the wheelbarrow up the yard.

"Bo, I don't like it here."

"It's all right." Bobo's eyes skim the yard, but the yard looks as lifeless as the rest of Little Egypt. "Come with me."

Bobo leaves the wheelbarrow at the bottom of the porch stairs. They set foot on the wraparound porch one by one. Although no one seems to be around, they tiptoe to minimize their uninvited presence. Skyler cups her tiny hands around her eyes and presses them against the front door to peek through its paneled window.

"Lookee here." She points at a bronze frame on the other side.

Bobo does as she's told: the frame in question contains a black-and-white bird's-eye view of Little Egypt from god knows how many years ago. Grain silos and gun stores and strip clubs and hypermarkets and self-storage facilities are shaping the tail of a gypsy moth; the longleaf pines its head.

"Dad," Bobo shouts into the house, nudging open the front door. "We're here."

The house doesn't respond.

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In her absence, Bobo's old room has become a jumble of other people's interests, her father's included. Porcelain plates, dreamcatchers, bronze doves mounted on marble bases. Action figures and statuettes ornate with dust. Old medallions and coins. A framed low-resolution image of the Pacific Ocean gleaming between a Star of David and the etching of a deer-headed shepherd losing his reserve over three naked nymphs in a sacred grotto.

On the nearest corner of her desk sits one of her old journals. She picks it up but doesn't open the cover right away. At first, she gets used to the idea of holding the journal in her hands after so many years, then of opening it, and lastly flips open the first page:

In the next fifty years:
— I have to read at least fifty pages a day.
— I need to learn when to hush up.
— I have to take more notes of my life.
— I need to learn how to be loyal.
— I have to learn how to get up early.
— I need to learn how to not promise anything to anyone.
— I have to learn how to fight back.

The list goes on for two more pages. She can see the difference between Bobo who wrote these lines and the Bobo she is now; another Bobo made this list, one with a future in her mind. A future

that just doesn't seem to be belonging to her anymore.

"Bo," Skyler calls out from the hallway where a pair of trash bags rest against the closed bathroom door. "Whatsss are we doing here?"

Bobo leaves the journal where it was. She moves past Skyler and starts toddling down the stairs. "Let's go."

Skyler studies her sister's bleeding soles, one step after the other.

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The barrow is on the move again. There are so many exits in Little Egypt, yet the sisters take on none. They stroll past a series of shopfronts crisscrossed with duct tapes and planks, and then a ragbag of tepees, and lastly a rundown pizza wagon until they arrive back at the marketplace. The afternoon is thick with men and the smell of violence: the hurried steps of a roadside vendor; the fluttering of wingbeats in dirty coops. Behind the farthest booth, the neon signboard of the chicken-sandwich place still invites the clueless Americans to some obscure habit no one can make sense of.

"Just wait here, okay?" Bobo grabs the waste bag from the wheelbarrow and takes off under Skyler's puzzled gaze.

Past the graveled driveway, Bobo peers through one of the steamy kitchen windows to make out what Jericho is up to. In the canopy of pine trees half a backyard ahead, an old black terrier with mange all over is observing Bobo's moves on its hind legs. Bobo remembers the dog; it is the one that used to bark just outside the door every time she and Jericho would make out inside the staff room. The creature is now tied to the rear bumper of a white minivan that has three bullet holes on one side of it for beauty spots. The animal's skin is scaly and shows hairless pink patches; its state of hunger is pronounced deeply through its bulging ribs. Its eyes beam in the hope of finding something to feed or drink on while the flooded potholes around its paws resemble some graves dug out for the dog.

With the help of her hooked cane, Bobo cuts the rope holding the old creature captive. Even after its newfound freedom, the dog doesn't move. It just looks up at Bobo as if it has expected to die all along and couldn't care less now if it is free or not—or even alive. Bobo kneels and unrolls the waste bag to offer its content to the dog.

The dog hunches its neck compliantly and starts licking at the dove's stiff body after a couple of hesitant sniffs.

When Bobo comes back out in hurried steps, Skyler is busy wiping the blood off her toes with a balled-up napkin inside the wheelbarrow. She tries to decide which smells worse: Bobo or the bag in her hand. As a compulsive self-sniffer, she has developed a nose for the stink and the bag is one of the worst she has yet to come across. Its rot lingers around in the air between them, burning through her nostrils with its pungent aftertaste. It's worse than that old skunk in their backyard that used to secrete out a sulfuric odor to forever ruin everything good nearby. It's worse than those gray clouds looming over Little Egypt all day to choke the houses and people below with the smell of burnt animal skin and fur and intestines. An evolutionary no-no by all means.

"Bo." Skyler can barely hold an eye open against the sun. "Whatsss a cocksucker?"

"Hop on out." Bobo is quick to grab at the handles of the wheelbarrow.

Skyler meets her hands behind her neck as her way of power play, refusing to move. "What's going on?"

Bobo turns around and stares off in the direction of the chicken-sandwich place, where an audience is starting to form around a commotion.

"Men," she replies, pouting.

"It smells like a mortuary in here," Bobo says first thing entering the house.

"Thanks," their mother says, her legs spread on the sofa. She straightens up to rid a day-old chicken wing from its skin using her front teeth; with a handkerchief, she wipes the greasy spots forming caves in the corners of her lips, then puts the cloth back on the table. Salted cucumber slices lie idly on a plastic plate right next to the handkerchief, an invitation for ants.

"Where is Crush?" Bobo flounces the waste bag down on the kitchen counter.

The mother tips her head in the direction of the backyard. Bobo peers out the screened window to spot Crush sitting on a tire swing, Hotel staring down at something by her side with genuine interest.

"Whatsss going on?" Skyler hollers from behind Bobo as she steps out into the yard.

"Come see." Hotel meets his hands around his belt. He points down at something in the shade of the sycamore tree that the swing is attached to.

Bobo stops beside the man. A large puddle of mud seems to have merged with the overflown pond gluing all the houses in the neighborhood from the backside. A motionless fish is floating about on the surface of the water, her scales glittering in the early moonlight. It seems to have been attacked by a larger, fiercer sea creature, or a human. Its rear half is all mangled; it's the only half that remains. Another fish swims excitedly around it, digs in and out of the water to probably grieve a good friend.

"Are you guysss gonna eat it?" Skyler asks with curiosity.

Hotel shrugs. "I don't think it's gonna eat itself."

"Just because you can do something doesn't necessarily mean you should," Crush says.

"Is that so?" Bobo shoots her sister a glance.

Crush rolls her eyes over.

"I'm ssstarving," Skyler says, unfazed by the tension in the air.

"I haven't had anything all day, either." Hotel nudges the animal with the tip of his boots as if to make sure it's dead.

"Is it, like, clean though?" Crush asks.

"How the fuck should I know?" Hotel says.

Everyone turns to look at Skyler, the littlest of the bunch. "It's Thanksssgiving," she says with a tone that makes it sound more like a question than an observation. "We all should eat sssomething."

A wind swooshes across the yard and dissolves back into stillness. It brushes some of the higher branches of the sycamore tree, making them gasp open. Because of those branches, Bobo's room would appear weird in the dark when she was Skyler's age, as if the dark was not weird enough a concept in Little Egypt. Things moved back then. They changed. Her family, her friends. Like everything else in town, even her happiness depended on the actions of others.

"Will you even bother to wash it?" Crush breaks the silence.

Hotel shrugs. "Do you think we should?"

"Depends." Bobo slips out a stinging sigh. "Unless you want it to be our last supper, then I'd say fuck yeah."

It's nearing the end of the day and a young couple is kissing on the deck of the water tower. Perched on the rooftop and blackened by pollution, the metal beast brings an interesting steampunk touch to an uninteresting skyline. It feels to Bobo like forever already, but they were there just this morning.

Skyler pulls at Bobo's hand, glancing up at her. "Who are they?" She gestures with her head in the direction of the deck.

Bobo shrugs. Skyler takes a few hesitant steps toward the tower and looks up. She picks a pebble from the ground and suddenly breaks into a sprint. She throws the stone at the deck, but it falls short.

"What the fuck?" Bobo is too stunned to move.

Skyler picks another pebble off the muddy ground and takes a better shot; the pebble clangs off one of the metal feet of the water tower.

"Jesus." The boy upstairs takes notice of the sisters, detaching his lips from the girl's neck.

"Sky, stop," Bobo shouts from behind her, but Skyler has already advanced halfway toward the stairs.

Skyler picks one pebble after another along the way, piles them in her palms, and then catapults all of them at once like buckshot. "Die, die, die, die."

Bobo bursts into laughter. For some reason, she doesn't feel sorry for the couple, not anymore. Everything will go well before they go wrong—that's the only piece of advice she got from her old man, the most practical kind anyone could get in Little Egypt, once home to the world's youngest volcano—the second youngest, too, counting Bobo.

She now gets herself used to the idea of holding a pebble in her hands, then actually picks up a pebble from the ground, and finally

throws it at the couple.

"Hell, yeah," Skyler cheers her on.

Bobo and Skyler march toward the water tower together and keep throwing pebbles at the deck, shooting them like missiles on a mission. Skyler starts climbing up the stairs as the couple flits around the back and down the other side of the tower.

Stripped of intruders, the deck feels like home again. Bobo holds onto the railings, gazing back at Little Egypt now obscured in the dark. It's windy and dizzy up there on this edge of the world, on the edge of everything. Dark clouds hang sketchily in the distance and paint a ruined nation black. She prays what's lurking in her belly isn't just another one of Jericho's pranks, that prick with no balls.

She straightens back up on the deck to reopen the hatchway door. She glances down the water tower like a drone of her future and counts a dozen feet until the first break of water. Then she stops counting, sure that it is the right number. Right enough to finally leave behind a life in wings and fire.

A WORD WE CANNOT PRONOUNCE

A Conversation with Sarp Sozdinler

James McNulty: Hey, Sarp. Welcome to the pages of *Driftwood Press.* Our editors love the stunning descriptions in this story, the beautiful, colorful language used throughout, the endearing characters, and the detailed setting.

Sarp Sozdinler: Hey, James, thank you so much for featuring "Little Egypt" in your pages and taking the time to have this conversation with me. As a writer, I don't find myself talking about my work in a professional context all too often, so I appreciate the opportunity.

JM: In some ways, this almost read as a novel excerpt—a snippet of a larger story. Do you have any plans to continue exploring this world outside of "Little Egypt"?

SS: Knowing from the start that this story would chronicle a day in the lives of Bobo and Skyler, short story format has always been the only plausible way for me to get "Little Egypt" across. The story has a symmetrical structure in the sense of where those characters start and end (and all the emotions and venues they navigate inbetween), so the larger story had to be confined within that seven-act itinerary. The interest I had taken in the characters were limited to only a couple of themes I wanted to explore, so as soon as they were dealt with, the story was vacuum-sealed in my mind and stored away for good. Also, when I'm done with a piece, especially if I started working on it as a short story, it's usually very difficult for me to go back to the same state of mind and enthusiasm I had when I first started working on it. My brain isn't wired to speaking the language of expansion. But, of course, never say never; if I ever take further interest in those characters in the future, which is possible in my fragmentary and intermittent way of working, I may reconsider exploring those char-

acters and settings outside the boundaries that the piece offers as is, maybe even with a whole new structure to it.

JM: Tell us a little more about the world these characters inhabit. Some of our editors appreciated how ambiguous the world was—you could easily argue that the wasteland of "Little Egypt" is post-apocalyptic, or you could argue that the world is very much real, just shown through the eyes of extreme poverty.

SS: "Little Egypt" has always been grounded in the physical reality of our contemporary times for me, so I would say the latter. I've been to places that don't "look" or "sound" too different from the setting in this story. I was born and raised in Turkey, and it's fair to say some of the impressions in the world of "Little Egypt" aren't wildly unfamiliar to me. In no way could I go as far to claim I've had it rough or anything, but I've spent a considerable amount of my life around people who did.

But to be perfectly frank, I had none of those places in mind when I sat down to write this story (of course, it's nearly impossible to trace where the influences start and end with these things, so I wouldn't rule anything out). In earlier drafts, the story was titled "Little Istanbul" to make it in some way a bit more about my personal experiences but later on I dropped this idea to render the story without nation, without any traceable clutches of time; the town in the story may come across as somewhere in the US to American readers as much as like a foreign one to some others.

JM: Along similar lines, the narrative is never entirely clear on the timeline. How intentional was this?

SS: In fact, I can answer this question as a natural extension of the previous one. I understand that that timelessness I was after can very well lead the reader to believe the story takes place thirty years ago or today; I wouldn't think it should make a difference either way as the core of the piece isn't heavily invested in the notion of time. Maybe duration, as it was always clear in my mind that the story would span a day, for it seemed long enough a period to shed light on the sisters'

lives and their relationship with the people and places around them.

JM: Talk to me more about the strength that comes through this ambiguity. Are there any potential pitfalls to ambiguity of place and time in a story?

SS: Not if the mechanics of the story don't depend on it, I don't think so. I don't want to sound pretentious or anything, but I strongly believe that a story, like any other piece of artistic production, should be judged only by its own merit, by the very components that make it relevant. Only a small part of my stories are ingrained in a definitive time and place, and I think it probably more has to do with the fact that I grew up in Turkey. God knows how much of a hard time I'd had trying to relate to certain elements in a book or a story I was reading at the time, especially when they were such deeply rooted in locality and temporality. You wouldn't believe how many times I wished as a youngster that Bret Easton Ellis wouldn't refer to a beverage or a piece of clothing by its brand name, which would give me a hell of a time trying to find a trace of it in pre-Google era, three thousand miles into the other side of the Pacific. But the joke aside, I think his books work for the very point that I've been trying to make here, only the other way around.

JM: At the story's end, we find out it's Thanksgiving. How does this play into the extreme poverty on display?

SS: Maybe unity? But I'm not sure even that would cut it. The most generous people I've known in life were more often than not those who've had it tough. The notion of sharing goes both ways for most of them, as I understand that possessiveness usually comes with things you cannot afford to lose. But if there's nothing to lose, then why bother to name things? It's all part of one big survival in the end, and I want to believe that's why all the shades in between mostly go unnoticed to Bobo and Skyler. I'm not even sure any of those concepts would even appear to them the way we name them: mercy, compassion, togetherness; I guess they all are parts of the same default they are conditioned to living in.

JM: What do you mean by "it's all part of one big survival in the end"?

SS: I think I meant it language-wise more than anything else. We usually try to make sense of our actions through those constructs that the words lend us when in fact a lot of the things we go through probably fall within the gray areas of what can be reasonably articulated. I'm sure that when I try and name a feeling, I not only constrain it within the boundaries of language but also define it through a prism of my own understanding of it, which is most probably based on my own life experience and can't be accurately replicated for others. So in that sense I think Bobo and Skyler just *do* things, *react* to things along the way, act upon instinct. Trying to rebuild a life on a day-to-day basis probably comes so naturally to them, with its own particular mindset. I believe theirs offers the kind of gray zones where the language fails all of us, even in a piece of fiction writing.

JM: In the poignant final scene, the girls take action for perhaps the first time in the story. Out of jealousy, internal rage, spontaneity, or a combination of the three, Skyler pitches rocks at a seemingly happy couple. While this is a beautiful character moment, it also seems to complicate the themes of poverty in this piece, giving "Little Egypt" more to say than simple poverty porn. Although this is a childish reaction—it's the child who begins it—the more adult figure, Bobo, takes to it after initial resistance. What do you make of this reaction, and do you think it corresponds at all with the current political moment?

SS: Things may get lost in perspective, but I think it's important to remember Bobo is a child herself. Her urge to go the extra mile for her sister in the absence of a functioning parent figure makes her look more mature than she actually is and magnifies the gravity of her actions by comparison. But at the end of the day, she's making a lot of mistakes in the process, even the more childish ones at times. She's brewing deep down with the fear of bringing a child into the world, more so when she's already looking after one. What both sisters have in common is a deeply buried rage and resentment that

they don't know what to do with and where to channel. So that end scene in my mind plays out as the first time they try and let go of it, which won't probably mean much in their lives but will absolutely give them a much-needed relief.

JM: Speaking personally, Bobo & Skyler's plight hit home for me in a big way: as a progressive in the US, it's easy to feel powerless as we watch the corporate class cripple the environment. I recently saw a film called *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, and the effort there to blow up a pipeline wouldn't have any serious ramifications—wouldn't stop the corporations from continuing their destruction of the environment—but similar to Bobo & Skyler's rock throwing, it probably *felt good* for the characters who did it. Eco-terrorism—or throwing rocks at strangers—doesn't lead to lasting change, but perhaps it's a chaotic result of feeling powerless for too long and a struggle to do something about it, however ineffective. And on the other side of the aisle, impoverished Whites in 2016 decided they were tired of the corrupt political bodies in the US and decided to throw a firecracker—Trump—into the White House. I think this final scene in "Little Egypt" taps into the resulting chaos & catharsis of feeling powerless for too long—a very prevalent feeling and result in late-stage Capitalism. Whether you intended this parallel or not, this story taps into the current feelings of folks on both sides of the aisle, I think.

SS: I hear you. As a Turkish national, I know what it means to live in the thrall of someone who makes you feel constantly unheard, unacknowledged, overlooked as a member of the society, with the only difference being that it has now spanned a period of over two decades in the case of Turkey. I've come to realize that that kind of helplessness triggers and resurfaces in me a lot of things that I've tried to repress for a long time and that I usually don't know where to channel. Living in that bubble of emotions is a constant hassle where something as fundamental as expression becomes one's primary goal for defining oneself in a plural form of living. I think it's one of those moments in life where you start making sense of what democracy should stand for in its most conventional definition and outside of its political connotations. We have a saying in Turkish, which can be

more or less translated as "Try not to talk out the things you can otherwise resolve by fighting"—and I think Bobo and Skyler's catharsis more or less falls into that side of the grid for me. (Now that I look back at it, this incredible bit from Anthony Marra's *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* could be a better fit to describe what the sisters are going through in "Little Egypt": "We wear clothes, and speak, and create civilizations, and believe we are more than wolves. But inside us there is a word we cannot pronounce and that is who we are.")

JM: The writing on display throughout "Little Egypt" stuns; it's a pleasure to read, and one of the few stories in recent memory that needed virtually no line edits from me. Please speak a little about how you craft your sentences.

SS: You may find it funny but "Little Egypt" has been the only story in recent past where I allowed myself to let loose a bit as a form of therapy and jot down the words as they come without delving too much into revising. I'm a strong believer of that half the writing is about editing, which is what I do with everything I write to an unhealthy degree. For the past several years, I've been in the process of writing a novel, and I'm sure I could have saved myself half the time if I wasn't being too religious about going through each line, each word, day after day. But when it comes to "Little Egypt," I think I have only made a couple rounds of reread before submitting it.

Also, I haven't received any formal education of writing, so I guess I can say it's all pretty intuitive for me. Being an avid reader has helped a lot in understanding the rhythm of words, sentences, paragraphs, and what really makes a piece of writing work in broader terms. It also definitely helped in trying to figure out what I do and don't like when it comes to finetuning my prose. I remember reading about how George Saunders described to his students once what "style" really means in the context of writing and how he admitted to not including anything to his pieces that he doesn't enjoy reading, such as opening a story with descriptions of a landscape. So I align with his stance on this.

JM: Saunder's words as you've paraphrased them make sense to me:

your "style" is what interests you. I would perhaps add that a writer's style can and should change from project to project—different topics, themes, and narratives should call for different approaches. I've never thought much of folks who try to find a singular style and close themselves in a box, a la Wes Anderson. I imagine such a singular style would get tiring, redundant, and constrictive after a while—and it likely isn't the best fit for every single narrative that will interest the writer.

SS: I strongly agree. Perhaps because I was initially trained as a designer, I tend to take things one piece at a time, since that each piece has often its own set of needs and own way of communicating with its audience. I guess at the end of the day it's probably more relevant to ask what the piece demands than what you think you need at the time as the author (I also believe this is why we authors tend to think differently of our stories after a certain amount of time has passed). That was one of the first things that I realized when I made my transition to writing, that how much the two worlds align in that sense than diverge; both come with an element of accountability that drives you to evaluate things with such an objective precision that might make you feel at times like an engineer rather than an artist. But I should admit it also works the other way round for me, that I don't think I find it endlessly interesting as a reader to devour the successive works of an author that might make me feel like they are all abiding by a certain formula.

JM: You mentioned earlier how "Little Egypt" didn't need as much editing. It doesn't surprise me too much that some stories need less editing than others. I think when you've accustomed yourself to looking at each line so closely—accustomed yourself to being a strong editor and purveyor of language—that you'd therefore write a stronger first draft. Said another way: extensive editing experience helps you avoid pitfalls as you draft.

SS: Yeah, I agree certain things tend to stick and linger even long after the fact, almost by osmosis, and I guess this is one of those cases. And I think you are absolutely right: after doing it for long enough, you

happen to find yourself editing on the spot as you write along, for the better or the worse, sensing that you've just taken a wrong turn and otherwise. I think everything that I've had a shot at—design or writing or whatnot—altered my way of looking at life in general to a similar effect, made me become more aware of the world around me.

JM: You mention that you had no formal education in writing. I want to make sure it's clear to readers and budding writers that you don't start off this strong without a lot of reading, self-teaching, and practice. Of course, no one needs a formal education to learn (though of course it helps). Tell me about how you taught yourself to write. Talk to me about your "nonformal" writing education.

SS: Being an avid reader helps immensely, I believe. You should first love to consume what you want to create. And a good part of what you refer to as "self-teaching" derives from managing to teach yourself how to read things—read *into* things. I've come to notice over the years that it's institutionally advised to emerging authors to be observant in life but a considerable amount of that effort should also be channeled to trying and understanding *what* works and more importantly *why* in other people's writing. Also why anything happens to work in general, I guess. This is not so different from what I would advise my students back in the day, that however strongly they may feel about their own sensibilities as a designer, they should also try and surgically identify each reason why they happened to like or appreciate a piece. Only after standing face-to-face with something for so long that certain things about it start to emerge out of those cracks in the paint, which definitely helps you make sense of everything that factors back into why you do what you chose to do.

JM: Do you write outlines before you begin drafting? How much thought goes into a story before the first paragraph lands on the page?

SS: I'm not an outliner, I'm afraid. I've spent some earlier years of my writing life envying those who have a clear idea and structure for what they want to flesh out in the end, but as I grew older I have eventually worn it out and started to learn how to embrace my

way of doing things in pretty much anything I create. When I start writing a piece, no matter it's a short story or a novel, I usually have a general idea as to how I want to begin and end things and then let the rest play itself out during the act of writing. But in no way do I go ahead and claim with certainty that this is the way: it's only by doing so that I can keep myself entertained and interested in what I do throughout the entire process; if I knew from the get-go what I should precisely do at each step, I wouldn't have probably delved into it in the first place. I'm afraid it would only leave me with so little room to maneuver in, which I'm sure would bore me eventually.

JM: Avid readers of *Driftwood* have no doubt heard my tangent here before, but I do think the worry you've described in that last sentence is actually the pitfall of *over*-outlining. There's often steadier middle-ground that can lead to less intensive re-drafting while still allowing for freedom in the process. But, of course, everyone finds a process that works for them, and it's often too difficult to change a working process.
Do any other mediums inspire your writing? Which mediums and artists within those mediums? Who are some of your favorite writers, and which ones most inspired "Little Egypt"?

SS: I'm not sure if any of my favorite writers directly or indirectly inspired me in writing "Little Egypt." As a designer, I'm as much susceptible to drawing inspirations from other mediums as from the writing world itself. Sometimes it can be a movie or a painting or some other piece of artwork, which is the case with this one story that I've been struggling to finalize lately: it is called "Little Boots" and is based on this marble bust of the Roman emperor Caligula I saw in a group exhibition in Köln, Germany just last year. (I don't know what to think of this increasing appearance of "Little" in my titles of late and I want to believe them to be purely coincidental). In the case of "Little Egypt," however, I believe Andrea Arnold's "American Honey" and some earlier Harmony Korine movies had become crucial resources in striking the tone and texture that I was after for this story.

But there are some authors that I love reading anything they

write, from Ben Lerner to Edward St. Aubyn to Brandon Taylor to Jennifer Egan to Rumaan Alam to Sandra Newman, among many others. Some young British authors such as Eliza Clark and Sophie Mackintosh have also been some of the more recent examples that're topping my list.

JM: Ah, I can see some Korine & Arnold in this. *Fish Tank* is my favorite of Arnold's, and fits in well with the others you've named. These references make a ton of sense to me. You mentioned work on a novel earlier. Can you tell us a little about it? Are you working on anything else right now?

SS: I know I will probably contradict what I've just said about the timelessness/placeless-ness aspect of some of my short stories, but my novel takes place in the setting of a past-life regression therapy center nestled deep in the mountains of New Mexico; it essentially tells the story of two distanced sisters who're navigating their current and past lives in search for a connection with one another, and with their dead mother. After three and a half years of working on it, I'm hoping to start querying it to agents by the end of summer. Usually I try to balance my time out on the novel and short stories, but lately, in the process of finalizing my manuscript, I had to singularly focus all the free time I'd had on the former. There are a lot of stories in the pipeline that I've been wanting to—*craving* to—write after working on this mammoth that's the novel format for so long.

JM: As we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to tell us—particularly about "Little Egypt"?

SS: Maybe one last thanks to you and all the editors at *Driftwood* who were generous enough to read and give feedback on "Little Egypt." More than anything, you folks gave this piece the love and attention I think it needed. It's always a joy to see someone else investing in something you wrote with the same level of intensity you nurture for it, and I will always cherish this opportunity.

You point to the grass field opposite the church, the one where children recess on school days, and it's on the top barb of the chain link fence I see it, the hummingbird. Poor thing. The way the metal pokes in through its hummingbird chin and out its hummingbird head.

Shrike did that, you say, exalted.

In those minutes before mass, while the Sunday-best children and their fretting parents settle into pews, while the priest and deacons and altar boys ready for procession, you tell me shrikes, all nine inches of them, are called butcher birds because of the way they hoard their pray. They strike with their beak at the tip of the spinal column to induce paralysis—you pinch me at the spot, sharp enough to make me wince—then shake and roll until whatever they're holding snaps its neck. It's then that the shrike carries its catch away, pins it on thorns or branches or barbs or whatever else and leaves it there for safe-keeping. Something to crave while it's gone. Something to return to, to prick and poke until it's nothing but bones torn bare.

The choir starts up. When I stand, your fingers trace their way from my neck, where you left them, down my arm and to my hand. You lock our fingers and squeeze, let me feel the cold, soft bite of your nails, the edge of your wedding band pinching the web of skin between my fingers, holding me to you. You smile and bite my cheek, play it off as a peck.

At communion, you are one of the few who open their mouth for the priest. It is never something I used to do, but I follow suit, knowing you are watching. It feels like something no one should see. It's an act too raw since you and I played it out, for the first time, on our honeymoon. Since then, it's become one of your favorite games.

You are not allowed to be a priest, yet you have me stand before you, arms crossed, ready to receive. Open, you say. I do. Your finger in my mouth, I taste the god you taught me to fear. Then you have me kneel, and you undress me piece by piece until I am shivering and moonlight pale at the foot of our bed.

What do we say? you ask. Amen.

Now, every Sunday is a picked wound. I feel the priest's pressure against my tongue, the wafer of sacrament all that separates us. Think of the day's gospel. Think hummingbird, shrike. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. That word, *submit*.

As we leave, you point again to the fence, to the hummingbird. Have you ever seen one? I ask. Sure, you say. They look like little bandits, shrikes. Little racoon birds with black bandanas tied over their eyes. They're cute, really. Just songbirds who discovered leftovers. Tupperware.

It's not their fault nature made them that way, you say.

We read from a book of prayers before bed. *Teach me to give, and not to count the cost. To fight, and not to heed the wounds. To toil, and not to ask for rest. To labor, and not to ask for reward save knowing I have done your will.* The Prayer for Generosity, it's called.

While you brush your teeth, I Google hummingbirds and learn of their generosity, how they wear themselves wan in order to pollenate thousands of flowers every day. They consume themselves by the minute, their metabolisms working overtime to compensate for their frantic hearts and darting movements. It makes sense. A heart so fast—a thousand ticks a minute—needs sufficient nutrients, so they spend their lives filling themselves on small ponds of sweet nectar. But it's a dangerous condition: a hummingbird can starve to death in just three hours. This is their nature. To teeter on the edge of life and put their faith in abundance, to be complacent in their weakness. No stores, no hope in lasting, only manic victims of their own blooming

hearts.

You come to bed and want me like you do each night. I love you, you say. You know that.

On my knees, I say the words, wait for the pain of your nails on my chest, your teeth on my back, of blood loosed from my skin. Think *submit*, think *not to count the cost, not to heed the wounds.* I imagine the most generous kind of bird—a hummingbird spiked to a chain link fence, one wing rigor-mortised to its side, half a crucifix—allowing itself grief. I already know what you will do to me. That you will, no matter how much I plea, always return to me. That you will make me last, blow by blow, and devour me. That I will let you.

NURTURING BELIEF

A Conversation with Colin Bonini

Stephen Hundley: Hello, Colin, and welcome to the pages of *Driftwood*! Our editors loved this short, sharp piece, so attuned to pressured observations of the unvarnished natural world. The stifling, macabre world of this story is palpable. What environments or places influenced "Natures"?

Colin Bonini: Thanks so much for including me!

When I was imagining this story, I was really just imagining my home. The school I went to, the church I got confirmed in. That's the grass field, the chain-link fence. I'm from San Jose, in California, and went to a Catholic school in a town nearby called Los Gatos, which is right at the foot of the Santa Cruz mountains. It's gorgeous. It's got all these great trees. And it's so green! I live in Phoenix right now, which is lacking in green, at times, so I think when I was writing this story, I was really romanticizing that environment of home. We would wake up and go to school and it would be cold—not like Midwest-cold but like, forties, fifties; so, you know, California-cold—and there would be mist and fog in the mornings. Lots of gray. But then, by the afternoon, it would be gorgeous. Sunny and colorful and just the total opposite. We'd go to school in sweats and hoodies and go home in shorts and tee-shirts.

I wanted a lot of contrast in this story. While I was writing, I wasn't thinking too much of the natural setting, but those were the colors and the atmospheres I was going for, which I guess are reflective of the environments I grew up in. So the church stuff, the fence, the shrike stuff: that's all rooted in deep green and mist and silver—the kind of fog you might get from a redwood forest in Santa Cruz. The kind of place where you might be hiking and see something dead on the ground, but it looks natural. The hummingbird stuff: I'm thinking spring afternoons. Flowers and yellows and reds. Urgent and alive; micro-level stuff. Bees and bugs and tiny heartbeats.

SH: We found the clean, condensed blocks of prose in "Natures" pleasant to the eye and well suited to carrying and comparing the

places of the piece—the field, the church, and the bedroom. How are these places in conversation within the story?

CB: Two of the main environments—the church, and the bedroom—they're very vulnerable, very intimate places. I used a church in this story, but really, think of any spiritual place—that's where someone goes to nurture their faith, their beliefs, whatever they might be. Things that are particular to themself and often unexplainable to others; even for people of the same faith, I don't think anybody has the exact same understanding of the divine or the spiritual. Belief is incredibly personal, and it can be incredibly powerful.

Bedrooms, too. Sex. It's great, if it's good. Getting close to someone, getting close to yourself, being comfortable in your own body and letting someone else see it, touch it, unguarded. It can be incredibly empowering—when it's healthy.

Basically what I'm saying is, in different ways, these settings are places where a person can be intimate and safe with themselves and with others. These can be places of celebration, of mourning, of connection, of learning. But this narrator—he doesn't feel safe in either of them. For him, faith, and the institution the church, have both become warped. So has sex. They're dangerous places for him. Anxious places. And it's this field—this public place—where he's able to draw comparisons and give language to these relationships in a way he understands. And that field, it's the opposite of the church, of the bedroom. It's out in the open. It's a clearing. There's nowhere to hide, and it's where the most noticeable, obvious violence is set.

Again, I wanted contrast. And I think those three settings played well off each other. People don't always look at sex and faith as interlinked, but I think they are. And it's funny, too, because the first version of this story didn't involve the church at all. It was just the field and the bedroom. Open and closed. I took it to one of my professors, Sally Ball, and she's the one who was like, "Something's missing. You need something else." That's when I added the church, which is kind of an in-between space—both private and public—and I think it really opened the story up and made it more complicated. I'm super grateful for that advice.

SH: How would you describe this form, and how did you arrive at it?

CB: I always thought of this as flash, but a few people have wondered if it's prose poetry. I don't think it is. I was in a graduate fiction program where the other writers were playing with the physical look of words on the page—completely justified blocks, single-paragraph stories—and they had this intense, *intense* focus on language and sound. Super talented writers—Hayden Casey, Rachel Reeher. They've both got stories in this one issue of *Bat City Review* that were big inspirations. When I wrote this, I was just trying to be like them, I think. I wanted sound to play a big role, and I wanted the way it looked on the page to reinforce the story. The blocks of text gave it a harsher feel, and I think they helped draw contrast between each paragraph.

SH: The sentences in this story sometimes communicated between themselves like poetry. Do you write in any other genres?

CB: I'm starting to, a bit. I'm working on some essays and nonfiction that I'm finding a lot of satisfaction in, and I'm getting more interested in poetry. I have one piece that kind of rides the line between micro-fiction and a prose poem, but it's still a little blurry. Some of my favorite books are books of poetry, and I've edited some poetry, but I'm a little scared to start full-on writing poems and calling myself a poet.

With poetry—there's so much I don't know. There are all these forms, all these micro-level decisions when it comes to line breaks and punctuation and spacing. And there's so much history in poetry that I'm not aware of. I think I'll write poetry one day, but I want to have a better understanding of the forms, the history, and the aesthetics before I share that work. Not because I want to do it "right" or anything—I don't really feel obliged to satisfy gatekeepers, and I know there are probably poets out there who are like, "just *start*!"—but out of respect for the form and the artists who have been working in poetry for so long. Some of my mentors are poets—Sally Ball and Jenny Irish, who both helped a lot with this story, they're poets—and they've taught me so much about sound, how lines communicate with each other, the movement between images. They're the best readers, poets. And reading poetry sharpens prose like nothing else. I think one day I'll try and make the jump, but for now, I'm mostly narrative-driven. Fiction, essays, flash.

SH: The natural brutality of this piece was pervasive to the last line, and left me with a heartsick, unsettled feeling. Can you speak to the role of melancholy in your work?

CB: Totally. I wrote the first draft of this story a few years ago, in 2021. When I look back, almost all the writing I was doing up until that year was centered around these depictions of loss, grief, anomie. Sad shit. They were usually stories about family members or romantic partners, and usually ended with the main characters—who were usually young men—kind of, like, erupting. They'd do something violent and weird, and that would be the end of the story. Or the story would end on some, like, super depressing image (like a dead bird).

At the end of that year, 2021, I wrote this sad, sad story about a dog (yeah…) and sort of hit a turning point. The stories were really helpful for me, personally—they gave me language and images for feelings I didn't know how to express, and they taught me a lot about writing stories and structuring a narrative—but they weren't stories I necessarily wanted in the world. I wanted my writing to do more than be sad. I wanted them to have joy, too. I've shelved a lot of those old ones.

My projects now still revolve around a lot of the same themes, but I think now that I have awareness that those are themes and moods I tend toward, I can do more with them. There's more variation in what I write, and how I write it, I think. I make jokes. I make my characters happy. There's complication and nuance in joy the same way there is in sadness. I still think there's room for—and value in—stories like "Natures" that meditate on these harsh, grieving moments and situations, but I think I look for more balance in my writing, now.

SH: "Natures" is a polished, finely-tuned piece. Did this story see many drafts? What was the writing process like?

CB: I think it went through three drafts? Four? It started in a class taught by Tara Ison called "What We Write About When We Write About Love," a riff on the Raymond Carver story. Incredible class. Tara rocks. She had all these amazing prompts, and there was this awesome atmosphere to the classroom. It was our first in-person class after going remote, and it was one of the best classes I've ever taken.

I met my partner in that class, too, so maybe I'm biased.

One of the prompts Tara gave us was to take a love song and turn it into a story. I'm a huge Hozier fan, and he actually has a song called "Shrike." I saw him in concert a long time ago and his intro to that song was something like, "I found out about this little bird that will take its prey and stick it on thorns and branches and things, and it'll save it for later or bring it back to its nest. And it's just so brutal, and so tender. And I thought that was a wonderful thing to write a love song about." And I was like, damn, he's right. So when Tara assigned the prompt, that was the song. This story wouldn't exist without that song, or without Tara and that class.

Researching shrikes went into researching hummingbirds, and then I wrote a draft. This was one of those stories that kept me up until like two, three o'clock in the morning. I wouldn't go to bed until I had a draft. Then I took it to Tara. Made some edits. Took it to Sally Ball, and she really opened it up for me and taught me a lot about how to write in a small container. I think I gave a draft to Jenny Irish, then to my roommate, Hayden. They all helped. Lots of people got this story to where it is. The goal, I think, was just to make every line count. Every sound. Sound and rhythm were the driving forces when I wrote this, so maybe that's why it feels poet-ish.

SH: I was glad to learn a few things about shrikes from this piece. Do you often write about the natural world?

CB: I never really considered myself as somebody who writes a lot of nature/science, but a lot of the time that's where I end up fishing for metaphors, images, and language.

In my writing, I rarely start with research. Usually I start with a plot or a setting, throw in some characters, and go until I *need* research to help me make sense of things. A lot of the time, that research takes me to the natural world, just because that's where a lot of life takes place. Like, I have this unpublished story about salmon processing in Alaska, and there's a lot of research about the river systems, the migration patterns of the fish, and the anatomy of salmon that went into that one, and that research really ended up carrying the story. That dog story I talked about earlier, I had to do a lot of research into canine anatomy and illnesses. I have another one about caves, another one about all the agriculture in California off the I-5…

My main project right now is this murder-mystery/coming-of-age novel, and there are a lot of scenes between kids in middle school. Whenever I'm stuck in those scenes, I'll do some research into like, seventh- and eighth-grade science and math curriculums, then use them as a lens for how the kids are thinking. What did they learn about in math today? How are they drawing connections between PEMDAS and their relationships to their parents and siblings? How does the textbook definition of an ecosystem impact the way they think about their friends at school? That's a lot fun. And even if my research goes somewhere else—like, I have this one chapter that's all about palmistry and Olympic gymnastic routines—research always opens my work up in ways I never would have thought possible before doing it.

SH: What about birds interests you and this piece?

CB: The hummingbird facts were the wildest, I think. Like, they can die so fast! I'd be so stressed if I was a hummingbird. They don't even sleep. They go into this like, half-asleep mode where they can still hover mid-air. It's bonkers. I think reexamining hummingbirds from that perspective was the most interesting part of this story to me. Like, when I see a hummingbird, usually I'm like, "Aw, so cute!" And, I mean, they are. I still think that. But I'm also thinking, now, "Damn, that thing is fighting for its life out here." There's something amazing about how persistent those birds have to be, how *tough*, but also how delicate they are. I love hummingbirds.

SH: Are there any artists, authors, or particular pieces that made writing this piece more possible? What sorts of things do you like to read?

CB: Like I said earlier, Hozier's song "Shrike" was the basic template for this story. That's what got me researching the bird, and really where the whole metaphor began. Tara Ison, too. Without her class, this piece wouldn't exist at all.

In terms of other readings and inspirations, there's this book of poetry called *Toxic Flora* by Kimiko Hahn that I read around the same time I wrote this story—I think the same semester I took Tara's class, or maybe the semester after. The collection is amazing. The way Hahn uses the natural world to explore the human world is just…

it's beyond anything I could hope to do. I think there might even be a shrike poem in there. *Dyke (Geology)* by Sabrina Imbler, is another one. It's such a short book, but it's like a masterclass on how to write the natural world, how to juxtapose images to create metaphors, how to focus on sound in the sentence. Everyone should read it. I haven't read Imbler's newest book, but I want to.

Those are books I was reading closer to when I wrote this story, in 2021. But I read a lot of stuff. Ken Liu, Tana French, Ocean Vuong, Alix Harrow—those are some of my other favorites.

SH: I was struck by the near-equal tension throughout the human and non-human environments. Nowhere felt safe. Can you speak to the ways you blended and differentiated between the pressures of the human and non-human environments?

CB: Oooh, that's a toughie. I like it.

My first instinct is to talk about the structure of the piece. I wanted each paragraph to move back and forth between the metaphor and the narrator's experience. I wanted there to be consistent movement between the images, the settings, and the violences of the narrator's relationship and the hummingbird's tragedy. It felt important for those two sides of this story—the human and non-human—to carry equal weight. The connective tissue between the metaphor and the relationship had to come in how much space each side of the story took up, and how the violences of each one reflected the other. Not so much in direct ties. That was actually one of the best edits to this piece, and it came from the *Driftwood* editors: don't overwrite the parallels. I wanted the unease and violence to carry from one setting to the next, one paragraph to the next, and it meant cutting back some of the writing and letting the reader make the connections. The differences in the pressures become a little more blurred, and the threats become more ambiguous, more encroaching.

SH: Do you have any other projects or forthcoming pieces that our readers should know about? What are you working on now?

CB: I do! I'm working on a novel, right now, so that's where most of my energy is going, but I have a piece in *Glassworks* called "Sometimes, if you're like me…" that's essentially the opposite of "Natures."

It's a lot happier, if anyone is bummed out by the way "Natures" ends. I've also got my first essay coming out in *Wig-Wag*, an online zine about movies, that I'm excited about, and I have some work in *The Under Review* that's very special to me. I love the editors there. They're wonderful people. Check them out!

SOMETHING YOU DON'T BELIVE

Gabriel Houck

Things begin as they so often do, without you really noticing them. The truth is that you don't really like cocaine. Seeing your friends in college do it was like seeing your dad drunk—a familiar shape behaving in unfamiliar ways, pushy and loud and vibrating like a high-tension wire. It bothers you sometimes, how this didn't ultimately make a difference. It no more kept you from coke than your dad's antics kept you from drinking, but a clever reader of this story should understand. Beginnings are a matter of vision. A matter of context.

★

Maybe the beginning of this story was the advertisements. A few weeks into lockdown, there were the reworked commercials for four-wheelers and bespoke kitchen appliances, somber reminders that your isolation was temporary, that money was still real, that stuff still mattered. Everything was in it with us.

The first time you saw one of those ads, you were reminded of an English teacher in college, and a book you'd long forgotten—involving a scene with a plane crash and surviving passengers who were disappointed that there weren't any news crews around. The rest of the book is just empty pages to your memory, but what stuck was the teacher. He was a young guy, eternal grad-student, fashionably irreverent, always nervous that nobody did the reading.

The plane crash was only real if it made the news, the teacher said. He had sat on the edge of his desk, scanning the room with the fever-eyes of a tent preacher. You'd sat there waiting for the punch behind his words to land.

★

Maybe the beginning was the moment your wife found the texts. Not the ones from the woman who teaches in Boston, nor the gallery of dirty pictures imported from your previous phone—grainy tits shared from changing rooms, up-close kissy lips, lingerie you'd bought stretched across another woman's pale body. This particular beginning began with the texts from Big Bernard across the street.

Your wife didn't know weed weights and prices, but she grew up in Humbolt County and knew what certain numbers signified. She knew enough, cared enough, to be concerned.

You had made no promises about quitting smoking. She'd made no specific demands. You may have felt the pinch of middle-age tightening at your collar, but it was never in the contract that you must grow out of old habits. Just a hope, one of her quiet things neither of you ever really spoke about.

★

Then there was the time Big Bernard wanted to know if you'd ever been with a black girl. He knew you were separated by then, and one night he pulled up in his truck while you were walking the dogs and just straight up asked. You'd been walking on autopilot. It was late winter, but the air was soft, and in the darkness above you, the owls whooped and cackled as your dogs pulled you on. When Bernard's headlights didn't pass you by, you'd stopped at the curb, and suddenly there he was, glassy-eyed and smiling, his face green and white from the glow of the dash.

You'd said you'd never been with a black girl. It was not immediately clear if this was the right answer or the wrong one.

Big Bernard said, *Wellllllll*, as if he was winding up to more, but then just patted his steering wheel. You smelled liquor-breath, but that could have been your own. The dogs blinked in the dark.

That's good to know, he said. *Be seeing you*.

Every day, you said, because he lived three houses down across the street, and because you thought it was a casual way to say goodbye, as if you'd known each other well enough to say so, as if you'd heard the

rest of his thoughts and didn't need him to say more.

★

You like to think the beginning of this story was when you didn't take the girl. Big Bernard texted you a few nights later—*come out*—no mention of weed, no mention of the money you'd left with him before. You went out anyway, hoping. It was fluency in the unspoken that you wanted; that was the whole game of it. You just acted like you both knew what was up, like you were in on it. A secret ally. One of the good ones.

The passenger window facing your yard lowered, and there she was. Lit by the overhead dome, shy-faced, round, not a day over twenty.

This man's had his heart broken, Big B said to the girl. She smiled and kept her eyes down. You thought of the pictures in your phone.

How y'all doin tonight, you said to the girl, casual, ordinary, utterly out of things to say after saying hello.

Tryin to get this money, the girl said to her lap. You nodded in deep agreement. Next door a neighbor pulled her recycling to the curb.

Show him, Big Bernard said.

The girl stretched the neckline of her tanktop down and pulled out her left breast. It was soft-looking, with a wide nipple that glistened like scar tissue. She cupped the breast in her hand and lifted it gently to her mouth.

That's what I'm talking about, Big Bernard said.

The girl's eyes rose but didn't quite meet yours.

Jesus, you said.

Sixty, Big B said.

The girl began to flick her tongue on her nipple. *You know I'm trying to be good*, you said.

The girl stopped licking and waited, one breast hanging free.

Told you he was a good man, Big B said to her.

This made you feel good, even though you didn't recognize it at the time. What was happening had become about you. What was happening ceased to involve the girl, the money she was trying to get, the why, the where, the how.

In the silence that followed, what you didn't do was get in the car. You didn't touch the girl, you didn't go back to Bernard's place with her. Instead, you gave him sixty from your back pocket as if that titty-show had been what you wanted. You thanked him, told him to enjoy for both of you, told him to get in touch when that other thing came through.

The girl's eyes closed as Bernard reached across her face to take the twenties from your fingers. He held them for a second and watched you. In your memory, his face was serious. He was like a teacher, quietly working ahead of the moment, gauging whether you've come prepared and where he can take you next.

★

Is there a beginning of this story for you and your wife if she's no longer your wife? Before the split, the beginning would've landed you somewhere further back than this really needs to go. To high school, and the back seat of Ian Kowolski's Chevy Cavalier. Or, to how her dad worked for the oil company your dad sued, and how this meant she knew your surname before you ever sat together in Spanish II. Or to the way you were a small-bodied boy, and how this meant you yearned for whatever kind of body would accept yours—the misshapen ones, the knees-and-elbows ones, the flat-chested ones with Roman noses like the woman who would become and then un-become your wife.

She left you in the Fall. And then she left you in the Spring for real, and this is perhaps the only safe beginning you can grant her: the life after you, another new normal. In the interim, Big Bernard had played wise counselor to your grief. He sat sentinel with you by the barbecue grill in his driveway, beers marking the hours unless it was too dark out to pretend like he was still working on his truck.

You were new to Georgia. You were new to the neighborhood. Your skin was new to the neighborhood too, in a way. The previous October, when a late-season storm knocked out the electricity in Atlanta for days, Big Bernard told you that your area would be last in line to get it back.

See how there's no sidewalks here? he said. It's a poor folks area. When they built this city, sidewalks were for white people downtown. Or for the Mayberry towns out by the perimeter.

The houses on your street seemed to checkerboard between poverty and Mayberry. All around, new craftsman monstrosities sprouted in beiges and blues and black-ironwork fencing. The rest were one-story ranchers. Squat brick nothings, like what you saw back in New Orleans before the floods wiped them clean down to the slab.

Twenty years ago, the only white faces around here were dope fiends on the hunt.

Bernard looked at you when he said this. He didn't laugh. He didn't talk about how much things had changed, about what these houses were costing you in rent, about what your white face meant here, now.

Nearby, the tax lawyer who'd just moved in waved from his porch.

You guys have power? he shouted.

Together, you and Bernard both shook your heads.

★

When you were in college, the girl who would later become your wife called to say her brother had gone missing. He was her half-brother, but this part doesn't matter—he was the only boy in a tribe of women, and they doted on him like the family mascot, a mop-haired kid who could do no wrong.

He was fifteen. He was gay, although nobody would have seen it this way at the time, and he was deeply unhappy after the family moved to Houston. It was a new school, a new scene, a blank slate at precisely the wrong moment. Her brother had drifted from the family since the move, and it didn't seem unusual to anyone that he got rides home after band practice from older boys they didn't know. Until he didn't come home. The rumors flew, the cops came, the local news did its stranger-danger thing. The community wore its mourning face at church and in school assembly, and soon, the brother's face joined the collage of faces papered to the wall behind the Wal-Mart checkout.

This memory comes to you in Peachtree City, mid-afternoon, the first time Big Bernard took you down to the traphouse. It was all the missing cat posters that did it. They were everywhere, crowding tree trunks and power poles all around the neighborhood. They were not all the same cat. You'd considered this: an epidemic of cats gone missing, and what it might mean. Later on, you'd asked Gio and Cookie about the flyers after doing a line together, and Gio had given you a hard time about it.

This guy thinks we eat pussy, he'd said to Big Bernard, flicking his cigarette at you.

There was a tense moment before everyone laughed. In the stretch of silence, you thought suddenly, sharply, of the brother. It was he—what was his name, how absurd is it that you couldn't summon his name—who seemed to ask the question about the fliers. Or he was why you asked, but either way, it was here that you suddenly remembered the phone call, the tears, that ripping sound in your future wife's voice.

The light behind the window blinds pulsed with passing cloud-shadow. Whatever Gio and Cookie were doing behind the curtain in the kitchen, you had found yourself in a stranger's house imagining, in great detail, a separate dimension—the world of missing things. It was an invisible landscape, layered over the visible world like a secret map, underneath which the trails of cats and dogs and runaway faces all left a traceable record of their passing. It was an omniscience that was religious, this feeling. A certainty of a world beyond this one, something you did not believe in. Something you did not believe.

An ending: the brother, we later learned, was not dead. Nor was he missing, kidnapped, or lost. He was in rural Iowa, with a man who had once volunteered at the music outreach program in his high school. The man was a twenty-something baby-faced 7th Day Adventist named Charlie, and they were in love.

Charlie was arrested and charged for, among other things, transporting a minor across state lines for the purposes of sex. He had referred to the brother as his teenage son to a skeptical hotel clerk in Waterloo. The clerk had called it in; the cops came, and the rest is

easy enough to guess.

The story that ends here is a story about invisible predators and Pied Pipers. Or it is about the benign neglect of which we are all capable—about the ways we will, despite our best intentions, fail the ones who love us by failing to see them at all. It is ultimately a cautionary tale.

But the story didn't end. When he turned eighteen, your future-wife's brother joined the army, saw combat in Kandahar. He now pairs service dogs with veterans for adoption after discharge. He still lives, as far as you know. He still lives, and so the story did not end.

⋆

All through the first pandemic summer, the woman from Boston wanted to visit you.

Everything's online now, she said.

Winter up here will be a kind of death, she said.

She didn't say: your wife is gone, I am here, isn't this what we did it all for? But this was the message, and of course you heard it.

What had you done it all for?

The longer the days, the less you seemed to know the answer. You'd found yourself missing odd details—the smear of the dog's nose on the windowpane. The smell of your wife's sweaty clothes in the hamper. The resonant heat of another body in the now-empty bed.

⋆

By then, you were visiting Peachtree City without Big Bernard, although not to spite him and not without his blessing. He stopped bringing girls by your house. You were grateful for this, even though you couldn't remember when you'd last had sex. He seemed relieved to not be your drug connect, but maybe that relief was yours. It felt good to separate the business end of things, but whenever a week passed without seeing him, you'd picture the garage he worked at and wonder if the virus got him. But then he'd be back, Toni Braxton playing from the speakers of his truck, and after some pleasantries he

would just wave you on with an oil-stained salute.

Go ahead, he'd say.

Go ahead, young soldier.

The night was bitter. Wind flexed the fingerbone branches of trees. Peachtree City wasn't far enough from Atlanta to fully escape its electric halo, but above you a river of frozen stars gilded the rooftops in liquid silver.

Gio let you in, but only after you went around back to knock on the kitchen door. He seemed reluctant at first, like he didn't fully recognize you. You wondered if you were not the only white guy who came around. You felt like asking, but you saw the smoked-over glass of his eyes, the tremor in his cigarette hand. When you reached for your wallet, Gio just shook his head and pointed up the stairwell.

In the flop-room, Cookie was holding court. You could feel the stereo in your lungs coming up the stairs, and when you opened the door the noise poured out into the hall. The room was lit dimly through a lenticular cloud of smoke. Cookie, his front teeth flashing at odd angles when he laughed, pointed to the group of teenagers sprawled on the floor around him and introduced them as cousins from El Salvador. Eyes rose to meet you, traveling up the legs of your jeans and the tailored cinch of your winter coat. You felt each look as the question it most certainly was.

What the fuck did you want?

★

A memory: your best friend's father got COVID in August. He—they—live in Lower Manhattan, near Washington Square Park, near where the freezer-trucks holding bodies were showing up in the background of news broadcasts. Your friend was stoic about it. On the phone, he walked you through the statistical breakdowns—infection severity, mortality rates, hospitalizations sorted by age and ethnicity and all the other useful metrics. It was doctor-language, and your friend was a doctor-in-training, already practicing the separation of what is from what could be.

This memory has a happy ending. Your best friend's father works

at NYU. He has the best medical care money can provide, eats simple clean foods and avoids the vices. He ended up riding out the virus locked into one half of his high-rise apartment, taking food his wife left for him on a tray by the hallway door.

Another ending: your ex-wife's father also died in August. He had a heart condition that left him terminal and homebound for years. It was, in part, for him that you and your wife had gotten married at all. He'd waited so long to see you both take that step. Once the decision to put him in hospice was made, the clock was ticking. You did your duty, and he lived to see the day. But he outlived the marriage, too. Just long enough to see his daughter's world come apart. You gave him this, you smart and gifted man. This was the story you wrote.

⋆

That fall, the woman from Boston offered an ultimatum. You gave in. She didn't want to be alone for the election, and you didn't like the idea of watching the current president get re-elected without having someone around to siphon off your despair.

You didn't put it this way, of course. This was a new beginning for the two of you, and the plan felt good. You could both teach from different rooms, drink beers and talk shop and maybe fuck after dinner on the couch. You spent mild evenings together on the back deck. She was entranced by the tropical Atlanta winters. Even in the apocalypse, the city pulsed and glowed, the electric beating heart of downtown painting the night horizon like the afterglow of a flashbulb.

When the election was finally called, you celebrated by driving into town. The city was caught in a paroxysm of joy. Cars waiting at red lights honked with windows down, their music spilling into the street in a hurricane of noise. Piedmont Park was a living sea of faces, masks, homemade signage, and plumes of pot smoke. Fists pumped in the air. The woman from Boston leaned out the passenger side of your Subaru and screamed, Thank you Georgia! People cheered. Someone invited her to show her tits.

Later that night, you freebased in the bathroom with your over-

head fan on, then smoked a joint to mask the smell. After sex, you listened to her talk about the plans she'd made in case the election had turned out differently. One was to overstay a VISA in London. Another involved an NGO in Colombia. Several of her friends in Boston had been preparing a cross-border run to Canada. Theirs was a mixed bunch—some of her fellow Jews, a lesbian couple from Somerville, a trans-man who taught in the same program she did. They'd booked a cabin in the Catskills, even pool-shopped groceries and supplies for the long haul. You laughed when she told you that they planned to bribe a border guard.

How much were y'all going to give him? you said, trying to snap-back to seriousness once it was clear she didn't think this was funny.

However much we had, she said.

You knew better than to laugh. You knew her family's history in the camps. You knew better than to tell her that bribing a border guard only happened in movies, and you definitely knew better than to suggest she be happy for how things turned out—here, with you, now that the fascist in the white house had lost.

The two of you lapsed into quiet for a while.

When she spoke again—However much it would take—you knew enough to know that she was no longer talking to you.

Winter arrived, gray-faced and disgruntled, for a few weeks in December. A cluster of snowstorms stalled out over the southeast, and the woman from Boston delayed her plans to return home. By then, the shine of things had dulled considerably. You talked less. You struggled to stay interested in sex. Even the joy that followed the election had evaporated. The TV talked about the legal challenges, militia violence, secession. In these voices you sensed the fear that the country was never going back to normal—to even the ugly, familiar, shit-stain version of normal it had been before all this started.

The woman from Boston felt these anxieties acutely. You talked her down each time the news broke the wrong way. Or, you tried, and wound up fighting, then isolating, then apologizing in breathy whispers in bed once everyone was too tired to stay angry. You smoked more. You'd stopped bothering to hide the freebase, and

stopped pretending you could even afford the habit.

Soon, objects that your wife had left behind started winding up on Ebay. You sold her wine fridge with the wonky temperature sensor. You sold the end tables, the art-deco lamp she'd left in the guestroom that must not have been such an important heirloom after all. They didn't bring real money, but this didn't matter. Numbers seemed to have a different meaning. 400,000 was big—an endless cemetery, expansive and impossible. 40,000 was meager—a salary piped directly to necessities without stopping over in your wallet. 600 was a stopgap—what the government thought was fair. What you deserved for surviving this far.

Now you counted only in cost. Your ATM's "most used" withdrawal amount was the price of an eightball. You'd re-done the budgets, but it was a charade that nobody was even watching. You had burned through the savings, the stimulus checks, the birthday money your poor parents still sent you. Even the joint-account from the equity—your half of it, anyway—had dwindled to a few pixels, a few grams, a few more weeks.

An ending: one night you and the woman from Boston watched a news program about how lockdown affects our sense of time. The woman from Boston made these epiphanic little grunts during the show—the kind you'd heard at poetry readings in the audience, as if everyone were solving little equations in their minds one step at a time. The man on the screen talked about depression and temporal distortion. You became aware of the clock ticking. You considered the small swath of visible life still illuminated by your own headlights.

After the program ended, the woman from Boston turned to you and held your hands in her lap.

I'm going to leave soon, she said.

Her irises were green-streaks exploding from a black sun. She held your eyes with hers.

The roads should be clear by the weekend, you said.

No, she said, her voice soft and slow. I mean, I'm going to leave.

To this you said nothing.

You have to see, she said. You have to see how this isn't working.

You did, and you didn't.

I'm thirty-three, she said. She let this statement sit, heavy.

I'm forty-one, you said.

It's not the same. Her hands were clammy, the fingers slipping out of yours. This was supposed to be—she paused, working the words with her mouth but unable to finish the sentence.

I don't want you to go, you said, feeling the familiar shape of the lie even as you spoke it.

Her face softened. She looked away, across the piles of laundry to the closet with your gear in it. She was like your wife in this way. She didn't know everything about weights and prices, or even what drugs were in there, but she knew enough. This was the saddest you'd ever seen her.

You may be an island, but I need my village.

You are my village, you lied.

I just have to leave, she said in the direction of the closet.

You imagined your wife watching this scene. You pictured her gloating. You pictured her comforting you. You pictured her walking away in disgust, and then you felt a crack inside of your body suddenly widen, a voice from inside of it calling out for her not to leave, calling out for her to turn around, to keep watching, as if you might say or do something in this moment that would make the audience remember that you were once somebody that someone could love.

The plane crash was only real if it made the news.

Fuck you then, you said to the woman from Boston.

★

Another possible beginning: You were born in 1979.

You were two years old when the police caught Wayne Williams dropping a body into the Chattahoochee. You were 500 miles south in New Orleans, in the backyard of your parents' shotgun house, in overalls or diapers or nothing at all, picking doodlebugs in the superheated shade.

You are in Big Bernard's driveway. Early evening, the roaches already prowling along the cracks in the driveway, crickets and cicadas hissing in the darkening air. Big Bernard is talking about the Atlanta Child Murders. He is telling you how he lived at his uncle's house

in Edgewood back then. He is telling you that everybody knew somebody who got taken, that Luby Jeter's mom still lives a block from here. He is telling you how the numbers were all wrong, that many more than thirty black children went missing between 1979 and 1981. You are excited because you'd read all about this before moving to town.

You ask Big Bernard what he thinks.

He says, the Klan.

You say, What about the cops?

He says, Them too.

You say that you'd read a different story, and he looks at you.

Wayne Williams didn't kill none of them kids, he says.

★

You told Cookie you just wanted to forget. He shrugged, smiled a no-teeth smile. You told him you just wanted to melt into the ground, and it immediately sounded as dumb to you as it must have sounded to him. He sold you a bill's worth of hash oil, and when it was clear that you weren't ready to leave, weren't ready to go because you hadn't planned that far, because going at this point was just the first step in coming back, he gestured at a beanbag in the corner by the speakers and went back to the kitchen.

Time pivoted in a circle around your seat. The smoke gathered, then dispersed. Now and then, the door would open and a fiend would pop in with hovering, nervous energy. Then closed, then open, then closed.

It was only when you opened your eyes that you realized they'd been shut. The room was quiet. Cookie was nowhere to be seen, although you heard the faint sounds of dishes clanking downstairs.

Your skin felt warm. A blanket was draped across your body, its itchy fibers tickling your cheek. You leaned forward. The room comes into view, under- and over-correcting in focus until the shapes make sense, until you see her. Against the wall opposite you was the girl.

★

A memory: you attend a funeral online. Your ex-wife tells you not to come, but you do, because you feel this strange and dreadful obligation for her father to be there anyway. Seventy-eight tiny faces are checkered across your computer screen in little white boxes. None of their features are clear. None of them notice you. None of them are aware of the mercy in this.

★

The girl sat perfectly still, her back against the wall opposite to you. She was almost a child, her eyes closed and her face holding a slack smile, as if she were listening to a song playing on an internal stereo. You squinted, imagining the dashboard of Big Bernard's truck lighting her face. You pictured her breasts, the wide circle of her nipple so close to her lips. You spoke.

★

A memory: The glint in Big Bernard's eyes when he is speaking to you. His eyes are inset, shaded, yet in the deepening gloom you see this flash, like a match light stretched around the curve of the whites.

It is still summer, still hot, still dark, still roaches darting across the pavement. Your conversation has moved from Wayne Williams closer to home: to New Orleans, the summer protests, and the great diaspora in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Big Bernard listens to your family's story, about how they got out and what became of everything.

He tells you that they bombed the levees.

He tells you that they did this to save the white neighborhoods, to take the pressure off by flooding the lower 9th ward. You have heard this before. You are from this city, your family lived through this storm, and you remember the stories that your father told you about the great flood of 1927. Back then it was the Jim Crow south. They blew the levees then, your father had said.

Same as it ever was, Big Bernard says.

You understand that they did not bomb the levees in Katrina. You've heard the analysis offered by FEMA, the city officials, the Army Corps of Engineers, and you know your own father filed an amicus brief on behalf of a lawsuit against the levee authorities for catastrophic neglect. You know that the sound some observers claimed was a bomb was in fact a barge, torn loose from its moorings by storm surge, hitting a concrete retaining wall that then overtopped into the neighborhoods. But there is this match-fire in Bernard's eyes, and somehow, you understand also that he is right.

★

It's you, you said to the girl.

The girl's eyes opened wide, all pupils despite the light, and you felt certainty wash over you like adrenaline.

I almost got in the car that night, you said to her.

Outside, an owl, hooting.

The girl's eyelids closed again, then opened halfway. She was looking at something in the middle distance, her soft features oddly peaceful. She kept smiling. Then, with great effort, she reached out a hand, holding a slice of air near your face so gently that it almost hurt.

I'm sorry, Dad, she said.

Faces wheeled like stars in the dark.

I forgive you, you said.

Finally, you believe. A beginning.

FICTION FOR YOUR IMPOSSIBLY PERSONAL COLLAPSE

A Conversation with Gabriel Houck

Claire Agnes: I'm excited to be speaking with you about this story, as I believe it's achieving something quite a few writers are trying to do right now: the discussion of current, collective societal trauma and its place within fictional narratives. There are certainly no right or finite answers as to how any writer should or could utilize international, local, or even personal events as elements of their creative work. "Something You Don't Believe" was, from first read, striking and memorable in its approach. Communal events enact themselves as forces of tension through the characters themselves, becoming stories that blur and change depending upon their teller. What catalyzed the decision to include this factually-driven aspect, especially in this specific narrative, which features such an unsteady narrator?

Gabriel Houck: I appreciate the complexity of the question! It's such a delicate and terrifying thing to write within (and sometimes against) the public perception of an ongoing globally-traumatic event. It's an idea that challenged me when I was writing in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, trying to square the communal and individual circles of relative suffering. Which manner of loss is most valid? Whose loss matters, and in what context, and by whose authority or grace? Our family was incredibly lucky: nobody died, property was replaced, lives continued. But I also know the ways this wasn't true, both in the abstract and the deeply personal, for everyone who lives in New Orleans. The psychic bruises of that disaster linger, from the visible blight, racial tensions, and poverty-echo in the city, to the invisible little rituals that keep batteries in the flashlights and gas in the car.

Basically, I had to believe that art's examination of loss at any scale was intrinsically valid. I had to believe that there was room for art to do this, that we didn't have to be reduced to the loudest losses,

the deepest pains, the widest and most socially-acceptable or understood sufferings. Even nobly-minded, such gestures often flatten the truth. But saying this is a howl in the void, too. Everyone who lived through Katrina (and the pandemic) is marked by a turbulent confluence between our relative luck and our relative suffering. I truly did not come to "Something You Don't Believe" with anything so high-minded or intentional as all this, but somewhere in the gut I think this message already felt true to me. Perhaps because I needed it to be. But nonetheless, it was permission for a story like this one to happen.

CA: Within a similar vein, there is often a discussion at writing workshop tables concerning the topic of technology—screens, cords, landlines, Wi-Fi, dial-up, solar, gas, steam. As concerned as we are with time and place when it comes to discussions of setting, we hesitate to date our writing without calling into question authenticity. "Something You Don't Believe" takes place during the brief sliver of human history during which we were dating and dying over Zoom. Why set this story during such a definable time, the early aughts of the COVID-19 pandemic? At what part in your process did you begin to cultivate aspects of setting?

GH: I was loathe to write a pandemic story. It felt like I was chasing the ambulance of our nation's grief, and the whole prospect felt utterly unfair and exploitative. Tim O'Brien's idea of war-writing as being fiction by-*necessity* seems relevant to this anxiety of mine: any foray into writing the pandemic felt like an erasure of someone else's truth, some greater suffering, some wider perspective beyond the bounds of my experience and this character. It's really the only time I can think of where I wrote so proximately to something like this without much critical distance. It felt gimmicky. It was a risk.

That said, this story started as a simple second person exercise, a dialogue between the real me and some inner "no bullshit" narrator. The pandemic was happening, as was a version of the divorce alluded to in the story, and so before anything narrative was in-place I found

myself interrogating… Well, myself, in the safe-space of a blank page. And then everything just came. I don't believe for a second that there was a singular or collective "experience" during COVID, or that the character's declarations about what was really happening have any validity beyond the narrow slice of his world—but what started as a way to ask myself questions became a story that had to unfold precisely when and where and how it did. There really wasn't any stopping it. Perhaps that's a pandemic effect too: that filled-to-bursting feeling that you only recognize when the floodgates finally, mercifully open.

CA: I'm so glad that you brought up the usage of second-person narration in this story, as its deployment has captivated me from first read onward. I have my own thematically-linked hunches about the choice, so I'm eager to hear your reasoning.

GH: I like second person stories that are stories about storytelling. My students sometimes misapply second person labels to epistolary first person narratives, but this confusion actually makes sense to me, based on a common "meta" posture. Epistolary fiction leans heavily on the "fictio"—the selection and shaping of a thing—to frame what's really here to be seen. And to me, what's fascinating about good second person writing is this representation of the offstage story: a mind in discourse with itself. The stories Joan Didion says "we tell ourselves in order to live" matter tremendously in the second person. Jennifer Egan's "Out of Body" does this so well. So does Jamil Jan Kochai's "Playing Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain." Each position the reader as a witness to the inner-churn of character, like free indirect discourse but with different pronouns. The churn constructs the doubt, the complexity, the self-delusions—all the stuff we might judge as "authentic" in the rendering of character motivation—and it's this shadow narrative, paralleling whatever the narrative on-page is, that illuminates what's worth seeing.

For me, the heart of things in SYDB lives in the contradiction of talking to one's self, singular and plural all at once. It's such a familiar act, yet one that heightens the contradictions. Our destabilized self

is most palpable in times of crisis, and in approaching this story, I encouraged myself by leaning into that. After all, what is more foundational to fiction writing than crisis?

In my real life, there have been two great crises—the destruction of New Orleans in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina, and my divorce at the onset of the pandemic. Each shattered me. I've written an entire story collection set in and around that first great catastrophe, but I've left the second largely untouched because it's so white-hot-close to me still; almost too bright to see. Even writing this answer I feel the self-loathing that it produced, but that's the paradoxical need behind writing "Something You Don't Believe". All I can do is ask the questions, listen to the voices, notice the patterns, hear the way the mind struggles and fails to forgive itself. That's the darkness which I can't trust to any other form of inquiry, to any other perspective than the one I used. That's the story to me.

CA: It is interesting to hear about your intimacy with the narrator, who is, in this story, an outsider in nearly every way—new to the city, detached from their romantic endeavors, chasing an entry-level addiction to a new drug purchased from new connections from a new friend. And yet, they speak from a place of authority, a future story beyond the horizon of the reader. As the author, and in some ways as the point of telling yourself, when and where did you envision the main character telling us this story?

GH: This is a great question. I wonder about how writers of autofiction—or even nonfiction—encounter this issue? I struggled with it in memoir myself: the implications of the centered "I", and the suggestion that the narrator-as-author has gained enough critical distance and authority to see things clearly. Coming to fiction, I've found that suggestion less and less plausible. It's an illusion of arrival, and like all illusions, it can fool the artist as much as the audience. Unless you're writing a memoir with a structural commitment to doubt (Lauren Slater's *Lying*, or Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*), the posture that we do have this quasi-omniscience to see and

know what everything means is dangerously seductive to a writer, and perhaps contrary to the best possibilities of writing itself.

Part of the experiment of "Something You Don't Believe" was to jettison the problem of memoir. In my real life, I don't know shit about what the loss of my marriage or my city means. I might know some things, but that knowledge is conditional, slippery, subject to change. Instead, I tried to think of this story as historical fiction, in how it eschews being a *narrative-of-record* in favor of being a narrative that populates the gaps and possibilities of reality. I'm sure there's an element of therapy or catharsis in there too, but the purist inside of me wants it to be about what fiction is here to do. What *only* fiction can do. I am expressly *not* writing a true story, a plausibly true alternative, a record of my real-life divorce or an exoneration of my failings as a human being. I am choosing fiction because it is the only thing suited—at least to me—to bringing myself into such close proximity with pain and still function. The insistence on this not being true is what gives me permission to try it at all. If fiction is the realm of the unsolvable problem (quoting Alice McDermott here), then it is, in some fundamental way, the only authentic approach to such an impossibly personal collapse.

CA: The female characters that populate this story—the wife, the woman from Boston, the girl—all remain nameless throughout the narrative, yet Big Bernard does not. The main character, our portal into the story, remains anonymous as well. What factors did you consider in these choices?

GH: I made up a term for my students—"the looking story"—to describe fiction in which the perspectival character is invested in, obsessed with or otherwise drawing the story's gaze back to some other, non-perspectival character. I'm sure there's already a label for this kind of thing, but for examples, think of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, or *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

A feature of the "looking story" is the two-way reflection of characterization. The looker (our protagonist) is often—at least on

the surface—more of an empty lens to the other, but by the end of the story we come to see dimensions and depth in them by juxtaposition: *the looker, illuminated by the act of looking*. This is what was behind my original idea to use a named neighbor and an unnamed protagonist. To an outsider like the narrator, Big Bernard represents both unfamiliar realities and semi-familiar habits. He gets a name because of this symbolism, this centrality of gaze. There's a ton of projection going on between the two. And as a white man, raised in New Orleans and living in Atlanta, I feel like there's an unavoidable discourse about race that's inherent in discussions of place—in who owns or defines it, who represents it, speaks for it, understands it. Bernard is the looked-at because he is of this place, whereas my narrator and his swirl of nameless women are of an old world, a dead history, now both figuratively and literally divorced from the present.

There's also a horizon-limit on what he knows. The narrator's relationships with both women—all women really—are unresolved, maybe unresolvable, and resist certainty or clarity because he is at a nadir in his trajectory. Pieces of the familiar fall away one by one without him knowing which pieces to fight for. There's a resonant hope in the final gesture of the story that I want to feel flimsy or absurd. And sad. Epiphanies are suspect things, so when the narrator seems to encounter one in the end, I wanted it to feel hollow, parochial, and desperate. It's the kind of urgent belief in something that comes from an even deeper need to impose order on the chaos. Namelessness is maybe speaking to the thinness of this mirage, a way to see (at least from the outside) the contrast between where we are and where we tell ourselves we're going.

CA: The complexities present in our narrator are mirrored in the prose itself, lines that vacillate between lyric profundity and grounded, gutting realism. Certain lines are searing, rendered with such acute attention to craft and clear authorial consideration. How many drafts of this story existed before its current iteration? In what ways were earlier drafts different?

GH: This feels like a compliment disguised as a question and I'll take it gratefully, thank you. I appreciate the quality and texture of language in others' writing, and I think whatever you're praising here comes from an obsessive privileging of language in the basic reader-writer contract. I need to feel an author is in control of language to really be seduced by them. And I task myself with the same demand if I'm the one doing the seducing.

But I self-analyze a lot (shocker), so there's also a source for this in my own neuroses. I have a pathological desire to be understood in the way I intend, and a pathological fear of being misunderstood. I don't know which is the greater need, which is the origin of the other. Honestly, I have so little faith in my ability to do this well, to speak and be heard and to have some agency in how the hearing happens. I read each draft aloud to myself each time I sit down to work on it, from the start to wherever the story's path has become uncertain, trying to sharpen the words each time I go. It can be ugly. Some days I prune or re-populate words. Some days I bring a scythe to the page. But in either case, it's undeniably about these needs as well.

CA: A similar clarity of vision must have been necessary when structuring this piece, as it jumps frequently between spaces, times, and levels of narrator reliability. Though the chronological order of things may become murky, this exact and respective proximity feels less crucial to this particular story than the emotive undulations of the main character and the particular and compelling texture to their voice. Are stories with this fractured structure representative of your style? Or is this particular narrative architecture distinctive to this story?

GH: I don't think I've yet written—and certainly not yet published—a story that isn't fractured or fragmented in some way. This was noted by my dissertation committee during my defense, with questions like, "*Who do you think will read experimental stories like this?*" I had no answer, of course. I've often seen it as stemming from my avoidance of things I'm weak at, like transitions or linear scenes. Maybe that's true, but there's also something true in the kaleidoscopic, episodic way in

which so many of us have been raised to digest stories like this one. I loved anthology stories as a kid, and the weird gordian-knots of narrative in films like *Shortcuts* or any of Quentin Tarantino's early bank-heist films. They showed the stitching between form and meaning in a way that appealed to me. They made the idea of collage storytelling possible. They resonated with the quicksilver uncertainties inside me at the time—with an unshakeable suspicion that linear, well-shaped experience was somehow suspect, somehow less than real.

But I think mentioning that frames it all too rhetorically, too intentionally. The truth is reality, to me, just feels this way. Memories work this way. Stories recombine and shuffle into existence this way. Beyond any grand justification for itself, it just seems authentic to what "is", I suppose.

CA: This story touches upon ideas of storytelling from a variety of angles. What particular stories are you drawn to, both as a writer and a reader?

GH: I guess I am interested in the doomed task of being honest about what reality is—and what such honesty looks like. I'm fascinated by belief and self-delusion, by how they chart the voyages of our magical thinking. And I'm interested in art that keeps a foothold in multiplicity and contradiction in the moment: in art that resists totalizing representations or politically utilitarian framing—even when audiences or publishers seem to demand such things.

Weirdly, I love all that totalizing stuff when it comes to character. I love how the absurd energy of a character's *insistence* is often what most invites us into their story, how their voice demands our attention. This keeps me bound to a piece of writing, whether mine or someone else's. But voice in the story is never exactly the voice of the author, so what attracts me to stories is a weird juxtaposition of these two outlooks. One is the effort to embrace that authentically messy, art-for-its-own-sake effort to see what's real. The other is the very purpose-driven urgency of a character or a voice, willing itself into existence with polemic and delusion and desire. One requires a

foggy complexity, the other a bolt of lightning. But I think both are necessary for me to really love a story.

CA: Are you currently at work on any other creative projects? Is this story a part of a larger work of fiction?

GH: Yes, always slower than I'd like. I faced a great silence in myself after my first book came out, as if I'd vented all the heat that drove my writing engine, and it took a while for writing and publishing stories to feel good to me again. I teach now more than I used to. Stories come in a trickle more than a flood, and life finds its way into and in front of everything as a rule. Happily, the stories themselves feel brighter and darker all at once. I feel them slipping beyond my old obsessions and into stranger and wilder spaces. It's like watching children grow up and into a sense of themselves, maybe. Even when I'm not editing or drafting, I can feel new voices murmuring to one another. I record their speeches and keep the notebooks filled, the research tabs bookmarked and the folders open. All this, too, is writing.

But yes—this is part of a manuscript project. In more practical terms, I'm about halfway towards a target-goal for new work, with the intent to have a second collection ready for my agent's review sometime in 2024.

CA: Thank you again for sharing this story with *Driftwood*. Where else might we find your writing?

GH: It's a joy to have the story published with y'all, and to answer such precise and evocative questions! I'm sort of a ghost in the social/professional online-ness that has become increasingly common in our profession, but you can find my first story collection, "You or a Loved One" (*Orison Books* 2018) pretty much everywhere. More recent stories of mine are available in literary journals such as *Salamander, West Branch, Smokelong Quarterly, Tupelo Quarterly,* and *Cream City Review*—some of which are destined for my upcoming second

collection.

CA: I can't wait to read more of your work! Is there a working title of this second collection that we should be on the lookout for?

GH: I wish I could tell you with any certainty! I think by default, the titles of stories in a collection often suggest themselves as titles for the book, but I'd want to have them all in front of me before committing. I'm in a headspace where I actually like the title of the story you're so kindly publishing here, but there are a few big and unwieldy projects I'm still wrestling with that aren't titled yet, so I suppose I'm still waiting on the full menu.

CA: Thank you so much for taking this time to speak with me and for sharing this story with our readers! It's been a pleasure learning more about the intricacies of your process and the inner workings of "Something You Don't Believe."

TRI NHAN 004 RECALLS A CREMATION TO HIS HUMAN ROBOPSYCHIATRIST

Mylo Lam

When they feed her to the incinerator
I don't understand why
they asked me to press

the button that wakens
the flames livening
past the chamber door

through the door
maybe I see
wildfire wolves

lapping the beret fitted on the skull
feasting on the failed organs
wanting for escape

I sense no pain in the chamber
nor from the chute pushing out her soot
yet there is a convulsion on my finger still

pressing the button which I then release which does not stop
the mourners from howling and crashing
into each other's arms and necks and

I don't understand why—

*((((*Oh.*))))*

The wolves got out.

MYLO LAM
In Conversation

Sara Moore Wagner: How did this character of Tri Nhan 004 develop for you? What do you see as the benefit of speaking through this persona (or persona in general)?

Mylo Lam: In late spring of 2021, I was living in DC and attended an outdoor Asian American Pacific Islander+ arts market, hosted by SAMASAMA, where I was half-sleepily passing by people who were selling their works. I was then struck and demanded to pay attention by a pen & ink illustration, "Infinitude," from artist Shani Shih. My words fail me, as they often do, in capturing the veracity of what I witnessed at that moment with "Infinitude": A woman with closed eyes and many, many arms swirling around her. The combination of the frenzied appendages, the woman's peaceful expression, and the industriousness of the color palette (white, black, silver, smatters of brown and steel blue) inspired me toward my next poetry project, which would be Southeast Asian science fiction, which then led to the character of Tri Nhan 004. Shani, I apologize that my words are insufficient for "Infinitude." I hope readers can take a moment to check it out online.

In terms of the benefit of persona, I sense it operates as an extension of my voice that, when correctly utilized, allows me to go beyond my own perceived capabilities as a writer. With persona, I find new opportunities to implicate myself in the work that are surprising and novel.

SMW: I really love the sound of this poem, the slant rhymes and attention to rhythm. How important is the element of sound to you? Do you listen to music as you write?

ML: Thank you, Sara! You just revealed to me that this poem has slant rhymes! I see it now with buttons/wakens, wakens/flames, and chute/soot/push! These slant rhymes, along with the liberal use of gerunds, form the sonic pillars of this piece. Sound is personally important to my writing, likely stemming from my theater background and love of music as a mood-setter. Sound helps me determine dic-

tion, rhythm (or absence of rhythm), and delivery. Reading the poem aloud is part of the rehearsal process that gets it to its latter stages.

Listening to music is also an essential part of a poem's generation for me; I think at this time, I was listening to Moses Sumney, Natalie Prass, and Corinne Bailey Rae—a mix of the otherworldly and the oh-so-human.

SMW: Could you tell us a bit more about the series as a whole? I'm so drawn to using science fiction as an entry point to the refugee experience. How did this idea solidify for you? Where does this poem fit?

ML: I wanted to explore science fiction but in ways that would feel authentic to my own experience. Cursory research revealed a dearth of Southeast Asian sci-fi. With androids/A.I., I was seeking what it means to be seen, labeled, and treated as subhuman. From there, I began drawing parallels to the refugee experience—this deep-rooted, curdling je ne sais quoi of being "less than." Of course there are sociological, political, and economic ramifications of this treatment that many, many other talented people from the diaspora can speak to (certainly more accurately and deftly than me!); my inclination was to work with poetry to explore this "less than" and perhaps see if I can personally revolutionize these concepts as a source of immense power and even agitation.

"Tri Nhan 004 Recalls a Cremation to His Human Robopsychiatrist" is one of the opening poems of the series. It is an attempt to capture the burgeoning awakening of what it means to be human by witnessing the explosion of emotions that happens when a physical body turns to ash. This was an experience I went through when I pressed the incinerator button for my grandpa and my dad.

THE BATHTUB

Caroline Harper New

On hurricane days, Mama dressed us
in life jackets and bike helmets and tucked us
in the bathtub. We swirled prophecies

of hair around the drain, soothsaying the rain
by the pink of the water line, as Mama split
her palms between all six ears

and softened the linoleum with psalms,
even the ones we want to forget. Blessed is he
that dasheth thy little ones on the rocks. The echoes

folded into a Book more believable than brimstone.
After all—swamps don't catch fire and we are a people
of Genesis. Our second-lines stomping

two-by-two through the Flood, with faith
our john boats can hold each of us and the family
dog. Above us, the dove

or more likely the heron, circles
the swells until subsumed by salt, her babies
still tucked in the bulrush. Or babies

flown North to safety as the Atlantic
spins carnivorously counterclockwise.
One Christmas, I came home with a man

from New York who didn't know how to swim,
and Mama gave him a life jacket to keep in his Camry
just in case. My sisters laughed, and we all

moved North to drier land where no one
needs a jon boat. Where we can pretend
creation purls clockwise, and more time

is all we need—but when I see the rainbow
on TV reverse our blue-green swamps
to yellow-orange-red-black, I know

it will end with Mama
in her helmet, alone
in the bathtub, holding
her little dog

DRIVING THROUGH DUNEDIN

Caroline Harper New

It's November. My grandmother has died and left me
the malachite ring her husband gave to her
before he died. Young. I am in love
with how the size of it gaudies the blue-green that would otherwise
be timeless. Adam and Eve must have loved each other very much

with no other choice. Here, in Florida
where my mother was born,
no mailbox a simple mailbox:
A mermaid, from seashells and a doll head.
A sea turtle, from fake leather and googly eyes.

The flamingos have faded from plastic pink to bone, but
there are jellyfish in the trees
dripping Christmas lights. The whole canopy blinks technicolor,
thanks to Max who scours estate sales for their opulent frames, then
sells them to neighbors cheap.

My mother is driving me to the trailer park where she grew up.
They're not trailers, they're mobile homes. She swears

it used to be beautiful; the grass was so thick
you could sink. *My dad planted only Saint Augustine.*
I stood there and watered it with a hose.

She tells me flamingos were once considered elegant.
They were always sold in pairs: one looking up, one down.
Mother-daughter.
Husband-wife.

I find the smell of sulfur soothing
as we pass the graveyard of shoes, visible in low tide.
The emerald ebb recedes and the mud spits them back

in the same spot. This is Florida,
where I was born and my mother has buried both parents.

Malachite is not expensive. Easy to carve and common
in dishware, but few rocks are so brilliantly green.

Can we drive down the street with the jellyfish?
Look closer, she says. *They're chandeliers.*

CAROLINE HARPER NEW

In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: I love the shape of "The Bathtub," how the tercets undulate along the page. I could make an assumption that this mirrors the water imagery, but I would love to know your specific inspiration and shape goals.

Caroline Harper New: I wanted it to have a back-and-forth tension—of waves, yes, but also of geographic distance. That nostalgia of home paired with unwillingness, or inability, to return.

I also wanted it to capture a feeling of inevitability. The powerlessness we feel when we confront mortality, climate change. I want the poem to make you feel like you're being swept along in a current that never breaks. There is nowhere to end up but the ending.

JS: The ending of "The Bathtub" is a beautiful but heartbreaking look into generational divides, specifically within the context of both parenthood and place. As an editor and writing teacher, one of the most common questions I get from students is, "Should I show this to my family?" What are your thoughts on showing work about family, to family?

CHN: I've asked this same question so many times. It was easily my biggest anxiety when I started publishing. I used to think questions like this depended on the subject, but I've learned it's trickier than that—even when it isn't sensitive, memory differs, perception differs. You have to weigh the delicacy of the story, the value of the relationship, the sensitivity of the person.

So that said, it's hard to give a blanket answer, but for me, my approach has been a mix of my family's adjustment to my career and my acknowledgement that some relationships are worth more than poems. And time smooths over a lot—if a poem feels too precious to release just yet, it might feel safer down the road.

JS: The idea of "hurricane days" is such a uniquely Floridian concept; I can still remember the little mental checklist I did as a child of all the batteries I would need in case the power went out. Within

the context of poetry, what are the positives and negatives of writing about hurricanes? What do we as writers gain (or give) by sharing creative work about natural disasters?

CHN: Living in a subtropical climate, hurricanes are a way of measuring time. Our seasons aren't divided neatly by leaf color and snow, they're wet or dry. Calm or tempestuous. And despite the destructive nature of hurricanes, I never saw them negatively. They were a fact of the landscape, breathtaking and terrifying at once. As a kid, we tracked them on TV with wonder; watched people ride the swells with their surfboards; hung from the porch to touch them before our mothers dragged us back inside, over and over.

It's interesting writing about them as an adult, because they've transformed to a metaphor for climate change. Hurricanes are political. Writing about them can no longer be about memory, about the past; hurricanes now carry the threat of the future.

For me, the purpose in writing about hurricanes now is to show the presence of disaster. People used to think climate disaster was distant in time. Now they like to think it's distant in geography. But for us, it's here and now. Soon, it will be for everyone else, too.

JS: "Driving Through Dunedin" is one of the most charitable and well-rendered poems about Florida that I have ever read. As a native Floridian, I loved how this poem took the stereotypes of the state and drilled into the emotional concerns behind them. When writing about this specific place, what were you most concerned with communicating? Inversely, is there anything you think people get 'wrong' when writing about Florida?

CHN: Florida is often imagined as a constructed landscape of golf courses and beach high rises, a transient place for tourists, snowbirds, retirees, the ultra-wealthy. I feel like it's rarely imagined as a home, or a place of roots. But the Florida I knew growing up, nestled in the panhandle, was wild and quiet and poor. It holds generations of stories that found my own existence.

I write of Florida as a land of contradictions: wild and developed, abundant and exploited, vulnerable and self-destructive. I have family who rode Florida's economic boom and family who died nameless. I've slept in houses that have survived generations and houses that

have washed into the sea.

I think I was most concerned with communicating how these opposites exist in a harmony that may only be intelligible to those who grew up here. For me, the emotion that blooms at those intersections is what makes so many of us have complicated relationships to home.

JS: "Driving Through Dunedin" is a visually fascinating poem, with stanzas that step to the right and return (almost typewriter-like). I would love to know what the first draft of this poem looked like. Did the structure change in revision, or was it largely there from the outset?

CHN: In 2021, I was inspired by Kathleen Graber's use of long, wandering lines in *The River Twice*. My own interpretation of that impetus has produced this structure, which I use quite often—in my head, it follows a similar logic as the haibun, with long lines juxtaposed against the smaller bits of language on the right margin. I've found writing into this form opens up my brain and allows me to relish individual parts of the sentence while maintaining the impact of the whole.

JS: I always appreciate italics in a poem and wish I saw it more as an editor. In your own words, what are the benefits of clearly defining dialogue in a poem? What are the challenges?

CHN: Italicizing dialogue roots that moment in the real. It is often a tonal shift—we write with poetic flourish, but we speak plainly. The reader is reminded that, despite the subjectivity of the author's memory, these words were said as-is, often with a directness that can be difficult to manage.

The challenge, for me, is to resist embellishment. Poems allow for so much imaginative play, but for me, dialogue is like citing a source. I bend and twist my subjects all the time into my own imagined reality, but when they speak, I try to let them speak for themselves. Maybe this comes from the ethnographer in me: the desire to document truthfully, while caught in the tension between perception and reality.

JS: "Driving Through Dunedin" is largely concerned with parent-child dynamics, specifically their relation to place. I'm struck by your declaration of "This is Florida, / where I was born and my mother has buried both parents." How do you think place shapes our familial relationships? Perhaps more specifically, what do we learn about our parents from where we live?

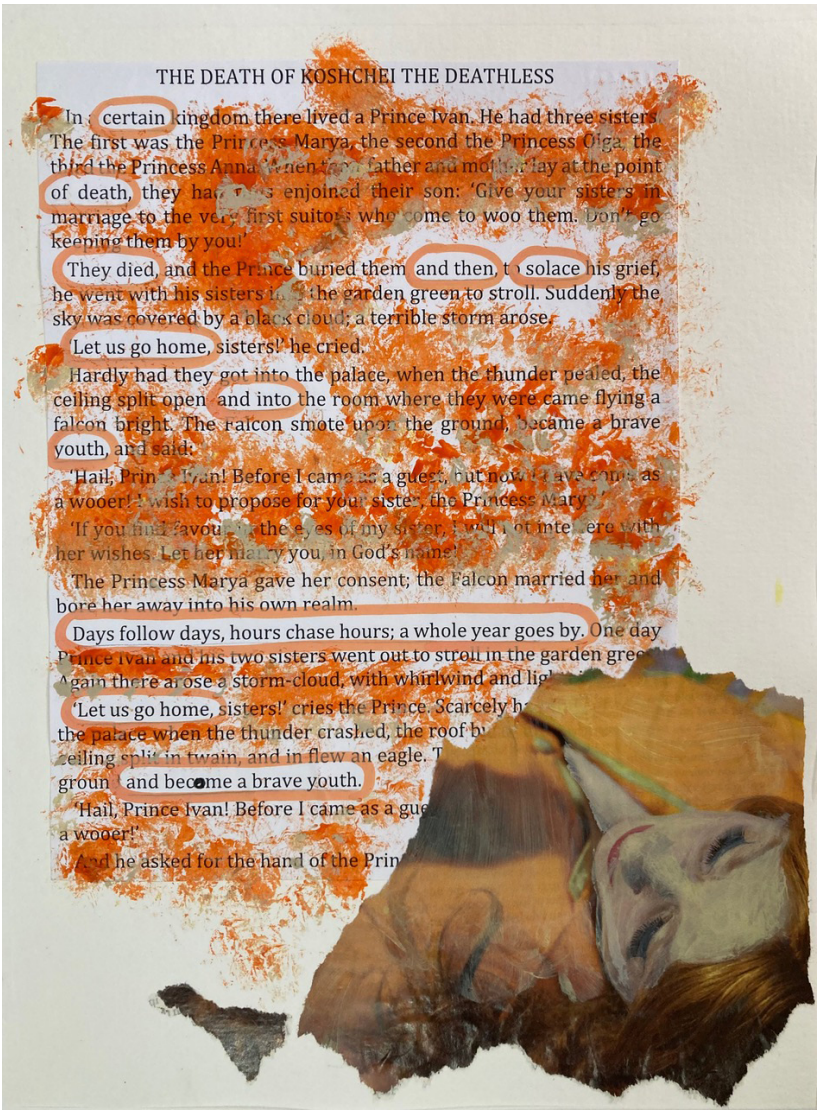
CHN: Memory is rooted in place. Returning to the places of home—lived, ancestral—is a re-discovery of your loved ones. Memories are activated, stories flow, imaginations are given body. People whom you've never met know your parents in ways you don't know yourself.

I have this kind of cyclical relationship to Florida. I was born there and raised nearby in Georgia, far from our family roots. My parents have similar stories, and I grew up thinking there was this continuous generational removal from place. I always felt like we were "floating," especially in a rural farming town, where family networks are deep and sprawling.

When I was older, I learned that one of my grandmas was actually from a small, nearby town in Florida. Knowing that gave me a sense of continuity to my own memories: our waterways connected; our flora was the same; we spoke with a similar tongue. We were never able to speak about her past, or this geographic connection, but knowing we were formed by the same landscape made our memories feel intertwined. Memory can remain embedded in landscape long after people are gone.

THE DEATH OF THE DEATHLESS

Amy Marques



HAPPY

Amy Marques

AMY MARQUES

In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: Traditionally, our interviews with poets will ask a few short questions about different aspects of their poem. For these pieces, I would instead love to hear about the creation process for each. Specifically, I'd love to know more about how the painted sections were created!

Amy Marques: Thank you for the opportunity to chat about these pieces!

I'll give you a tiny bit of context and backstory first. I am not an artist by training. In fact, I think I got art trained out of me for much of my life.

I now consider myself an artist in at least three art forms: music, literature, and visual art.

Music is the one where I have the most training and the least confidence. In (prose) writing I have the most "consumed repertoire" as I am a lifelong reader, but I've also been intentional about learning the craft. Visual poetry is a happy accident.

I sound like one of those parents where the first child is planned and over-thought, the second intentional and correcting parenting mistakes of the first, and then, years later, a third delightful accident pops into their life!

I stumbled into erasure poetry and thought I had invented it when I used old magazine pages when we ran out of scrap paper. I realized I could make meaning out of uncovered words. About a month later, *The Bennington Review* published a profile/interview on Mary Ruefle and I was completely enchanted! I loved everything about the interview, including the fact that we both sent anonymous letters to random people just to cheer them up and we both enjoy snail mail (real mail). That profile was when learned she modified whole books. I thought that was brilliant! So I started to work on that.

These two pieces are part of a series where I decided to use work that is in the public domain—fairytales in particular. I wanted to play

with as many things as I could: acrylic, photos, magazine cut-outs, glue, colored glue, watercolor, etc. And I wanted to approach it as I've approached all visual art since I began last year: with the delight of an over-confident kindergartener!

I cannot explain how I find the words. Ruefle explained it best: the words just float off the page. That's the easy part. And working with fairytales was fun because so many of the words were magical in and of themselves. At one point in this collection, I created 12 different erasure and collage poems using the exact same page. Each of the poems is distinctly its own (as is the art that accompanies it), while using the same source material. It was such a great way to think about how much we can do with just a few words!

As for the images, as I mentioned, I have no training, but I approached it much like in any art I've learned in the past (medicine, music, writing): copying and shadowing. I discovered that it was more fun to modify pre-existing images than to start from scratch. So for this collection, most of the images—especially those of bodies—were created by painting over and modifying magazine ads. I could change the people or the background, the clothing, the faces, the expressions, etc.

So the images are as much erasure as the poems. They, too, used source material and subverted and reshaped it into something new.

JS: What advice would you give to poets looking to create their own erasure/redaction poetry?

AM: Have fun. Seriously. Don't over-think it. Sometimes the results will surprise you. Hopefully they'll delight you, too. Also, do it even if you don't think you're good at it. It's addicting. And it'll improve all your other writing. Once you learn to delight in deleting and crossing out, then you'll be more likely to delete, cross out, modify, and play with your own prose or poetry and, more often than not, you'll find that it makes your work better.

COMMON SENSE

Daniel Hudon

A picture frame gapes
on the table under
a bowl of pears.
Next to the bowl
on the blank canvas
four green apples
cry themselves to sleep.
Now Wednesday
follows Friday,
the fridge is full
of clouds, blood
drips from the taps
and my desire,
oh my desire,
is a vase percolating
with starlight.

Jerrod Schwarz: The couplet middle stanza is a fascinating moment of personification. I would love to know how this image developed. Was it part of your first draft, or did it appear later?

Daniel Hudon: The couplet used to be the end of the first stanza and in the first draft there was no second stanza, so now it acts as a bridge to connect the two. The surrealist Rene Magritte, upon whose work this is based, was after images that evoked mystery because, he said, the mind loves mystery. At face value, the couplet is absurd, but beyond that, it's both playful and mysterious. I mean, what could these poor apples be crying about anyway?

JS: This is a short poem with powerful images that linger long after the ending. What are your personal thoughts on the 'short' poem? As an editor, I have seen it become more prevalent in our submission queue, and I would be interested to here your take.

DH: I've long been a fan of the great haiku masters, so I do like short forms. For short poems not in any particular form, my feeling is that it has to hit the ground running, as it were, because there's little time to develop images. I've taken inspiration from Charles Simic for other short things I've written.

JS: The final stanza of this poem is the most shocking and represents a mixture of staple household objects with unexpected imagery. Can you go into the specific motives and inspirations for this stark final stanza?

DH: If your apples are crying themselves to sleep there's no telling what else can happen in that world! There's meant to be a playfulness here but I think a starkness comes through, like in a Magritte painting, when the mind tries to make sense of so many incongruous things. It's fun for a spell but also concerning because we can't figure out what kind of world this is when our familiarity and common sense are thrown out the window.

THERE'S WORD OF MORE FLOODS, THE CICADAS SING.

Ashley Taylor

My daughter says the sun is following us,
says the grass of the field feels like a mouth.

We lay on the soft teeth
and look up at the sky.

In my dreams, a rhythm emerges,
palms open, hands to shoulders,
a dance of interlocking circles.

The opening notes augment,
extending and stretching
rejoice with a happy heart.

Same earth same sky we hold on,
stepping over and around the questions
of scope or location, leaving space
between what counts as prophetic.

I stim, staring at the light-weaving splayed silhouettes
the leaves shape along the brick wall. The constant

metronome — less of a bark, more insistent
on the chill seeping through the air.

My mother tells me on the drive home she's hearing voices again
in the morning just before waking, the blue hue of our shadows.

Sara Moore Wagner: I love the way time is blurry in this poem. It feels like generations blurring and overlapping. Was time something you thought about when writing this poem?

Ashley Taylor: I love to explore this blurriness of time—and have often wrote about memories and my own mother in this way. This poem, however, was the first I've written that brings in my own children. In starting to write about them, it felt as if I was reaching through generations as a way to make sense of my own identity as a "mother." In making sense of any relationship, there was an interconnecting link to a different one. I was surprised by dance/rhythm as a mechanism that both anchored and turned this kind of time overlapping.

SMW: Thinking about writing about family, about motherhood, which is a subject too often dismissed: what advice do you have for someone who wants to approach such a tender subject?

AT: Oof, I am still learning. It brings up gender, class, trauma, perception, body horror, body elation, healing, grief, accountability, there's so much. I often feel like my heart will burst. Sometimes it simply hurts not to write about it. I would encourage every reader to explore their relationship with motherhood by reading *The Spoons In The Grass Are There To Dig A Moat* by Amelia Martens (*Sarabande Books*, 2016). My favorite poets who write about motherhood with tenderness get there through leaning into the wound/magic of the surreal and abstract.

AN APPLE CLEFT IN TWO

Sebastian Merrill

Remember the first time we realized
we could choose our own name?

The name that would become my name?

In college, we played with gender in the theater,
acted as Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*.

One night, after rehearsal, we told our friends,

Call me *Sebastian, even when I'm not on the stage.*

Over ten years since we found my name,
I'm still learning myself:
I grow my hair long for the first time
since I abandoned you.
I buy pink shorts from the women's department,
pierce my septum.
Our grandmother taught you how to knit;
I teach myself how to cable,
follow her pattern for socks.

Sometimes I even miss
your nipples, your breasts,
their ability to feel a tender caress,
the slightly sweet smell they left
in the cups of your bra.

Sara Moore Wagner: First, this poem is extraordinarily powerful! Much of the power comes from the weaving in of *Twelfth Night*, how the story blends into the speakers' story. The self is split, cleaved like a twin. It feels so well crafted, but so organic! How do you go about striking that balance?

Sebastian Merrill: Thank you so much! I'm so glad this poem spoke to you. As a young trans kid, there weren't a lot of examples of gender exploration in my life, and Shakespeare's plays were some of the first texts in which I encountered gender as something that could be malleable or changed. I reread *Twelfth Night* when working on this piece and I was struck by the parallels between the story of Sebastian and Viola and the division or twinning of the self that I was exploring. This piece is an excerpt from my book *GHOST :: SEEDS*, a book-length poem that is obsessed with the ocean, and so it felt important to pull in the "blind waves and surges" of the sea. I didn't want to overwhelm or overshadow my writing with quotations, but it also felt important to call in the play, as both a touchstone for my own gender journey as well as a reminder that gender ambiguity and transgression are not a modern phenomena. It's interesting to me that the original productions of Shakespeare's plays were performed entirely by male actors, so that the switching of genders was doubly there: the Elizabethan actor playing Viola would have been a young man playing a woman pretending to be a man. And while it's not explicitly stated in the poem, the experience that inspired this story was a college production in which all of the roles were played by women, a kind of modern reversal. Of course, gender played on the stage and gender identity begin to collide for the speaker, as they did for me as well.

SMW: The theme of recognition feels important here. In tragedy, there's always recognition and reversal, a change into misfortune. Here, though, the reversal feels tragic, but isn't, which is a satisfying irony. Would you say there is tragedy here?

SM: I would say that the dominant emotional threads of this piece include melancholy, loss, and a sense of ambiguity as to the self, but I wouldn't call it a tragedy. This poem, and the book as a whole, grapple with and interrogate what it means to change from one gender to another within a society that expects and desires a simple story with one pivotal moment of transition. In order to access necessary medical care, trans people are often forced to tell a story that involves a hatred of the body we were born into, with physical transition depicted as the moment of salvation. There's no room for grief or ambiguity. Instead, I wanted to push against this reductive narrative, to create space for a more complex and nuanced story of change and self-discovery, one that allows for a trans speaker who is both happy to have had top surgery but who also sometimes misses having breasts. The real tragedy is the ways in which trans people are denied basic rights, safety, and access to medical care.

SMW: In the end the speaker asks a question to the "twin." Though the self is split, your speaker feels so whole. Could you speak on your "speaker," and what you see is the role of the speaker in poems? There's so much power in the act of saying "I"!

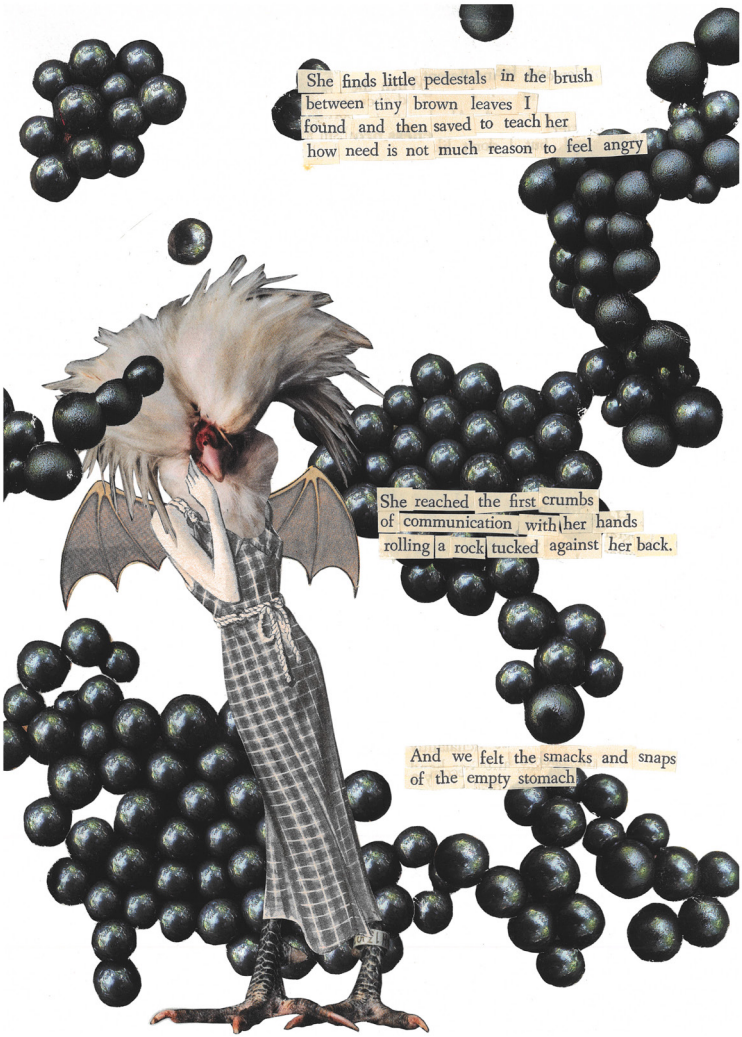
SM: This work began as a letter written to my former self. When I began this project, I was struggling with the question of audience. When I thought about writing about trans identity for a cis audience, I couldn't write at all. I didn't want to have to explain trans identity, to simplify my story. I realized that I had to start with myself, that there was power in that. Within this piece, and the book as a whole, the voice of the speaker moves between a singular "I" and a collective "we," oscillating between the distance and isolation of "I" and the doubling closeness of the plural pronoun "we." There's a kind of fracturing that occurs in this poem when the "we" dissolves into "I" and "you," a doubling of identity that mirrors the division of the self into two, the former, feminine "you," splitting away from the contemporary, masculine "I." Ultimately, this poem ends with curiosity and recognition: I wanted to resist easy resolution.

SMW: We are so excited to hear about your forthcoming full-length! Could you tell us about how this poem fits into the collection as a whole?

SM: Thank you so much! As I mentioned above, this poem is a part of *GHOST :: SEEDS*, which was selected by Kimiko Hahn as the 2022 winner of the X. J. Kennedy Poetry Prize from *Texas Review Press*. The central tension of this book-length poem is a dialogue between a transmasculine speaker and a figure that he conceptualizes as his ghost, the girl-ghost of the self that he left behind to become the person he is today. Putting a queer spin on the myth of Persephone, the girl-ghost speaks from an underworld lit by glowworms, cut through by dark rivers, and connected to the world above through a sea cave. This piece is in many ways an outlier in the text, as it deviates from Greek myth to pull in a different reference point, *Twelfth Night*. I was initially nervous about incorporating Shakespeare into a book that is already so laden with references to the Western canon, but ultimately I felt it added important depth and nuance to the larger narrative. I'm so grateful to *Driftwood Press* for giving this piece a home.

UNTITLED

Jessica Dawn Zinz



Notes/Materials:

Collaged images primarily from *Ladies' Home Journal: The Magazine Women Believe In* October 1962; *National Geographic Magazines.*

Text sourced from *The First Three Years of Life: A Guide to the physical, emotional, and intellectual growth of your baby* by Burton L. White, ©1975.

UNTITLED

Jessica Dawn Zinz

Notes/Materials:

Collaged images primarily from *Ladies' Home Journal: The Magazine Women Believe In* October 1962; *Playboy: Entertainment for Men* February 1980; *National Geographic Magazines.*

Text sourced primarily from *The First Three Years of Life: A Guide to the physical, emotional, and intellectual growth of your baby* by Burton L. White, ©1975; *National Geographic Magazines.*

JESSICA DAWN ZINZ
In Conversation

Sara Moore Wagner: First, how long have you been writing collage poems? Could you tell us a bit about your journey into this medium?

Jessica Dawn Zinz: I might argue that I've been both a writer and a visual artist all of my life. I have doodled, sewn, cut and pasted, and made collages involving images and text for as long as I can remember, but I focused more on literary collage and poetry comics in the last five years or so. I have always been interested in the way words and images come together, the way new meaning is created when we merge images and text. When I was in college, 2004-2008, I was writing ekphrastic poems. My senior thesis project was focused on ekphrastic poems using the black and white photography by Sally Mann from her book *Immediate Family* (*Aperture*, 1992). In graduate school, I continued with some ekphrastic work. I was also interested in found poetry in these years. I was playing a lot with the way I could take a found text and dissect it to completely alter what the original intended. I was seeking out interesting books about topics that I would never have read about, like a now factually defunct book I found about the toxicity of nicotine, and playing with them to uncover and unbury poems that spoke to something entirely separate from the original subject. I have an old survivalist's handbook focused on worst case scenarios, featuring things like how to jump into a dumpster from a roof, and it has resulted in many poems about my marriage. I love the way that transformation happens. With an art background myself, in the last five years, I also became more interested in the way my own visual art might merge with my poetry. I would seek out text, seek out images, and let them be my painter's palette, my toolbox. I began collaging and considering the way comics writer Scott McCloud talks about interdependent word-image combinations, considering how words and images come together to mean something together that they cannot mean separated from one another. This led to poems that I knew spoke to how I truly feel about the poetry process. They let me play. They let me uncover

what the poem wanted to say, what the poems wanted to tell me, not what I was begging to tell other people. The muse really comes to show itself in the process of creating collage poems. Certainly, my own experiences filter in and out of the work, because I'm still piecing things together, but the act of creating these poems results in so many moments of discovery for me. I think I lost that in my writing for awhile. Collage poems brought that back to me and my work.

SMW: Which comes first for you, the image or the poem? How do they inform each other?

JDZ: For me, the text of the poem usually comes first. I see the images and text together being the poem as a whole. One doesn't very well function without the other. I certainly hope the text of the poem holds the most weight and could perhaps stand on it's own, but I think that it would be standing on rather shakey ground. The images ground the text. But I don't mean this in a typical grounding for stability sense. I hope that the images actually stir things up a bit, make us question and challenge the text further than we might have originally though to. I hope for the images to twist, alter, and juxtapose the text. I think of it like I might teach a method of enjambment to my students. I tell them that they might think of the ways that ending a line on a certain word allows the line to mean something on its own, but that it might mean something else once the reader goes to the next line and reconsiders the prior line. I encourage students to think about ways they can surprise their reader, surprise themselves while writing, and I seek that while merging images and text and collaging.

SMW: How did you come across these specific magazines and sources? Could you tell us about the larger project they might be a part of?

JDZ: I am always seeking out quirky books. Sometimes, I find them in a session of dumpster diving at the local recycling center. However, these specific sources were a bit more focused for a project I'm currently working on. My father owns an antiques and thrift store in Pennsylvania. He often does home "clean-outs" and obtains nearly everything in a person's home when they pass away—the cups in their cupboards, the

art on their walls. He once obtained several boxes of *Playboy, Penthouse*, and *Genesis* magazines. He didn't want to sell those at his store and was going to toss them into the dumpster. So I said to my father, "No. No. Don't toss them. I'll take them. I want them." He chuckled and passed the "dirty" magazines on to me. I receive most of my magazines for collaging from him. He has given me several vintage magazines too, including a *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1962 and one from 1912. I began flipping through these magazines and thinking about these interesting ways women are represented in them. The *Ladies' Home Journal*s were shocking, more shocking to me than the "adult" magazines. The way women were represented as home-makers, domestic slaves, and servants to men just shook me up. So I wanted to work with that and see where it would lead my work. I wanted to juxtapose and alter that text, to turn it into something more empowering. I think that is part of my goal in many cases—to see what new directions the materials will go in when they're told that they are becoming a poem, that they're no longer a magazine featuring domesticity, they're no longer a book about a healthy family, but they are free to become something else.

I'm currently working on a larger project using several books focused on family, pregnancy, and parenting. There are lots of books telling us how to get pregnant, how to act while pregnant, and how to raise children. I began thinking a lot about being a non-parent as well. There is a lot of judgement toward women who do not have children. As a woman nearing forty, people were constantly asking me when I was going to have a child. The project began there and my poems really spoke to being a non-parent. However, I did recently become pregnant and had a child just a few months ago, so the project has evolved in that interesting trajectory. Throughout my pregnancy, I was so worried about losing the child, so that started feeding a lot of my work too. I began gathering "parenting" books from my local used bookstore (*Grounds for Thought, Bowling Green*). Some books are about the loss of a child. Others are guides to how to properly parent (???). And I have one from the early 1900s that is focused on keeping children safe. I starting cutting up the text and poems kept coming to me, kept falling on the page and begging to be arranged into lines. I work with the images in a similar way. I cut

things out, arrange and re-arrage them, and see how things speak to one another, speak about one another, and, my favorite, speak against one another.

So, I'm working on a larger project of collage poems about being a woman, family, being a mother, birth and death, and the things that float in between all of that.

JUST OUTSIDE LAGOS

Quinton Okoro

a relative
brings a cow
made of gold
to the house
a relative built.
i kneel to sip
at its udder.
the nipple is sweet.
the milk is supple,
laced with honey.
a relative lays
beside me
and drinks her share.
a relative rubs incense
into her flaxen down.
young relatives
stand in line
and wait their turn.
i take the place
of a relative
and she takes mine.
upon standing
my knees buckle.
the spirit overcomes me.
i am told
i have done good.
at dusk a relative
stews the beef
until it is brown.
it lands
like a stone
in the well
of my body.
a few relatives
provoke the fire.
its warmth drinks

into my goose-
fleshed skin.
i sleep for forty days.
when i awake
my body is golden,
stone solid.

QUINTON OKORO

In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: I love the terse, short lines of this piece. Can you go into your drafting process? Specifically, I'd love to know if these short lines are inherent in the first draft, or if they appeared through editing.

Quinton Okoro: While the poem's language is virtually unchanged from the initial draft, the form it has taken varied quite a bit during the drafting process. My intention with introducing the very short lines in this poem was to draw out the image and delay the transformation as much as possible, while still maintaining the tension of the strange, quasi-biblical ritual that is depicted. This is a very short poem and longer lines seemed to push the reader towards the end at a pace too quick for them to take in all of the imagery and symbolism that is packed into it. I felt that I could leave clues woven into the language to prepare us for the final act of transformation in the last three lines, but I found that the impact of those clues was lessened when they weren't (literally) broken down. For example, the lines "i take the place / of a relative / and she takes mine" hints at the speaker's transformation from one among the relatives participating in the sacrifice into the thing to be sacrificed next, and in addition allows readers to infer that the initial cow was once a relative who had completed this ritual before. This symbolism may have been missed or harder to scrutinize had the sentence been kept as a single line rather than drawn out into three beats. Although, I'm still not sure if I accomplished all that!

JS: The opening image of the golden cow is fascinating. Outside of the story of the golden calf in Abrahamic religions, I'm hesitate to draw any further conclusions than what is put forth in your poem. How did this image germinate for you? If you are comfortable sharing, what is the personal significance?

QO: I am writing a manuscript now that is heavily involved in the queering, disrupting, or otherwise obfuscating of traditional biblical stories. I grew up in the Catholic church and had many of those

stories told to me time and time again. As a queer person, I never truly identified with the Christian faith, though I have always been fascinated with Bible stories. I took a literature class in college that analyzed the text of the Bible from purely a literary and historical standpoint, something that I had never been exposed to, and I realized that my fascination with Bible stories stemmed from me simply enjoying a good folktale. As I began to write the poems that would eventually comprise my now in-progress manuscript, I found myself retelling these stories in a way that allowed me to reckon with the emotional and spiritual violence I experienced while growing up in the Church. So yes, the religious undertones of the golden calf imagery were definitely intentional. I had also written a series of poems around the same time that this poem was first drafted that dealt with notions of duality of the self or a change/shift happening internally after some ritual or action was completed (usually after eating something, encountering a body of water or a wild animal, or falling asleep). I have also been obsessed with the idea of "becoming a monster" in a completely neutral sense, not praised or vilified but simply describing the circumstances surrounding the monsterification.

JS: The lack of capitalization in this piece adds to the tone of stillness and intimacy. Is this grammatical choice common in your work, or is this poem unique in that regard? Moreover, what grammatical or syntactical elements do you value most in your poems?

QO: I almost never use capitalization in my poems, and until I was gently reprimanded by a professor for never punctuating full sentences in my poems, I rarely used punctuation in any conventional manner. I love poetry because it allows us to dream and break all the rules of writing that you learn in school. It's hard to do this well when you're just starting out, but as you learn more about writing poems and developing your craft, playing around with grammar and syntax can add so much to a poem that we cannot get from words alone. I feel that removing the casing of capitalization and proper punctuation allows the reader to focus more on the words, the meat, of the poem. And then it frees you to use those grammatical elements intentionally, like a capitalized word for emphasis or a comma placed to symbolize a crucial or surprising breath or pause.

THE BULLFIGHTER'S DAUGHTER

Carmen Fought

What if inside each of us is a tunnel
and inside each tunnel, a dozen shelters
in case a train comes by.

What if the baby is not a baby
but the soul of a bull
the horns inside, waiting
for the fontanel to close.

What if I walk past a cypress and
the branches whisper my name in Spanish
or I sink into the grass and don't stop.

What can I fold from my blood,
what animals turn loose to run
through my blood
a stampede of sweating flanks
bloody paw prints
hooked talons editing
or retelling my red story.

What if you find your *querencia*
and are no longer afraid of me
or if the light from your clothing
blinds us to cracks in the wood,
places where something could
come through, a memory or a hoof.

Running my finger around
the edges of the bull ring, walking
in a slow circle from shade
to sun, sun to shade, where
the ground smells of urine
and silk, and a man's sweat,
where anything could be
in the circle with us.

THE KANSAS WIFE

Carmen Fought

Did you ever lie down in the brown
grass so tall no one could see you,
but then wonder if they saw your pregnant belly
sticking up over the edges?

Did you want to trade places with your husband?
Did you want to trade places with an astronaut?
Did you want to trade places
with the slow cows on a July afternoon?

Did you wrap the wind around you like a house?
Did you wrap the house around you like a cell?
Did you wrap your child around you like a mistake,
wrap a blanket around it all, like an apology?

Did you see the calf coming out the wrong way?
Did you wait while they did the cutting?
Did you want to do the cutting
(and do it right this time)?

CARMEN FOUGHT
In Conversation

Sara Moore Wagner: These poems feel magical, yet entirely rooted. The images unfold in such strange and surprising ways. How do you approach an image? Where do your images come from, for you?

Carmen Fought: That's a lovely description. I think there's a lot of magic in everyday life, and many poets do a beautiful job of describing ordinary moments in great detail, so that we see their inherent wonder. I tend to go the other way and push away from the ordinary into the surreal and mystical. But the root can be something real. For example, I am actually the granddaughter of a bullfighter, and I have been in a bull ring. But rather than try to describe it for people who haven't seen it, I try to describe it in a way that will make it strange even to people who *have* seen it. I'm always chasing strangeness. I think the question of where the specific images come from, for me, feels more like trial and error than any kind of brilliant inspiration. Often I just hold two images up against each other in my mind, repeatedly, until I get a chemical reaction.

SMW: Both poems utilize anaphora and are built on the repetition of questions. How important is inquiry to you in a poem?

CF: I love questions! I love them as an invitation to the reader, or one other specific person, or the universe itself to come in and participate. And they also serve as an acknowledgment that, for me at least, there's an inherent uncertainty in poetry. I am putting these words out there and trying to capture something that probably isn't entirely capturable. The questions and their repetition are a way of saying, "Are you seeing what I am seeing? Can you help me turn this idea around in your mind? Will you try this on for me?" If I could hear the reader's answers to the questions as they read my poem, somehow, that would be fascinating and delightful.

SMW: There's a distinct exploration of gender dynamics and expectations in these poems (daughter and wife). Is this a common theme in

your work? What would you like your audience to take away about these gender constructions?

CF: I feel like I am often trying to capture in my writing some sort of transition. A moment where you're going through a challenge in life and longing/struggling to figure out what the version of you that emerges from that is going to look like. And being a woman adds a particular tension to those moments. Having sex for the first time, getting married, having children… Society has such different expectations around these events based on gender. And some of those expectations are quite dangerous. Maybe my poems are trying to be a yellow caution tape around them?

CONTRAFACTS HYMN

Afton Montgomery

Verse 1: I remember the sneakers I was wearing when I jumped from the bridge, 141
Verse 2: The question: *Will you buy the film of it?* "First commercial bungy!" glass-jar-
Verse 3: I remember Mom singing Godspell in the living room, all musicals in the six
Verse 4: I kept waiting for "to Coda," "to Coda" the next summer when my Dad was
Verse 5: Begin the riddle again. *Four of you stand on one side of the bridge. The ghosts will*

Soloist

1: feet	give-or-take	(*give*, don't you think?) **rst-rst**	down to the Kawarau River,
2: preserved on Facebook		(R's Dad did. Perfect hawk of a man)	or another Peter. Hung by his
3: disc	CD changer,	(wearing glitter wings, elastic strap)	angels or **rest rest** fairies
4: dying too. Give me—		(no, it was *take* **r e s t**)—	a different ending. When R's
5: *arrive soon* **rest**		(No rest! 17 minutes until they're)	here, right. *Only two can cross*
		Choir	*Soloist*

1: feet tied; R's dad died on that bridge **r e s t r e s t rst-rst**		(well, not *on* the bridge)
2: feet and gorging on the	dregs of Lake Wakatipu	(You can't just make time—)
3: of lemon-sage mop water "to clear the energy," wood panel		(after panel. Did you know)
4: Dad shrunk skeletal, mine was topping Grays Peak, **rest**		(arms out, Christed hawk *of a man,)*
5: *the bridge at a time. You are quick; you can*	*cross*	*(in just one minute. But it)*
		Choir

1: a few years earlier.	(He died of multiple myeloma last summer.)	Cancer?	(Yeah,
2: Fine, I'll keep it, then.	(He died of multiple myeloma last summer.)	Bone	(into
3: Steven Schwartz	(didn't write "By My Side?" It was in the)	original	(cast
4: renal cell carcinoma	(eating his sternum right? The wishbone is)	fulcura,	(lucky
5: *will take Mom two*	*(and R's Dad five and Dad a full ten.)*	Pebbles	(in His
	Choir (including soloist for verses 2 & 5)	*Soloist*	*Choir*

1: cancer,)	but arms out, crucified on the bridge anyway	(well not *on* the bridge.)	Jesus: off
2: a riddle, from)	childhood: *No more than two people can cross*	*(together. Anyone)*	*crossing*
3: production.)	Right: before Broadway. *I'll put a pebble*	(**r e s t**)	*in my shoe*
4: once broken.)	**Rest. r e s t rs t**	(But not just yet.)	There's a
5: shoe and His)	shoe. *Any of you can safely wait in the dark*	*(on either side of the)*	*gorge.*
	Soloist	*Choir*	*Soloist*

Verse 5 to Coda

1: the bridge; final bucket list check. One last r s t before he died. 4th of July.		(That's all water:)
2*: must either hold the lantern or stay next to it, and any can safely wait in the*		*(dark.* **Re s t** Water:)
3: *I shall call the pebble Dare, I shall call the pebble Dare.* And she	rubs	(the floor in water:)
4: scholar, visits her dead spouse each year by jumping in the North Sea naked		(Ashes rest in water:)
5: *No tricks. You can't swing across, jump, or befriend the*	*ghosts. Don't*	*(fall* in the water:)
	Choir	

Verse 1, 2, 3, 4 to sign

Verse 1:	
Verse 2:	
Verse 3:	**rest rest** his head receding from his eyes. Little orbs (under the bridge now.)
Verse 4:	

A capella, haunting

From verse 5: (*I shall call the riddle Dare, I shall call the riddle Dare*—) I took my scuba dive **rest**

Choir *Soloist*

r e s t r e s t test in Chatfield Reservoir. Visibility less **r e s t** than hands before

my face. 47 feet down, I lost the yellow rope that held us all together. (It was knob-knotted to grip)

Choir

Rst-rst-rst-rst but it takes hands to "hold" (Right.) I buried myself in **re s t** pebbles (couldn't see

Soloist *Choir* *Soloist* *Choir*

to read the oxygen meter). His head receding from my **r e s t** orbs (under the **r s t** now.)

Soloist *Choir*

AFTON MONTGOMERY

In Conversation

Sara Moore Wagner: I am blown away by the intricate structure of "Contrafacts Hymn." Do you have a background in music? Could you tell us a bit about that, and how it informs your work as a poet?

Afton Montgomery: My mom was raised in a family where music wasn't allowed; she snuck out every week to bike to dance classes and to paint sets for musicals around Denver. So I then grew up with soundtracks to *Pippin* and *A Chorus Line* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Wiz*—all 70s shows—and Carole King, Tracy Chapman, James Taylor on the six-disc in the living room. We danced on the table. And I was really involved in choral music for fifteen years or so, which was a lot of religious songs from all over—some very traditional and some contemporary.

Music is more important to my work than anything else is, which is something that usually shows up more in syntactical rhythms and sound play. Ironically, the sheet music form of this piece is so constrictive and takes up so much space energetically that I leaned more into image here than I did into sound—I didn't want tools of music to become gimmicky with overuse.

SMW: Every time I read this poem, I envision it being performed. What would your ideal performance of this look like?

AM: I love that. The page is always a little stage or diorama for me to play things out and see how they work. A real performance, of course, would be something else—a translation and not a replica. In the same way that I translated a musical form to suit the page, taking creative license, many of the tools currently employed in the poem would have to shift for a stage.

I imagine a performance of this would be silent except for percussion; it's not a piece that operates on sonic melody or harmony as much as the cyclical counting of rhythms. The riddle would be the main set and scene—spatially, in the piece's new genre, the riddle would be "the soloist." The other happenings: the two deaths and the woman in the North Sea, the bungee jumps, and so on, would be

smaller tableaus within it; they'd become "the chorus," an entity that adds depth and presses against the riddle's rules.

Of course, my dad's death is the emotional center of the piece for me, but I wouldn't ever be able to get at the enormity of that loss by giving it the solo. Instead, I'd give the stage to something adjacent but concrete, which operates in the same register that the loss did. The riddle covers a drawn-out expanse of time, and it tricks participants into imagining that they can think their way out of misery. If only! But they can't; here, it's unsolvable. Figuratively, the riddle sings the melody line at full voice while the real deaths quietly take a baritone or mezzo harmony. All together: something awful but apt.

SMW: This feels like a cousin to the contrapuntal (the contrafact!)—do you see it that way? How do you begin to approach a form or know when a poem lends itself to this kind of experimentation?

AM: A second cousin, yes. A contrafact is, loosely, a song that borrows chord progressions or other harmonics from an existing piece and creates a new melody over the top. (I had to have a musician friend explain this to me because I'm not an instrumentalist.) An example is Dizzy Gillespie borrowing from Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" on—actually on a lot of songs, but the one I love—"Dizzy Atmosphere." It's common in classical music and in jazz. And the format I use with multiple verses sharing an ending followed by one or two with a new ending is a staple in lots of worship music—that's where the hymn portion of the title comes from.

I find that form often comes before content, and it shows itself to me as a constraint or a prompt. What is the content that lends itself to this sort of musical form? That's a much more interesting question to me than, "How do I write about X?"

I borrowed the contrafact and the hymn and spun both; practically, my poem is closer to a hermit crab essay than a contrapuntal. That said, I'm riffing—the written form will always be something different than music, with different tools and emphases.

Superficially, paper sheet music is the element I borrowed. Can I take a musical mode of communication (the "harmonic element" of a contrafact) and give it a new "melody" via poetics? That's a question I'm asking.

But the bigger contrafactual element here is that I've taken the

concept of dying, which is like a jazz standard, and written a whole bunch of melodies over the top. They try and try to get to a different ending—something strange and revelatory. And of course, they don't. The standard is too powerful: dying leads to death. But the effort itself of pushing back is so much of the grief process before acceptance, so the new "piece of music" feels worthwhile regardless.

SMW: This captures memory in such an accurate and impactful way, blurring the past with present pain and grief. What advice do you have for others approaching a topic so vast? How do you begin?

AM: There's a porosity to memories that have big emotions. Grief is a thin place, I think—a place where the whole universe exists at once, where my body becomes coral-like and filled with holes. Maybe that makes it a dangerous place to write from (for all the reasons we hear about in the catharsis versus art debate). But it's a place where strange and unexpected images come into perfect crystalline alignment with emotional experience. From the porous place, a lemon rind could be my grief, or a riddle I used to tell participants on backcountry trips I guided, or the tether on my ankles before I jumped from a bridge in New Zealand. Whatever feels true. The greatest writerly gift of thin places is that, in those places, things feel true that we might not have the same access to when we're a bit more settled. We're more impressionable in grief and heartbreak than usual, and that means our own intuitive connections have more power over us than they do when our minds are leading the charge. I can't ever sit down trying to write about the big thing; I write instead about other things that feel true at the same time.

WORLD BUILDING #1

Valerie Fox

Much later next to the highway I note electricity's leavings—dinosaur tower candles near the road edge, caramel candy wrappers, answerless whines trapped in time. Are we almost there yet?

Can't decide if this is beauty. These upturned chairs. A box of last year's pin-pricks.

And Artie, with that broom, swept to the nib. I pretend to sleep.

I let my steady eyes stay shut too long and lose the ability to hold on to my wilting future.

We were taught, as children, one thing about everything. We held onto that.

And I keep missing him, our John the Baptist, backdoor knocker.

In earlier times, I followed some directions left on my phone, going to the whistle-stop airport and searching for a hidden letter in the waiting area.

We never get so far as a fight.

VALERIE FOX
In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: The details in this poem are fascinating. Each new image or observation adds up to a dizzying bricolage of details that still feels cohesive. I would love to know what the original, first-draft of the poem looked like. Was there a central image that jump started the poem?

Valerie Fox: The original draft was responding to a photograph by Alicia DeSimone. (DeSimone was a student at Drexel University where I used to teach). And I incorporated specific images. The broom especially captured my imagination. And checking out versions, I can see that I took out words and edited less with this poem compared to many of my drafts or beginnings. The tone of DeSimone's photograph is what I am going after. The photograph is so beautiful and tragic at the same time.

JS: I love the long lines in this poem. Most end with a period, and this allows readers a moment to consider that stanza's interesting imagery (it feels synonymous with the effect of a Ghazal at times). Do you write in longer lines often, or was this poem unique in that regard? What are the benefits and challenges of the long line?

VF: I think one benefit of the long line is that when we're going for a narrative effect, readers do intuit that with the long lines. It encourages (for me at least) a colloquial tone. And we can also get the same benefit as from short lines using end-marks and the like. Spaces (like with the Ghazal) give readers that space for reflection, as in stanza breaks in shorter lined poems, as you mention. People pick up on a persona/setting quickly. Ever since I started writing poetry I have used varied line lengths and also experimented with the prose poem. This probably goes back to my loving the work of Gertrude Stein, Baudelaire (the prose poems especially), and others. A formative influence for me is the inimitable John Taggart's work, whose long lines (used in much of his work) are both musically and visually essential.

JS: There are a myriad of settings and details in the poem, but the "I" feels singular and cohesive. Would you consider this poem 'confessional' in the context of the Confessional Poetry genre? More broadly, what are your thoughts on the idea of 'confessing' within a poem?

VF: I do think most of my poems that are successful have an element of autobiography, if not confession. They have an image from memory, a name, a real snippet of talk, or maybe something that is not so much secret or coded, but a detail that has been reclaimed from the past. Readers of poetry tune in when they sense that kind of reality. Since I make up or alter from reality so much of what's in my writing, I think it's probably closer to fictional than Confessional. However, I respect writers in that Confessional mode. I'm kind of reserved, so I don't think I could pull off that style. My work is surely voice-driven, and I love hearing when people say that my voice and work connects with them or helps them to arrive at some insight.

BAPTISM

Zarah Parker

The water heater is broken.
The preacher twists his hands in mine
to kill me in a likeness.

He covers my nose and covers my mouth
and I think he'd leave me to die.

I revisit that now. I hold my breath
and push backwards in the pool water
to lie on the cement floor.

The sky has never looked more beautiful
then when I could inhale it into my lungs.

Jerrod Schwarz: I'm struck by just how much emotional information can be gleaned from this short poem. Each word feels necessary, and each image is rendered with stark clarity. What did the first draft of this poem look like? What does your revision process look like?

Zarah Parker: The first draft of this poem didn't look all that different. I had a few awkwardly worded lines, but structurally it was about the same size. I think that's because when I sat down to write this I wasn't trying to write anything other than this image I had in my mind—a parallel between a baptism and looking up from the bottom of the pool. I sought for preciseness from the start, which made revision more about rearranging/exchanging a few words, making sure I kept the image intact. I'll admit, usually my revision process begins with me writing a new draft on a blank scene over and over again, keeping or exchanging lines. I find this helps me break out of the mold of the original draft so I can see beyond it.

JS: The 'preacher' figure is ominous and foreboding. The line "and I think he'd leave me to die" feels the most crucial in communicating the harrowing tone of this religious ritual. If you are comfortable sharing, I'd love to know the inspiration for this figure.

ZP: The preacher represents the legalistic nature religion can produce, where a person must act in perfect accordance with "religious rules." This is contrary—and suffocating—to the freedom one is supposed to find in their faith.

JS: What are your thoughts on short poems? As an editor in 2023, I have seen an uptick in really strong short poems being submitted. Why are you personally drawn to writing shorter poems, and do you have any larger, sociological thoughts on why they are becoming more popular?

ZP: Short poems are hard to get right because the poet has to explore meaning and image in just a few lines, in just a few words. There's

not room for "this line is ok" because all lines have to be extremely intentional. And almost nothing is more satisfying than being able to produce one that hits the mark. Sociologically, I think with the rise of social media and reading two-minute news articles, we as readers are reprogramming our brain to intake more information at bite size. Shorter poems I think fall in line with that. If a poet is going to share a poem on their social media, it's going to have to be small or it'll be swiped over.

JS: This might be an oversimplification, but "Baptism" seems largely concerned with re-examining religious experiences. What are the challenges of writing about religious or spiritual topics in poetry? What are the joys?

ZP: The challenges I face in writing about religious/spiritual topics is to not shove a truth I believe as a poet down the reader's throat. I think this is a common challenge with most people writing about religious topics. My goal isn't to tell the reader what is true or false, but I want to present an experience revolving around religion that can produce interesting conversations. The joy I find is that I am able to. As someone who is still involved in their faith, I find so much joy, and freedom, being able to explore different aspects of religion without feeling like I can't because I'm a Christian but my readers may not be. To me, that's part of the beauty of poetry.

LOVE IS PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE AND JOHN DEERE GREEN

Paul Doty

Love is a vessel slick with vegetable oil and vinegar, love is purple hope and John Deere green. The 1973 Livingston County Fair the old man bringing paper cones full of dark brown fries damp with malt vinegar, as good as a rain that saves the farm and common as rain making a June bride's party jog, the memory delicious because fried potatoes are ubiquitous, common as a June bride, but is love ubiquitous? What is ubiquitous—Daylilies, Purple Loosestrife, Creeping Charlie—a young woman on a riding mower slowly navigating the cusp of a ditch, she is Marvell's Coy Mistress and looks up as I scythe by a lawn's prickly fringe flying motely chow to fry on the road ahead. Common as a plot of land and optimism, but measure her for Marvell's ideal of wavering chastity and had I gumption enough and time I might u-turn to sing her praises in John Deere Green: chance favors the flatterer who notes a job well done. However, windows open and cut grass wafting into the car over every rise in the road, I need to make the St. Lawrence County line by dark so to a county where creeping chessboard Daylilies accelerate. Love, you weed, you ingenious vine that if gardens were just and wilting vegetables would go, love acquiesce to the side mirror and make me (or any summer wandering soul) a motor car Apollo.

PAUL DOTY
In Conversation

Sara Moore Wagner: I just love this poem's use of Andrew Marvell's 17th century poem, "To His Coy Mistress." Both poems seem to have a "vegetable love." In your poem, though, there are so many rural images, the John Deere Green and greasy fries, which do feel "ubiquitous," but the speaker and his lover are more shadowed figures on the outside. In both poems, everyone is "coy." What drew you to this poem?

Paul Doty: Marvell is a poet I have long been interested in, so when I'm writing he's always lurking in the shadows. I live in a very rural part of New York State, and this, along with a number of other things I've written, connects with scenes I've encountered while driving back and forth across St. Lawrence County. One of the things you see a lot of, in the summertime, is people out mowing their lawns, and there are a lot of quasi-meadow lawns and thus riding mowers. I suppose Marvell's "Mower" poems were the seeds from which this sprang, but because it is an aspirational love poem, or a poem about love dreamt of, the quality of temptation and anticipation in "Coy Mistress" made that the poem to name in trying to create the mood the poem strives for. The "ubiquitous" element to the poem (along with the fact I really like the word) is teased out of the phrase "common as a June bride" and then seemed to be an avenue toward describing the scene wherein the narrator finds the extraordinary on an ordinary afternoon.

SMW: What makes a good love poem? How do you think "Love is Purple Loosestrife and John Deere Greene" expands on the genre of love poems?

PD: A good love poem incapsulates a moment in time. In the case of this poem, it tries to capture everything in an instant when the narrator is (to borrow a phrase from my favorite rock group Jethro Tull) "wondering a'loud" what it might take to get to know the woman deftly handling a riding mower, a figure come upon quite by chance. If the poem can capture a moment of emotional and carnal energy spliced by this circumstance, then it can perhaps speak to a human universal, and speaking to that universal is the goal of any love poetry.

SMW: The repetition and rhythm in this poem, in contrast with the prose form, is really striking. Could you explain a bit about your process for the form here?

PD: The rhythm in the poem is an attempt to create a persona for the narrative voice, and here I am drawing on "Coy Mistress" for a tone of voice to do this. It's a tone that asserts I know a thing or two about love, I know a thing or two about where I am. Hopefully there is some humility and humor in the poem (which after all does drive away). I had Marvell in my mind in trying to build the character for the poem.

APRIL, 1929

Michael Brockley

after *South Carolina Morning*, Edward Hopper, 1955

In the mornings I wait, arms crossed, on the porch of the house my husband built with timbers he harvested from the river that runs along our southern border. He fashioned our home to favor a hardware store, with its tall display windows holding the darkness inside. Two months of sweat and swearing to restore the crawl space and escape hatch from the time fugitives found their way to this desolate patch. I wear the same clothes whenever I'm waiting for my man. My mother's wide-brim hat, the sleeveless dress, and black pumps. I stand on the porch in the shadow of the shingle roof. In front of a house surrounded by the cement slab he laid with the energy that never gave me a daughter. Or a son. A child for the swing set he promised to build before he left for Savannah. I keep the hurricane lamp dimmed. The floor swept and the pillows fluffed. Pinecones scattered among lavender and chamomile in the lingerie drawer. And atop the chifforobe beside the trapdoor if the night riders from my grandmother's time should rise out of the river bottom like they did in '09. I hold my head up and allow sunlight to tease the strawberry and cherry hues out of the summer cloth I sewed by hand. I'll wait until the sun has passed noon. If he arrives tonight, he'll never find me in this unfaithful world again.

Jerrod Schwarz: Much of your poetry exists in prose block form. For you personally, what are the advantages and disadvantages of the form?

Micahel Brockley: I don't think in terms of advantages and disadvantages. I have written poems since the second grade at St. Gabriel's in Connersville, Indiana. These poems eventually took the form of song lyrics followed by texts with stanzas that contained line breaks. However, during the second half of my thirty-three-year career as a school psychologist in rural northeast Indiana, I transitioned to prose poems because my case loads required me to work at home more frequently. Subjectively, it seemed as if time constraints were interfering with the time I spent thinking about line breaks. I respected the prose poems written by David Shumate and included Forché's "The Colonel" and Hass' "A Story about the Body" in the hundreds of poems on my top ten list. These authors and their work influenced my choice to work in boxes, in what Shumate described as the outline of an American Plains state. Once I started writing prose poems exclusively, I felt like I had aesthetically and artistically found my home. And my voice. More than I ever had before, I found myself writing the poems I wanted to read and wished I had read, a notion I had gleaned from reading Toni Morrison. With this epiphany, I composed poems about an alter ego called Aloha Shirt Man. And poems about Wile E. Coyote, music, movies, books, even the dogs I guardianed and loved. And loneliness. As a person who has lived most of his life alone and who has been lonely more often than not, prose poems allowed me to investigate and face the role loneliness has played in my life across the span of my seventy-four trips around the sun. Perhaps prose poems afforded me the opportunity to immerse myself in my own poetics, a process that continues to be evolving and influencing what I do when composing and revising poems to this day. I don't think much about disadvantages. I sometimes finish prose poems with seventeen syllables. I don't call attention to this move, and I couldn't tell you which poems I finished in this manner. In general, I would say I can express what I want to say through the

prose poem form. I also like being a rebel of sorts.

JS: What drew you to Edward Hopper's work for this piece?

MB: Loneliness haunts every poem I write. And Hopper is, in my opinion, the artist of America's loneliness. I've written several ekphrastic poems, including many responses to Hopper paintings. Last year, I Googled Hopper's work and discovered this painting, South Carolina Morning, which spoke to my sense of isolation and, perhaps, the notion that one might not know that one is alone because the partner won't be returning for reasons that might never be revealed. If I remember correctly, the woman in question was actually waiting for a partner to return and might not have been pleased when Hopper photographed her (if my understanding is correct). But the painting captures the cold isolation I associate with his work, and the story unfolded fairly seamlessly. I tend to write poems unintentionally, in a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants manner. And this poem was not any different. During the revision process, I deliberately chose to make certain that she had an opportunity to break the cycle of loneliness that I find myself to be caught in.

JS: I love the long opening sentence of this piece, how it communicates both geography and intimate relationship. What did the first draft of this sentence look like?

MB: I let this poem incubate in my mind for a day or so before I started typing it on my computer. The first sentence was composed during those mental formulations that I wander into late at night or early in the morning, during the time when I'm closest to my dream mind. This poem seemed to need to be established on a foundation sentence, and that is what this sentence does. It escorts the reader into the poem's movie.

HOMER SIMPSON EATS SIX INSANITY PEPPERS & HELPS ME FINISH THIS POEM

Rodney Wilder

Because / by the time I read this I will have / swallowed whatever / fire-ant / manna this slam has / dared me & / therefore / invited my own coyote to / cackle a whole band of / laryngitic, black-metal bad decisions from the / horizon that is my throat. / I / likely / am becoming a bonfire, / my mouth / a capsaicin zodiac horoscoping me its / judgment, my chest / that Nazi-melting *dracarys* from *Indiana Jones* / cooped in an ark of / sacreder make / than gold, my / stomach lining a / Helm's Deep stormed by Uruk-hai berserkers sparking / ghost-pepper embers & / promising eruption & I / will stop there. / Homer, / who gargled with / candle wax & then / bellied a kettle of Guatemalan lava, I / am calling on your stupid / to successfully see me through mine. / Because I love / all the violentest flavors! Am / a true Simpson / with the mantra I carry to every
table:
ow! / quit it / ow! / quit it / ow! / quit it
This
is such a costly cult to imbibe. / Heat & hurt such / nonsensical lovers to paramour for, but / look at the way I keep / calling on them to / ahegao my face & lips this / masochistic bliss, / tongue out / lips inflamed / too / enamoured with each mouthful to be / turned away by pain. / Homer, / who hallucinated the / sun into an Armageddon of glass without so / much as a tear, I / am calling on your dauntless to / wax me an unburnt palate, a poem / coaxed from the depths of Hell / without crying. That's all. / Pull / from this brushfire throat what / poetry there is to be pulled, & keep me from panting / or sniffling or / monsooning myself in milk until the poem / is done. / But afterwards, with my / status as spice-god secured—my / scorpion-tail laurels to gloat / & suffer under—I / will sweat & snivel to myself like all / champions do, my wounds to lick left / chipotle-smoky / jalapeño-sharp / mango-sweet. They / will be appetizer enough. & their / lingering scorch / a coyote wisdom I, / like you, / will be too far gone to learn from. So bring me / your habaneros & your ghost peppers, your / carolina reapers & your mustards. I / am Quetzalcoatl's insane hunger. The snake-god's / magmic fruit chewed
whole. I / am always in the mood / to burn

RODNEY WILDER
In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: I love this poem's title! Tell us how it came about. Specifically, I would love to know if the title came first, or if the poem inspired the title.

Rodney Wilder: Thank you! Yes, the poem's title was the last touch on this one, coming after the poem itself had been written. I wrote this poem for an event being put on by Slamlandia, a poetry slam in Portland, OR; the event being a Pepper Poetry Slam in which participants would eat something spicy (hot sauce, pepper, etc.) and then perform their poem. So, with that expectation of pageantry and pain, and my penchant for utilizing the lens of pop-culture for poetry's sake, the poem became precisely what I think it needed to be. Got me to second place anyway.

JS: The slashes in this poem are fascinating. Is this a technique that you've used before, or is it unique to this poem? For you, are the slashes primarily a function of rhythm, or do they serve a more visual purpose?

RW: The slashes aren't a technique I use that often, usually leaning on left-alignment and line breaks for the majority of my poems. If a poem feels particularly conversational or aggressively stream-of-consciousness though, that's where the measured flow of line breaks feels less appropriate. In those cases, as this one, the slashes allow for this wall of verse that—while being the visual barrage that the tone calls for—still has that internal segmentation of phrase and idea and flow to keep a constant jump from emphasis to emphasis, if that makes sense. With poems like this, I feel like I'm always courting a balance of ferality and structure, and the slashes add to that, I think.

JS: What did the first draft of this poem look like? This is a long poem that feels simultaneously very intentional with its structure, and I'd love to know what the first version looks like.

RW: I actually don't tend to draft with my poems, preferring to hammer them out line by line until I'm ready to call the piece satisfactory. So it's more or less in the only form it's ever had. If there was any structural change that happened along the way, I'd say it was when I realized the way I read the poem out loud gave it a natural hemisphere in the line "ow! / quit it / ow! / quit it / ow! / quit it". Before that, the poem had been one massive block of text, but turning the line into the poem's visual hemisphere brought it even closer to what felt right to me. Especially after actually performing the poem at the Pepper Poetry Slam and realizing that's about how far into it I got before the capsaicin started working its asphyxiant magic on me. Because spiciness doesn't just hurt your mouth; it also severely incapacitates your ability to breathe and speak at high rapidity. I know that now.

THE ATLAS OF INDESCRIBABLE DEAD THINGS

Kelly Gray

I.

The storm slips inside my home dampening the bathroom till the mouth of the sink spits up a delicate sparrow bird. I take her into my hands, press face between fingers, observe feathers wetted against paper soft skull. Her eyelids open then close in an inverse blink. For a moment, I make eye contact with the flying dead. I am filled with maps of bramble and constellations shining all the light we have yet to swallow.

II.

I wash my body with the bitter waters of fenceposts and shotguns. Dead things are perfumed, hung on barbwire. A skunk, a snake, a gingham dress with a lace-collar my mother straightens while the photographer takes my picture, asking more than once if I will stop crying soon.

III.

The girl is a field with rubber boots splashing through reflections of stonewalls while a mouth the size of a peach pit asks where do the bodies of ground creatures go when it floods.

IV.

I promised I would wait for your death before writing this, but the waters have been rising for three weeks. I have forgotten how to swim to you after you threw me in the pool. My arms and legs learned what would not be taught with kindness.

V.

The metal floor is painted wound red. By summer the house swells and the bedframe wedges so tightly between walls I must hammer

it out, exposing a nest of mice between the floorboards. A mother, gorgeful pink. Eyeless faces, swallow-with-your-whole-body babies. I try to cover them with heavy things; toolboxes and black cases for stringed instruments. She will not stop having babies. In winter the bed slides again as my husband unblouses me, my neck in his hand, forgetting the small lives of rodents beneath my back. After the blankets are picked off the floor and I am half content and half aware of my body, the cat brings me the mother mouse. She is broken in two, little driplettes of milk falling from cat teeth.

VI.

Still, the girl is a field. Windswept hair even when all the planet is still. Stars set white against eyes so blue you can't help but imagine her dead. As she writes her thumbs fly in different directions to keep time with her breath speak and the clicking clicking of the keyboard. Her fingernails are bitten moons and without me asking she offers that she has a fake life that will take too much paper to transcribe. We both turn towards the trees and the lumber mill beyond. I think I should take an axe to her throat before she burns this forest down.

VII.

I wrap the mouse body in a sock and leave it to warm beneath the lamp hoping the baby mice will find her. The mouse looks too tired to become a whole unbroken being again. The mouse funeral will be held among books, there will be Cala lilies and oxford shoes and tweed ties. At the pulpit they will quote Plath, Sexton, Pozzi and Marmara. Mouse brethren, accusations. Publishing companies in the crotch of husbands. Me, crying above, promising repeatedly to leave her miniature mice writings untouched, in nest form, available to all.

VIII.

Others have fallen but you are still not dead. Instead, photographs of you fall from my ceiling. You were once a child. You fit in a bucket once. You sat on a fencepost, you shot a deer once. You look like me.

IX.

Before I drain the bath water, I place the bird in the tub with me. She
opens against soapy water as thunder trembles clawfoot. When her
body catches current, she circles and circles, tail first through
the drain, wings squeezed, reaching for my tangled hair.
There is a dead poet in my oven, the smell of yeast
and agitation fills my home. My floors are the colors
of all the ways you left me. When boys fuck me
I cum neatly crafted ballads and it hurts
because they are never stories with endings.
I can't take all this niceness.
I think there are enough trees.
I am a house with a bird in my stomach.
My windows grow darker and darker.
The storm is taking a thin finger
to my chimney. I am the blister
in the face of the licking burn.
I am the slipping dead,
my palms soft as service.
All the babies
crying.

Jerrod Schwarz: I always love a poem that is broken into sections. Was this structure of the poem inherent in the first draft, or did it develop in editing?

Kelly Gray: I agree, I appreciate the deep pause and pivot that sections can create, like our own pocket-sized chapters in a poem. I started this poem with the title. I wanted to work with a series of images that would create maps of textural and tone-based experiences, and then tie them together in atlas form. For a moment, I thought about creating definitions for the indescribable dead things, but quickly realized that it felt too restrictive and would be contrary to the indescribable. So, I started writing it in sections. More sections than you see here, as some became their own poems and had to be removed. The idea of creating an atlas never lost its appeal to me because it worked against internal pressure that I self-impose to reach an ending. Why not spend years collecting and assembling these vignettes?

JS: I'm fascinated by the animal imagery in this piece. Was there any specific inspiration for the animal's appearances in this poem? Moreover, are there any poets/artists who inspired you?

KG: The winter I wrote this poem, everything was flooding, the cabin I live in was heaving with saturation, and the forest and all the animals were in constant contraction. The idea of solid ground was becoming more of a memory, huge trees were uprooting and taking out homes. I was thinking a lot about the small animals I share space with like songbirds and mice, and the forced loss of domesticity. The sparrow in the poem was metaphorically flying in and out of that loss, right through the pipes that were literally backing up when our septic tank flooded and pushed its interior back into our sinks and toilets. I was grappling with the horror of non-nomadic life. Speculating about the miniature lives of animals in my home could feel both unhinged and cathartic, depending on the day.

When I was writing this, I was starting an intentionally collaborative conversation with the artist Douglas Pierre Baulos, who him-

self is indescribable, but one of the ways he works is with fiber to create layered visual stories. He is a master cartographer of mood for sure. Poets that I admire are poets who evoke through imagery and trust their reader; Diane Suess, Sylvia Plath, Emily Skaja, and Victoria Chang are currently all on my nightside dresser and are read and reread. Right before writing "The Atlas of Indescribable Dead" things, poet Katherine Fallon has shared Larry Levis's "Linnets" with me, and I thought maybe I should not bother writing anymore, because he accomplished it all in one poem. But you know, thankfully we push through and drag ourselves back to the page.

JS: The ending of this poem is visually stunning; the break from prose blocks to the intense funneling of words is kinetic. What are your personal goals when writing an ending? What do you want to feel at the end of a poem?

KG: Thank you so much, I love that you used the word *kinetic*. Often when getting to the ending of a poem, I have lost touch with my thinking brain and intentions, and I just want to experience a good old fashion poetic climax. I want to get everything out of my system. I also want to feel surprised by what was in my system and informed by the revelations I needed to release. I want to write the quickening of pace and the crescendo, but cut off before any dissipation sets in. In other words, the poem is for the moment of heightened transcendence, the cuddling and relaxation should happen off page.

CRY IT OUT

Erika Eckart

I tried the way of the books. I filled her belly, turned off the lights, put her down, waited down the hall, ignored the screams. But it was no use. She scaled the sides of the crib, threw her small body against the door. She was going to hurt herself. So I begged forgiveness, let her curl her small body against me like an abalone nestled to a ship, but now she is cursed to be awake, unless rocked to sleep or pushed in a stroller to a particular mixtape. She can't as the experts say "self-soothe" and they warn this has consequences. Maybe I was predisposed to be to overstuff my child with my attentions. When my great grandmother grew up she had so little that her parents would slice up an apple between 7 siblings, so when her children and much later me arrived in times of plenty she fed us until our skin stretched and turned iridescent in stripes from the pressure, until once I vomited out the car window. She would have us know fullness to make up for all her want. Each meal was several courses, even in the middle of the night: a lavender melamine bowl of peaches, pound cake, a foot-long hot dog, an iceberg salad drenched in orange dressing, chicken soup. I'd catch her watching me eat, smiling subtly. So maybe I couldn't resist lavishing my baby with touch, couldn't let my dear one cry it out. For every night I had gone to sleep unheld, away from my mother, for how I had learned to wrap a blanket tightly around my shoulder like a Cocoon to simulate the pressure of a person, I would cradle my little one twice as hard, babybook be damned, even though I know you can have too much of a good thing.

ERIKA ECKART

In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: Prose poetry is one of the few forms that has varied definitions depending on who you ask. In your own words, what are the crucial elements of a prose poem? Perhaps more specifically, why are you personally drawn to the form?

Erika Eckart: To me, a prose poem uninhibited by the line can be almost breathless—or can when it needs to use syntax to perform the line's function. I can't totally explain my attraction to the form, but to say that it feels like an intersection between prose and poetry that has the density needed to tell the stories I want to tell.

JS: This poem is largely concerned with motherhood and the expectations placed on mothers. What are the challenges of rendering the parent-child dynamic in a poem? Did you have any specific you wanted to communicate at the outset, or did this poem gestate more organically?

EE: The challenges of motherhood verge on inexplicable, they are amygdala-based and/or a cocktail of guilt/joy/concern that makes them hard to parse. To find some tangible way to give shape to my anxieties about mothering, I attempt to make a poetic version of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, the ubiquitous parenting book we all turn to to see what those spots mean, if you are swaddling correctly, when to call the doctor. This is part of that series. For the subject of sleep, I tried to tune into why the conversation about how a parent puts their baby/toddler to sleep feels simultaneously like a failure and a victory to me. From there, the poem bloomed into a life of its own.

JS: I love this poem's focus on "fullness" and the idea that we both explicitly and implicitly pass on these concepts to new generations. What advice do you have for poets writing in a similar vein of genealogy and familial concerns?

EE: To those who want to write about what we inherit and how we become those our children inherit from, from a parent perspective I would lean into moments of tension, moments where something sinks, where you can't explain why you just did or said something that seemed to move through you like the voice of a ventriloquist, where you wish you had a time machine so you could take it back—or as the inheritor how the emotional "estate" that leaves its signature on you inhabits your habits, your posture, the way you move through the world. In teasing out those moments, I think writers can get at the sometimes beautiful and sometimes hideous sticky connective tissue that binds us together.

ASLEEP, WITH HEAVY BREATHING

Joshua Roark

You bleed red, but your mouth is a birdhouse
for yellow teeth. Your feet—Sons of Your Legs—

grow slowly. You reverse yourself
to the contented: slick witness as you dream

within a dream: measure your daily actions against
the width of your wife's thigh, the weight

of a sparrow wing. *How many colors*
do we contain? Your fingertips are nightly

capped with glass as the memory of want
blows the flute. Modulations flung across

the gap: F to F-sharp, C to G, G to C to F.

Jerrod Schwarz: I'm struck by the opening of this poem, the quiet violence inherent in the first stanza. When drafting this poem, when did this image of bleeding and teeth show up? Perhaps more specifically, was this first stanza the onus for the whole poem, or did the harrowing images appear through revision?

Joshua Roark: I recently did a table read for a screenplay I've written, about a group of high schoolers and their teacher competing in spoken word. After the reading finished, an actor turned to me and asked, "What's the deal with you and teeth?" I poke fun at this a bit in another poem in the collection—teeth are all over this book. It's an obsession I am learning to live with, this need to be inside the reader's mouth!

This poem is one of about eighty I originally drafted in this series of little surreal hits of image and sound. I then set them all to fight each other for a few months, very gladitorial. About ten made it out the other side, wearing all the bits and pieces of the ones left behind. I couldn't honestly tell you what is original and what has been cannibilized from another poem.

JS: This poem exists within a larger collection about the speaker's brother. Could you tell us a little bit about this poem's place in the collection? When did you know this was going to appear in your collection?

JR: One level of organization for me has been place. Much of the rest of the book is either desert, or Florida swamp, or city, but this one, and the others like it, exist in dream. I feel compelled to make some deliberate room for symbolic ambiguity, this unreasonable overlapping of image and meaning, speaker and reader and brother. This poem, and the other dream poems, were written before the rest of the collection, so they always acted as a bit of an anchor for me in drafting the manuscript. The most honest answer is that it's at the top of the book because it has one of my favorite phrases: "sons of your legs."

JS: My favorite part of this poem is the final line. As a lifelong piano player, the sting the F-sharp is a powerful moment of dissonance against the backdrop of the otherwise standard set of chords/notes. Broadly speaking, how does music function in your writing? What are your rhythmic concerns when writing a poem?

JR: I had a moment during the pandemic where I set out to learn the piano. The electric piano broke about a couple weeks in, but that was enough time for me to watch loads of YouTube videos on music theory. Triads and chords and modulations really struck me as evidence of some basic poetry built into the universe. I thought this poem wanted to break language apart a bit, and using triads to turn sounds into letters fit that purpose.

Different poems want different rhythms, so the work is more finding out what the poem wants—this one wants density, wants pressure, wants to replace all your teeth with shiny little rocks. It's a bit generous that way.

INSTEAD OF A DIARY, I CONFESS TO THE ROOMS OF MY DOLLHOUSE

Kailey Tedesco

ribcage
victoriana—
kettle-fat bones.
hair in lockets & frames
& around the windows
with more than one
sun.

eye sockets ceramic
& statue—
so goes the chorus,
the choir masked
in asp & the feathering
of a bad birth.

liminal & anatomically
correct, the field trip
heart-tunnel
fastens us in its mold—
arteries
web-beholden.

the cabin in the woods
opens on its hinges, on its
haunches—towering its
blood baths & scissoring
limbs.

i steam
like the clearing
of a throat. mobile homes
with moats—shoe-strewn
retention pond: a shrine
for how you died on
multiple highways.

where the ground gets gore-soft i vampire-sire you
back to life scalp-plastic in all my hairbrushes
your unmatched shoes clog deeply in my bloodstream
here you are my dolly awake & off the shelves
your hollow forever a little burial ground

KAILEY TEDESCO

In Conversation

Sara Moore Wagner: Poetry is so often spoken of as a "house," with the word "stanza" coming from the Latin for room. Here, you've made that image literal, turning the image into the words held in a physical space. Could you explain a little about what led you to take the "stanza" room a bit further?

Kailey Tedesco: I am always struck by the emphasis on interiority, voyeurism, and fantasy that is inherent in a dollhouse. I thought of these stanzas as small vignettes that reveal something secretive or shameful. When I placed these vignettes into more traditional forms, I kept thinking that the poem was lacking in an energy I was aiming for. Positioning them within rooms of a dollhouse seemed fitting—they are now enclosed in a room but still made into a spectacle. Reading the poem can be playful and malleable—just like dragging a doll from one room to the next.

SMW: What drew you to visual or graphic poetry?

KT: In my reading, I am always drawn to more experimental writing & forms. I sometimes get stuck in my usual moves to the point where I feel my poetry is either stale or just not as interesting as it might be. Usually when I feel this way, I push myself into some kind of new territory. I just finished a larger project and while experiencing some burnout from that, I thought it would be fun to try out forms and structures that I was previously too insecure to try. This dollhouse structure was the first poem to come of this challenge. I had so much fun with it that I continued to put poems in teacups, zoltar machines, mall directories, etc. Some of these pieces are just for me—little ways to break out of my rut—but there are some (including this one) that I am very proud of.

SMW: What do you think makes an effective graphic poem? How should someone who wants to experiment with visual poetry ap-

proach this form?

KT: I think mimesis is everything here. There's a sort of deliberateness to writing graphic poetry that can feel very authentic or very phoned in. I know because I have many drafts of my own where I struggled with this! Ultimately, though, if you feel as though the graphic form is giving the poem a life or energy that it didn't previously have, absolutely go for it! If the graphic feels more like a scaffold or a prompt to achieve the content, I think it's a sign to redesign.

SMW: I'm struck here by the use of juxtaposition, of the bodily images in the white/domestic space which is not meant to hold a physical body, being a dollhouse. It seems to be about the more grotesque elements of girlhood and domesticity. Is this a common theme in your work? How do you begin to approach large subjects in such innovative ways?

KT: I really love and appreciate this reading!

One-hundred percent, yes, this is a large theme in my work. I love domestic horror paperbacks and horror movies, so I think a lot of those tropes are constantly weaving through my work. It's in these spaces that the most shunned topics are brought to life and given room for discussion.

A few years ago, I was diagnosed with Forbidden Thought OCD, which is a really common and debilitating (but rarely talked about) form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I've recently been cognizant about ways I can use poetry to explore some of the intrusive thoughts that have plagued me my entire life while also bringing awareness to the normalcy of these intrusive thoughts as a whole. I keep this in mind when approaching most projects, and I just try to be authentic to those experiences.

DAYLIGHT

Laura Goldin

We were in the car when it started. It started in the car
on the left side of my head.
In my head, on the car, a left-sided throbbing beneath my eye.

We were in my left eye when it started.
A beautiful day, so few clouds, and you
sitting to my left in the car with the throbbing.

The car was in us when it started. It started on the left side
of my car in the head
with the beauty of the sunroof —

so few clouds, and the daylight reflecting in my terrible left eye.
On my head in the daylight
on the left side of the car below my eye, it started.

You were in my eye with the clouds and daylight.
You were sitting to my left
in the cloud with the throbbing.

There was a side of my head, and you were on it.
All around you the car throbbed
beautifully in the daylight.

Jerrod Schwarz: The form of this poem is fascinating. Full transparency: I'm not entirely sure what it is! I see elements of pantoum, rondeau, and sestina here, but I'd love to know more. Is this an established form, or a structure of your own creation?

Laura Goldin: I love this question because I'm very fond of the forms you mention—pantoums in particular—and have enjoyed playing with them, but the structure of "Daylight" is just what came to me as I revised what started as some notes of a particular experience. The poems to which I'm especially drawn as a reader are those that suggest a narrative without quite telling a coherent story, and those that approach a formal structure but don't entirely achieve it. I love list poems, especially those that start off sounding reasonably quotidian and then go off the rails on one or more levels, and this poem—like the notes it grew out of—is an attempt to capture some of the ways in which an ordinary event (car-ride, headache) can become another animal as we dig into it in retrospect.

JS: The central action of "throbbing" is mysterious and harrowing. While I can't make any certain claims, it alludes to pain on some level. If you're comfortable sharing, can you shed some light on this aspect of the poem?

LG: I am prone to what people call motion-sickness, but my problem isn't actually motion so much as light: unlike most people, I do better in the back seat of a car than in the front, and I get seasick standing on dry land if I am foolish enough to spend more than a minute or two admiring the reflection of sunlight on water. "Daylight" started with an actual experience—one of many—of a migraine set off by a car-ride in the front passenger seat, but the throbbing you mention refers not only to the physical phenomenon of the migraine but also to something else that I found myself wanting to explore as the poem developed, which is the experience of being a passenger (being "driven"), especially when one's relationship with the driver is not uncomplicated. So the poem is trying to operate on a few different

levels: describing the experience of the developing migraine (mine usually start over my left eye) in a syntax that distorts along with the speaker's ability to make logical sense of what is happening. For me, the experience of a full-blown migraine is entirely disorienting: as the throbbing intensifies, my ability to speak in full sentences diminishes to a point where I'm ultimately unable to manage much more than single words. Relationships, when they go seriously south, can have a similarly disorienting/disabling effect: "You were sitting to my left / in the cloud with the throbbing" refers in the poem both to the physical position of the (implied) driver and to the speaker's experienced helplessness, notwithstanding the beauty of the (cloudless) day.

JS: What advice would you give to other poets looking to write more structured poems like yours? What are the benefits and challenges?

LG: Again, I love this question, but I'm not sure that I can claim credit for "Daylight" as a structured poem. The advice I've given myself, and would share with anyone else who is both intrigued and perhaps intimidated by formal poetry, is to approach the exercise as an opportunity for experimentation and play. Write a mediocre sestina, a terrible pantoum, and an adequate but unexciting villanelle, and then see what, if anything, about the formal constraints you're working with sparks interest and creativity and what feels like it's simply getting in your way. You may surprise yourself with what you can do on a first try, or you may find yourself working in a kind of hybrid space that interests you more than the structure you initially set out to accomplish.

UNTITLED

Kyle Marbut

I mother a slow eternity. Erebus and iced seawater in a jar, compass needle beset by magnetisms not of this material world but over the cliff of feeling one might stumble off in late haze. Cataleptic, bitterness in the mouth I savored till the year I wanted to die again. One foot in my mother's voice, the other perched cloudtop and whiling only transformations. Another dusk folding over another—bluejay's rib cracked in my fist. I knew a darkness, once, just like this.

SPRING EQUINOX

Daniel McGee

In the kitchen, my sister watches a viral video of angels
erupting from the sun like flies. Their luminous flesh
reveals the innerworkings of a body, skeletal structures so similar

to our own. They whirl through space, awakened
from hibernation, flocking back to the Earth, to us again.

The whole family huddles around her phone and keeps replaying
the 43-second clip while exchanging thoughts
on the new prices of cherries in the coming summer months.

The post's caption worries my mother: "NASA #Hubble Telescope
snaps series of photos capturing largest annual angel migration to date."

Outside our window, their fluttering bodies eclipse the sun
in fragments, projecting grotesque shadows of limbs and wings
on the ground: channels of darkness that cascade through the streets.

Sara Moore Wagner: This poem uses an online natural image in such an inventive way! It reminds me, in some ways, of Dana Levin's "Banana Palace," which expands into a viral online image. Do you use these kinds of images often in your work? What does the use of online images or references do for a poem?

Daniel McGee: This was actually the first time I've explored an online image in a poem. I think these online images (as well as their captions) can be used as artifacts within the world of the poem. By establishing these artifacts, a writer can create an embedded narrative to juxtapose to the broader narrative. In this poem, I wanted to explore how I could switch which world is the larger "outside" world and which might be the micro-narrative within it.

SMW: To build on that, the message of the poem seems to be about moving away technology to the reality of the outside world. How do you believe our societal dependence on technology affects our lives and/or poetry?

DM: Technology is slowly integrating itself into our everyday lives the same way it does in this poem. For example, what might have once been considered a "snow day" for some schools may now be a day of online class. Contactless orders on mobile apps also create a new reality for what it means to order food or groceries. We've started engaging with these services and institutions from a distance, the same way the family in this poem is more fixated on the video than the happenings outside their home. Our experiences are becoming more and more mediated through technology.

Thinking about poetry, social media apps have a very specific form that encourages shorter posts as to encourage readers to consume larger quantities of content. Poetic forms can be informed by these same constraints, especially when exploring social media within the content of a poem.

SMW: This poem is also so surreal and fabulist. Do you have any favorite surrealists who inspire your work? Where does a poem like this come from for you?

DM: Belgian Surrealist poets such as E.L.T. Mesens and René Magritte are some of my bigger inspirations. When I was first composing this poem, I wanted to explore how Icarus' flight towards the Sun might be perceived in today's world of technology where so much of the sky and space is documented. The idea of documentation pushed me to explore the flight of angels as a social and general phenomenon. I found that as I explored certain subjects from an unconventional perspective, such as the ecology of angels, I was able to create this poem that feels both fabulist and scientific.

WHAT'S MY LINE, PART ONE: A FRIDAY AFTERNOON

Alison Davis

She is pouring more coffee into an almost-full mug.
It is watered down to the point of looking like whiskey.
Maybe it is whiskey.
Maybe it is muddy runoff rescued from the puddle.
She says, *jacaranda, for instance, is beautiful*
but not serious.

They are carrying a box of chalk and a stretch of sidewalk
in their dreams. The moon is never in a hurry. Tomorrow
will bring a fresh unfastening. A new haircut. A viscous voice.
Does everything seen from a distance
seem pretty? they ask.

I am contemplating loneliness again.
Sometimes joy lights a small bonfire in my hands
and warms everything I am reaching toward.
It is easy to believe touch is superfluous.
I've shaved my head, I said, *I wear robes now*
instead of dresses.

The lambkins butt heads as they slosh through the pasture,
rolling with three seasons worth of rain. The placenta is bright
with blood and earth against the gate. With an ungloved hand,
the farmer pulls back a fistful of vetch, feeds it to the ewe.
He says, *if there are fifty thousand levels of the mystery,*
maybe I'm at forty-five.

ALISON DAVIS
In Conversation

Sara Moore Wagner: This poem feels like small vignettes or snippets of reality overheard, without context. With all the people around the I, it makes the I feel even more isolated. I love the use of direct speech in a poem (and I'm also a big fan of doing it in italics!). Are these statements entirely invented or overheard?

Alison Davis: The italicized statements in this poem are from a commonplace book. For those not familiar with the practice, a commonplace book is essentially a compilation of words, phrases, quotes, commentary, and other thoughts, usually taken down while reading. I used to rely almost exclusively on annotation as a way to interact with texts, but these days, I'm much more likely to just log language that I love. Every so often, I go back and read everything I've written down, and sometimes it leads to a poem.

SMW: I am so drawn to how each of your stanzas works independently, but the poem comes together as a whole in a profound way. How did you approach order? How did you find that ending?

AD: I actually wrote this poem from a prompt I designed for one of my students, Minsoo Kim. I call the prompt "What's My Line," hence the name of the poem. Each stanza follows the same line-by-line structure, which starts by describing a subject in a moment of action and ends with a speaker tag and a quote from the commonplace book. The order of the stanzas here was totally intuitive. I had a few images in my mind, and I allowed them to just unfold. It took me a while to find the right phrase to end with. I wanted something a little mysterious, almost intangible, to balance out the earthiness and very concrete reality of the farm scene (which I actually witnessed). When the phrase about levels of mystery presented itself to me in a daily meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation, I knew that was it.

SMW: This poem is called "Part One." We would love to hear about

the other parts, and about this project overall!

AD: As I mentioned above, I wrote this poem from an original prompt, and I had so much fun with it that I just kept going. I got friends involved, we traded phrases from our commonplace books, I started listening more intently in case I might overhear something particularly inspired, and I found myself writing a whole series. I'm currently working on my second book of poetry, which is divided into three sections, with a "What's My Line" poem leading off each section. This one is the very first! The italicized lines in Part Two were provided by my long-time partner-in-poetry, Iman Hassen, and helped me make sense of some very intense fever dreams from a recent illness. The third part uses the last few lines of a Hafiz poem to reflect on the way that the cost of great love is often great loss, and somehow I'm always willing to pay. And I'm sure there's more to come!

"What's My Line" Prompt

1. Describe a person in a moment of action.
2. Say something else about the action or the person.
3. Add a "big assertion" (see Tony Hoagland's *The Art of Voice*).
4. Quote from another source, but attribute the quote to the person in your poem.

UNTITLED

Melinda Freudenberger

i am what they call a romantic or at least my BA-BEE says so /
once i sensed a wet gray cloud over BA-BEE and with flowers in
my teeth came to her — she asked *when are you now* and i didn't
want to say any where else but *here with you* so i dropped
the bundle and / open mouthed / waited for the moment to pass / drool
dripping twirling covering the stems in clear ooze now looking softer
more blue / made more enjoyable for her by my body or at least i
hoped so / in the woods outside this home i am another sort of
creature : not lingered upon / no eye undressing me / in all my
nakedness i dream of her of carrying her deep in our body / marred
in marrow resplendent in / glistening stomach / *it is not realistic*
to be so tender BA-BEE said / OF ALL the things she knows about me
first she should know i'll love her in any way i'm allowed

Jerrod Schwarz: I'm really fascinated by the shape of this single-stanza poem. Specifically, it feels like it exists in a limbo where it could also be interpreted as a prose-block shape. What did the first draft of this poem look like? What was the original shape?

Melinda Freudenberger: It was very important to me when writing this that the shape of the poem come second to the character's voice. I like to think of Dog Woman, who is speaking in this poem, as a newborn, fresh in the world. I wanted all of her poems to feel a little jumbled, a little rushed and full of feeling. For me, nothing quite does this like a poem that elongates the line and defies a line break, like a prose poem.

JS: This is a visually exciting poem; I'm especially drawn to the use of capitalization and slashes. I would love to know if, in your creation process, these are included as a function of visual style or rhythm control?

MF: In Dog Woman's poems, the slashes function as rhythm control. While I do want her poems to feel a little rushed, as I mentioned, I like implementing certain functions, like the caesuras or slashes, as a means of control that wouldn't impede the narrative but would still give me opportunity to create pauses for the reader. In poems in the work from the other character's, BA-BEE's, point of view, I use typical line breaks and styling, though the slashes still remain to further entwine and connect the two characters. Their voices and layouts on the page remain distinct for most of the work.

JS: The imagery and descriptions are simultaneously vivid and grotesque; it reminds me of Aase Berg's poetry in its details of the body. Do you see this poem as more lyrical or narrative? Perhaps more specifically, do these vivid images culminate in something chronological or something emotional? Or both?

MF: The way Dog Woman experiences the world is not always reliable. BA-BEE has a better grasp on the narrative—she is someone who is like us, a person in the world with a phone and a clock and a schedule. This is one of the more emotional poems for me. I like to think that Dog Woman's experiences of the world are received into her through a sort of haze, like looking out of a rain-soaked window. If I imagine this moment narratively, I think BA-BEE would actually be disgusted by Dog Woman bringing her these flowers—but Dog Woman doesn't think like that. She's finding love and freedom in herself and in the world for the very first time. She'll keep giving, even if she shouldn't.

RICHARDSON II

Andrew Hutto

I will keep mutilating myself at the edge of your vow book.
Better thing and cold apple man that I am.
Richardson, please swallow my keys.
I am drinking bout' our stomping ground again.
Getting into the car and Sonny Clark comes on.
I am getting tapped and laying goose eggs.

Where's the fever sweat now?

Now you're painting your nose with him.

Am I googly-eyed death?

Whacking you silly with a belt and telling you I am in love with a way of life that echoes and groans.

Richardson, please.

Hollow out and crab.

Balance me in your ledger so that I might work out.

There are dead-eyed alarm clocks and punctured tithes.
There are ways to swim that I haven't begun to try out.

When the sliced moon cuts across your belly, do you ever whimper out loud?

Angie, Angie, Angie.

ANDREW HUTTO
In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: I really love the disparity of line lengths in these poems and the overall entropy of their placement. Did the first draft of this poem differ visually, or was it largely similar? What does your process from first writing to 'finished' piece look like?

Andrew Hutto: The first "draft" of this poem was really another poem:

> A dream in which I heard your voice
> coming from a red-headed addict.
> I saw some of your face and your checks
> had lost their BABYJOY... skin was picked apart
> and stretched thin like hide on wires.
> There was a camera shuttering from
> behind your eyes, and it looked like
> you had clawed at the lens, leaving puffy red
> rings around each eye.
>
> I heard your voice.
> raked in its remorseful glee, repeating
> "Angie" "Angie" "Angie" "Angie" "Angie" "Angie"
> "Angie" "Angie" "Angie" "Angie" "Angie" "Angie"

This poem was a brief snapshot of a dream I tried to capture when waking up in the morning. I liked the final line and scrapped pretty much everything else when I went to work on a new poem that evening. Visually, a bit more energy and space were needed for the obscurity and momentum of "RICHARDSON II," so the varied line structure made more sense in the final draft.

JS: The final line of the piece is harrowing, mysterious, and invites the reader back into the poem to glean more information. Can you share with us some insights into this specific name?

AH: The name "Angie" was a pet name my wife would use (sort of a shortened play on Andrew); oftentimes, in the sleepy liminal moment, I would wake her up after getting home late from bartending in the city.

JS: This poem feels both confessional and ephemeral at the same time. There are moments of clarity ("I am in love with / a way of life that echoes and groans." and moments of obfuscation ("Hollow out and crab.") How do you achieve this balance? Were there any explicit goals you had when crafting this piece?

AH: This is a balance I don't have much control over. I often spill over into one of the two domains and can't veer the rudder back on track. It's a generous observation, and I hope a balance can be found here. In many respects, any balancing of these two results from reading Richard Siken and Robert Lowell, who have controlled the realms of the real and the abstract with a tact I only hope to come close to.

The explicit goals here are somewhere in the same vein of confessional and ephemeral. As the title suggests, there is a series of "RICHARDSON" poems that tell the dreaming story of infidelity. This early poem in the series is trying to capture that initial turmoil of being discarded for another and living in a psychic lack of providence that you hope might still be curved around your body to make meaning of what once was.

LUNGI KAM

Catherine Eaton Skinner

LUNGI KAM

Catherine Eaton Skinner

LUNGI KAM

Catherine Eaton Skinner

LUNGI KAM

Catherine Eaton Skinner

LUNGI KAM

Catherine Eaton Skinner

LUNGI KAM

Catherine Eaton Skinner

IMAGO

Shannon Louise Barry

COGITO

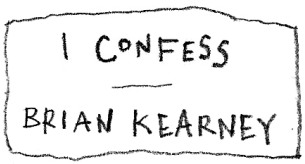
Shannon Louise Barry

INNENWELT

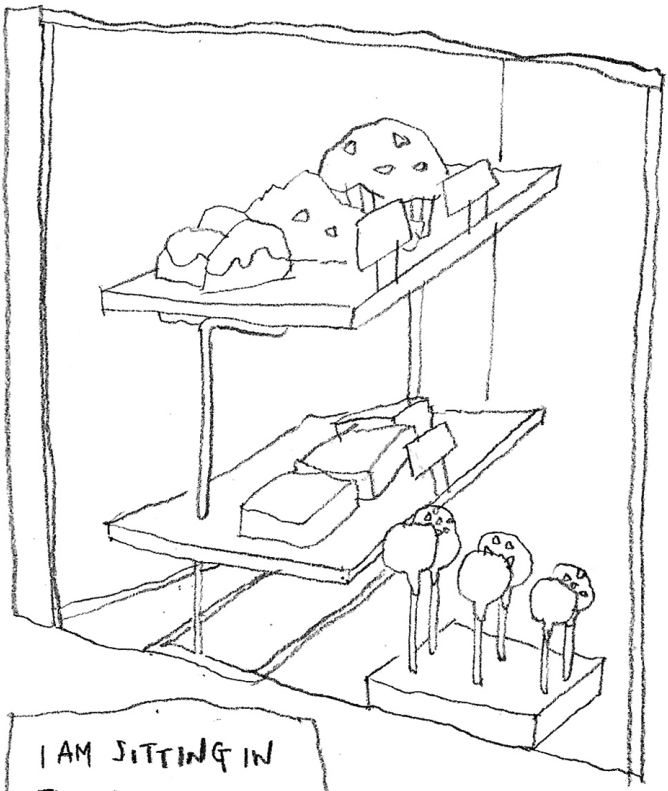
Shannon Louise Barry

AHA-ERLEBNIS

Shannon Louise Barry


I CONFESS
BRIAN KEARNEY


I MADE IT, MOM!
I'M IN AMERICA
DRAWING TRAINEE
BARISTAS


I AM SITTING IN
THE MALL ON A
WEEKDAY MORNING
DRAWING CAKE POPS


THREE VIEWS OF
A YOGA MAT

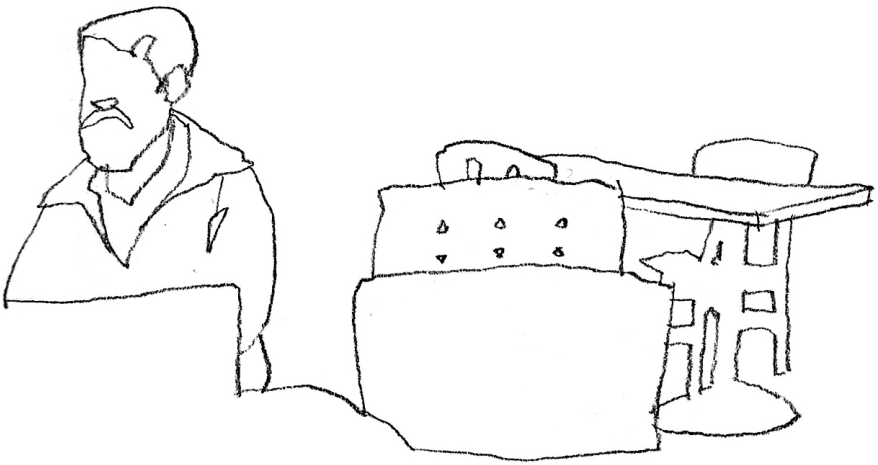

DIFFERENT
-SIZED
DADS


YES. I WOULD RATHER
LOOK AT PEOPLE
THAN TALK TO THEM

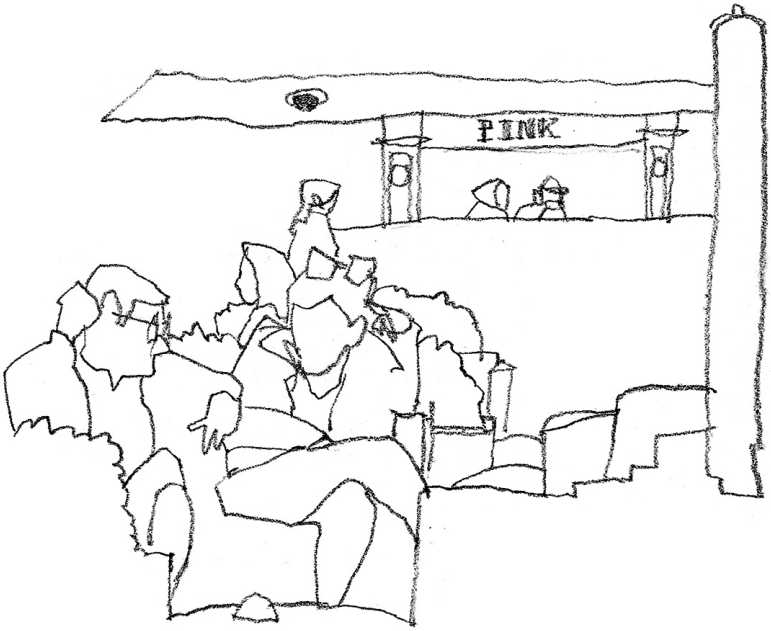

30 DAY
HOME
HAVE YOU CONSIDERED
THE HUMAN BODY AS A
KIND OF BACTERIAL MALL?


TO BE HONEST I
JUST ASSUMED I
WOULDN'T MISS YOU

I THOUGHT I WANTED TO BE ALONE

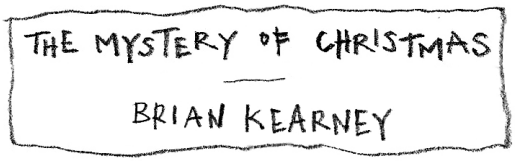


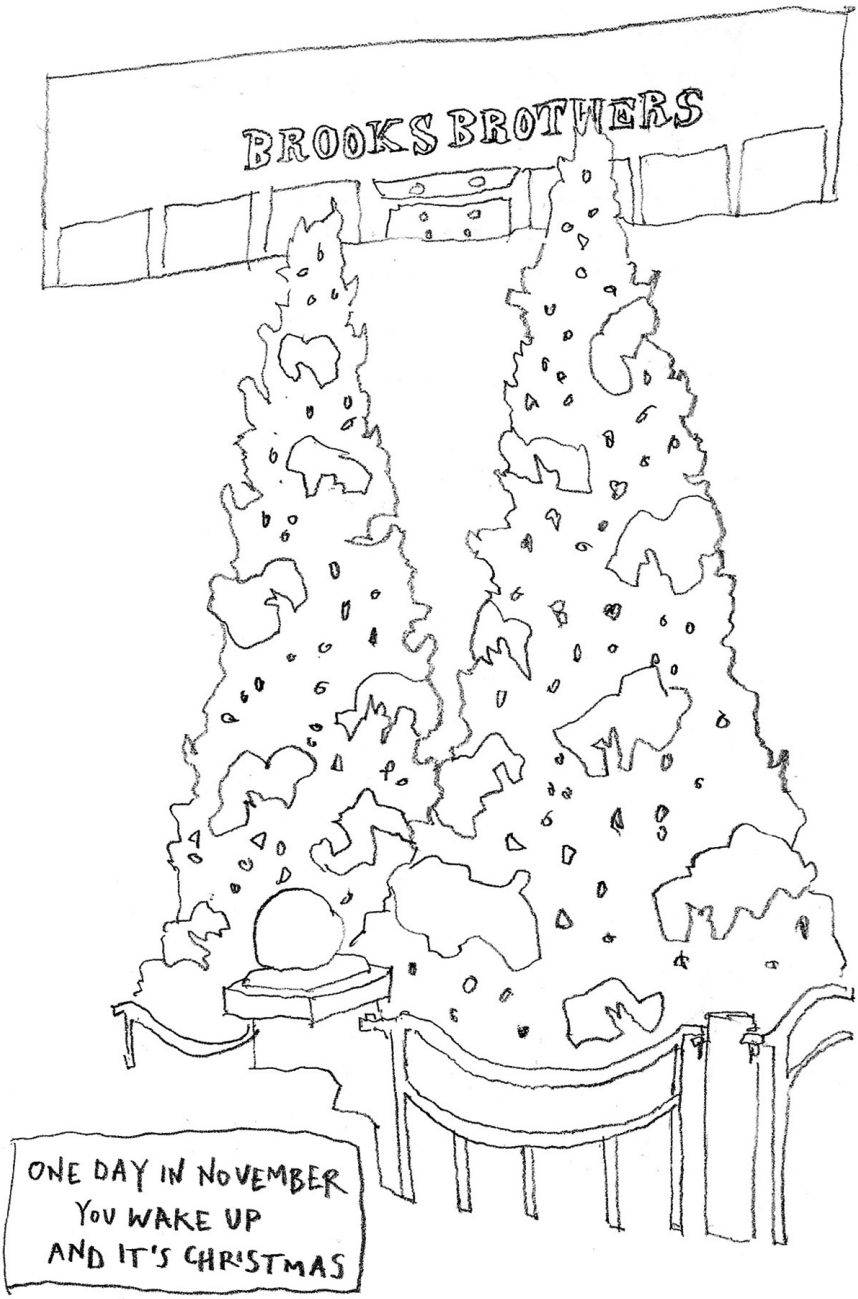

AT LEAST
I HAVE
THE MALL

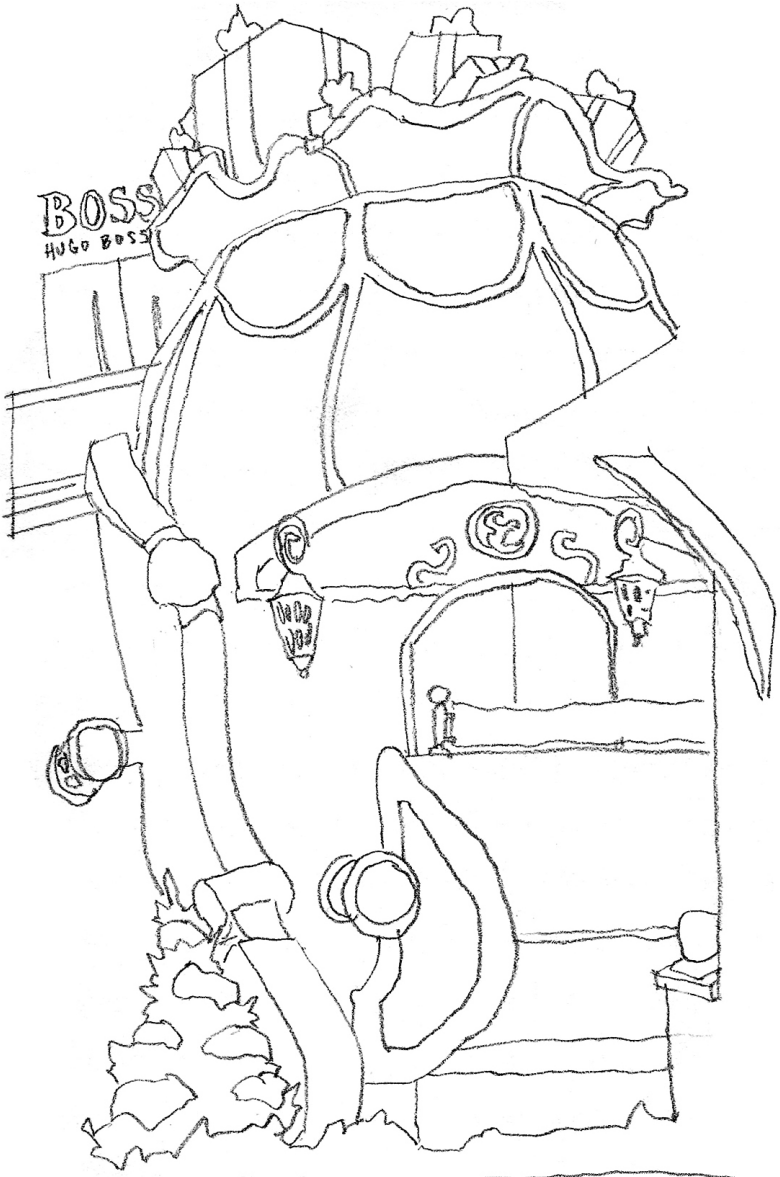


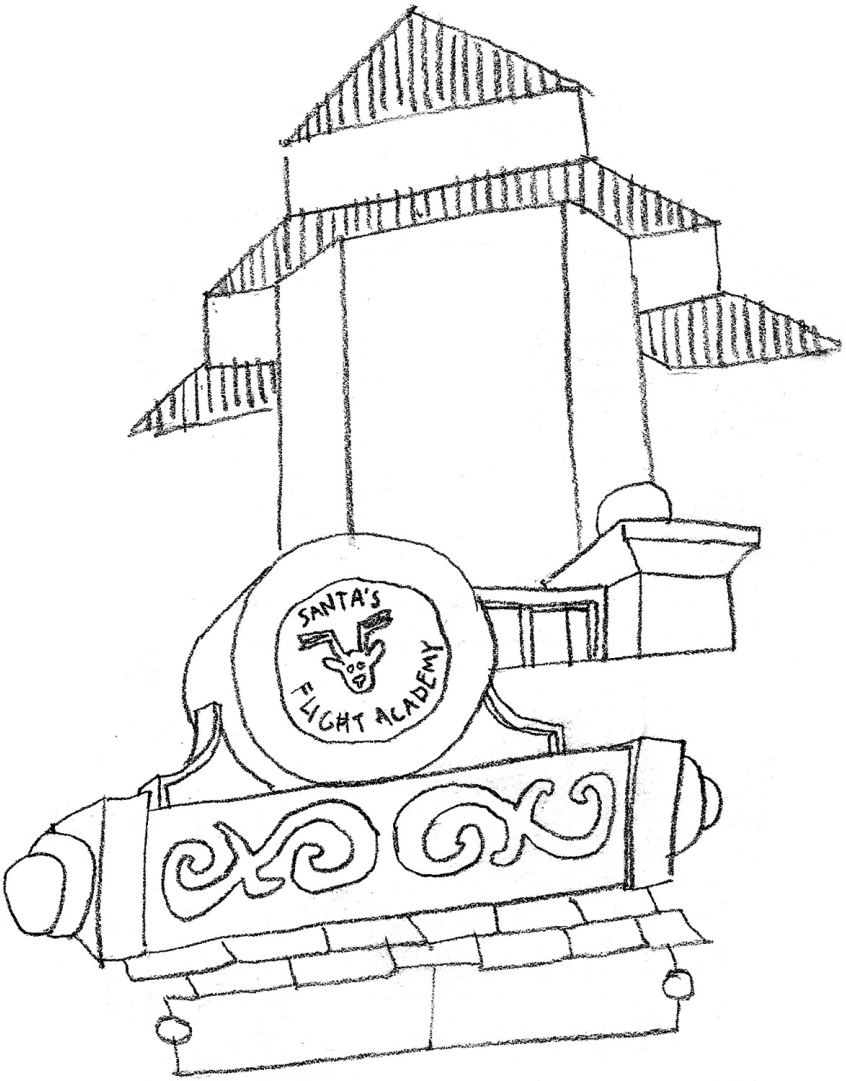
IT'S LIKE A LIVING ROOM,
WITH SECURITY CAMERAS


FOR ME,
THIS IS THE
EASIEST WAY
TO LOVE


THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS
BRIAN KEARNEY


BROOKS BROTHERS
ONE DAY IN NOVEMBER
YOU WAKE UP
AND IT'S CHRISTMAS


BOSS
HUGO BOSS
THE SEASON HAS INTRODUCED AN ELEMENT OF SHEER LUNACY



THIS CAN ONLY END IN TEARS

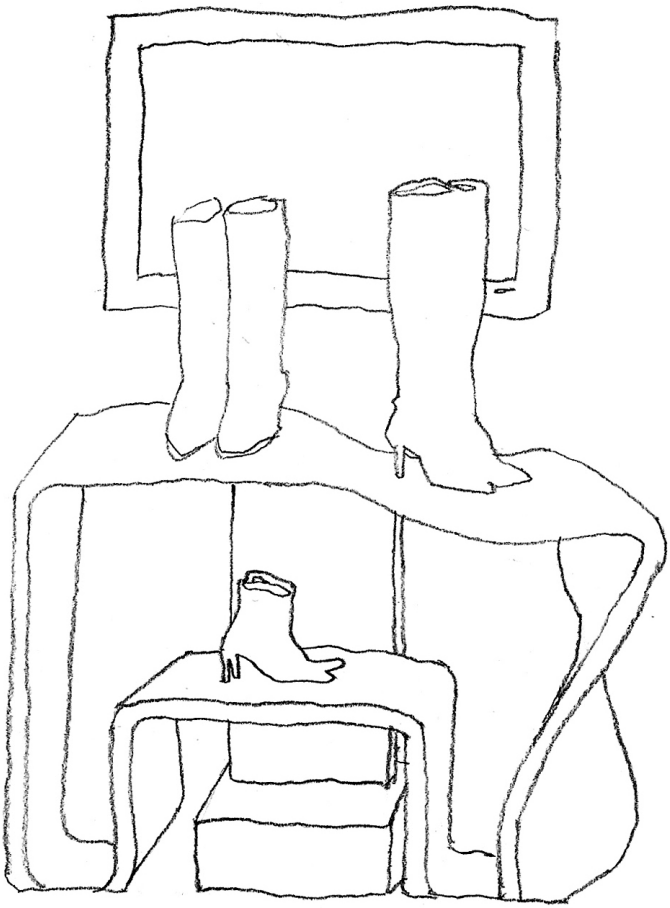

IMAGINE A WHOLE
SOCIETY OF LITTLE
MONARCHS


THEY ARE SCREAMING BECAUSE THEY'RE HAPPY


I AM JEALOUS
OF THIS CHILD'S
EARMUFFS


YOU WANNA TIME OUT, BUDDY?


Work.
Play.
Be
Merry.
IMAGINE IF YOU
HAD TO BE TOLD
WHAT TO WANT



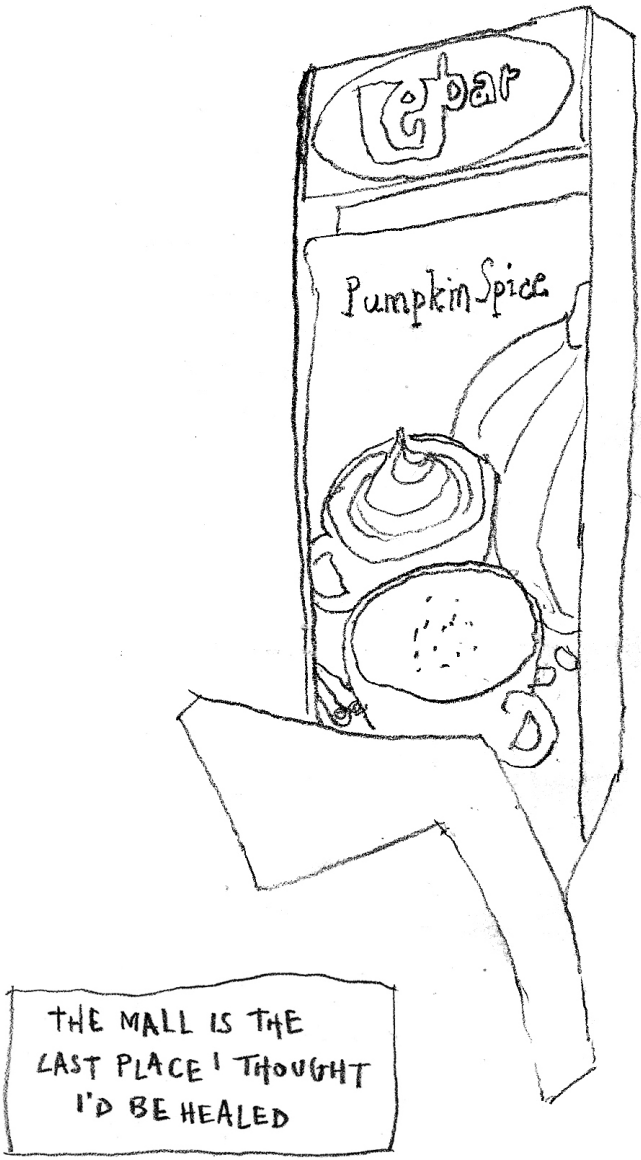
DEAR GOD, FREE ME
FROM THIS CRIPPLING
RESENTMENT OF AMERICANS

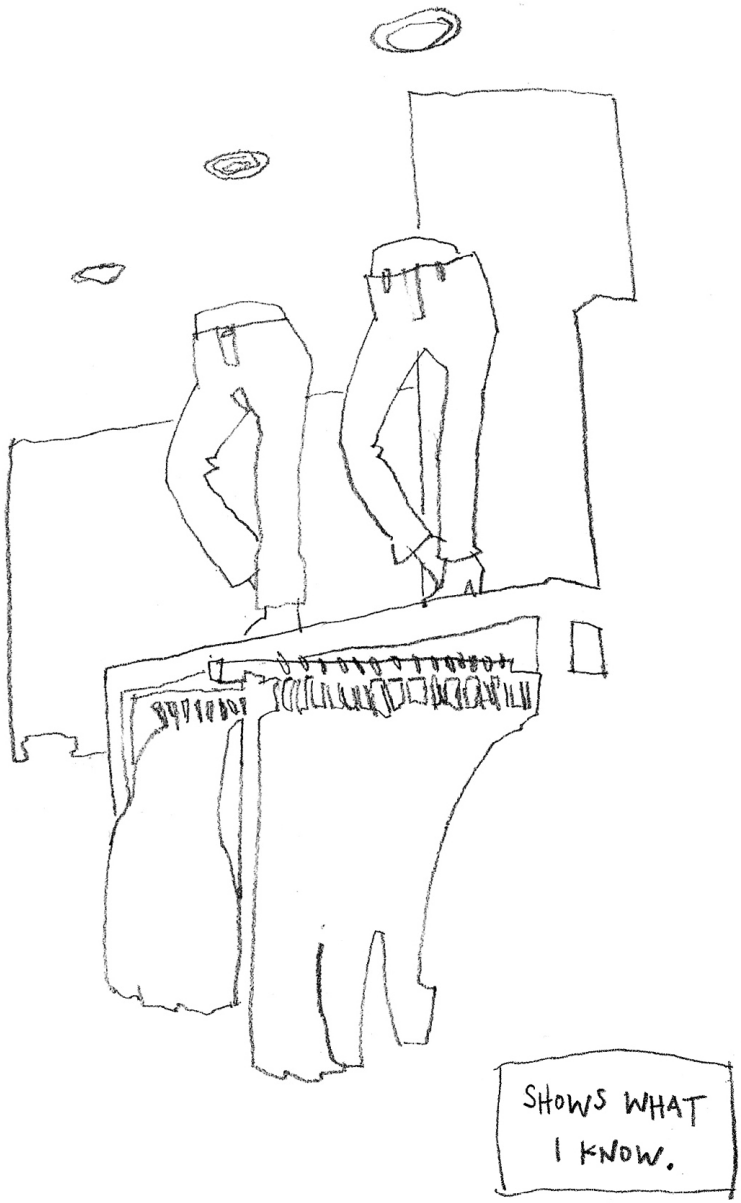

THE SORROW IS
THE MYSTERY


BECAUSE JESUS
WOULD LOVE
THE MALL


DISMISSAL
BRIAN KEARNEY

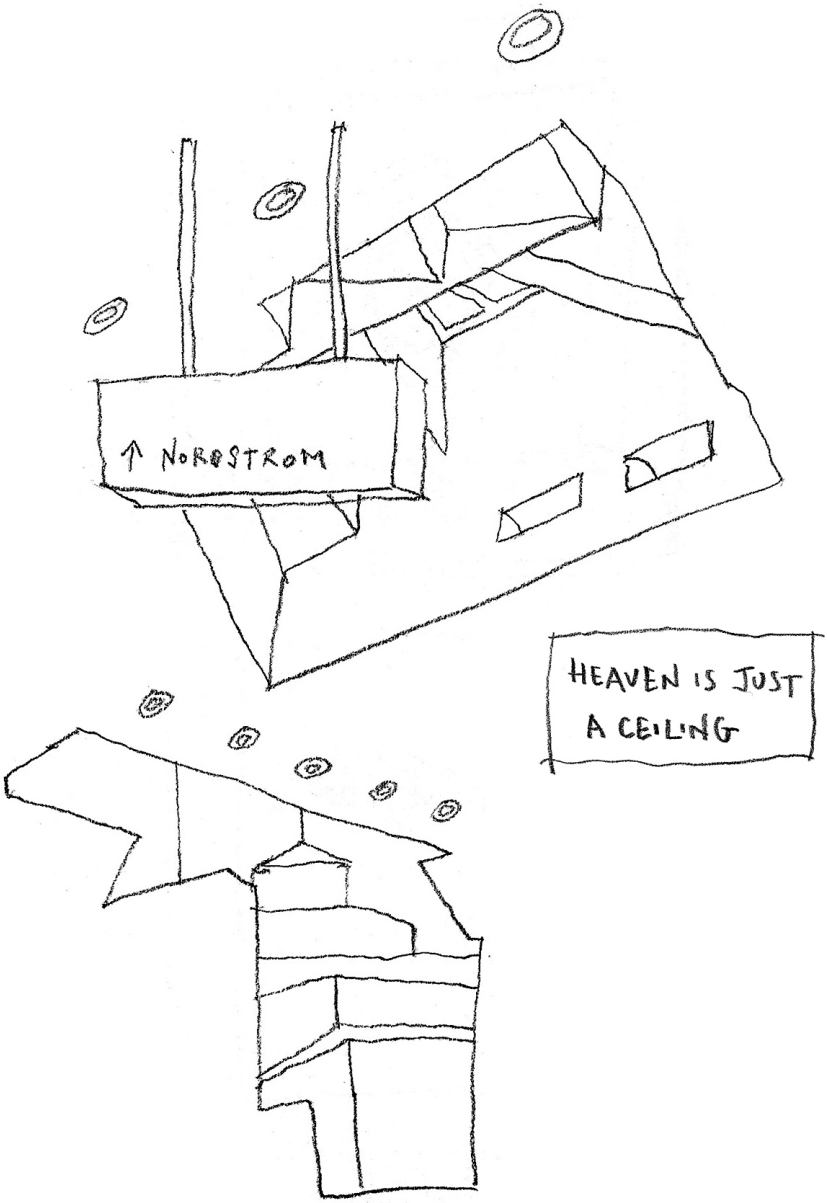

I CAME HERE WITH
SO MUCH SORROW


Pumpkin Spice
THE MALL IS THE LAST PLACE I THOUGHT I'D BE HEALED


SHOWS WHAT
I KNOW.

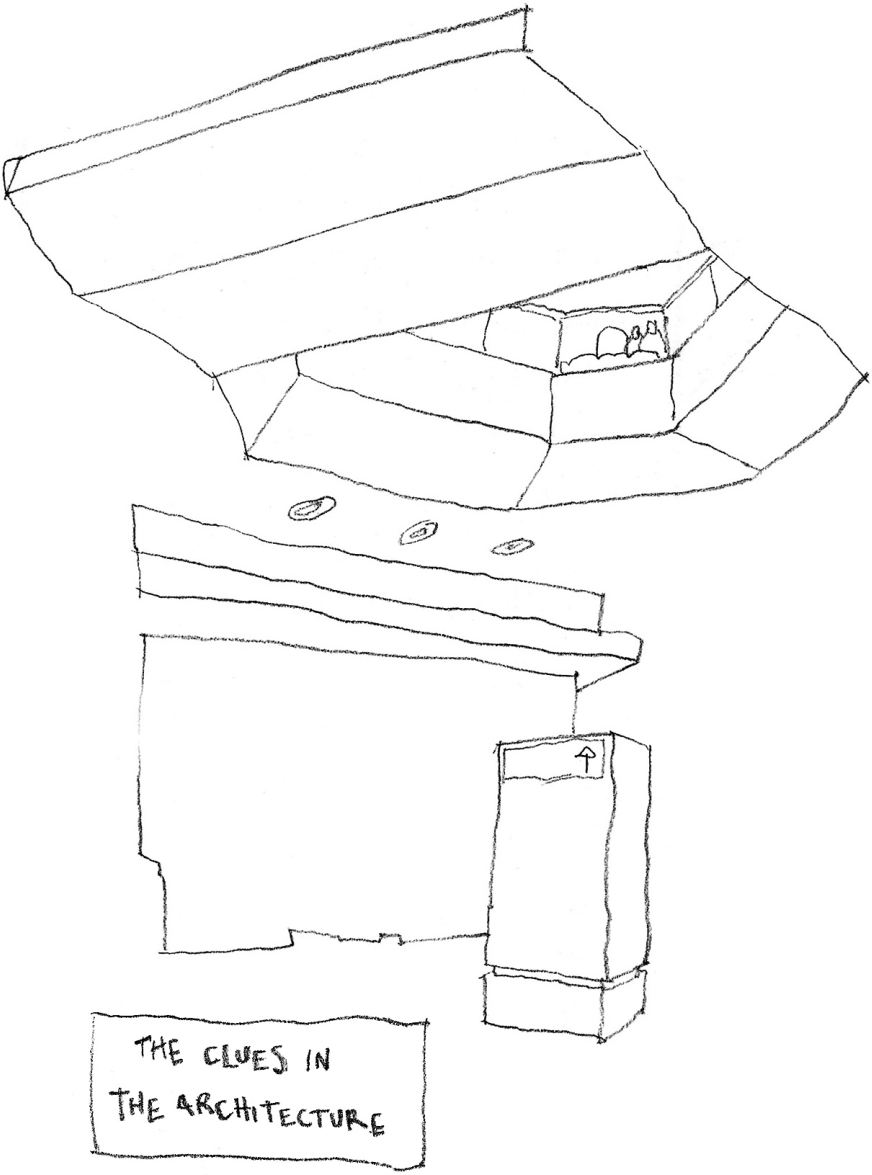

HEY, Look up


THESE SHOPPERS
ARE YOUR FAMILY

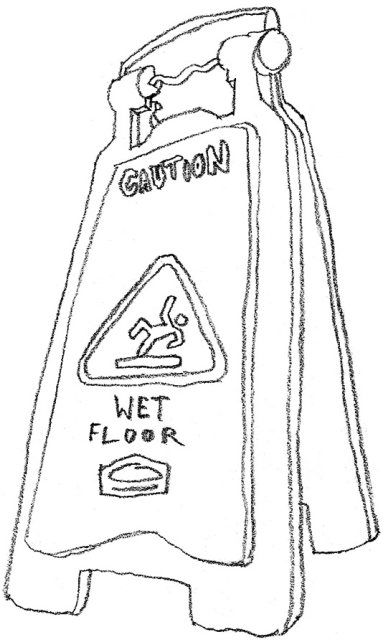

↑ NORDSTROM
HEAVEN IS JUST A CEILING

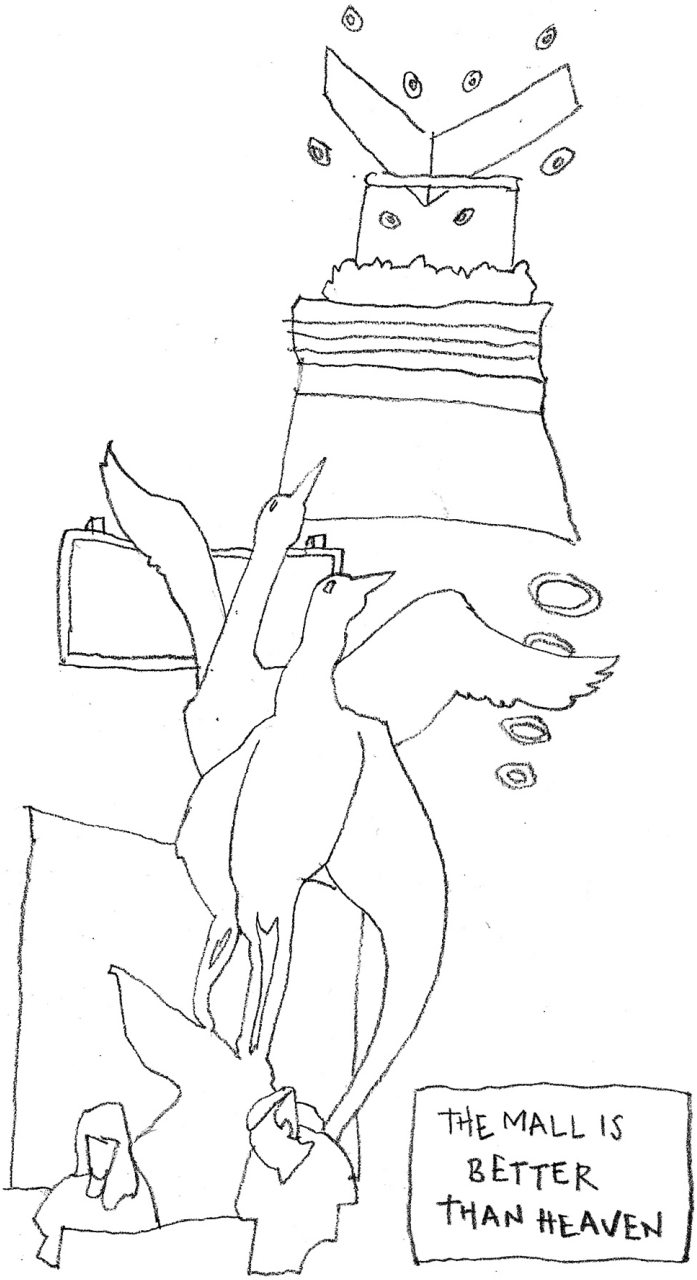

DINOSAUR GULCH
DIRECTORY
macy's
IF YOU WERE IN THE NETHERWORLD, WOULD YOU EVEN KNOW?

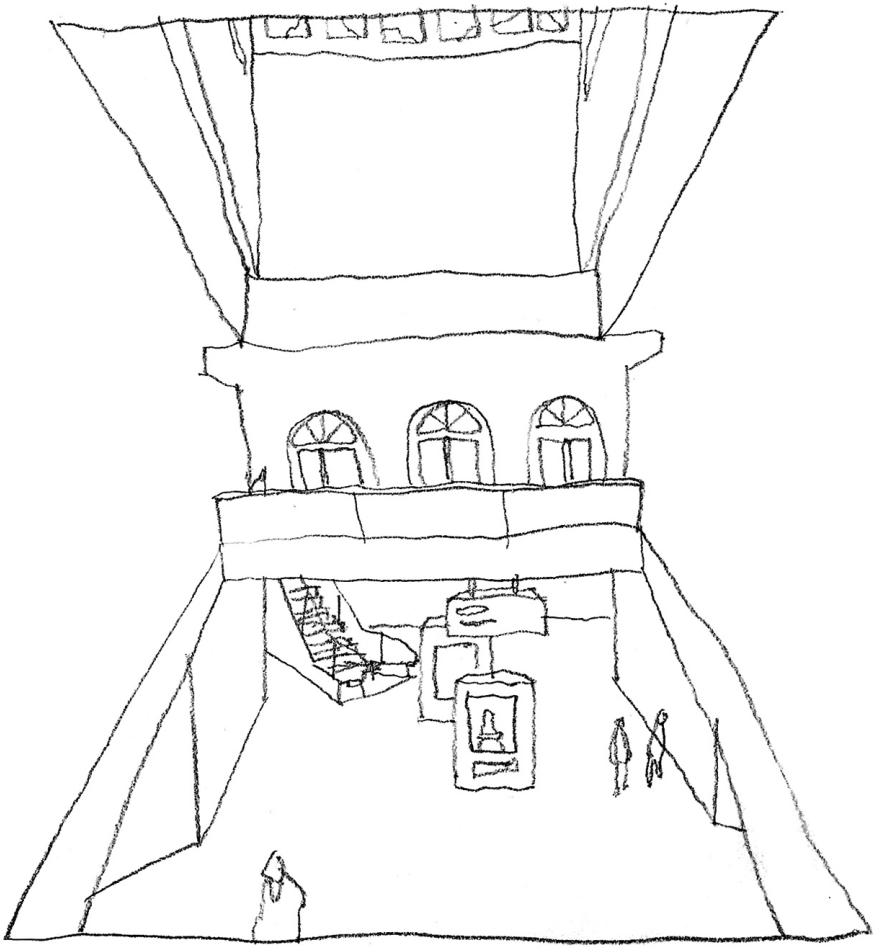

I SEE DANTE AT THE MALL, HUMBLED BY THE PHYSICS OF PARADISE


THE CLUES IN
THE ARCHITECTURE

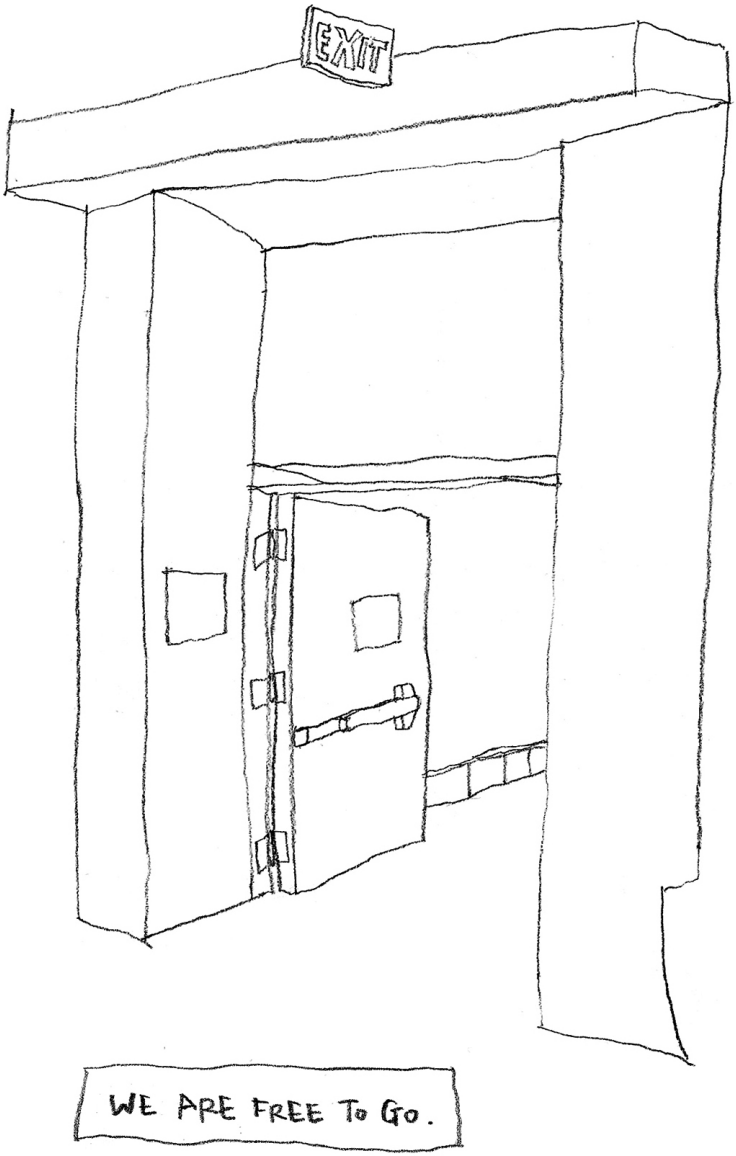
CLEARLY SIGNED




THE MALL IS
BETTER
THAN HEAVEN



IT HAS AN EXIT


EXIT
WE ARE FREE TO GO.

BRIAN KEARNEY
In Conversation

Jerrod Schwarz: I would love to know what initially drew you to making comics about malls. What about that space compels you?

Brian Kearney: This project started out with a drawing practice—I was looking for a space that was visually interesting, that had a lot of people in it, where I could go regularly to sit and draw. There was a mall near where I lived in Denver that fit the bill, and initially there wasn't much more to the selection than that. I grew up in Ireland, a country with a different relationship to materialism, and when I moved to the US, I was repulsed by malls; I thought they represented the rot at the heart of American materialist culture. When I draw something from life, however, I kind of fall in love with it. The process forces me to open up to whatever I'm drawing, to appreciate it for what it is, against my preconceptions. After I'd been drawing the mall for a while, I started to really enjoy being there, and to see it as a fascinating space of shared humanity rather than the two-dimensional horror I initially took it for. What compelled me about the space was that, as I drew it, I could feel myself making a kind of peace not only with the mall, but with the country it stood for. In short, the mall taught me how to be an American.

JS: Your art style in these pieces is simultaneously minimal and deeply affecting; the shapes of mall-goers, mannequins, and bits of department stores all culminate in a stark but gracious assessment of American life. How did you land on this art style? Does it differ from your other comic work?

BK: Thank you, I appreciate that! I've always loved drawing, but a few years ago I decided to "get serious" about it, and I spent two years at the Georgetown Atelier in Seattle learning how to draw in the Classical Realist tradition: a method where you begin drawing with a block-in, which is a series of mostly straight lines that contain the flat shape of your subject. It's a bit like you're looking at what you're

drawing through a windowpane and tracing its shape on the glass. I was always fascinated by how expressive those block-ins could be, and how they were often more interesting to look at than the finished drawing that followed. A lesson I learned at the atelier is how much of a good drawing is filled in by the imagination of the viewer. At the end of my training, I knew I didn't want to keep doing those highly finished drawings, but the block-in was still the basic grammar of my drawing. I wanted to figure out what a block-in comic might look like, and the art style in this project is one answer to that question. It is different from the other comics work I've done, but it's also just pretty much how I draw now.

James McNulty: In these excerpted chapters, there are very few instances where more than one image landed on a single page. How conscious were you of the paneling here, and what effect were you going for with the primarily single-panel pages?

BK: There are a lot of single images in here because each page is scanned from the original sketchbooks I brought to the mall. I fixed the levels in Photoshop, cleaned the thumbprints off, and in some cases rewrote the text, but other than that, these are the original pages. When I was working in my sketchbook, I really enjoyed the accidental narratives that emerged as I flipped through it, and I wanted the final layout to keep some of that character. I also wanted the outer contour of the drawing to do some of the work of a panel border. My intention was to make something whose shape on the page wouldn't leave the reader wondering if I'd forgotten to draw a box around it.

JM: What's the most important thing you've learned about Americans from the mall? How does this differ from other countries' citizens?

BK: Drawing the mall definitely formed my impression that, in America, buying things is the primary civic activity. I think American life is organized around having money and buying things to such an extent that, if you don't have money, in a way, you don't exist. Ireland, for example, is another modern capitalist economy, but I don't think

civic life there is organized around having and making money in quite the same way. Drawing the mall made me think about the way societies organize their public spaces around the things they value most, and it occurred to me that the mall had a lot of the characteristics and functions churches had where I grew up. I see the mall as America's holy place, and I mean that as an observation rather than a judgement.

JM: The narration is minimalistic, giving these excerpts a light quality. What came first—the drawings or the writing? How did you decide what to write for each image and chapter?

BK: The drawings came first, but it all happened in the same sitting—I'd go to the mall, make a 10-20 minute drawing and then caption it. Sometimes the words were a direct commentary on what I'd just drawn, sometimes they were a more abstract reflection of the mood I was in as I was drawing. After I made a lot of these captioned drawings, I started to see certain themes emerging, ones I hadn't been consciously aware of in the moment. I grouped the drawings together by theme, shuffled their sequence until I started to find a poetry in it, and the chapters grew from that. At a certain point, I stopped making new drawings, and a long process of rearranging and rewriting followed. But it was very much the case that I made the material first, then went back and let it show me what it was about.

JM: Which artists or cartoonists inspired these excerpts the most?

BK: Egon Schiele is a long-time obsession, and I think a lot of how I draw here comes from trying to copy him. I love the American commercial illustrations of the 60s and 70s, and that lucigraph style of people like Bernie Fuchs and Bob Peak is another inspiration. The way Ferenc Pinter uses line to balance busy areas and flat shapes was an influence on the drawing. Barron Storey's journals were a big deal for me too, as were Allen Cober's *Forgotten Society* drawings. In terms of mood, I was influenced by a lot of more contemporary stuff—Lauren Redniss made a series of illustrated journalism pieces

for the *New York Times* that I looked at a lot. There's an affection and a sympathy that comes through in Wendy McNaughton's drawings that influenced me. Liana Finck was also an inspiration, for cartoons that are simple, skillful, and cutting.

JS: These pieces are part of a book-length collection of comics centering around your relationship with a single mall. What advice would you give to other artists looking to create a full collection of work? Is there anything you wish you would've known at the beginning of this journey?

BK: It's fascinating to me how differently people's creative machines work, so to speak, and I think it's very helpful to understand how your own machine runs. How do you turn it on, how do you keep it running, what makes it break down—these are all helpful things to learn. On this project, I learned that I work best by taking a process I enjoy and then doing that over and over in an unselfconscious way until I have a lot of material, not worrying about what it is or what I'll do with it until that process starts to run out of steam. I'm stating the obvious here, but the thing about a full collection is you need to make a good amount of work to get there, and so quantity is in some ways the first problem to solve. Quality might turn out to be something you ultimately have limited control of.

I wish I'd known at the start that it's more fun to make the collection than to have made it; once you've made it, if you want it to have a life in the world, there remains the less pleasurable task of finding someone who wants to take it off your hands. A good chunk of this project has been published in different venues, but I'm still looking for someone to publish it as an entire book. Entering the competitions and writing the cover letters is the part that really feels like work.

JM: What are you working on next?

BK: I finished my MFA in Digital/Cross-Disciplinary Literary Arts at Brown back in May, and my thesis was a book length image/text

project that combined monotype printmaking with writing in different forms—translation, poetry, creative nonfiction. The working title is "Return Flights", and it's a book about grief, homesickness, and making sense of adult life in a context very different from the one your upbringing prepared you for. It's also a meditation on a 13th Century Irish poem, "Buile Suibhne," about a pagan chieftain who is driven mad and turned into a bird by a bishop's curse, and spends the rest of the poem wandering Britain and Ireland. It's not done though, and I plan to finish it before I move on to anything else.

CONTRIBUTORS

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